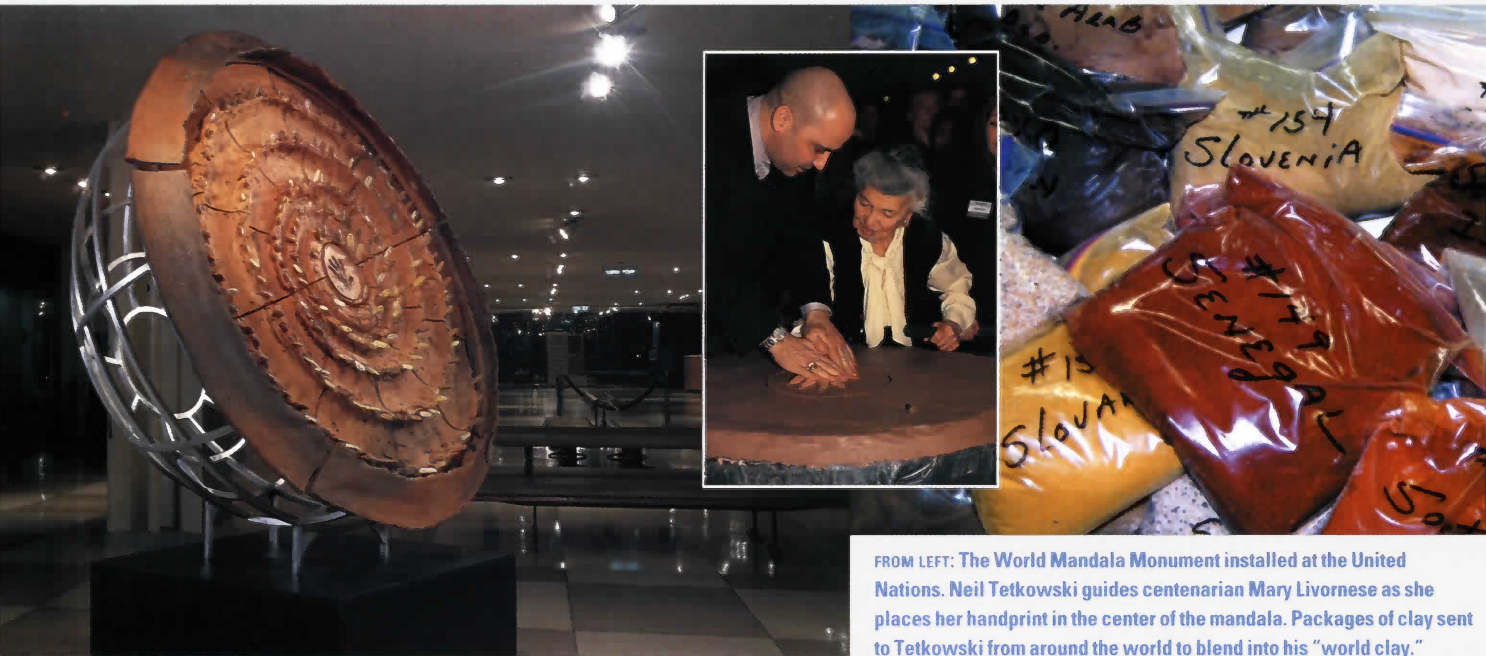


COMMON GROUND

Neil Tetkowski's World Mandala Monument



FROM LEFT: The World Mandala Monument installed at the United Nations. Neil Tetkowski guides centenarian Mary Livornese as she places her handprint in the center of the mandala. Packages of clay sent to Tetkowski from around the world to blend into his "world clay."

Our world is made of stardust—its shell composed primarily of alumina, silica and iron produced by stellar annihilations eons ago. This stardust, if adapted by volcanic action and worn down by wind, water, freezing and thawing, in time becomes clay. The ceramist Neil Tetkowski's World Mandala Monument, on view earlier this year in the General Assembly Visitors' Lobby of the United Nations headquarters in New York City, is a unique work made from the most complete representation of this clay.¹ At once a participatory work and a sculpture with geopolitical implications, this mandala is meant to symbolize our interconnectedness as citizens of the earth.

I have followed Neil's project since its inception seven years ago, when he laid out his plan to build a monument to human unity. It was my first visit to his studio in New York City, and I was more impressed then by the fact that he'd established a clay studio in the city than I was by his new project. I remember hoping he'd drop the idea before wasting himself on the impossible.

