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# NI YOUYU

## RELIC

29 September – 27 October 2018



“The obsolescence, the residue, the dereliction, I name them relic” – Ni Youyu

**Contemporary Fine Arts** is pleased to present Relic, **Ni Youyu**'s second exhibition with the gallery. Showcasing 39 works from the Pinball Series, Relic offers a unique view into Ni's exploration of the form. Just one example of the diverse creations that comprise his practice, Ni collects, refits and hand-paints the pinball installations, employing cosmological and mythological motifs.

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Ni's works approximate a universal cognizance found in moving beyond paradigms of antiquity and modernity. Ni developed this principle in his studies at the Fine Arts College of Shanghai University, where he specialized in Chinese paintings. Educated in traditional Chinese ink-wash painting (a style involving ink applied to rice paper or silk, often in scroll form), he draws from the rich and deep traditions of Song (960-1279AD) and Yuan (1271-1368AD) Dynasty ink paintings, when the ancient artists pursued the unity between man and nature within the limited space of paintings. While the genre focuses on a relationship to antiquity, Ni's works explore the temporal and spatial interplay on a cosmological scale. Ni maps intersections between Chinese and Western cosmologies and art histories with precision and awareness of life. The astronomical tropes in his Dust series, for instance, evoke the cosmology of Five Dynasties and Northern Song Dynasty landscape paintings, while a recurrent grid technique draws upon Renaissance Scandinavian landscape paintings.

For his Pinball Series, Ni mines flea markets, online auctions and garbage bins to gather his trove of materials. He incorporates bits and pieces into his works: chipped figurines, pieces of marble, mechanical components, broken rulers. These discarded fragments carry his philosophy, repurposed as vessels for metaphors that are similarly fragmented, not simple to decipher. In the white Pinball Installations, echoes of Park Seo-Bo resound, in other works, the impact of Joseph Cornell, to whom Ni pays direct homage, is evident. In tracing the fundamental cognizance that informs understanding of the dynamic between the ancient and contemporary, between China and the West, Ni moves beyond division of identity, nationality or race. The subjects of his practice, whether dust, the ruler, the waterfall or the pinball installation, all gesture towards a collective embodiment of life.

A catalogue accompanying Relic with images of the Pinball Series and an essay by art critic Kito Nedo will be published in November. This essay is also included as an addendum to this press release.

Ni Youyu (b. 1984 Jiangxi, China) lives and works in Shanghai. He graduated from the Fine Art College of Shanghai (2007). Recent institutional solo exhibitions include Concrete Waterfall, Kunstverein Konstanz, Konstanz, Germany (2017); Constant dripping wears away a stone, MOCA Taipei, Taipei, Chinese Taiwan (2015); Inches of Time, Art Museum of Nanjing University of the Arts, Nanjing, China (2014) and A Brief History, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China (2012).

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# Relic

Kito Nedo

In December 1945, the young architect Georges Candilis knocked on Le Corbusier's studio door on the Rue de Sèvres in Paris.<sup>1</sup> To his surprise, the pioneer of modern architecture himself opened the door and asked gruffly, "What do you want?" The announced visitor timidly replied, "I'm a Greek architect and I came to say hello." Corbusier's face brightened: "Come in, if you are Greek, then you must have a sense of proportion. I'll show you something." Writing about this meeting a decade later, Candilis describes his surprise when Corbusier did not present a model, but simply reached into his pocket and pulled out a numerical volume divided into sections. „This is a great item which will revolutionise the work of the architects, young man!" he exclaimed, "For the first time, I am able to transform dimensions into proportions, and what proportions? Those of the people, for whom we work." Corbusier was describing his Modulor, a measurement he had invented in which harmonic dimensions, derived from human proportions and the golden ratio, replace metric abstraction. Corbusier's goal: the humanisation of measurement in architecture. The system was employed on a major scale for the first time in the design of the prototypical Unité d'Habitation (Housing Unit) in Marseilles, also known as the „Housing Machine". When the architect planned a Typ Berlin (Berlin Type) unit with 530 apartments at the 1957 „Interbau" International Building Exhibition in Berlin at the Berlin Olympic Stadium, however, he was met with resistance from the Berlin building authorities. They demanded, among other things, that the architect raise the planned ceiling height of the apartments from 2.26 metres to 2.6 metres. Corbusier was annoyed, to say the least, by this disregard for his Modulor system.

