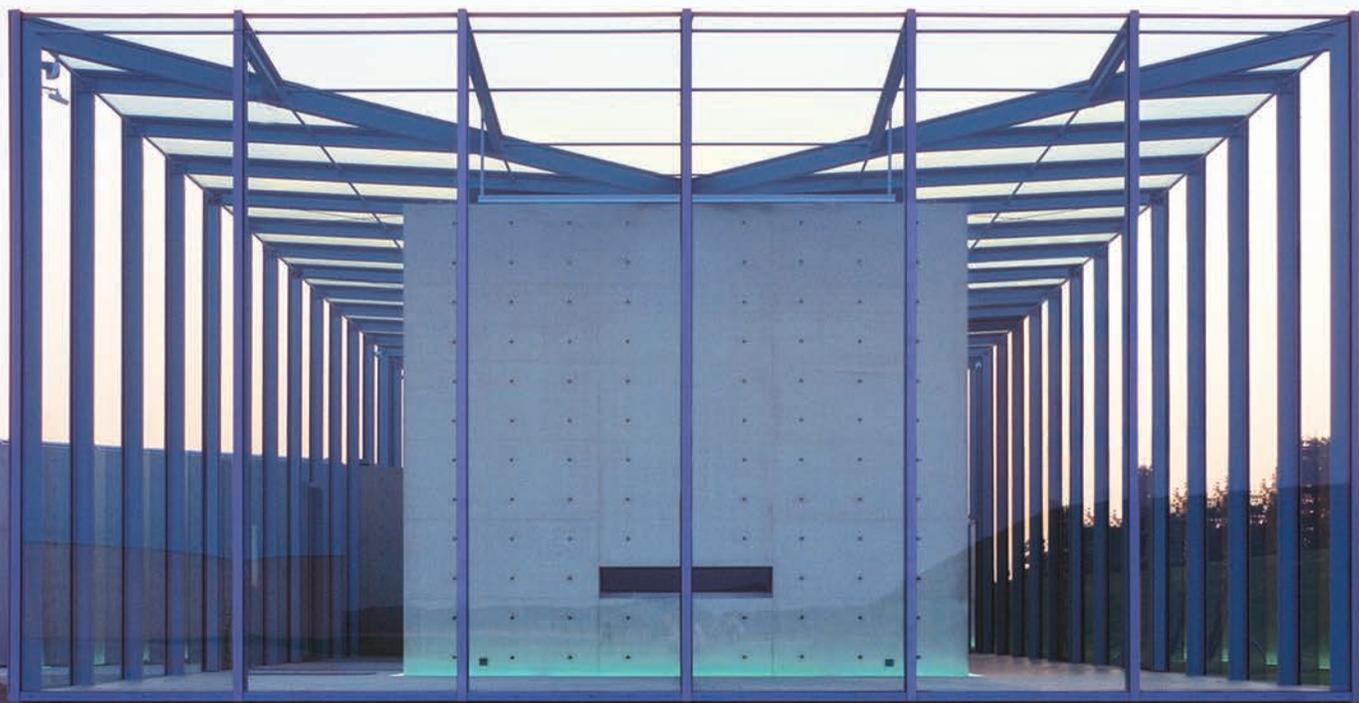




INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

# HOW TO SEE [WHAT ISN'T THERE]

by Gianni Jetzer



“Absences are not just what there is not, but rather what was there and now is not any longer, or what should be there and yet is not.”<sup>1</sup>

The group show “How to See [What Isn’t There]”—on view at Langen Foundation, Düsseldorf, from September 2018 to March 2019—presents works from the Burger Collection, a Hong Kong-based private collection of contemporary artworks from Europe, the Americas and Asia. Artists have proven to be extremely innovative in activating the immaterial in their work, often operating in conceptual gestures and utilizing themes such as disappearance, emptiness, dematerialization and a simple—yet profound—framing of the void. In this particular exhibition, the works were selected to highlight and ultimately blur the dichotomy of presence and absence.

The exhibition aims to unveil some surprising perspectives by exploring constant dialogues between the visible and the invisible, presence and absence, and material and immaterial, exploring the status of reality, memory and other aspects of human life. The show is structured in five chapters: “Reaching for Emptiness,” “Archaeology of Here and Now,” “The Nature of Absence,” “Out of Nothing” and “I Is Another.”

