Reconstituting Geographies:
By José Ortiz-Pagán

There has been ongoing debate about how to appraise cultural and creative work—whether to focus on the final product or the process behind it. While this essay does not explore the former, the process was essential to understanding Heryk Tomassini's work as it unfolded during the RAIR artist residency.

I raise this point because the process through which Heryk produces most of his work—particularly the *nameless* piece developed and researched at the recycling compound—speaks to the possibility of unfolding alternative methods of production. These methods challenge traditional notions of creation by working within the constraints of post-commodified materials and, more radically, through a practice that is willing to abandon the art "object" altogether. While the limitations of working within a recycling center might seem restrictive, I believe the work fully embraces its position—geographically, existentially, and conceptually—situating itself within a space of tension, or more precisely, resistance.

From the beginning of the residency, and throughout my visits to Heryk's studio, I witnessed the *mythification* of the found objects he was collecting (rakes, fruit pickers, fishing nets, destroyed shovels, all standing on pails) —a deliberate effort to construct speculative narratives about their past uses. This act of storytelling was not about romanticizing labor from a Marxist or capitalist lens, but rather about reclaiming the history of these materials from the perspective of the worker—one often omitted from dominant historical accounts. Strategically, Heryk reframed these so-called "labor" objects through the lens of a society in the aftermath of industrialization, a society unable to control its compulsive consumption. In doing so, he gestures toward a haunting reality: that neither end of the political spectrum has made space for a truly humane alternative to production, and the failure to do so increasingly threatens life as we know it. In this sense, Heryk's work becomes a warning—a vision of what lies ahead if we fail to reconsider our current modes of living and making.

Artistically, his strategy is equally compelling. I see his work engaging with the legacy of overconsumption by reconstituting the landscape—almost as if taking on the burden of the Western tradition of landscape painting. This connection is no coincidence given the ongoing legacy of land grabs and colonial invasions that continue to shape our present. Heryk's installation stages a quiet, subversive inquiry: a line of structures positioned on a Superfund site, facing the Delaware River—site of Washington's historic crossing—and directly confronting the opulent row of McMansions across the shore. The installation thus becomes a critique of wealth, displacement, and environmental degradation, literally grounded on land stolen from Indigenous peoples and stripped of its environmentally attuned technologies.

Furthermore, Heryk positioned several rows of large cubes—approximately 6 to 7 feet tall—covered with industrial tarpaulin. These structures resemble makeshift shelters, not designed to endure, but rather to evoke the harsh and unsustainable realities of temporary living conditions spreading across the globe. They function almost like an emotional tally—a visual

and visceral reckoning with the true cost of overconsumption. This contrast is especially poignant when viewed against the backdrop of the nearby *McMansions* and the overdeveloped cityscape of Philadelphia.

Yet Heryk's critique extends beyond Philadelphia. It resonates with the current crisis in Puerto Rico, where violent and large-scale displacement is ongoing (and where he currently lives and practices). His work doesn't just issue a symbolic "bill" for what humanity has consumed—it emotionally invoices us, while also expanding the landscape of concern beyond any single geography. In doing so, he frames the installation within the brutal context of colonialism and its enduring consequences.

This becomes especially clear in the installation's central "totemic" columns—three sculptural towers placed at the core of the space. Each seems to stand as a monument to what we, collectively, have become proficient in: destruction masked as progress. The first, draped in military-green slashed tarpaulin, flutters in the wind like a tattered flag. The second is covered in artificial turf, a thermal blanket, and topped with an empty bucket. The third, adorned with copper plates and a lifesaver and capped with an empty water bottle, reads like an elegy to survival. All three are precariously supported by rickety buttresses—structures that seem on the verge of collapse, amplifying the sense of fragility and danger inherent in the systems we've built.

This "center stage" is framed by two distinct scenes. To the south, it is confronted by a cluster of tools—shovels, fruit pickers, rakes, and more—standing upright in pails and buckets, anchored in a foundation of sand and concrete. As I mentioned earlier, these used tools face the stage like silent witnesses or survivors. They seem to demand answers—to the impact of unchecked industrialization, to the promises unfulfilled, the treaties never honored, the lands stolen, and the lives lost or never returned.

To the north of the center stage: empty bleachers. I consider this one of the most poignant elements of the installation. For most of the time while the piece was being built and even after its formal opening, the bleachers remained vacant. Yet they became briefly animated during a performance by a group of Bomba musicians—artists carrying the tradition of Afro-descendant music from Puerto Rico. Their presence introduced a different rhythm, a fleeting yet powerful possibility of life, time, and movement.

This ephemeral moment—both performance and ritual—offered an alternative way of relating to the land beneath the installation. Through sound, gesture, and collective presence, the artist activated the tools not only as remnants of labor but as instruments of transformation. It opened space for a subjective, perhaps spiritual, dialogue with the earth—suggesting that another relationship is still possible. A relationship rooted in care, memory, and coexistence. A glimmer of hope in how we might yet learn to see, and live with, the land differently.

Returning to the beginning of this essay, I'm compelled once more to ask how we will approach artistic work in the future—particularly how we engage with landscape and our relationship to it. Will we continue to rely on mimetic representation or "Art" as an artificial means of

understanding? Or can we begin to shift toward processes, rituals, and gatherings as alternative ways of constructing lifestyles more aligned with our humanity and our coexistence with others?

In this light, I see Heryk's work as one of these vital inquiries—an ongoing process of research and exploration that continually asks what it means to create, and how those acts of creation relate to the LAND.