How to See [What Isn’t There]
Burger Collection, Hong Kong is happy to look back on its hugely successful major exhibition How To See [What Isn’t There], curated by Gianni Jetzer, at Langen Foundation, Neuss, Germany. The show, which ran from 9 September 2018 until 17 March 2019, attracted over 10’000 visitors, with more than 1’000 on the opening day alone, including many of the artists in the show. Well received by art critics and journalists the exhibition received both local and international press coverage.

With a live-streamed artist talk between the artist Jon Rafman and curator Gianni Jetzer, as well as various guided tours, this exhibition and its theme could be examined more deeply by a wide audience. Further a booklet in both English and German accompanied the show and was available to visitors to guide them through the exhibition and deepen the concept and their understanding of all works on display. This helped ensure a very lively atmosphere where people really engaged with works and took the time to contemplate the theme. The location, Langen Foundation, designed by Pritzker Prize winner Tadao Ando, located on a former missile base, provided an exceptional surrounding to showcase this multidisciplinary exhibition and further people’s interaction with the art on display.

How To See [What Isn’t There], which featured 46 works by 32 artists from 5 continents, reflects the global nature of Burger Collection. The works included photography, sculpture, installation, painting, video, VR and performance art, with Davide Balula’s Mimed Sculptures being exclusively performed at Düsseldorf’s K21 Museum for one week during Art Düsseldorf in November 2018. Deluge (Raketenstation Hombroich) by Jon Rafman, a site-specific Virtual Reality piece, was specifically created for the show and referenced the military past of Raketenstation, and, in contemporary usage of the name, the ballistic missile named Nike, past occupant of Raketenstation Hombroich, as its name reveals, is military, and exists within a history once dominated by the Cold War. NATO had stationed Nike missiles here in preparation for a possible strike by Russians until as late as 1988: an anticipation of an imminent, invisible threat. To make present this invisible history of Raketenstation, the exhibition also includes three wallpapers depicting the variations of Nike: the famous fragment of the winged Greek Goddess representing victory from the collection of the Louvre in Paris, the ballistic missile named Nike, past occupant of Raketenstation, and, in contemporary usage of the antique deity, the American sports apparel company’s brand slogan: “Just Do It.” The visual quotations applied as wallpaper illuminate unique historical trajectories from Greek mythology to the Cold War to branded consumerism, creating a bricolage of immaterial and material references to the locational identity, united by the central signifier: Nike.

The study of signs has made important contributions to the illumination of the complex relationship between the material and immaterial invoked in this exhibition. The reciprocity between signifier and signified in Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory does not rely on logical frameworks, but rather on the social conventions that consolidate these relationships. Art, akin to language, is an arbitrary system of signs whose content is delivered in material and immaterial ways and whose realities are negotiable.

Featured are works that literally direct our gaze to something other than themselves, works that act as indicators of complex histories and processes, and works that convey the presence of another human or process despite their physical absence. Together, the works ultimately question the contained meanings of images and objects, inviting us to stretch our imaginations into the void in order to see hidden layers.
Participating artists

1 Elisa Adami, “In the Presence of Absence,” Mnemoscape, no. 2 (March 2015), 2.