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Profile 5: 'Art the Works': T. Allan Comp and the Reclamation of a Toxic Legacy

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DEMOCRATIC VISTAS PROFILES

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T. ALLAN COMP AND THE RECLAMATION OF A TOXIC LEGACY

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DEMOCRATIC VISTAS PROFILES

**‘ART THAT WORKS’:
T. ALLAN COMP AND THE RECLAMATION OF A TOXIC LEGACY**

by Erik Reece

**THROUGHOUT PENNSYLVANIA, THE
VFW HALLS LOOK MUCH THE
SAME**

—a bar stretches across the front and a bingo parlor sits behind it. In 1995, T. Allan Comp, a historic preservationist who specializes in industrial sites, walked into the VFW bar in the small borough of Vintondale. Comp was looking for some local people who had agreed to talk with him about a reclamation project that he called Acid Mine Drainage and Art (AMD&ART). Comp’s idea was to reclaim toxic former coalmines using not only science, but also elements of design, sculpture, and history, which he hoped would spur community involvement and

create vital public spaces. And while a small group had gathered in the bingo hall to meet with Comp, the men at the bar had their doubts.

“One of the guys said, ‘Are you here for that art thing?’” Comp told me last July. He explained that it was actually his idea to transform the wasted area that ran alongside the community into a new kind of park. A ripple of laughter ran down the bar. “They were like, ‘Har, har, har. That’s got to be the dumbest idea in the world,’” said Comp.

Five years later, after a lot of public meetings and public planning, Comp took a picture of a group of men building benches in front of the firehouse, benches that would eventually sit in the park. “What’s great about that photo is that three of the men in it had been at the bar that first night,” Comp told me on the day that the AMD&ART Vintondale Park was officially dedicated.

We were actually sitting at one of those benches inside a large pavilion. It was a beautiful summer day.

Erik Reece is the author of Lost Mountain: Radical Strip Mining and the Devastation of Appalachia (Riverhead, 2006). He recently received the John B. Oakes Award for Distinguished Environmental Journalism.

Speeches had been made and supporters had been thanked. To our right, a series of passive treatment ponds was transforming an orange, acidic syrup into potable water that flowed into a seven-acre wetland, before emptying into Blacklick Creek. To our left, children were playing on the new soccer field while their mothers watched and talked in the pavilion's shade. Visitors took guided tours of the ponds, gardens and sculptural installations dedicated to the memory of the men who dug coal in this small community until the 1950s.

Unfortunately, when the underground mines shut down, what they left behind was a poisonous discharge of sulfuric acid and iron known as acid mine drainage. So many streams in Pennsylvania run orange with acid that, according to Comp, "People from the region don't even see it. They grew up with it." Comp, who grew up in Southern California, came to Pennsylvania in 1993 to

"WHEN THE UNDERGROUND MINES SHUT DOWN, WHAT THEY LEFT BEHIND WAS A POISONOUS DISCHARGE OF SULFURIC ACID AND IRON KNOWN AS ACID MINE DRAINAGE."

work for the National Park Service's Heritage Area Program, where he oversaw economic development, education, and historical preservation in a ten-county region. He had earned his Ph.D. in the History of Technology and American Economic History from the University of Delaware. But two years of teaching at Boston University convinced Comp that his future lay beyond the ivory tower. "I wanted to be out in the field, working with all of this history," he said. So he moved to the National Park Service where he became senior historian of the Historic American Engineering Record, documenting historical industrial sites for the Library of Congress.

Comp's work with the National Park Service did indeed allow him to experience first-hand the region's built industrial landscape, or what he calls "the vernacular of technology." "That is the American character as far as I'm concerned," Comp explained, "All of the amazing things we've built give you a window into us as a culture." But it also gives you a lot of toxic waste, and

that waste has destroyed rivers throughout Appalachia, a region Comp calls the country's "largest forgotten ecosystem." Stretching across eleven states from Mississippi to New York, Appalachia first attracted the nation's attention in 1964 when Lyndon Johnson stood on a miner's porch in Martin County, Kentucky, where the unemployment rate stood at 70 percent, and announced that he would launch a War on Poverty. Forty-two years ago, Appalachia's poverty rate stood at thirty-one percent. Since then, nearly 2,300 miles of roads have been laid across the region and 800,000 more families have indoor plumbing. And today, in the Appalachian region of my home state, Kentucky, the poverty rate hovers around, well, thirty-one percent.