With no encouragement from me, or anyone else, Tetkowski began working on what he called the Common Ground World Project. Its centerpiece was to be a ceramic disk, or mandala, the ancient circular form occurring in all cultures. For Tetkowski, who has used the form in previous work, the mandala symbolizes "healing and reconciliation, a visual construction for contemplation that may lead to a heightened state of awareness."²

Tetkowski planned to shape the eight-foot-diameter mandala from a "world clay" mixture of 188 clay samples, gathered from the member states of the U.N. As a conceptual offshoot of the project, he would first create *Installation 188*, an assemblage of 188 glass bottles lined up on an aluminum structure, each numbered and containing clay from a participating country. For the construction of the mandala, which was to occur early in the year 2000, he planned to ask representatives of each nation to place a small fired tablet

made from their local clay into the "world clay" while the mandala was still in a plastic state. The tablets would form a spiral from the center of the disc to the outer edge. Handprints, a theme in Tetkowski's work, would grace the sculpture, symbolizing the generations. One would come from a 100-year-old, born at the end of the 19th century, and within that, the handprint of a baby born the first day of the new millennium.

As the project evolved, the most powerful aspect for the artist was to engage the world in making the mandala. He needed volunteers at his studio and around the globe. Though orchestrated by Tetkowski, the collaborative effort would be the work of many. And the ideal place to make and exhibit this piece would be the U.N., the symbol of our best, if stumbling, attempts at world unity.

In 1998, the Common Ground World Project was officially endorsed by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs as part of its effort to promote sustainable development. It has been supported by \$200,000 in grants and contributions from organizations and individuals, among them, the New York Foundation for the Arts and the Ford Foundation. In addition, Tetkowski received some \$400,000 in donated goods and services.

The clay began to arrive in October 1998 from Turkey, Bahrain and India. It took until January 2000 for all U.N. member countries to be represented. Samples were sent by communities, local officials, diplomats, schools, clubs and individuals. The Standard Ceramic Supply Company of Pittsburgh offered to test and mix the world clay body.

On the evening of April 9, 2000, the night before the mandala ceremony at the U.N., I arrived at Tetkowski's studio for a gathering of volunteers and friends. Stepping away from the party, I wandered into the dimly lit studio to discover the narrow, numbered tablets laid out for the next day. The clays >>



Residents of Olarobi, Tanzania, were among volunteers from 188 countries who gathered clay for the Common Ground World Project.

were every color and texture imaginable. I felt privileged to be in the same room with this representation of the world. The next day, as dancers and musicians performed a preamble to the creation event, Tetkowski invited the centenarian, Mary Livornese, to come forward and press her hand into the center of the mandala; the handprint of the millennium infant, Kelly Rose Tom, was placed within it. Representatives of nations from every continent then inserted their clay tablets into the piece, starting the spiral that would continue to grow over the following three weeks.

Two months later, Tetkowski sectioned, dried and fired the mandala at his studio, using the reduction, low-fire salt processes typical of his work. The sections then were taken to Tallix, Inc., a foundry in Beacon, NY, which fabricated the 700-pound aluminum hemispherical backing and rectangular base for the mandala.

Nearly all the participants in the project, not least the artist himself, found themselves rethinking global issues, particularly their personal relationship to our family of six billion. "I've come to see that there no longer is a 'them,' only an 'us,'" Tetkowski says. "When you get to know somebody from Gambia and Djibouti and everywhere else, and you work on something together, the world becomes a very real and unified place. From that point on, events that take place 'out there' no longer are distant or abstract."

In January 2002 the World Mandala Monument in its finished form came back to the United Nations, where it had been nurtured and constructed. Its future remains uncertain, but Neil Tetkowski hopes the U.N. will accept it permanently. If funding permits, he plans to return a piece of world clay to each nation that contributed — stardust sent from separate nations, but returned to them unified. —BILL HUNT

1. *The World Mandala Monument was exhibited at the U.N. April 10-May 15, 2000, and January 28-March 6, 2002. A touring exhibition consisting of Installation 188, a maquette of the World Mandala Monument, other related objects and photographs has been shown in venues around the country and is at the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY June 15-September 1.*

2. *Quoted by art historian Robert C. Morgan in Common Ground World Project, a publication about Tetkowski's endeavor, available for \$20 (tax-deductible), payable to New York Foundation for the Arts, c/o Common Ground World Project, 432 West 19th St., New York, NY 10011, or www.tetkowski.com.*

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