



## *uncommon clay*

### Neil Tetkowski thinks big.

This New York artist who has been working with clay for more than 30 years had a global vision: collect earth samples from all UN Member States, blend the samples into a common "world clay," and sculpt a work of art symbolizing unity and our shared humanity. Call it the World Mandala Monument, craft it on location at the UN in a live "creation event," invite all Member States to participate in the creative process, and, as a final flourish, exhibit the product, fired and framed, in the UN Visitors' Lobby in 2002, the year of the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

What on earth...? But Tetkowski, who has a decided flair for the dramatic, pulled it off with great panache. The installation this January of his mammoth, 8-foot, 1,200-pound terracotta mandala marked the completion of a process that began more than four years ago.

The work of collecting clay from around the world started in 1998. Thousands of individuals cooperated to collect and send soil in 2-kilo packets to a clay-mixing facility in the United States, where the materials were catalogued and tested. The samples arrived via ordinary mail, courier services, diplomatic pouch and even by hand. The collectors ranged from schoolchildren to the UN ambassador from Samoa and chairman of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS).

In the preface to the catalogue documenting Tetkowski's Common Ground World Project – an NGO that uses the arts to highlight environmental and other global issues – Nitin Desai, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, wrote:

"Symbols usually reach for an ideal beyond the reality we know and understand. Yet the process of creating the World Mandala actually produced the experience it seeks to symbolize." The sculpture itself is replete with symbols,

large and small. Writ large is the mandala itself, a wheel, a universal symbol of harmony, a coming together of disparate elements. At its centre are two handprints, one from a 100-year-old woman, the other from a millennial baby, together connoting the march of time.

A raised, spiral design radiates from the centre of the wheel and is peppered with small clay tablets, corresponding to Member States. Each was added to the disc by a country representative in the April 2000 creation event, an exuberant three-week happening held at UN Headquarters

to dry for two weeks, then transported to the artist's studio in New York City, where it was fired in a kiln.

Tetkowski admits that art is a "hard sell" when one considers the welter of global problems vying for the public's attention – hunger, land mines, pollution. But, he maintains, "art inspires and has a tremendous influence on the way people behave. As the world becomes smaller and more integrated, we need new symbols to inspire behavior that will be for all 6 billion of us."

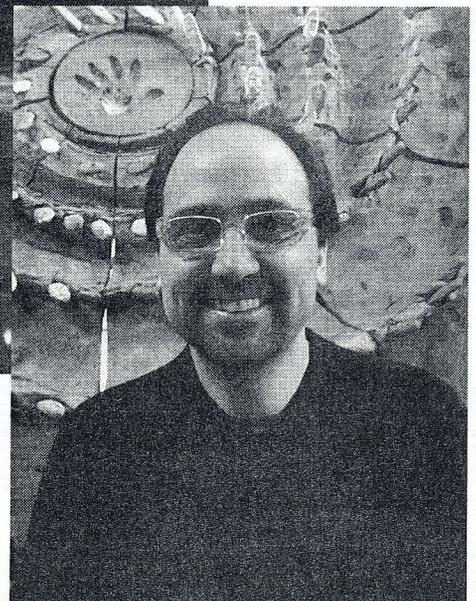
The World Mandala Monument is one.



Above:  
Vials of clay collected  
for the Mandala project

Left:  
The World Mandala  
Monument on display in  
the UN Visitors' Lobby

Below:  
Neil Tetkowski



in New York and attended by hundreds of people from around the world. The event featured the artist molding the mandala on site from the world-clay soup. As the disc began to take shape, country representatives added the clay markers. Once all Member States had "made their marks," the disc was carved into 16 pieces, left