



Wolfgang Laib/MATRIX 188

Pollen from Pine

October 14 – December 17, 2000

**University of California
Berkeley Art Museum**

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“I am not afraid of beauty, unlike most artists today. The pollen, the milk, the beeswax, they have a beauty that is incredible, that is beyond the imagination, something which you cannot believe is a reality—and it is the most real. I could not make it myself, I could not create it myself, but I can participate in it. Trying to create it yourself is only a tragedy, participating in it is a big chance.”—Wolfgang Laib¹

German artist Wolfgang Laib uses elements of nature—beeswax, milk, rice, pollen, and stone—to create artworks whose power is derived from an extreme modesty. Born in 1950, Laib began working as an artist in 1972. Several iconic, almost mythic, identities define Laib: his training to be a doctor, his hermetic living and working practices, and his serious study of Eastern and pre-Modern religions including Buddhism, Jainism, and medieval Christianity.

All of Laib's works reflect his abiding interest in nature. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “Nature is loved by what is best in us. It is loved as the city of God, although, or rather because there is no citizen. . . . And the beauty of nature must always seem unreal and mocking.”² Laib believes one can only communicate with nature in solitude. The artist spends the spring and summer months every year gathering pollen from the fields and meadows around the rural village in Southern Germany where he lives. He speaks of this repetitive and meditative process as a way of participating with natural materials rather than as a means of creating art. Laib works in time with the rhythm of the seasons. His four to five month process begins with the hazelnut tree and continues with the dandelion, buttercup flower, and pine tree. His method is simple: he collects the pollen with his hands and shakes it into a small, glass jar in which it is stored and sometimes even exhibited. He is known for his luminous, site-specific, rectangular installations of pollen, which sit directly on bare stone or concrete floors. Laib always performs the action of collecting, as well as sifting the pollen through muslin, himself. The pollen is recollected and cleaned at the end of each exhibition for utilization in future installations. As such, Laib's pollen pieces are themselves cyclical.

Laib admits that the classical evolution or development of an artist is absent from his oeuvre. For twenty-five years he has worked on the same themes with the same materials, with “the possibility of expansion.” Preferring the cyclical over the linear, the artist applies this model universally in his successful fusion of art and life. This philosophy parallels that of influential thinkers such as Buckminster Fuller, who wrote, “Synergy means behavior of whole systems unpredicted by behavior of any of the system's parts when it is considered only by itself.”³ Indeed,



Laib explains that originally he wanted the work to be anonymous due to his belief that the power and relevance extends beyond the individual. He has said, “If you only believe in the individual, in what you are, then life is a tragedy that ends in death. But if you feel part of a whole, that what you are doing is not just you, the individual, but something bigger, then all of these problems are not there anymore. Everything is totally different. There is no beginning and no end.”⁴

Laib positions himself resolutely apart from the art world and has largely escaped assignment within the aesthetic canon of the last several decades. Rather, his approach is inscribed in a wider perspective where art constitutes the means to reach beyond the visible universe. Here art is related to an ethical or ascetic calling and as such recalls one of Laib's few cited artistic influences, Joseph Beuys.⁵ Beuys and Laib both address the notion of healing a sick society through art. Beuys believed passionately in the power of art to effect social change and worked tirelessly to expand its boundaries. They differ in that Beuys's approach was shamanistic and utilized his own charismatic persona as a teacher, discussant, and debater whereas Laib, working in silence and solitude, stresses the importance of being part of a larger, collective whole.