The Tadao Ando-designed Langen Foundation is situated in Raketstation Hombroich, a former rocket station site. The history of the grounds exists within the Cold War narrative; until as late as 1988, North Atlantic Treaty Organization had stationed Nike missiles here in preparation for a possible strike by the Russians, anticipating an imminent, invisible threat. To shed light on the history of the Raketstation, the exhibition includes three wallpapers, selected by the curatorial team, depicting various “Nike” objects and figures throughout history: from the winged Greek goddess of victory, most famously represented in the Hellenistic sculpture *The Winged Victory of Samothrace*, now in the collections of the Louvre museum; to the ballistic missiles that were once stored at the Raketstation; and the famous logo of the contemporary American sports apparel company, stating “Just Do It.” The wallpapers illuminate unique historical trajectories, from Greek mythology to the

Cold War to branded consumerism, creating a bricolage of immaterial and material references to local identity united by a central symbol: Nike.

Semiotics has played a large part in uncovering the complex relationships between the material and the immaterial, invoked in this exhibition. The reciprocity between signifier and signified in Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory does not rely on logical framework, but rather on social conventions that consolidate these relationships. Parallel to linguistics, visual art is an arbitrary system of signs whose content can be packaged in material and immaterial ways and whose realities are negotiable.

The exhibition features works that literally direct our gaze to something other than the objects, or act as indicators of complex histories and processes, as well as conveying the presence of another absent human process. Together, the group of artworks ultimately questions the intangible networks between images and objects, inviting us to see and explore these hidden layers.

### What Reality?

How do images and their frames constitute reality? How do they change or challenge our perceptions of the world? What lies beyond the visible, waiting to be activated?

Such questions are central to the practices of artists Jon Rafman and Kris Martin, whose works reveal potential dimensions of reality through the sacred and the digital. In reinterpreting the landscape, through Martin’s metal frame structure, reminiscent of a multi-paneled Renaissance altarpiece and a pair of virtual-reality goggles that reveal a Doomsday setting, designed by Rafman, the works propose experiences of the vistas surrounding the Raketstation that are at once sublime, holy and dystopic.

### Reaching for Emptiness

While the world around us can hold a multitude of meanings, nothingness can be used as a tool of transition from one reality to the next. It can illuminate the paths beyond, just as negative space is used in artistic

<sup>1</sup> Elisa Adami, “In the Presence of Absence,” *Mnemoscape*, no. 2 (March 2015), 2.





composition to delineate a subject without showing the subject itself. When there is a total lack of subject, however, what is one to make of emptiness?

The Japanese concept of *ma*, as in other Buddhist and Asian philosophies, describes emptiness as a positive phenomenon detaching us from material structures and pushing us along the path to transcendence. The experience of this path may be described as a phenomenon, as a pure duration of time, allowing for an emphasis on beauty beyond the static object. The architecture of the Japanraum (Japan Room)—where the exhibition is held—was built specifically to show long Japanese scrolls from the Langen Foundation collection and employs a long, empty space, a structure typical of architect Tadao Ando’s work, which is informed by Buddhist Zen philosophy. Building on the model of emptiness, the space was designed to emphasize simplicity and an environment that provides frictionless experiences of time and transit.

### Archaeology of Here and Now

In classical archaeology, remnants from past cultures are excavated and interpreted as sources for the functioning and beliefs of ancient societies. The inert material becomes a signifier for the social and cultural life of communities that have vanished. Various artists in the Burger Collection have created artifacts that can be seen as a form of archaeology, by manipulating the stages of ageing or mimicking antiquity. Some objects look like contemporary reinterpretations of the surrealist *objet trouvé*; others seem lost, evoking the absence of an owner and creating a sense of dislocation.

The result is thus often a fragmented art object, an artifact acting as an indicator of the social, political or phenomenological contexts of particularly absurd or transitory moments in time. Michel Foucault explores this fragmented archive in his 1969 book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, claiming the archive as something that “emerges in fragments, regions, and levels . . . it is the border of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it, and which indicates it in its otherness; it is that which, outside ourselves, delimits us.” The works on display are, in part, manifestations of this concept, revealing themselves as archives and confusing their

(Opening page)  
Image of the Langen Foundation. Photo by Tomas Riehle.  
Copyright Langen Foundation, Neuss.