In the late 1990s, the Environmental Protection Agency designated acid mine drainage as the biggest environmental problem in the eastern mountains. But even earlier, Comp started kicking around the idea of an acid mine drainage reclamation project that would actually call attention to the problem and its solution. "If we're going to get our act together enough to address a big environmental problem," Comp said, "we ought to celebrate the fact that we've gotten our act together enough to address a big environmental problem." And ten years after that first meeting in the bingo hall, Comp and Vintondale have indeed brought off something remarkable—together, and assisted by a dedicated crew of Americorps and VISTA volunteers, they transformed the town dump into what the AMD&ART mission statement calls "a public place in which to explore, learn, reflect, and recreate." And they have learned a lot about themselves and each other.

THE AIM OF AMD&ART— "to re-create a sense of place by honoring the past and instilling hope in the future"—is certainly laudable. But Comp's first encounter at the VFW hall is suggestive of the forces that work against such initiatives in the coalfields of Appalachia. In the 1910s, the railroad found its way into the remote hollows of these mountains. Company towns, or coal camps, were thrown up quickly, and all manner of men—immigrants and mountaineers—went to work underground. Families from twenty-two countries came to Vintondale, looking to earn a living. The work was brutal and the pay poor. A man might spend all day loosening coal in a twenty-inch-high mine shaft and earn one dollar. A miner's wife-turned-songwriter,

Sarah Ogan Gunning, who was “discovered” by Pete Seeger in the 1950s, remembered, “It literally happened—people starved to death. Not only my baby, but the neighbors’ babies. You see them starve to death too. And all you could do was go over and help wash and dress ‘em and lay ‘em out and sit with the mothers until they could put ‘em away.” Eventually, the miners tried to organize. Throughout Appalachia, the bloody union wars of the 1930s dramatized exactly what kind of civic engagement the coal companies would not tolerate.

“If you were civically engaged in a coal camp,” noted Comp, “you were likely to get fired, blacklisted, and be homeless.” So the tendency to keep one’s mouth shut, to grudgingly accept terms set by others, became part of the Appalachian character. And according to Comp, it has led to the “nothing good happens in Vintondale” attitude that he met up with that first night at the VFW hall.

And looking at old photos of the AMD&ART site, one can understand why. When the coal operators pulled out of Vintondale, they left behind thousands of tons of “bony,” coal waste that has very little energy value. Mounds of this black rubble were strewn around crumbling coke ovens and rusting coal tipples. The coal operators also left behind a dwindling community where the per capita income was half of the average Pennsylvanian’s. As Comp writes in his AMD&ART “Founder’s Statement,” “These are citizens who rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to participate and learn from any kind of cultural or arts-related activities within their own town. There is little sense of being special in Vintondale, no particular distinction to boast of, only constant decline for half a century—typical for much of Coal Country, too typical.” In 1998, as a survey of townspeople showed, the idea that this thirty-five-acre blight could be a place that attracted tourists and brought pride to the town sounded, if not like “the dumbest idea in the world,” certainly like a remote possibility.

Undeterred, Comp put together a core team of designers that included hydrologist Bob Deason, sculptor Stacy Levy, landscape designer Julie Bargmann and himself. And crucial parts of that elaborate cast are the townspeople themselves. “If I have an art form, it’s probably choreography,” Comp explained, “and I don’t even get to pick the dancers. I’ve got elephants and gazelles

and they all have to work together.” At one of the first town meetings, Comp handed out topographical maps of the site, along with markers, and he asked the people of Vintondale, including some high school kids he had rounded up on a street corner, to draw in what they wanted. And as it turned out, what the community wanted and what the AMD&ART team envisioned were not exactly the same thing. The design team talked about a water treatment system, wetlands, and public art; the community talked about picnic tables and a baseball field to replace the one lost in a 1977 flood. Ten years later, Comp takes obvious pride in the fact that everyone—designers and townspeople—got most of what they wanted. “No one is allowed to compromise, but all have to accommodate” is a kind of mantra for Comp when it comes to designing with and for communities.