The artist Ni Youyu collects rulers: curve rulers, slide rulers, folding rulers. His Shanghai studio is full of rulers he has found all over the world. Ni's interest in measurement and its instruments goes beyond collecting measuring tools. His artistic practice builds upon existing measurement units and instruments and imagines new ones. His perceptual ruler, for example, proposes measuring perception: „I want to kill some time / and make a perceptual ruler. / I hope there will be architects using my ruler..."<sup>2</sup> Ni aims at a sore spot in architecture: it depends on standards, orders and rules, but must maintain the subjectivity, diversity and expressiveness of design in order to continue to develop, and to remain an art. Only the entirely self-sufficient, those who build their own house and bake their own bread, need not concern themselves with standard units of measurement.

In 2014, Ni made a 167 centimetre "Sigg Ruler," divided into 1000 units like a standard ruler, for the art collector Uli Sigg. Ni lends this objective tool subjectivity. Sigg, an entrepreneur who served as the Swiss ambassador in Beijing in the 1990s, began collecting Chinese contemporary art in the 1970s. Today, he is an influential figure, a grey eminence in the international art world. Deeming the collector the measure of all things prompts a few associations. Take, for example, an early work by Martin Kippenberger, who seemed to make fun of an all too predictable conceptual art. During a three-month stay in Florence in the mid-seventies, Kippenberger painted a series of 84 greyish canvases, each 60 x 50 centimetres and stacked one above the other to reach the artist's 1.89 metre height („Uno di voi, un Tedesco in Firenze", 1976). Just 10 centimetres before reaching his self-imposed goal, the painter simply stopped painting and left the city.

As the Swiss engineer Thomas Glatthard once pointed out, measurement permeates art both as a temporal and geographical motif. Depending on the time and place, the motif carries different implications: „the act of surveying or the land surveyor appears in connection with the preservation of soil fertility (Egypt), land development and division (Roman Empire), creation (the Middle Ages), the acquisition of knowledge (Renaissance), the conquest of new countries and continents (15th and 16th centuries), new technology as a new creation, but also the danger of losing one's soul (Baroque, Romanticism), the protection and expansion of the habitat (flood protection, drainage, fertilisation, railways in the 19th century) and the technical criticism of recent decades."<sup>3</sup> So measurement was never really left to the architects, programmers and engineers, just as they too always dealt with the cultural ramifications of their actions. We are left to ask what image represents the world today? This place subject to constant, real-time measurement enabled by digital networking.

In Ni's latest series of works, "Pinball Series," measuring instruments like rulers, protractors, thermometers and clock gears are recurring components. The pinball installations are assemblages of various objects, found trinkets and materials installed in small and medium-sized, wooden boxes. The frames' arched upper sides offer a purely formal architectural impression. These boxes are in fact the frames of old, wooden pinball games, which are found today in antique markets and on websites like eBay. Ni transforms them into a kind of display case, some of which resemble top-view, architectural models (e.g. „Swimming Pool", 2016 or „Relic 5", 2017). Other works revolve around astronomical and cosmological phenomena such as the solar eclipse („Eclipse", 2016), the structure of our solar system („Solar System", 2015), the largest planet in our solar system („Jupiter", 2016), comets („Comet", 2017) or dark matter („Black Matter", 2016). Black matter, an invisible specimen that has not been explicitly detected, is assumed to exist on the basis of gravitational observation and calculation.

A key work in the series is "F=ma" (2017), which refers to Newton's second law of motion. This law states that the acceleration of an object is dependent upon two variables: the net force acting upon the object and the mass of the object. Ni regards this law not merely as a matter of physical theory, drawing upon it instead to articulate a basic philosophical approach to the world and the cosmos. From this perspective, everything in the world can be located within an orbit, at any moment, all the time. Everything is in constant motion. Every object and living creature constantly adjusts its relationship to another. This vantage point sheds light not only on the present, but also on culture and history, becoming a sort of metaphysical cultural law. Everything moves, everything flows.

Ni mines flea markets, online auctions and garbage bins to gather his trove of materials. He incorporates bits and pieces into his works: chipped figurines, pieces of marble, mechanical components, broken rulers. These discarded fragments carry his philosophy, repurposed as vessels for metaphors that are similarly fragmented, not simple to decipher. Ni finds a beauty, a preciousness, in the objects he collects. Sometime the objects bring connotations of their own, bestowing an inheritance of meaning onto the work of which Ni might not even be aware. Ni cites this as integral to the Pinball Series, as well as to his use of found materials in his practice more broadly. He is not interested in creating something from scratch. He is concerned instead with observing and re-organizing existing materials and objects in order to create something new from what is already there. His assembling is recast as an almost passive act, as he brings things together in order to constitute a new meaning. He creates constellations, which might somehow already exist, in an intangible, mysterious way. Thus, the task of the artist becomes to draw these constellations into existence, pulling meaning from proportion and precision.