The pre-Modern and non-Western resonance of Laib's works serves to partially locate rather than isolate it.⁶ The therapeutic view of art overlaps significantly with the conception of art as a form of magic. Countless instances of such beliefs occur from Tibetan mandala practice to Navajo sand painting. In fact, noted Swiss art historian Harald Szeemann observed that Laib's art issues from the improbable marriage of Indian mysticism and the austere, reductivist aesthetic of Russian avant-garde painter Kasimir Malevich. He explained that it is at once a ritual and a sculpture or painting, without allowing for a choice between one and the other of these categories.⁷

Laib has expressed extreme disappointment when viewers experience one of his pollen installations only visually or aesthetically. While he admits that, “the color is incredible,” he explains, “it is not a painting and it is far away from Yves Klein or Mark Rothko,” two artists with whom his work is often compared.⁸ He notes the difference in an almost pedantic way, explaining that a blue painting—a reference to Klein's I.K.B. monochromatic works—is not the sky, whereas pollen is pollen and milk is milk. In an attempt to differentiate his work from art, Laib states, “[Milk] is not just

Milkstone, 1992-93, milk and marble, 2³/₈ x 28³/₈ x 22¹/₂ inches (6 x 72 x 57 cm). Photo courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York, NY.



a white liquid or a white paint. I could not create the milk, and that is the chance, that is what is beautiful and important. . . . The pollen is not a yellow pigment that I have made a painting with.”⁹

Pollen, an active, living material, is connected to the generation of many earthly life cycles. The pollen that comprises Laib's installations, such as that in his MATRIX exhibition *Pollen from Pine*, shimmers. Pine pollen is very fine, the consistency of dry sand. The brilliant yellow color is remarkably stable over time and the material so light that it appears to float in the air just above the ground. Several of Laib's early works embody his ideas regarding what is and is not important in the world, such as continuity and synthesis. This is true of *The Five Mountains not to Climb on* (1984) which is comprised of five cones of pollen, each seven centimeters high, arranged in a line, as well as the first work Laib created, *Milkstone* in 1975. Only one surface of the white Carrara marble slabs that comprise Laib's *Milkstones* is polished. The square sculptures vary in thickness. Laib sands a slight concavity that is then filled with a very thin layer of milk. The milk is poured onto the horizontal surface of the stone to create a subtle shine that is almost invisible. The two elements blend into one—milk and marble, organic and inorganic, warm and cold.

The *Rice House* pieces (begun in 1984) are more overtly sculptural and referential than any of Laib's preceding works. Because Laib scatters rice both inside and outside the forms, a funerary character is often read into the meaning. The notion of evoking an existence beyond death begins with the *Rice Houses* and continues in Laib's beeswax pieces, begun in 1988.¹⁰ The smell of the golden beeswax precedes one's witnessing of the forms, and the condensed, powerful fragrance seems to penetrate and purify the body. Laib's newest form is that of the wax boat, a form which, like the house, is a receptacle for the body. But while the rice houses are situated firmly on the floor, the wax boats float in the air.¹¹ These works, associated with Laib's exploration of the realm beyond sensory perception, refer through titles such as *You will go somewhere else* to the transformation from material to immaterial, from body to spirit, from this world to the next.¹²

Laib has poured the milk into *Milkstones* and sifted the *Pollens* countless times, yet he says that the experience is new every time. His choices in art and life have a Buddhist resonance. The practice is well described in the quote: “If we long to see a miracle, we need to look no further than our daily activities. Any task

Bog with Pines (where Wolfgang collects the Pine pollen). Photo courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York, NY.



performed with concentration and respect is a marvel to behold . . . Sitting, standing, lying down, and walking: these actions shared by everything that breathes proclaim our mutual interdependence—one upon the other and all upon the universe.”¹³ In Laib’s work, art assumes an ancient function, that of constituting a privileged access to the sacred.

Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson
Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator

This essay was conceived in collaboration with Christopher Jacobson.