He is emphatic in his belief that good design must include public engagement. “Designers who work in the isolation of their offices when doing community projects are designing in a vacuum,” he maintains.

Sue Thering, from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has spent a great deal of time studying the Vintondale project. Thering is an extension agent in the Department of Landscape Architecture, and her work focuses on encouraging citizen participation in public works. She believes that the design team’s receptiveness

“THROUGHOUT APPALACHIA, THE BLOODY UNION WARS OF THE 1930s DRAMATIZED EXACTLY WHAT KIND OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT THE COAL COMPANIES WOULD NOT TOLERATE.”

was the key to earning the community’s trust and changing much of its defeatist attitude. The same survey that was conducted in 1998 was replicated in 2001. In those three years, the number of residents who thought positive change—e.g. attracting tourists and bringing fish back to the creek—was possible jumped from 20% to 70%. Thering attributes the change to what adult education theorists call “transformative learning.” “The people in Vintondale were being listened to and they were learning to bump up against their own preconcep-

tions about themselves and about the community,” she told me at the dedication, over a couple of kielbasa sausages. “Something changed that made them think it was possible to build a park that people would visit.” That something was a dialogue between what Thering terms “outside experts” from the design team and “inside experts,” the people in Vintondale who knew their town’s history best.

Something else that might not be as easily measured statistically is Comp’s charisma. Many who eventually donated money or resources to AMD&ART describe their first meeting with him as something akin to watching a fast-talking dervish armed with maps and

this system, Comp emphasizes that all four members of the design team collaborated on every component of the park. They designed five keystone-shaped ponds at the eastern edge of the property. A half-mile away, acid mine drainage was pouring out of a mine portal into Blacklick Creek at a rate of two hundred gallons per minute. Today, that drainage is pumped into the first treatment pond where, instead of using sodium hydroxide to neutralize the acid, Deason lined the bottom with limestone that naturally draws iron out of the water. The discharge then flows downhill into the other ponds, growing cleaner with each filter process, until it is ready to return to the creek.

“THE PEOPLE IN VINTONDALE WERE BEING LISTENED TO AND THEY WERE LEARNING TO BUMP UP AGAINST THEIR OWN PRECONCEPTIONS ABOUT THEMSELVES AND ABOUT THE COMMUNITY.”

pamphlets. Comp, who is 62 and has been married to Selma Thomas for 33 years, has unruly white hair and an easy manner. He takes as a given that his ideas seem unorthodox and untried, and he starts from there. Consequently he seems to inspire a lot of frontier thinking in people: let’s do something no one else has done before. Liz Elliott, one of AMD&ART’s many volunteers said, “I think Allan knows before the people themselves know that they will become committed.”

BACK IN THE LATE 1990s, when Comp was still trying to sell the Vintondale community on his idea for the AMD&ART park, the state of Pennsylvania started building power plants that would only be allowed to burn waste coal. It was an effort to get rid of all the bony piles that littered the state, but what it meant for AMD&ART was, as Comp said, “We got 70,000 tons of material removed from the Vintondale site for nothing. That at least got us down to more or less bare ground.”

Then in 1995 the EPA’s Sustainable Development Program awarded AMD&ART a \$250,000 grant. That was enough to begin work on a “passive treatment” system that would naturally convert acid mine drainage back to swimmable water. Though Deason engineered

On one weekend in 2001, AMD&ART organized the planting of a thousand trees beside the ponds. The idea was to create a “litmus garden” where the fall color of the trees would reflect the color of the acidic water as it turned from a reddish-orange, to yellow, to silver-green. One hundred and fifty people showed up that day to help, including many Vintondale natives who had since moved away. Alongside the first pond, they planted six-foot-tall black cherry and sweetgum trees whose leaves would turn red in the fall. Downstream they planted orange-leafed sugar maple, yellow-leafed poplar and hackberry, and finally the bronze-leafed black willow to indicate clear, uncontaminated water.

