

The inescapable future past

*“O let not Time deceive you,
You cannot conquer Time.*

—W.H. Auden, 1937¹

Two freshly-made tequila *sunrise* cocktails. A photographic abstraction of a *sunset*.² And situated between those bookends to a day were myriad references to temporality. Bill Conger’s *now were alone now* consisted of the artist’s installation at Heavy Brow Gallery in Bloomington, Illinois (on view April 6 through May 18, 2012), and an accompanying website (<http://nowwerealonenow.com>) that was launched at precisely the same time that the physical exhibition opened. The artist placed his sculptural objects in response to the gallery’s idiosyncratic, narrow, two-story space, and presented a sequence of related images on a website that he created specifically for this project. Conger deftly engaged in strategies of collection, appropriation, and curation, all the while paying quiet homage to the Duchampian Readymade and Proustian notions of memory. The exhibition component of *now were alone now* consisted of the artist’s installation of found sculptural objects (some of which were altered) and his original companion text, which together offered poetically driven observations and laments. Meanwhile, the text and found images on the project’s website—accessed when the viewer was no longer in the exhibition space—resonated with one’s remembrances of the physical objects. Conger’s meticulous selection of on-screen triggers for recollection represented a new mode of investigation in his enduring meditation on the passage of time and the impermanence of memory.

Although the word “poetic” sometimes seems to have been stripped bare by its ubiquitous deployment as a descriptor, Conger’s practice reinvigorates the possibilities of the designation. Using images and objects as the vehicles for delivering his elegiac texts, Conger relishes the friction and fusion generated by the collision of words. *now were alone now* evidences the primacy of language in the artist’s work. For example, he wrote *were* instead of the expected *we’re*. The missing apostrophe (which many people may have unconsciously auto-filled in their reading of the phrase) was not a typographical error but rather a conceptually rich gesture through which Conger implied the collective nature of *we* while also capturing the sense of duration embedded in *were*. To verify this observation Conger disclosed, “Throughout, of course, there is this implication of singularity, or the concept of anyone or thing being anything but singular...”³ Additionally, the jarring disjuncture in his shift from *now*—which is intentionally repeated to highlight the circular nature of language—to *were* emphasizes the idea of living simultaneously in the past and the present. Perhaps existence steeped in rumination is actually a collective malady rather than a solitary anti-pursuit.

The astute subtlety of Conger’s title is indicative of his approach to art-making; his conceptual use of text to complete his work is integral not only to this project, but to each of his sculptures, collages, paintings, and site-specific installations. At the outset of both the exhibition and the website for *now were alone now*, Conger presented a single page of self-scribed text. Instead of a traditional checklist of titles and materials, his poems provided necessary clues about the relationships among the seemingly disparate objects and images.⁴ Echoing Marcel Broodthaers’ use of found objects, collage, text, and installation, Conger collapsed time and space with his range of personal, historical, geographic, and temporal references. By reading his words, one could discern that a wine cork placed on the floor was found by the artist during a visit to Berlin the previous year; that the man’s shirt neatly folded nearby was purchased as a result of an ebay search for the clichéd but loaded terms “romantic” and “vintage;” and that the snapshot straddling

the space between the floor and the wall was taken by Conger on March 26, 2012. The artist's inspiration for the photograph stemmed from his discovery of "the only photograph found online of David Foster Wallace in Bloomington, Illinois."⁵ In a twist on rephotographing, Conger sought out the same location twelve years later to create an unpopulated version that conveyed the absence of the esteemed author who tragically hung himself in 2008. Having seemingly fallen from the clip on which it was hung, the new photograph was displayed on the floor of the gallery directly across from the empty shirt. In a nod to Wallace's demise, Conger digitally altered a Peanuts animation cel—which visually recalls the deserted building and trees in the photograph—by removing the iconic figures of Charlie Brown and Linus. A copy of the original photograph of Wallace appears on the website three pages after the manipulated animation cel. Discussing his personal interest in the writer, Conger cites their simultaneous employment at Illinois State University and the subject matter in his posthumous release, *The Pale King*, which "focuses on the idea of Peoria, Illinois as a black hole for unfeeling lemmings obsessed with boredom."⁶ A lifelong resident of the city, Conger commiserates with Wallace's portrayal.

Conger's meditation on a deceased literary figure resonates with his other explorations of time in relationship to bodily notions of presence and absence. He pays particular attention to the horizontality of a body in repose, whether permanently entombed in a crypt or temporarily resting on a mattress. For instance, the image of a mattress on Conger's website—identified as a "Tempurpedic Rhapsody Memory foam mattress"—elicits not only ideas of fleeting slumber on a material that momentarily preserves the shape of prone bodies, but also the epic, or indefinite, nature of a poetic or musical rhapsody. In the presented image, the mattress is disconcertingly bare and floats in a nether-region without feet to tether it to the ground. It evokes the present but unconscious nature of the body that would rest upon its soft minimal form. Similarly, Conger's web image of the Arundel Tomb—in which the Earl and Countess of Arundel lie in perpetual repose, their representations permanently preserved in stone although their physical bodies have long ago withered away—functions on multiple levels. Poet Philip Larkin wrote "An Arundel Tomb" as a recollection of his response to seeing the medieval sepulcher. With this image, Conger sets off a constellation of reverberations as he simultaneously references his earlier works that pay tribute to the personally influential poet; draws attention to the process through which one remembers a bodily experience (akin to one's experience of viewing the artist's website after walking through his exhibition); and highlights the temporary nature of human existence. To abstractly explore that fleetingness, he engaged numerous strategies to "imagine a bathroom as a sort of prep room for death."⁷ The initial press image for *now were alone now* featured a photographic detail of a marble slab while a marble tabletop was included as an object in the exhibition. Later, upon viewing the website, one would discover the image of an austere marble bathroom and could draw connections between it and the image of the Arundel Tomb, and perhaps, the Tempurpedic mattress. Conger thought of this as a slow delivery of psychological information, akin to a movie camera that slowly pans back to reveal more of the subject.⁸