(Opposite page)  
Installation view of KRIS MARTIN’s *Altar*, 2014, steel, 440 x 460 cm, at “How to See [What Isn’t There],” Langen Foundation, Neuss, 2018–19. Photo by Benny Proot. Courtesy Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf.

(This page)  
Installation view of URS FISCHER’s *Mr. Flasky*, 2001/2002, wood, dispersion paint, plaster, Styrofoam, lamp, glue, glass and screws, dimensions variable, at “How to See [What Isn’t There],” Langen Foundation, Neuss, 2018–19. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zürich/New York.





(Opposite page)  
Installation view of **SYLVIE FLEURY's** *Eternity Now*, 2016, stainless steel and mirror aluminum, 56 x 203 x 103 cm, at "How to See [What Isn't There]," Langen Foundation, Neuss, 2018–19. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Karma International, Zurich/Los Angeles.

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Installation view of **HO SIN TUNG's** *Words Thou Said*, 2009, plastic and trash can, 32 x 37 x 34 cm, at "How to See [What Isn't There]," Langen Foundation, Neuss, 2018–19. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

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Installation view of **VALENTIN CARRON's** *Belt on Valet Stand*, 2014, plastic, metal, glass and paint, 119.5 x 47 x 30.5 cm, at "How to See [What Isn't There]," Langen Foundation, Neuss, 2018–19. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich/New York.

temporalities. This multilayered yet fragmented presentation encourages us to perform an excavation of the contemporary through lenses that are both entrenched in today's culture and, uncannily, entirely outside of it.

### The Nature of Absence

Presence can be constructed through any number of different media and contexts. Still, the combination of words and visual signs to indicate presence has a long tradition in visual art, from Hans Holbein to René Magritte and Joseph Kosuth. Various artworks in the Burger Collection significantly build on this tradition, evoking material realities through language.

The works follow what Jacques Lacan called "presence made of absence,"<sup>2</sup> a phrase describing the relationship between linguistic signs and objects. According to this mode of thought, words—in fact, any and all symbols—appear out of the absence of the things they represent; a signifier only exists insofar as it indicates something other than itself. Thus, though language is a tool for communication, it should not only be treated simply as code or a tag for objects, elements and established concepts. It is, rather, another object that can be manipulated and made to indicate multitudes of meaning, framing how we understand ourselves and the world around us.

### Out of Nothing

Images and forms can, too, be understood as signifiers, at once revealing and concealing that which is beyond the symbol. Simple objects such as a valet stand, a potato or an egg can point to a symbolic or even archetypical set of contents. As de Saussure rightly remarked, material attributes such as color, form and size do not really matter when considering the signifier.<sup>3</sup> We relate to these objects and images in more generalized ways, allowing us to take them as flat signifiers in a shared reality. Since artworks can be understood as a form of communication, the objects presented can be seen as timeless markers, derived from the artist's mind and made physical.

### I Is Another

Artists have not only invoked the presence of the universal in their work. Often, the presence of another human being, whether fictional or not, comes into play. The artist's subjectivity thus becomes a nexus for interaction, leading to both the presence of the other and the construction

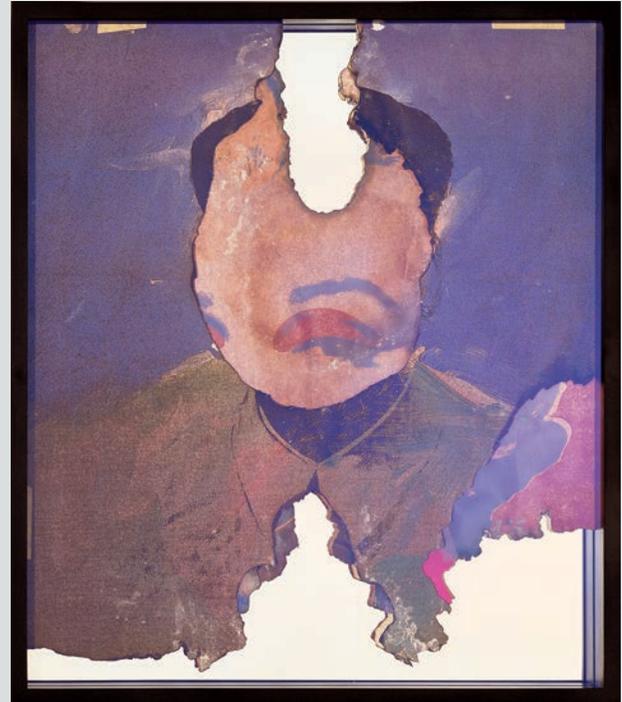


<sup>2</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007), 228.  
<sup>3</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1959).