¹ Clare Farrow, *Wolfgang Laib: A Journey* (Stuttgart, Germany: Edition Cantz, 1996), p. 18.
² Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature” in *Emerson’s Essays* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1926), p. 387.
³ R. Buckminster Fuller, *Tetrascroll* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1982).
⁴ Farrow, pp. 22-23.
⁵ Guy Tosatto, *Wolfgang Laib: Somewhere Else* (Nîmes, France: Carré d’art, Musée d’art contemporain, 1999), pp. 7-8.
Joseph Beuys’s key ideas can be divided into the following categories: nature, healing, communication, and political activism. Beuys said, “To make the people free is the aim of art, therefore art for me is the science of freedom.” A painter, sculptor, and performance artist, Beuys also attempted to dissolve the boundaries between art and life.
⁶ Thomas McEvilley, “Medicine Man: Proposing a Context for Wolfgang Laib’s Work,” *Parkett*, 1994, no. 39, p. 105.
⁷ Didier Semin, “A piece by Wolfgang Laib,” *Parkett*, 1994, no. 39, p. 74.
⁸ Farrow, p. 14.
To be fair, Mark Rothko also deplored the ascription of himself as a brilliant colorist. And, as with Laib’s work, the spiritual, the sublime, and the transcendent are ever present in Rothko’s.
⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
¹⁰ Tosatto, p. 30.
¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.
¹² Kathy S. Cottong, *Wolfgang Laib: You will go somewhere else* (Chicago, IL: The Arts Club of Chicago, 1998), p. 5.
¹³ J. A. Taylor, “Koans of Silence: The Teaching Not Taught,” *Parabola*, Summer 1999, vol. 24, no. 2, p. 10.

Pollen from Pine, 1999, 126 x 142 inches (320 x 360 cm), installation view at Carre d’art, Musée d’art contemporain de Nîmes, Nîmes, France. Photo courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York, NY.

Wolfgang Laib was born in 1950 in Metzingen, Germany. He entered the University of Tübingen in 1968 to study medicine and became a doctor in 1974. Since then he has worked exclusively as an artist. Laib lives and works in a small village in southern Germany.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2001
“Wolfgang Laib: A Retrospective (tour),” Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX; Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Scottsdale, AZ
- 2000
“Wolfgang Laib: A Retrospective (tour),” Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
Buchmann Galerie Köln, Köln, Germany
- 1999
Carré d’art, Musée d’art contemporain de Nîmes, Nîmes, France
Milleventi, Milan, Italy
Kunsthau Bregenz, Austria
- 1998
The Arts Club of Chicago, Chicago, IL
Sperone Westwater, New York, NY
Kenji Taki Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
- 1997
Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, Orangerie, Germany
- 1996
Galerie Konrad Fischer, Düsseldorf, Germany
Galerie Artek, Helsinki, Finland
Galerie Ropac, Salzburg, Austria
Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, France
- 1995
Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany
- 1994-1995
Henry Moore Studio, Dean Clough, Halifax, U.K.
Camden Arts Centre, London, U.K.
- 1994
Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg, Austria
- 1993
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA

Jars with Pollen from Dandelion, Sorrel, Buttercup, Beech Tree, and Hazelnut (2), 1981, installation view at Gallery Sperone Westwater Fischer, New York, NY. Photo courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York, NY.

1992
Musée national d’art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2000
“Cosmologies,” Sperone Westwater, New York, NY
“Around 1984, A Look at Art in the Eighties,” P.S.1, New York, NY
- 1999
“Powder,” Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, CO
“In Passing,” Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, NY
“Minimalia,” Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, NY
- 1998
“The Edward R. Broida Collection: A Selection of Works,” Orlando Museum of Art, Orlando, FL
“Early Forms,” Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, France
“Etre Nature,” Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, Paris, France
- 1997
“Cittá Natura,” Palazzo delle Espozioni, Rome, Italy
“Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life,” The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, traveled to The Hayward Gallery, London, U.K.
“La Biennale di Venezia,” Venice, Italy
“4e Biennale de Lyon d’art contemporain,” Halle Tony Garnier, Lyon, France
“Unmapping the Earth,” 97 Kwangju Biennale, Kwangju, Korea
- 1996
“Time Wise,” The Swiss Institute, New York, NY
“Luis Barragán: Sitio + Superficie. Su obra y la vanguardia en el arte,” Mexico City, Mexico
“Spirit and Place,” Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia
- 1995
“Fondation Cartier,” Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, Taiwan