Filmic allusions extend to the structure of the website as well. Conger's text introduces the images, much as the opening credits introduce a movie; however, his writing takes one on an allegorical journey through the course of a day: beginning with a bed, moving toward light, and ending at sunset. Devoid of titles, the individual images on the following pages on the website function cinematically. With his staging of image sizes and placement, Conger composes a refined rhythm that conjures the lyricism of music and poetry. Echoing one's movement through the exhibition, the navigator must scroll up, down, left, and right in order to see the entirety of many of the images. As a result of this carefully orchestrated construction, the website acts as a trigger for remembering, a completion of the project, and even a "critical way to investigate sculpture."⁹ Conger's digital *Wunderkammer* is not beholden to the logic and restrictions of the physical world; instead, one could immediately transition from an unembodied concert stage in Chicago to the Chichester Cathedral in Sussex, England.

Conger's metaphorically-laden use of various sources of light evoke the circadian rhythms of the day, as well as methods of lighting throughout time. Conger includes a "candle snuffer" (an extinguisher of light); a "600 watt photo lighting rig" (an abundance of light); a "cordless shatterproof stick up bulb" (an inexpensive option that will quickly fail); and a "Kelvin light meter chart" (for measuring the temperature of light while creating a photograph). Finitude is implied through bulbs that will eventually burn out and batteries that will lose their power, but Conger also includes more explicit references such as the instruction book to a watch and the dates on photographs and publications. His screenshot of "Googled" time displaces the viewer not only by showing the image search results for "time," but also a representation of it in the upper right corner of the artist's desktop—a time that was present in the moment Conger conducted the web search but that had already passed by the time it was added to the website. A viewer could easily become disoriented while looking at an unfamiliar screenshot within the boundaries of his own screen. Seeing Conger's bookmarks directly beneath one's own yields a moment of communion, and perhaps unintended accessibility, between artist and audience.

Functioning almost as a love letter to the friends and colleagues who most intimately know Conger's work, one could spend a great deal of time scavenging through the multiplicity of nods to writers, artists, musicians, and the artist's earlier works in *now were alone now*. The layers of self-reference embedded in the project do not function as a fetishization of knowledge but they do reward close looking and careful consideration. For instance, a perceptive observation of the artist's desktop on the "Google clock images search, artist's computer desktop" page reveals files about poet John Berryman and artist Jason Sherman, who have both influenced Conger's thinking about language and art. Likewise, a viewer who is familiar with Conger's oeuvre will find a striking affinity between the empty shirt and two earlier works: *seawall* (2006), consisting of his wife's loosely folded blue tank top spanning the space between the wall and the floor, and the heartbreaking *unmade dress for an unborn daughter* (2005), a demure pile of floral fabric folded into a neat pile on the floor. A viewer could create his own trail of cerebral associations among the provided text, images and objects.¹⁰

While creating that trail of connections, one may miss that the website's design alludes to the cyclical nature of both the sun's passage and the project's title. Upon reaching the final image—a "sunset photographed as a time grid"—and clicking once more, one is again directed to the page of text on which he started. The word "next" appears on the bottom of the screen. This navigational signal indicates the existence of additional content beyond the initial page, but if one continues his revolutions through the website, he perpetually returns to this page. Thus, "next," the final word one encounters with *now were alone now*, serves to reinforce the inescapability of the future regardless of our ruminations on the past.

—Kendra Paitz

¹ Auden, W. H., and Edward Mendelson. *As I walked out one evening: songs, ballads, lullabies, limericks and other light verse / by W.H. Auden; selected by Edward Mendelson*. London: Faber & Faber, 1995.

² Two freshly-made Tequila Sunrise cocktails were the first objects/text entries in the exhibition, while a time-based photo grid of a sunset is the final image on the website.

³ Conversation with the artist, April 26, 2012.

⁴ The text builds upon Conger's poem, *Sangfroid A.M.* (2011)—written for the online journal, *Methods of Being*—which follows one's movement through a day through a list of grooming products (whether actual or imagined remains unclear). Likewise, *now were alone now* is structured according to the temporal cycles of day and night.

⁵ Conversation with the artist, April 26, 2012.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ For example, I found the website for the William Morris Home and was pleasantly surprised to discover that its newsletter is titled, "News from Nowhere." "More News From Nowhere" is the closing track on Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds' (the artist's favorite band) 2008 album, *Dig, Lazarus Dig!!!*