



Bill Conger  
*something like leaving*  
November 4 - December 15, 2018

# In the wake of nothing, something.

Claudine Isé

I don't want to do an exhaustive exegesis on the works in Bill Conger's *something like leaving*. If I do, the ideas, experiences and associations I describe will be mine, and my sole aim with this essay, and in presenting Conger's work, is to create a space for you to have yours.

But still, I want to provide some words to frame it, and speed you on your way.

You may feel bewildered upon entering the main gallery, wondering what it is you are supposed to see, where you are supposed to look. Just remember: there is a lot of space that seems empty, but isn't.

There are two works here; one is titled *up monster up*, 2018, and consists of a Ducati tachometer that is 5 inches in diameter.

A Ducati is a brand of motorcycle. The Ducati Monster, according to Wikipedia, is a muscle bike that was designed by Miguel Angel Galluzzi and which has been produced by the Ducati company in Bologna, Italy, since 1993. It is a "naked" bike, which means it has an exposed engine and frame.

I know nothing about motorcycles, so I had to Google further to learn that a "muscle bike" is a type of street motorcycle that "puts a disproportionately high priority on engine power."

I also didn't know what a tachometer was, so I Googled to find that it's a device for measuring the working speed of an engine, especially in road vehicles. A tachometer is different from a speedometer, which measures the speed of the vehicle.



*falling down stars*, 2018, sanded magazine page, 12 x 9 inches framed.

Is a vehicle's engine equivalent to a living creature's heart? Or is it more like the muscles that make it go?

The other piece in this gallery is titled *nilophobia*, 2018. It consists of a fishing depth finder that is also 5 inches in diameter.

A fishing depth finder is a device to locate fish at various depths of water. The one here is a somewhat older model, probably vintage. The kind of thing someone's parent or grandparent, if they liked to fish, might have relied on before the more sophisticated LED models came on the market.

The term *nilophobia* refers to the fear of nothingness. Nilophobia is from the Latin *nihil*, meaning "nothing." The condition is also known as *oudenophobia*, from the Greek *ouden*, also meaning "nothing."

According to the website [phobia.wikia.com](http://phobia.wikia.com), people who suffer from nilophobia tend to obsess over the experience of death and dying and are particularly fearful when imagining the loss of all perception and sense of being upon death. Nilophobes may also fear things that have nothing in them. The experience of opening a container and finding it empty, for example, could prompt sudden feelings of anxiety, dread or even panic.

The number zero can be terrifying to those with nilophobia. Situations where a countdown on a timer reaches zero may trigger a sense of doom or panic at the notion that time has run out.

A side note: when I was in my early twenties and living alone I found it extremely soothing to listen to the lectures of Alan Watts before going to sleep at night. His voice calmed my anxiety and helped me feel less afraid of the darkness and silence around me. Watts was a British philosopher who interpreted and popularized Eastern philosophies (like Zen Buddhism) for a Western audience. He was born in 1915 and died in 1973.

Watts spoke quite a lot about nothing and nothingness. If you have periodic bouts of nilophobia I highly recommend you listen to one of his talks.

Basically Watts says that fear of nothingness is essentially fear of death, which is essentially fear of nothingness. Around and around. But, he insists, nothing—the negative, the empty—is in fact extremely powerful, because you cannot have something without nothing. If you don't have space, you can't have anything solid. Without space outside the solid, you wouldn't know where the solid's edges were. Likewise, the solid makes the space around it apparent.

