

The ring recycle? More like the hard cell for a load of rubbish

Conspicuous consumption of mobile phones rings a bell with photographer Chris Jordan, writes Philip Geffer

Chris Jordan stands on a ladder, gazing down at 3,000 or so used mobile phones piled on a warehouse floor. His camera is perched even higher, on a tripod four metres above them. He's spent the morning figuring out how to include every one of the phones in a single photograph, eventually sweeping them into a neat, trapezoid mound, the shorter side closer to the camera, or what would be the bottom of the picture frame.

Jordan has flown from Seattle, where he lives, to photograph at CollectiveGood, an electronics recycling centre in the Atlanta suburbs. "I want to give a concrete sense of our consumption, with the real quantities," Jordan says.

For one image to represent the number of annually discarded cell phones – 130 million, according to CollectiveGood – Jordan would have to reproduce the picture he

is now getting ready to take about 43,000 times, creating a panorama that would stretch 100km if the photos were laid side by side.

The millions of consumers who buy new mobile phones each year give no thought to the ones they discard, Jordan says. "If they're only thinking about the environmental consequences of their own actions, they have to change their lifestyles."

Jordan has certainly changed his own. In 2002, aged 38, he abandoned a 10-year career as a corporate lawyer. The job had been supporting his photography habit: for a long time, he'd spent his money on photography equipment, sheet film and processing. When he finally left his job, he resigned from the bar, dismantling the safety net that his legal experience would provide should photography not be an adequate livelihood.

"As a lawyer, I represented industry," he says. "I felt I could no longer reconcile representing some of the companies, based on what they were doing."

Jordan's freefall from law to photography is about to pay off. He's preparing for an exhibition of his photos of industrial refuse – his first solo show in New York, in September, at Yossi Milo Gallery in Chelsea.

Most of his subjects – huge piles of crushed cars, mounds of discarded cell phones, bales of recycled cans, mountains of sawdust – were photographed as he found them at industrial sites.

Back at the mobile phone warehouse, he's beginning for the first time to rearrange the objects into a swirling pattern based on drawings he's been making throughout the day, adding an interpretive layer to his formal documentary approach. He isn't sure if the experiment will yield a successful visual metaphor, however. It might be too obvious or corny.

The shape signifies to him the enormity of a galaxy of electronic refuse and also the idea of a

whirlpool, as if the mobile phones were swirling down a drain.

"Walk on them," he says, urging an observer to follow him as he steps on the pile. The phones crunch under his feet as if he's treading on cockroaches.

As Jordan crawls around on the mound of cell phones, he bears a ring beneath him. Seth Heine, the founder of CollectiveGood, says it's not uncommon for people to throw out active cell phones. Then he provides another statistic: if all

the mobile phones that are thrown out annually were recycled, they would yield some 5,700kg of gold (worth about US\$84.8 million) and keep 65,000 tonnes of toxic materials – battery components and elements such



An estimated 130 million mobile phones are discarded each year, making for an environmental nightmare

as cadmium – out of landfills and incinerators.

Jordan says he's been greatly influenced by Andreas Gursky, whose eye-zapping images depict, among other things, our commodity-patterned world. Even the enormous scale of Gursky's prints is meant to reflect the globalisation of capitalist sprawl.

"Gursky's work proved that representational photographic art can be cutting-edge relevant, as well as complex and beautiful," Jordan says. But he says Gursky took "the point of view of detached observer, which I started with in my consumerism work and am finding myself no longer comfortable with".

Jordan is a passionate advocate – or maybe a protester. Although he's aiming for visually resolved images as an artist, his point is to heighten awareness about our collective environmental disregard. But art and advocacy can be at odds, the goals of one often cancelling out the other.

"My goal," he says, "is to try to face the complexity of the issue and honour it."

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