Americorps and VISTA volunteers were interspersed among the planting team. By 2000, AMD&ART had raised enough money to provide room and board for a few volunteer workers each year. They set up their headquarters in the basement of the Hungarian Orthodox Church. Built in 1930, it has only a handful of members 75 years later. They agreed to lease the church to AMD&ART for \$1 a year. The new volunteers ran their operation from the basement—writing grants, coordinating field projects, and hectoring the state to build an access road for the park. Comp credits them more than anyone, himself included, for finally winning the town over. “You have to earn credibility and trust,” he said.

“The way I do it is with Americorps and VISTA. These volunteers give you the face time with the community that is absolutely critical if you’re really going to do community-based design. Coal country is nothing if not tight. You get inside that culture a little and you get lots of support and lots of interest.”

ONE OF THE STRANGER THINGS about Allan Comp is whom he works for now. The U.S. Department of the Interior—in particular, the Office of Surface Mining (OSM). For most people in the environmental and conservation community, OSM is usually not considered a forward-thinking regulatory agency—particularly under the current administration. When George W. Bush first took office in 2001, he loaded most of his natural resources agencies with under-secretaries who had worked as lobbyists for the very industries they were now charged with regulating. Steven J. Griles is a particularly odious example of this fox-guarding-the-henhouse scenario. It has been well documented that Griles worked as a lobbyist for the coal and oil industry before he was tapped to be Bush’s Deputy Secretary of the Interior. During each year of his term at Interior, Griles received a \$284,000 deferred-compensation package from his former employer, National Environmental Strategies (NES). The *Washington Post* reported that Griles met three times with the National Mining Association (NMA), a former client of NES, while the NMA was seeking looser standards on mountaintop removal—the nefarious form of strip mining that is rav-

aging central Appalachia. And looser standards are exactly what they got. In 2001, Griles rewrote a key provision of the Clean Water Act, which stated that “fill material” can be deposited in American waterways, but “waste” cannot. Griles reclassified all waste associated with strip mining as merely benign “fill material.” He also worked diligently to eliminate the “stream buffer zone” that says there can be no mining within a hundred feet of any waterway (for anyone who has followed Griles’ career, it was no surprise to learn last November, as reported in *The Nation*, that he was heavily entangled in super-lobbyist Jack Abramoff’s lurid scheme to bilk the Choctaw Indians out of \$36 million). Former Mine Safety and Health Academy Director Jack Spadaro once told me flatly, “Steven Griles is a monster.”*

“ONE OF THE STRANGER THINGS ABOUT ALLAN COMP IS WHOM HE WORKS FOR NOW. THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR—IN PARTICULAR, THE OFFICE OF SURFACE MINING (OSM).”

None of this is news to Comp. He knows he’s the odd-man-out at OSM. But in 1999, when Gene Kruger, OSM’s Division Chief for Reclamation Assistance, saw what was happening at Vintondale, he asked Comp to organize something similar for OSM. “OSM wanted me to come in and do this in a lot of other places,” he said. Consequently, he now oversees

*In the tragic aftermath of the Sago Mine disaster in West Virginia, Spadaro’s own story is instructive. In 2000, a coal slurry impoundment pond broke in Martin County, Kentucky, flooding the town of Inez with three hundred million gallons of toxic sludge. Davitt McAteer, assistant secretary at the Mine Safety and Health Administration, appointed Spadaro to an investigative team. McAteer was a Clinton appointee who Spadaro trusted to enforce mine safety laws. But days after his inauguration, George W. Bush replaced McAteer with David Lauriski, the general manager of Energy West Mining. In the meantime, Spadaro’s team found that MSHA had warned Martin County Coal about an impending break in the reservoir of the impoundment pond, but the coal company did nothing. Spadaro recommended charges of criminal negligence, but Lauriski refused to hold Martin County Coal accountable. When Spadaro declined to sign the final investigation report, someone changed the locks on his office door at MSHA. Then Lauriski tried to bring bogus charges of insubordination against Spadaro. When that didn’t work, he transferred Spadaro far from his family in West Virginia. Spadaro sued, saying that these actions were retaliatory. In the end, he and MSHA reached a settlement, and Spadaro retired.