The colour white prompts a range of associations. Many of these connections are not linked to the colour per se. For the Ukrainian painter Kazimir Malevich, for instance, white is the abyss, white is infinite. He began by reducing everything to a "zero of form" and later developed "no colour" with his masterpiece "White on White." The Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein defined white as "colourless." Ni, on the contrary, sees white as a sum of all colours in the highest key: "If you look closely enough, you can find the richest nuances in white. Nuances that are intensely unified in whiteness." This exploration of the colour is prevalent in several pinball installations, such as "Relic" (2017) or "Radiance" (2017). For Ni, the colour white prompts thoughts of the South Korean painter Park Seo-Bo and of Beijing's snow-covered Forbidden City, which offers the onlooker only a vague notion of its powerful colors and structures. Monochrome master Park Seo-Bo exhibited his writing traces on white and under white in the groundbreaking 1975 exhibition at the Tokyo Gallery, Five Hinsek 'White': 5 Korean Artists. Echoes of Park Seo-Bo resonate with Ni's understanding of the colour's subtlety. All the elements used in the white pinball installations are materials left over from the creation of other works. Ni alludes to the ruins of classical Greek temples. These are the ruins of his works, the negative forms of intentions, vessels for imagination.

On other occasions, Ni employs more explicit allusion, a departure from his tendency to hover in the implicit. "Musician" (2016), for instance, resembles a family tree of birds, where each bird represents a famous musician like Bach, Mozart or Beethoven. Ni seems to suggest that the narratives of natural and cultural history observe similar classification principles. Ni used print cut-outs from original 18th and 19th century European encyclopedias, coloured the birds by hand and attributed each with the birth and death dates of a famous musician. This work also engages the way in which artists confront the legacy of the masters that precede them and the knowledge that others will follow. How different are they from the dreadfully beautiful, lifeless birds? How different is cultural history from a carefully categorized and artificially arranged natural history? This is certainly one mode of grappling with the burden of art history, which is presented here as a highly-selective and constructed presentation of a much more complex story.

Some of Ni's installations resemble miniature vitrines or dioramas, nodding to the tradition of the museum as a "knowledge machine." The pinball installations can be located within a long art historical tradition. This history reaches back to the old curiosity cabinets, cabinets of art and wonders, which marked the beginning of the museum. Their form also recalls the assemblage boxes of the renowned American sculptor, painter and experimental filmmaker Joseph Cornell (1903 - 1972), to whom Ni pays direct homage in "When Night Falls (Homage to Joseph Cornell)", (2018). Cornell was interested not only in theatre, ballet and film, but also in maps and astronomy, describing his practice in terms of "constructions." He assembled found objects, photographs, texts and postcards into poetic spatial collages, placing these constructions in homemade wooden boxes that were sealed at the front with a glass pane. In the early 1950s, Marcel Duchamp described Cornell as "among the best American artists of today."<sup>4</sup> Ni's pinball installations pay respect to craftsmanship, to classical ways of showing and seeing. It is as if he wants to defend the remaining spaces for imagination in a present saturated with immersive technology. Harkening back to an analogue point in time, his pinball installations lure in viewers, insisting on concentration, offering calm. Ni suggests that the ultimate questions are best addressed through modest form and technique. These works testify to the significance of an artwork as a vehicle for inspiration, unconcerned with production value or cutting-edge technology.

Ni's pinball installations become materialised modes of thought that discreetly insist on the game as the basic mode of cognitive production. The spiritual and the material appear as parts of the same sphere, the history of

culture and technology is superimposed like a slide. Like artists, architects are cognizant that the tools they work with impact and influence their ideas.<sup>5</sup> These tools also point to the complexity of the tasks they perform. During the European Renaissance, for instance, rulers were used that did not show "real" lengths, but were shortened instead according to certain scales so that scale drawings could be produced without constant conversion. Today, people work with computers or draw manually with triangles that display six different scales. These tools are not only used by architects, but also by mechanical engineers or cartographers.<sup>6</sup>

