

Below is a transcript and slides from the presentation for The Paper Artifact Conference, Falmouth University, August 2025

# The Paper Artifact

## Paper Value; The work of Yuken Teruya

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Yuken Teruya, Green Economy, editorial image for the New York Times, 2010

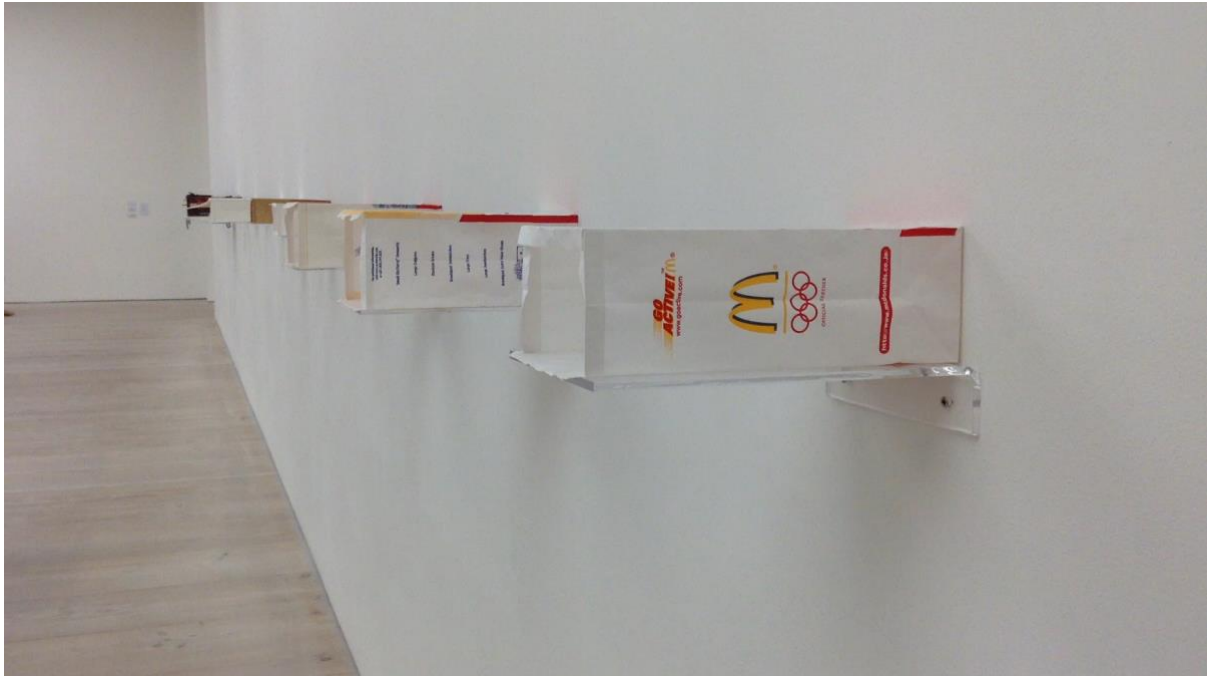
### Paper Value; The theoretical versus the realised worth

I first saw Yuken Teruya's work in the summer of 2013 in an exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery that was titled Paper. Struck by its intimate and elegant power I have had this work in the back of my mind for around 12 years and this summer the Paper Artifact conference allowed me the opportunity to revisit and develop my understanding of Teruya's work. So, I would like to thank the organisers this opportunity.

I have used the term "Paper Value" in the title of this presentation because I find the term to be of particular interest in relation to Teruya's work, we use the phrase paper value to point to a tension if not a contradiction between the theoretical value and the real value of things and I think that this tension operates at the heart of Teruya's work. I think that we can also go further with this point to consider the complex interaction between a symbolic financial paper-value in relation to a cultural paper-value of a given piece of paper.

Teruya's work plays extensively with these paper-values, at the simplest level paper is on the one hand powerful and enduring in an abstract and symbolic sense (legal

documents are a good example of this) yet its materiality is quite fragile. On a more complex level Teruya's interventions with readymade paper artifacts provokes the audience to re-value the abstract, symbolic, cultural and material worth of the paper's value to arrive at conclusions that may upend the day-to-day routines of life.



Yuken Teruya's work in The Paper Exhibition, 2013, Saatchi Gallery London

For over a decade Teruya produced work that relies on intricate cutting and reforming of found paper artifacts that have the power to generate forces of desire and belief, his use of bank notes, newspapers and product packaging cause us to reevaluate the power of paper artifacts that pass routinely through our hands on a daily basis. I made this short 3 minute video (unavailable in this document) of Teruya's work in the summer of 2013 at the Saatchi gallery and at the risk of falling into the trap of showing my holiday snaps at conference I thought it would be a good way of acquainting you with some of Teruya's work.

What is missing from this Saatchi installation is the lighting employed in other installations of the work where spotlights shine through the cutouts dramatising the interior of the bag creating an intense theatrical space. Such dramatization enhances the difference between the inside and the outside of the bag. The exterior branding becomes relatively mundane and that which is to be found within a delight. The interior space that should become deactivated once the product is removed and consumed finds a new life created through the voids that cut irreverently through the exterior interrupting the voice of the Logos and strapline messages.

I have approached an analysis of Teruya's through 2 key texts - Dan Hick's recent book *Monuments will Fall* and Martin Heidegger's 1954 essay *The Question concerning Technology*

I will begin by talking about Dan Hicks and in a few slides I will turn my attention to Martin Heidegger.