In 2004, looking back on his tenure at MSHA, Lauriski told the *Oklahoma City Journal Record*, “The industry has always been good to me. I just hope that I’ve given back as much as I’ve received.” What he gave back, as the *Lexington Herald-Leader* recently reported, was an agency that issued fewer and smaller fines than the Clinton administration, obtained half as many criminal convictions for mine safety violations, and cut mine safety enforcement by one hundred officers. The Sago Mine benefited enormously, racking up hundreds of violations and very small fines. Now, the West Virginia governor has appointed McAteer to investigate the Sago disaster; after all, the industry-friendly Bush administration has not proven up to such a task.

the Watershed Assistance Team, which places VISTA workers in places across Appalachia. In 2004, Comp won the Department of Interior's Environmental Achievement Award for creating innovative partnerships between OSM and various organizations working to protect watersheds. And Steven Griles presented him with the award.

"It was great," Comp told me over breakfast on the day of the Vintondale dedication. "Griles actually had to stand up there and say words like 'sustainable' and 'environmental,' and then shake my hand." He flashed a big

She had recently completed a mosaic for the cafe in New York's famous Random House building. "To a lot of people, that may just be wall decor," she told us, "but here in Vintondale, I've spent time with the very people who this mosaic is for. It became very real when folks that lived in the town and worked in the mine walked up and pointed out the homes that their families had lived in for generations."

Across the Ghost Town Trail from Liddell's piece stands mine portal #3, where in the 1930s and 1940s, most of the men of Vintondale disappeared under-

"OVER ONE HUNDRED PEOPLE ATTENDED THE DEDICATION OF THE MINER'S MEMORIAL EARLIER THIS YEAR. WE HAD GUYS SHOWING THIS TO THEIR GRANDKIDS, SAYING, 'THAT'S THE KIND OF LUNCH BUCKET I HAD.'"

grin. In coal country, in the current political climate, one learns to savor small victories. And in reality, Comp works, as he said, "so far down inside the belly of the beast" that major players like Griles know that, for now, he poses little threat to their industry interests. We were sitting in Comp's favorite diner in Cambria City, about fifteen miles from Vintondale. Right across from the steel mills, this was the community where immigrants settled in the 1930s. Reasoning that he was also an immigrant to Pennsylvania, Comp himself bought a small house here back in the 1990s so he could be close to Vintondale. The diner is a neighborhood fixture where the waitresses are extremely nice and breakfast is ridiculously cheap. After we ate, Comp gave me a tour of the newly completed park. We walked along the Ghost Town Rail Trail, which today attracts 75,000 bicyclists a year, and was one of the main things that attracted Comp to this abandoned mine site. A few cyclists had stopped at a low concrete platform to watch artist Jessica Liddell add the last few porcelain tiles to a mosaic that illustrates what these thirty-five acres looked like at the height of the coal boom. The fifteen-by-twenty-five-foot mosaic is modeled on a 1928 Sanborn Insurance map. It depicts with a line of brown and black tiles the coke ovens whose foundations are still visible in the wetland area beyond the mosaic. Liddell chatted with us as she began to wipe grit from tiles.

ground each morning. From the trail, you can see that a large slab of polished black granite now blocks the portal, framed with heavy timbers. But much like the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, D.C., it does not look that impressive from a distance. Only when stepping closer do you realize that a tableau of nine miners leaving the portal has been diamond-etched into the granite. The miners all carry lunch pails and wear head-lanterns and heavy work coats. The artist, Anita Lucero, etched them life-size and in exquisite detail. Unlike the Vietnam Memorial, where only the names of the soldiers appear on the granite wall, the images on the Miner's Memorial were taken from a quarter-inch image on 8-mm film of a 1938 home movie. Comp enlarged the image to eight-by-ten-inches and chose Lucero to recreate this tableau. Over one hundred people attended the dedication of the Miner's Memorial earlier this year. Comp recalled, "We had guys showing this to their grandkids, saying, 'That's the kind of lunch bucket I had. My lunch was in the top, my water was in the bottom.' As a historian, that's important to me." And unlike the Vietnam Memorial, where the names are cut deep into the granite to accentuate that they will not be forgotten, the image of these miners appears gauzy and almost ghost-like. That was Comp's intention, and Lucero's rendering is as evocative as it is accurate.