Decimal measurement systems (based on the basic number 10) were already present in China and parts of India in ancient times. In Europe and the West, the basis of today's measurement has been set out (with some exceptions, such as the USA or Great Britain) with the introduction of the metric system, the basic unit of which is the metre. It was established around 1793 during the French Revolution. The new measurement system, introduced at the time by the Paris Academy of Sciences, was to be developed, as far as possible, according to criteria of reason and to correspond to the ten millionth part of the distance between the pole and the equator. This intention, however, was never fully realized. In the mid-1790s, a total of sixteen standard metres - „mètre étalon“ - were installed in public places in the Parisian city area to impose the unit of measurement on the population. Such a public metre scale can still be consulted in the French capital, where one is installed near the Palais du Luxembourg.<sup>7</sup> The folding ruler, which is today a household object, had numerous predecessors. In 1886, the inventor brothers Anton and Franz Ullrich, who came from the May Chamber of Rhineland-Palatinate, patented the „innovation in joint scales with spring locking“, and therefore the prototype of today's joint scales. This development was probably not completely new: folding rulers are said to have been in use even in ancient times. Illustrations in Denis Diderot's widely distributed Encyclopaedia published during the second half of the 18th century also verify the use of such instruments.<sup>8</sup>

About a hundred years ago, in 1918, the writer, artist and Dadaist Raul Hausmann mounted a piece of measuring tape, a folding rule, a stamp roller, a clock, a wallet, a collapsible drinking cup and a cardboard number on a wooden wig head and gave his work the double title „The Spirit of our Time / Mechanical Head“. The work addressed the absence of spirituality and discomfort in mechanised culture. What purpose does spirituality serve in a mechanised world? German media philosopher Siegfried Zielinski described the advent of technology between the wars: technology pushed itself into life and „impudently and ruthlessly took possession of it. This technology then encountered a situation of shortage. There was a demand for it.“ Today, Zielinski continues (describing a present eight years before the introduction of the Apple iPhone), the situation has changed as technology has become „a drama of abundance.“ The „interface“ determines the way this excess is handled: „The Hollywood version comes from California: an interface that is cuddly, ergonomic, Aristotelian. Whoever masters interaction between machines, between programmes and machines, and between media people and media machines, is powerful today.“<sup>9</sup> Anyone who wants to counter the power of corporations and the state must learn the craft of hacking.

A ruler is both a measurement scale and a leader. By measuring a room, one takes possession of it in more than just a symbolic manner. Colonial history offers countless evidence of this dynamic. Today, this is resoundingly illustrated by the Google Maps navigation service, which launched in 2005 and now cites more than one billion users worldwide. According to a recent New York Times article, the app has already become the „primary mediator of location descriptions“.<sup>10</sup> This can lead to false name entries as the decision-making power of Google cartographers redefines the identity of a big city or a small town alike, leaving the inhabitants with little ability to defend their own location. Yet another example of the defining power of Silicon Valley. This omnipotence extends to the fact that today, every person who owns a telephone can be located with the utmost precision. You don't have to be a conspiracy theorist to come to this banal realisation. Perhaps this is also the reason for the sentimental fascination the „Pinball Series“ inspires: these artworks seem to be about a time in which measuring was an activity closer to discovery than being discovered. In this respect, it is both nostalgic and futuristic at the same time.

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2. Ni Youyu: Inches of time
3. Thomas Glatthard: Vermessen und Landmesser in Literatur und bildender Kunst. p.103-123, here: p.103. In: Zur Geschichte des Vermessungswesens. (VDV series Volume 8. Der Vermessungsingenieur in der Praxis) Publishing House Chmielorz. Wiesbaden: 1995
4. Marcel Duchamp, „Memorandum regarding Joseph Cornell,“ 1951; Cornell archival file, The Art Institute of Chicago. Quoted after: Lynda Roscoe Hartigan: Joseph Cornell. Navigating the Imagination. Peabody Essex Museum and Yale University Press: 2007, p.15
5. See: Robert Temel: Mittel und Zweck. p.104-143. In: Elke Krasny, Architekturzentrum Wien (Vienna). Architektur beginnt im Kopf. Birkhäuser Publishing House Basel, Boston, Berlin: 2008
6. See: Elke Krasny, Architekturzentrum Wien (Ed.): Architektur beginnt im Kopf. Birkhäuser Publishing House Basel, Boston, Berlin: 2008, p.167
7. Philip and Phylis Morrison and the studio of Charles and Ray Eames: Zehn hoch. Dimensionen zwischen Quarks und Galaxien. Spektrum-der-Wissenschaft Publishing Association Heidelberg: 1987, p. 114
8. Raymond Wiseman: Der Meter ist nicht das Maß aller Dinge. FAZ online 15.10.2012, accessed September 2018; Permalink: <http://www.faz.net/-gyg-73lth>
9. Siegfried Zielinski: Maschinen der Enthaltsamkeit – Maschinen des Überflusses. In: Junggesellenmaschinen. Extended new edition. Springer Publishing House Vienna, New York: 1999, p.340-350, here: p.342
10. Jack Nicas: As Google Maps Renames Neighborhoods, Residents Fume. New York Times, 2.8.2018