Selected Catalogues and Publications

- Wolfgang Laib. Somewhere Else.* Essay by Guy Tosatto. Carré d’art, Musée d’art contemporain, Nîmes, France, 1999.
- Wolfgang Laib.* Essay by Rudolf Sagmeister and Elisabeth von Samsonow. Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln, Germany, 1999.
- 4e Biennale de Lyon d’art contemporain.* Text by Harald Szeemann. 4e Biennale de Lyon, Lyon, France, 1997.
- Future, Present, Past.* Exhibition catalogue by Germano Celant with text by the artist. La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy, 1997.

Rice House, 1996, marble and rice, 13 x 16¹/₂ x 57⁷/₁₆ inches (33 x 42 x 146 cm). Photo courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York, NY.

Unmapping the Earth. 97 Kwangju Biennale, Kwangju, Korea, 1997.
Wolfgang Laib: A Journey. Text by Clare Farrow. Stuttgart, Germany, 1996.
Wolfgang Laib—Pollen Installation. Essay by Diane Armitage. The Center for Contemporary Arts, Santa Fe, NM, 1991.
Wolfgang Laib. Interview with the artist by Suzanne Page. ARC, Musée d’Art Moderne, Paris, France, 1986.
Wolfgang Laib. Text by Annelie Pohlen. Whitechapel Art Galley, London, U.K., 1985.

Selected Bibliography

- Avrilla, Jean-Marc. “A Wax Room in the Mountains.” *Parkett*, 1994, no. 39, pp. 91-101.
- Diehl, Carol. “Wolfgang Laib at Sperone Westwater.” *Artforum*, November 1998, vol. 86, no.11, p. 126.
- Drobnick, Jim. “Reveries, Assaults, and Evaporating Presences: Olfactory Dimensions in Contemporary Art.” *Parachute*, January-March 1998, no. 89, pp. 10-19.
- Farrow, Clare. “Wolfgang Laib: More Than Myself.” *Parkett*, 1994, no. 39, pp. 77-81.
- McEvilley, Thomas. “Medicine Man: Proposing a Context for Wolfgang Laib’s Work.” *Parkett*, 1994, no. 39, pp. 104-109.
- Politi, Giancarlo. “The Venice Biennale.” *Flash Art*, October 1999, vol. 22, no. 208, pp. 76-80.
- Stevens, Mark. “Art: Bee-ing and Nothingness.” *New York Magazine*, June 8, 1998, pp. 104-105.
- Tomkins, Calvin. “A Question of Human Presence.” *The New Yorker*, June 1997, pp. 104-206.

Work in MATRIX

Wolfgang Laib
Pollen from Pine, 2000
Pollen
110¹/₄ x 118¹/₈ inches (280 x 300 cm)
Courtesy the artist, Sperone Westwater, New York, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco

Please Note:

Wolfgang Laib will conduct a Question and Answer session on Saturday, October 14, 2000, at noon. Andrew Harvey will read poems by Rumi on Friday, November 3, 2000, at 6:00 pm.

The MATRIX Program at the UC Berkeley Art Museum is made possible by the generous endowment gift of Phyllis Wattis.

Additional donors to the MATRIX Program include the UAM MATRIX Council Endowment, Ann M. Hatch, and the California Arts Council.

Wolfgang Laib/MATRIX 188 *Pollen from Pine* is supported by Anthony and Celeste Meier.

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cover: *Pollen from Hazelnut*, 1992, 137-3/4 x 157-1/2 inches (350 x 400 cm), installation view at Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. Photo courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York, NY.

above: *You will go somewhere else*, 1995, beeswax and wood, 160 x 516 x 36 inches (406 x 1311 x 91 cm) each, installation view at Sperone Westwater, New York, NY. Photo courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York, NY.