And yet, through the ritual of art, these ghost miners have made the history of Vintondale real again. The social theorist Michael Mayerfeld Bell has written very thoughtfully about what he calls “the ghosts of place,” defining ghosts as “felt presences” or “the sense of the presence of those who are not physically there.” In Vintondale, that dormant sense of *being of a place*—so characteristic of Appalachia—gets revived through a work of public art that retrieves the past in order to celebrate it. And by laying claim to the past, a community lays claim to the revived sense of place. “Our sense of the rightful possession of a place depends in part upon our sense of the ghosts that possess it, and the connections of different people to those ghosts,” writes Bell. “From feelings of local identity to the possession of office space ... ghosts make claims about the territories of social life.” Perhaps the clearest example of this in Vintondale is that its residents have recently decided to restart, after thirty years of inactivity, the Town Planning Commission.

Comp and I circled the treatment ponds and the Litmus Garden until we came to one of my favorite aspects of the AMD&ART Park design. It is another slate installation, set directly across the park from the

“THROUGH THE RITUAL OF ART, THESE GHOST MINERS HAVE MADE THE HISTORY OF VINTONDALE REAL AGAIN.”

Miner’s Memorial on the bank of Blacklick Creek. This one, called “Clean Slate,” was designed by University of Pennsylvania landscape architecture students Claire Fullman and Emily Nye. It is a minimalist work made up of two long pieces of rough black slate, placed in the form of a stair step. The lower slab is set right beneath the mouth of a culvert where the water from the treatment ponds, which then passes through a wetland area, finally empties into the creek. Visitors are encouraged to stand on that platform and let the purified water wash over their bare feet. Anyone who is inspired to do so can leave chalk messages on the higher, dry piece of slate. Around this stark work have been planted ferns and other plants that date back to the Carboniferous Age—the age of coal.

STILL, FOR ALL OF THE PARK’S OBVIOUS VIRTUES, the cynic’s question hangs in the air: *But is it art?* Not in any traditional, representational sense. Rather, the origins of a landscape such as the AMD&ART Park are in the conceptual art movement of the 1960s and 1970s—a movement that took art off the canvas, and often out of the museum, so that it became an *experience* in place and time, rather than simply a painting on a wall. Whatever conceptual art was, it wasn’t decor. Its practitioners believed that such projects could, as RoseLee Goldberg writes, “effectively transform people’s everyday lives.” Joseph Beuys, one of the conceptual movement’s luminaries, submitted “7000 Oaks” to the Documenta 7 exhibit of 1971. It was a plan to reforest Kassel, Germany, symbolized by one spade that leaned against a white wall. Each patron paid to sponsor a tree, and in return received from the artist a signed certificate proclaiming, “Small oak trees grow and life continues.” To understand the world as a canvas is to think very differently about its composition, and one’s place within that composition. And to think “of the entire world as art,” greenmuseum.org director Sam Bower suggests, means to begin thinking seriously about ecological problems and their solutions.

Sam Bower’s online environmental showcase has featured AMD&ART prominently, and he gave a short talk at the dedication ceremony. “As the twenty-first century unfolds,” he said, “we urgently need a more constructive relationship between our species and the natural world. We can no longer afford the vacationer’s emphasis on art for art’s sake. The new catchphrase may actually be, ‘art has a job to do.’” To that end, Bower describes tractors and backhoes as “sculptural tools” that brought this thirty-five-acre canvas into being.

For years, Allan Comp has been describing the Vintondale project as “art that works.” The AMD&ART Park, as it is now formally known, “works” in the sense that it filters acid mine drainage from millions of gallons of water. But it works in a much more subtle way as well—in the way the people of Vintondale experience and respond to it as art. Thering describes Vintondale as a blue-collar town where “people work hard to put food on the table for their families and they don’t have time for art, thank you very much.” However, Thering believes it was the artistic components of the park that brought locals—especially the men—around. As she sees it, most people don’t get too excited about the science

of water purification. But the older men of Vintondale *were* inspired to show their grandchildren what they looked like, back in the 1940s, walking out of mine portal #3.

