Introduce yourself to T. Allan Comp, who works for the Office of Surface Mining in Washington, DC, and he'll give you an earful. He calls it "the art thing." As founding director of an organization with the curious name of AMD&Art—Acid Mine Drainage and Art—he became obsessed with the idea that art could somehow play a part in environmental reclamation. For professional artists, the notion that art can address ecological issues is taken for granted. Hans Haacke, Alan Sonfist, Mieke Laiderman Ukeles, Newton and Helen Harrison, Agnes Denes, and Mel Chin are but a few who have taken up the topic. But usually the artists approach the non-artists, insisting that they have a contribution to make. This time, however, it worked the other way around. Comp, who holds a PhD in the history of technology, actively sought out the artists.

As his idea developed, an unlikely mix of historians, hydrogeologists, landscape designers, artists, retired miners, community activists, AmeriCorps volunteers, Navy Seabees, politicians, schoolteachers, and students came together in an extraordinary effort involving three sites in Pennsylvania—the Dark Shade Watershed in Somerset County, the Hughes Bore Hole, and the town of Vintondale in Cambria County—areas ravaged by acidic runoff from abandoned mines.

"Every region that mined coal in the 19th and first half of the 20th century is afflicted at one level or another by acid mine drainage," Comp explained in a television spot for CNN. "AMD&Art is a project that is trying very hard to engage rural, usually impoverished communities in fixing up what has been left behind by this coal-mining legacy." Comp's vision engaged a new paradigm, one in which the problem could be seen as an opportunity "to create an economic—even a spiritual—asset, a chance for transformation."

Sounding more like a philosopher than a government official, he set out to build a coalition that would, in his words, ask "new questions" and find "new answers."

The first of these endeavors to come to fruition was Vintondale Park, a 35-acre coal field that has been transformed into a recreation area. On July 8, 2005, a public symposium involving scientists, historians, and artists was held at the church that housed the project's education center.

The next day, the townspeople held a gala celebration, complete with a parade down Main Street. At the dedication, the park was formally turned over to the residents, with its endowment to be managed by the nonprofit Community Foundation of the Alleghenies. Ten years in the making, the Vintondale reclamation looks, at first glance, like any other park; it includes a hiking/bicycling trail, a stream and ponds, wildflowers, baseball and soccer fields, and a pavilion. But it soon becomes apparent that the history of the land and the process by which it is being healed are included as well, and this is where the art comes in.

The Great Map is a large ceramic mosaic originally designed by North Carolina artist Peter Richards and eventually executed by Philadelphia artist Jessica Gorlin Liddell and former AmeriCorps member Dana Serow. Based on an old fire insurance map, a schematic of the town is juxtaposed with reproductions of historical photographs and newspaper articles sandblasted into black granite. The map is framed by the word "hope" translated into the 26 languages spoken by the immigrant miners. Visitors to the park can walk on and around the work, imagining the layout of the town and its mines as they were while viewing the panorama of the area as it is now. Practically the work serves as a point of orientation for geographic understanding of the park, symbolically as a means of preserving public memory, and artistically as a way to visualize both the past and the future of the Vintondale community.
The Great Map is located directly across from the entrance to the old Mine No. 6 shaft, facing the town on the pathway that once led to the bridge connecting to the company houses. The mine’s portal now frames a granite mural by Vermont artist Anita Lucero. Measuring 6 by 12 feet, the polished black stone is etched with ghostly images of miners, inspired by a 1938 home movie filmed by Vintondale resident Julius Morey. A crowd of almost 100 attended the dedication, three of whom had once worked in Mine No. 6.

Clean Slate situates two large pieces of Pennsylvania slate as platforms where “visitors can gather and reflect on the processes they witness in the park.” Designed by Claire Fellman and Emily Nye, graduate students in landscape architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, it was selected in a national competition. Clean water flows over one of the slabs as it returns to Blacklick Creek; the other piece acts as an overlook to a descent of 10 steps leading down through a carboniferous garden to the creek.

Stacy Levy’s Testing the Waters sculpts the environment itself. Along with landscape architect Julie Bargmann and hydrogeologist Robert Deason, she created a passive treatment system that de-acidifies the water while making its gradual purification visible.

“One of the most amazing things about this cleaning process of the water is the different colors that it turns,” Levy explained to CNN. “It’s an extraordinary transition from a sort of scary orange to a kind of pea-soup green, and then it blues out in the end. That movement from orange to blue is the color of healing the waters, and we’re going to play that up in this project by reiterating and enlarging those colors by the vegetation that we’re using in what we call our Limnus Garden. It’s showing the changing water quality through the vegetation that’s designed to be around each of the pools.” The now-purified water settles into an area of wetlands that allows it to seep back into Blacklick Creek.

AMD&Art, which is headquartered in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, is slowly but surely continuing its work at the Dark Shade Watershed and the Hughes Bore Hole. Forming the necessary alliances of funders, politicians, scientists, artists, and local residents takes time and tenacity. Its charismatic founder (San Francisco artist Jo Hanson once described Allan Comp as “a relaxed blend of John Muir, John Dewey, and John the Baptist”) has moved on. However, with the inclusion of artists like Lily Yeh, well known as the founder of Philadelphia’s Village of Arts and Humanities, the list of those committed to the mission remains impressive.

More information about AMD&Art is available at <www.amdandart.info>.