Hicks' book is a text determined to expose the legacy of British colonialism by identifying the persistence of white supremacist colonial systems and thinking that have become structurally ingrained in British culture. Hicks is particularly interested in museum collections as not only holding specific objects such as statues that are monuments to colonial thinking but also the institutions themselves as being monuments. The relevance of Hicks to this discussion of Teruya's work is to consider the bags, bank notes and newspapers that Teruya uses as monuments and to realise that those monuments have been constructed by organisations that wish to develop systems of belief and effectively colonise our minds and world view in a manner that is closely related to the arguments of Hicks.



Left, McDonalds bag from the 2002 Olympics in the collection of the Smithsonian  
Right, Prada shopping bag in used condition for sale on ebay for \$31

The two images above are examples of the monumental nature of branded paper bags, The Smithsonian has seen the cultural value of the disposable McDonalds bag to be of such cultural worth that it has acquired one for the collection, and the used Prada bag on the right is not alone in responding to a market desire for used branded shopping bags, the ebay page that offers the empty bag for sale also shows a photo of presumably the buyer leaving the store with a full bag in a state of euphoria. The monumentality of these branded paper bags and the paper/cultural value they represent is the energy that Teruya modifies through his interventions. As I pointed out in the previous slide Hicks argues that a monument is not limited to physical objects such as statues, he sees the monument as being manifest in both material and conceptual forms such as emblems, institutions and structures of thought, his work focuses on museums as monuments to colonial white supremacist thought. And while museums are his key concern those museums are linked to many other organisations whose nature is educational, commercial and militaristic., Hicks' work argues that we need to vigorously modify and explain the monuments that are maintained in our world as an act of decolonisation. Within the context of Hicks' work I would argue that an essential strategy of Teruya's art is the modification of monuments. The monuments shown here are apparatus that have been carefully constructed and maintained by brands that have been built from a regime of signs that are designed to capture and persuade us, shaping our sense of being in the world.



Left, McDonalds bag from the 2010 Olympics in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Right, Yuken Teruya, Notice Forest (Mc Donalds bag)

Heidegger's mid 20<sup>th</sup> century essay, *The Question concerning Technology* reflects on the enormous impact and change resulting from rapid development and dominance of technology within day to day life in the first half of the twentieth century, for Heidegger technology exerts a powerful effect on our sense of being in the world. If we consider the bags used by Teruya as technological items produced via refined manufacture processes and also the use of visual language as a form of technology, we can consider applying a Heideggerian approach to understanding Teruya's work. Heidegger considered that technology presents a danger to us if we consider it as being neutral, something that we activate. He argues that technology activates us and that we are in effect made by our own tools. As we are involved in the causation of technology we are revealing through the development and use of technology a map of our being in the world, where our experience of nature is limited and constricted. This constricted relationship with nature, may be thought of in terms of distance. Heidegger argues that technology is shrinking space and time, but this does not increase our nearness to things. Fast food outlets reduce the preparation time of a meal to a few minutes, and they also offer the same food almost anywhere in the world. The fast-food outlet shrinks space and time while creating a distance between us the consumer and the source, the nature and the significance of the food we eat. To go further the act of giving food or drink to a guest is a ritual of coming together of nearness but within the technological process there is no nearness between the giver and the receiver only a subordinate relationship to the monumental brand.

When Teruya intervenes with the bag, he is producing a unique hand made object from a mass-produced item, through his intricate and attentive making our nearness to Teruya is established and the hallucinatory spell of nearness cast by the brand is shattered. I would also point out that each tree that he makes is a representation of an actual single tree that does exist, it is not a non-specific representation of tree-ness, that would be too close to the brand or logo as a concept, consequently our nearness to nature also grows through the uniqueness of Teruya's sculpture and in turn our nearness to the living source material from which the bag is made. Teruya is toppling the monument



Yuken Teruya, The New York Times 2011

The seedlings that Teruya constructs from the New York Times invites us to consider the organic material source of the paper and also the messages carried by that paper in the form of editorial content.

In his 1954 essay *The Question Concerning Technology* Heidegger uses the example of a forestry worker whose purpose is to nurture trees into becoming forests that will be harvested for their cellulose that in turn will make paper that will carry printed messages that to quote Heidegger will “in their turn, set public opinion to swallowing what is printed”

These stages are seen by Heidegger as transformations of energy released from nature to be stored or to become a stock, the humans involved in this process become captured and crafted by the technology. Technology orders nature as a standing reserve of energy ready to become processed. Teruya’s seedlings like the trees in the bags reconnect us with nature mending a link that was broken when technology reduced nature into a source of raw material that would be converted into a standing reserve, Teruya’s interventions may be understood through a Heideggerian mode of revealing that allows us to realise our position and seek a return to an organic source. Teruya is also pointing to the editorial content as a message that should break free from the ordering process of technological metabolism of the news cycle. Something may grow from this news paper.....



Yuken Teruya Money Tree, 2015 -2016

Teruya's Money Trees can also be understood as a Heideggerian standing reserve of energy. The abstract worth or the paper value of money is inherently unstable and its material worth as paper is limited yet it is a reserve of energy waiting to be transformed into goods or services. With reference to Heidegger's example of the forest as a standing reserve of energy money literally does grow on trees. Currency is also monumental in that it represents a system of belief, and it relies on that belief to sustain its value consequently the monument of currency requires constant maintenance. Bank notes are also objects of cultural significance that present carefully chosen constructs and projections of national identity and like most monuments they are hallucinatory, Teruya is destabilising that hallucination and offering us an alternative version of the paper's value. In the closing chapters of Hicks' book *Every Monument Will Fall* he asserts that all monuments will fall unless they are actively maintained and those who are profiting from the illusion. He also energetically argues throughout the book that monuments need to be revealed, modified and explained. Teruya's Money Trees like the other work that we have seen today reveal, engage, modify and explain some of monuments that we are exposed to and the hypnotic power they may exert.

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