“Art isn’t just about someone with too much time on their hands trying to draw a picture,” Thering said, paraphrasing the classic workingman’s distrust of the artist. But for the local people, “realizing that art would be meaningful to them was an important part of AMD&ART’s success.” It couldn’t have happened inside a gallery; it had to happen in this “green museum” where the experience, in a very fundamental sense, *is* the art.

ALLAN COMP HAS DESCRIBED the term “AMD&ART” as a shorthand for “science and the arts.” Following the ecological principle of interdependence, Comp possesses an almost mystical belief that disciplinary boundaries need to be broken down and worked across. Turf wars, especially at universities where budgets are strained, have too often kept “the sciences” and “the humanities” on opposite sides of campus, increasingly specialized, and so estranged that they, quite literally, cannot understand the language the other is speaking. But early in the twentieth century, the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead stressed that while different disciplines obviously represented different *values*, those values, in the end, remained complementary. “When you understand all about the sun and all about the atmosphere and all about the rotation of the earth,” wrote Whitehead in *Science and the Modern World*, “you may still miss the radiance of the sunset.” Comp, in his own effort to bring academic disciplines back into dialogue has undertaken another, smaller commission on the campus of the University of Virginia’s College at Wise.

The town of Wise sits in southwestern Virginia, near the Kentucky border. It is strip mine country, and these hills have been badly ravaged by bulldozers over the last fifty years. With the exception of Wyoming’s Powder River Basin, most of the United States’ current coal supply comes from this pocket of Appalachia where unemployment is high and graduation rates are low. Due to run-off from surface mines, the water quality here is especially poor. A recent Eastern Kentucky University study found that children in Letcher County, Kentucky, just across the state line, suffer from an alarmingly high rate of nausea,

diarrhea, vomiting, and shortness of breath—sometimes called “blue baby syndrome”—that can all be traced back to sedimentation and dissolved minerals in their drinking water.

UVa at Wise is a sleek, contemporary satellite campus with a beautiful pond and large, *fleur de lis*-style fountain in the middle of it. However, because it sits at the base of an old strip mine, the stream that flows through the campus and empties into the pond runs toxic with acid mine drainage of heavy metals. In 2001, the Lonesome Pine Conservation District received a grant to create a wetlands and acid mine drainage treatment system. Hearing about Comp’s work at Vintondale, the group asked him and landscape architect Kathy Poole to design the project. What they came up with is a series of four passive treatment ponds, much like those at Vintondale, that sit near the forested headwaters at the back of the campus. And as with Vintondale, Comp hopes to collaborate with sculptors and other artists who will help bring the region’s history back to the surface.

As I sat with Comp beside one of the trails that loop around the ponds, surrounded by Christmas fern and jewelweed, it occurred to me that this site represents a microcosm of the region’s natural and cultural history. Because the glaciers never moved this far south, central Appalachia has maintained the biological integrity that makes it the most diverse ecosystem in North America.

“IT COULDN’T HAVE HAPPENED INSIDE A GALLERY; IT HAD TO HAPPEN IN THIS ‘GREEN MUSEUM’ WHERE THE EXPERIENCE, IN A VERY FUNDAMENTAL SENSE, IS THE ART.”

And when the glaciers receded, this region became the seedbed that repopulated much of the continent. Unfortunately, because of mountaintop removal, a devastating form of strip mining that literally blasts away the tops of ridgelines in pursuit of coal seams, much of this land now looks as if glaciers had indeed swept through it. Five hundred square miles of the Appalachian Mountains have been flattened over the last few decades.

And one of the mining by-products was pouring into these treatment ponds as we watched. Here, in the woods that rim these treatment ponds, Comp hopes that students can begin to understand the biological complexity of the mixed mesophytic forest, the environmental consequences of an extractive industry, and the possibility of repairing that damage.