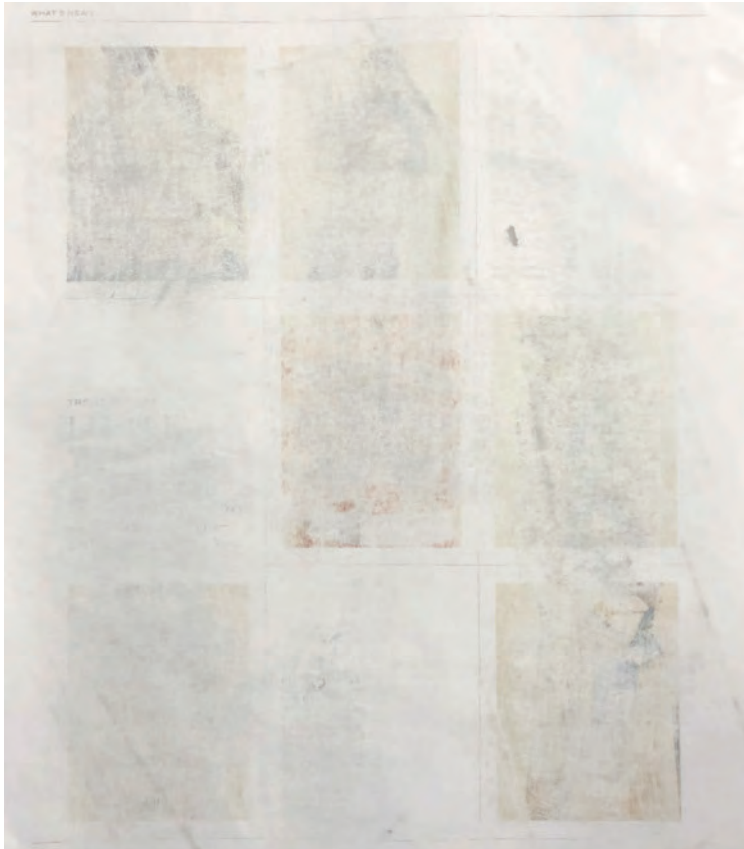
Therefore something and nothing, Watts explains, are two sides of the same coin.

The metaphysics of this idea strike me as being in many ways fundamental to the acts of creating art and also to exhibiting it and looking at it.



*litness*, 2018, sanded magazine page, 12 x 9 inches framed.





*little with wishes, 2018, sanded magazine page, 12 x 9 inches framed.*

In the second, smaller gallery with the window, it may seem easier to see what you are looking for. There are some framed paper works on the walls, and frames—although they are something—act a lot like nothing does by emphasizing things and showing us where their edges are.

The pieces inside the frames may look like nothing too. They are made from pages of Wall Street Journal magazines that Conger has altered by sanding away all of the images and text on the page, leaving behind surfaces that from a distance may appear blank or empty. And in a very real, material sense their contents *have* been erased and nothing is left, but that nothing is dense with something. Just look at them.

Alan Watts once said that children are the proof that we do, in fact, go on after death. He wasn't referring specifically to the reproductive act of having children (although of course that's an essential part of it). He wasn't talking about inheritance or legacy or even memory. He simply meant that the generations that follow us after we've left will carry on the business of life, just as we do for the generations before us.

I'm not sure any of this will help me feel less bereaved once my parents are gone. And it definitely doesn't quell the black hole of fear I feel at the thought of my child being lost to me, nor the lesser and more realistic feeling, the persistent melancholia, of knowing with certainty that when she grows up she will leave our home to live her own life, leaving our proverbial nest empty.

Like hearing Alan Watts' soothing voice in the darkness, Conger's installation for me ultimately frames nothing, by allowing us to see that nothingness *is* the frame that gives shape and contour to "something." Equally true: by focusing too closely on the objects in the gallery—the "something"—we can easily fool ourselves into forgetting the emptiness there too. But if we can manage to hold onto both perceptions at once, it may lead us a little closer to understanding something like leaving.

\*Front image: *nilophobia*, 2018, fishing depth finder, 5 inches diameter.

\*Back image: *up monster up*, 2018, Ducati tachometer, 5 inches diameter.

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Exhibition dates: November 4 – December 15, 2018  
Gallery hours: Fridays & Saturdays 12 – 4 pm and by appointment

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*Design by Nicole Gardner*



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