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Wolfgang Laib: Returning to What Is

An Interview with Wolfgang Laib

Abstract

This interview with the German artist Wolfgang Laib reveals his thoughts on the function of art in the world. Laib has been an immensely successful international artist since the early 1970s. While minimalism is often considered to be the movement that enabled his success, he himself has little allegiance to this or any other art movement. What is interesting about the interview is the way he links his life, his art, and the way in which he wants it to change the way people think. He reveals that, far from the austere appearance his art may have, he wants his art to bring about change in the world.

Wolfgang Laib: Returning to What Is

Wolfgang Laib is a German artist who has been exhibiting internationally since the 1970s. He uses flower pollen, milk, marble and beeswax to make objects that appear ephemeral in a gallery setting. To obtain the pollen, he spends months brushing it from the stamen of fertile flowers. *Milkstone* (1977), made by pouring a layer of milk onto the smooth surface of granite, must be refreshed every day by nervous gallery staff. *Passageway-overgoing* (1996) is a set of beeswax boats elevated to the ceiling of the gallery by a thin wooden scaffolding. While critics have all too often read him as a 'nature' artist, Laib himself insists that what he does has little to do with nature. In taking the materials of nature out of nature, they attain a purity that, as he explains in the following interview, has a more abstract quality.

DJJ: When you bring the pollen into different spaces it is moving through different containers. It's moving from its natural environment into a jar and then into the gallery. What happens to the pollen in the process? Do you still feel the same way about the pollen as it moves?

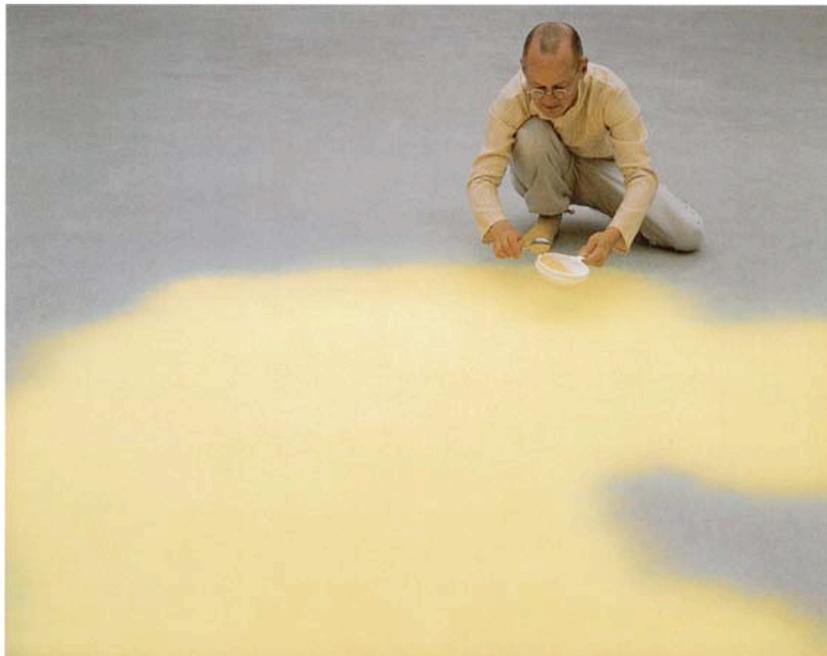
WL: You could think that a meadow or a forest is the opposite of the gallery space here, but I feel this is something very good. The meadow is a natural environment. But when I collect the pollen and bring it into the gallery and make just a square with pollen, it's intensified and abstracted. It's a very intense experience in a very abstract environment, totally different from the natural environment of the meadow. You will see this pollen in a square field in this artificial light. It is not about a meadow and nature, it's about the pollen itself.

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DJJ: Have you ever shown your work anywhere else besides an art gallery?

WL: You can imagine if you make exhibitions all around the world, the spaces are very different, but it's nearly always an art museum or a gallery. I think that's fine. I've also exhibited in some churches, but I prefer the abstractness of a neutral space where you can just enjoy the pollen in itself. It's the same with the milk. A cow in a meadow is something completely different. But to see the milk and how the milk is, I think that it's like that.

DJJ: A substance like beeswax or milk, these are substances that have already been made, they have already been put through a process already, by bees or cows for instance. I'm wondering what you see in these materials, as opposed to other kinds of materials?



Wolfgang Laib, *Pollen from pine* 1999, 4 jars with pollen, sieve, 140 x 160 cm to 320 x 360 cm, Collection of ifa Stuttgart, Image courtesy of the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia.

