

The Capital City Arts Initiative was honored to collaborate with St. Mary's Art Center on Mark NeuCollins' spring 2011 residency and exhibition, "a thousand ways . . ." The artist was in residence at St. Mary's for two weeks to create the exhibition. In conjunction with the project, media artist and writer Katie Grace McGowan wrote the essay below. CCAI extends its appreciations to Mark, Katie, St. Mary's Art Center, and all those involved in the project.

An Exquisite Balance

*"Let the beauty you love be what you do.
There are a thousand ways to kneel
and kiss the earth." Rumi (1207-1273)*

An inquisitive nature can function like a religion. The curious soul is a devotee of consciousness and understanding. These themes, drives, passions—whatever one may call them—are not denominational or specific to a certain religion, but rather the proverbial carrot on a stick for those driven by a need to know. These searchers may sometimes be viewed as irrational, but never lazy. The drive to investigate and learn is never sated. The searcher searches until he or she is no longer.

The French Oulipo author, Georges Perec, wrote:

What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us. We live, true, we breathe, true; we walk, we open doors, we go down staircases, we sit at a table in order to eat, we lie down on a bed in order to sleep. How? Why? Where? When? Why? (*L'Infra-ordinaire*, 1973)

This call to action, or, call to obsessive inquiry, is not out of line with the process of many artists. Without such research and growth, we are not challenged to look ahead, behind, aside, and underneath. This seeking tendency is more the territory of mad scientists and Romantics.

Mark NeuCollins has an unusual blend of intelligence, gentle personality, and absolutely childlike spirit. His hair appears to have gone gray far too young, then you realize he isn't in his early 30s but his early 50s. Born in Durham, North Carolina, and raised in Indiana, NeuCollins has a sort of ageless persona, simultaneously youthful and wise. A keen intellect matched with a sensitive worldview make for an artist that challenges and implores viewers to reflect on their own potentiality in the universe.

His process is one of seeming contradiction: part obsessive organizer—mapping, cataloging, and analyzing—and part free spirit, driven by desire and longing.

For his 2011 Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] residency at St. Mary's Art Center, NeuCollins took a typically thoughtful approach. Bringing only a set of hand tools, he aimed to create a site-specific installation using all materials found in the area. Leading

up to the residency he also noted that he, “fully expects plans to be affected and amended once in Nevada.”

In an email update from Carson City, NeuCollins evokes the Perec quote:

I found this ‘mind mapping’ software a little while ago, and since that time I have been rather obsessively mapping the ideas involved in the “1000 Ways” installation. Every day this gets added to, things get deleted, things get moved around. It’s my attempt to figure out how these ideas fit together. Many of the relationships are unstated. This morning I stepped back and realized that creating this map is a parallel activity complimentary to the meaning and understanding that I get from the physical creation of the piece...

For this project, he allowed the natural splendor of Nevada's Great Basin Desert to determine the work being made. Initially he gained a sense of the place by visiting the area for his preliminary artist talk. But, true to form, he anticipated the human propensity to change and evolve and allowed the work to take final form in situ.

Mandalas made of earth, sagebrush flags, a gateway of found materials; he attempts to incorporate all of the senses. A gong includes the viewer in the ever-evolving installation. NeuCollins notes, “A gong is traditionally used as a starting and ending point to a meditation session.” This meditation session speaks to global cultures and religions without committing to one. The deep palette of the landscape grounds the mandala in Virginia City, while the conceptual roots of the work grow from celestial themes. Perhaps the whole point here is reverence.

A self-directed student of world religions, NeuCollins approaches these quotations with sensitivity and deference. He is interested in the ways in which different people appreciate the world around them.

The relationship between one’s art practice and one’s worldview or politic is, naturally, an intimate one. In this case, a sort of radical empathy that permeates all aspects of the artist’s perspective influences his artwork.

NeuCollins acknowledges his practice has shifted from his earlier, overtly political, new media work to work that is highly charged with personal politics. This quiet evolution, from media artist to more environmentally focused one, is a product of experience and maturation.

While NeuCollins has always had a commitment to environmentalism, recent events made him spring into action. He was present in Iowa City, Iowa, in 2008 for the 2nd 1000-year flood in his 23 years of living there (1993-2011). The second flood inspired an immediate concentration on environmental issues. This more focused attention creates a sense of urgency that isn’t as apparent in his older work.

Keenly aware of extinction and temporality, and not merely in the *au courant green* way, his conscientiousness and genuine mindfulness make for introspective, erudite work that hints at the universal. NeuCollins retains aspects of his previous approach, but has moved on to what he considers the next phase of his art practice.

NeuCollins speaks of collectively harnessing our potential as producers. Here, the sensitive philosopher links his artwork and politics via a faith in human agency. In some ways he sees this residency as a first step toward reconciling the grappling he's done negotiating between his art and political convictions.

Hands are a recurring theme with NeuCollins. Images of the artist's hands demonstrate his interest in visceral, physical work and perhaps also hint at his preoccupation with the passage of time. A skilled carpenter and Rhode Island School of Design graduate in Industrial Design, it's no surprise when he mentions, "What I do with my hands is my soul work." In these hands are history and experience.

In seeming contrast to all of this physicality is the cerebral, meditative core of NeuCollins' current body of work. Here we see, and feel, the effects of time and consideration. *Gongs, sound, participation, subjective unconscious, archetypes, Carl Jung, biology, sociology, architecture*; he is quick to list some of the many thoughts behind his process. He mentions being inspired by Buckminster Fuller and adds, "Fuller made no assumptions about the way things should be." This absence is something the two seem to share.

NeuCollins is pulled between his interest in Conceptual art and his desire to build things with his hands. In turn, this desire begets desire for material objects imbued with deep concept. This conceptual bent may be partially informed by NeuCollins' M.F.A. degree in Intermedia from The University of Iowa; but this could be a chicken or the egg-question.

Repeatedly he mentions how when struggling for something really ephemeral, it's easy to miss. Always the truth-seeker, NeuCollins creates charts to explain his trains of thought.

The exquisite balance, the sweet spot—as NeuCollins calls it—where the physical object supports the concept, is the goal of so much research, of so much work. Possibility and struggle permeate NeuCollins' practice. Maybe this metaphysical wrestling with time and existence is just what Rumi meant about kissing the earth...

As an artist, NeuCollins seems to have found this sweet spot, if only for a minute. For he, of all people, would be the first to point out that there is no stasis here. Like a mantra, NeuCollins reminds, "Everything changes. We aren't on this earth forever."

Katie Grace McGowan
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Katie Grace McGowan is a media artist and writer based during Croatia in summer 2011. She says, "a smattering of her work can be viewed at www.katiegracemcgowan.com."