“When you come to the campus,” Comp said, “you don’t hear anything about its mining past.” And yet central Appalachia is a region that is fiercely proud of its past. The literature and the music of these mountains are particularly rich with stories of union standoffs and miners who worked for terrible wages in terrible conditions to feed their families. In 1931, Harlan County Sheriff J.H. Blair sent a group of deputies, also known as “gun thugs,” to the house of union organizer Sam Reece. When they only found his wife, Florence, and their seven children home, the men ransacked the place, then waited in the woods to ambush Sam. Somehow, Florence Reece got word to her husband to stay away. During the long standoff, so the story goes, she tore a

building, community and family on the one hand, and then the loss of jobs after World War II, the poverty, and the lingering, almost fatalistic frustration that the country has taken so many natural resources from this region and given very little back. “We want to reach back to that era people are proud of and bring it to the surface to recognize that was really important stuff,” Comp said. “And we’re doing important stuff now with the clean-up and reclamation of this particular place. It gives a continuum and you don’t have to think about anything shameful.”

It’s an optimistic—some would say unrealistic—vision for a region that has grown used to disappointment and neglect. But Comp’s vision for helping to revive a depressed community worked at Vintondale. In fact, last September, soon after my visit, the AMD&ART Park won the prestigious Phoenix Award. Touted as the “Brownfields equivalent of Hollywood’s Oscars,” the Phoenix is given annually to recognize exceptional reclamation projects on toxic industrial sites across the country.

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page from a wall calendar, and on the back of it wrote “Which Side Are You On?” The third stanza goes:

*They say in Harlan County
There are no neutrals there.
You’ll either be a union man
or a thug for J.H. Blair.*

The chorus repeats four times the troubling question, “Which side are you on?” Then the song ends:

*Don’t scab for the bosses,
Don’t listen to their lies.
Us poor folks haven’t got a chance
unless we organize.*

Sam Reece died from black lung from working in the mines his whole life, but “Which Side Are You On?” has become one of the most famous protest songs in the world.

Comp has a keen sense of the conflicted history that characterizes Appalachia. There is the pride in nation-

After pushing his version of reclamation for over a decade, Comp feels vindicated by the award. “It affirms that the arts and sciences belong together in reclamation,” he said as a red-backed salamander crawled through the leaf-litter at our feet. “That’s why they gave us the award. It wasn’t for the best science project.”

Moreover, one of the most important elements of Vintondale may not be its water treatment system or its sculptural installations, but rather its function as a potential *model* for many other such projects across the country. “AMD&ART is now both the name of a park in Vintondale and the name of an idea, a commitment to interdisciplinary work in the service of community aspirations to fix the environment,” Comp said. “I know I’m not going to turn Appalachians into optimistic Westerners, but if you can just push people a little to see what’s possible, then that’s something.”

The impact of the AMD&ART projects has reached Oregon, where Comp is taking on a similar commission, and even England. Whether or not AMD&ART as a non-profit organization will continue remains unresolved. Comp does not want to limit it to Pennsylvania, mainly because he and his wife live in D.C., and he is thinking of forming a new board and taking the organization to a national level. But Comp is equally ready to hand off, or at least pass on, what he has learned about rehabilitating landscapes and rural communities to younger visionaries, including the VISTA volunteers working with the Office of Surface Mining.

“It’s clear I’ll probably never be more than a minor bureaucrat in my full-time job,” Comp told me, “but I guess I’ve never really stopped being a teacher, even if I did bail out of academia. I still enjoy chasing an idea like AMD&ART just to see where it might lead, and I still enjoy bringing young people along with me to enjoy the hunt.”

Twelve years after his idea to resurrect the town dump of Vintondale and turn it into an iconoclastic, award-winning landscape, Comp feels more committed than ever to the idea that “arts and the humanities are absolutely necessary to environmental recovery.” Science can change the water chemistry, but for Comp, it is art and history, combined with the science, that will ultimately change people’s minds—will change the way we think about an industrial economy that is destroying the very ecosystems that sustain us, and all life. “It’s not the water that’s the problem, it’s us,” Comp said. “And if we fix us, we’ll start fixing the water.” *