of the self. French poet Arthur Rimbaud expanded on this idea, questioning the single personality; to him, the other and the individual become one and the same, “I is another.”<sup>4</sup> He considered the “I” as an exterior force reaching beyond one’s own personality and into what sociologist Émile Durkheim deemed the “collective consciousness.”<sup>5</sup> In the contemporary age of avatars, the concept of the self is undone altogether, replacing the real with the digital. In this age, the growing reconfiguration of the individual has reached a new level of complexity, almost completely detached from the carnal body.

Other points of view regard the heterogeneous nature of society, as Foucault has remarked in his 1986 essay *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*. In this text, he analyzes the encounter with his mirrored image: “From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there . . . I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect.” This tension between an absolutely real situation and its absolutely unreal counterpart epitomizes the complexity of identity and the total disentanglement of the self from the body. The question then remains: what form does presence take in the absence of a body?

Writer and cultural theorist Elisa Adami elucidated the complex nature of absence: “In the end, are [absences] even objects, or just the empty spots left behind by the object’s withdrawal, the wounds of a lack? Every time we try to determine them ontologically, or to express them in words, we need to recur to the grammatical mode of the negative and the rhetorical device of comparison.”<sup>6</sup> Artistic investigation becomes a mode of expression, offering the opportunity to render absences present by way of references, traces or mirroring effects that trigger recognition of what is missing in the mind of the viewer. Through a combination of forms of archaeological thinking and philosophical conceptualization, “How to See [What Isn’t There]” investigates the ways in which artists have given form to the gaps between things and ideas, the concrete and the intangible, and more recently, physical and digital space.



“How to See [What Isn’t There]” is on view at Langen Foundation, Neuss, Germany, from September 9 through March 17, 2019, featuring Doug Aitken, Iván Argote, Davide Balula, Fiona Banner, Mohamed Bourouissa, Valentin Carron, Alejandro Cesarco, Angus Fairhurst, Urs Fischer, Sylvie Fleury, Gao Weigang, Gilbert & George, Douglas Gordon, Wang Guangle, Ho Sin Tung, Sabine Hornig, Huang Rui, Marguerite Humeau, Nadia Kaabi-Linke, Kong Chun Hei, Fabian Marti, Kris Martin, Hans Op de Beeck, Pak Sheung Chuen, Jon Rafman, Pamela Rosenkranz, Fiete Stolte, The Propeller Group, Kin-Wah Tsang, Wang Du, Xie Lei and Zhang Huan.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, “Letter to Georges Izambard,” Wikisource, accessed April 2018, [https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Lettre\\_de\\_Rimbaud\\_%C3%A0\\_Georges\\_Izambard\\_-\\_13\\_mai\\_1871](https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Lettre_de_Rimbaud_%C3%A0_Georges_Izambard_-_13_mai_1871).  
<sup>5</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 80.  
<sup>6</sup> Elisa Adami, “In the Presence of Absence,” *Mnemoscape*, no. 2 (March 2015), 2.



(Top)  
**DOUGLAS GORDON**'s *Self Portrait of You and Me (Mao over Marilyn)*, 2008, smoke on framed mirror, at “How to See [What Isn’t There],” Langen Foundation, Neuss, 2018–19. Copyright Lost but Found and VG Bild-Kunst. Courtesy Lost but Found, Berlin, and Gagolian, New York/Los Angeles/San Francisco/London/Paris/Rome/Athens/Geneva/Hong Kong.

(Bottom)  
 Installation view of **MARGUERITE HUMEAU**'s *JEAN, an elephant watching the scene with a sense of wonder*, 2016, polystyrene, white paint and nylon with a powder-coated metal stand, 104.9 x 162.1 x 188.2 cm, at “How to See [What Isn’t There],” Langen Foundation, Neuss, 2018–19. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zurich.