WL: As you can see, I'm using these natural materials like pollen, milk and beeswax and sometimes the misunderstanding is that I am only interested in nature. But that's somehow a very basic idea, and of course they are all natural materials but beyond this I am interested in all materials which I did not create. Milkstone has a white surface or a pollen piece has a yellow square but it is not a painting which I made. The milk is not a white painting that I painted and I think this is why the

milkstones are so far beyond any painting that I could make. I took the material out of its normal environment just to show what this milk is.

DJJ: Tell me about the process of collecting pollen. Could it be compared to a spiritual practice?

WL: Other people might think it's a spiritual practice, but it's also something very, very simple and very straightforward. But it's also something else. If you collect pollen from a meadow or in the forest for day after day for one or two months and afterwards you have a jar that's not even full, this is something completely different from what everybody else does. It's even beyond spiritual practice. You don't need a name for it. For me, it's something that challenges everything else; what I do or what I could do. It enables a totally different idea of what a day is, or what your life is about, or what work could be or what you would like to achieve.

DJJ: How do you feel about the word artist or the idea of producing something that's called art?

WL: Art? I do not know if you know but I studied medicine before and I have a full doctor's degree. Some people think that has nothing to do with my art but I think that it has a lot to do with my art. What I searched for in medicine and what I couldn't find, I hope to find with my artworks, with my life. I think that I never changed my profession. I just did what I'm now doing, what I wanted to do as a doctor. But I also feel (and most people think that this is very naive) that art has much more power than medicine. I mean, medicine is very important for us, but it's just about the physical body, and it doesn't stretch far beyond that. If art is really good it can include everything. It's the most important thing. That's why I became an artist and didn't become a monk or work as a doctor. Art is most important and therefore I would call myself an artist and what I do art.

DJJ: What is most rewarding about showing your work?

WL: I was also very naive at the beginning. When I started making the milkstones and the pollen pieces I was very young still and I was living in small village and did not have much connection with anybody. But I felt that my work was most important, even that it could change the world. So I tried to show, and had lots of luck, I had the possibility to show my works very quickly in the best museums all the around the world. I felt that this was a very important message.

DJJ: So art has the potential to change the world?

WL: Yes. I strongly believe this, as naive as it might sound. If you think of the history, and if you look back at culture, it has always changed mankind. From day to day or year to year it may have been the politicians who marched into another country or did this and that, but eventually it was culture which somehow brought mankind to somewhere else.

DJJ: What is your relationship the rest of the so-called "art world". Art is generally produced with a less utopian intention. Do you find that your work is more understood or misunderstood?

WL: I am not so old but I am also not so young any more, so I have survived this fashion or that fashion in the art world somehow. What I feel very uncomfortable with is that recently fashions are changing faster and faster and that is a pity, a real pity. I can be very tolerant, as long as there are many different possibilities (and there are still many different possibilities and many different ways of looking at things) but when art becomes a fashion show that is a pity. Many artists do this. When you look back in history there were always many artists doing the same and some artists who did the opposite, something totally different. There are many artists who don't know what to do, so they just do what the others do, and there are many curators and museum directors that just do what the others do. That's pretty weak.



Wolfgang Laib, *Passageway-overgoing* 1996, 7 beeswax ships, wood construction, 350 x 70 x 1033 cm, Collection of ifa Stuttgart, Image courtesy of the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia.

DJJ: Of the Western art movements, have you found any that you relate to?

WL: These days I don't have much time to go to many exhibitions but earlier I was very interested in many different things and I knew much. I was mainly interested in non-European art, like Asian art or North African art. But now, just like other artists too, I am very involved in my own life and work.

DJJ: Would the comparison between Asian art and your own be that you are preserving something that has, in one sense, been lost in the West? When you go to India and witness the deep faith of people, you also witness spaces that are sacred.

WL: I was interested in non-European cultures because I feel that if you take them really seriously they offer a big challenge to our own cultures. They can give you a totally different perspective on what you think is right and wrong and what you know. I think that is also what art brings to a society. Something totally new. Of course, many artists today feel this is very naive. They just copy what is there, but to what purpose? I mean, everybody knows it already and you end up producing more of what you had already. Many artists feel this is how their life is, or how life is today. I don't feel that this is what art is about.

DJJ: Tell me about your studio.

WL: I am living outside a small village in Southern Germany where I also grew up. It is very rare that an artist would stay where he grew up. For German conditions it's a really large property with meadows and forests. There is my studio there, a large barn from the nineteenth century. My studio has windows - a beautiful small space - just for myself, where I work and where I can be with my own work. And, as you can imagine, I work outside, doing stonework and collecting pollen all around the village where I live. There is also an three hundred year old farmhouse which has many small spaces that I use for storage, a darkroom, and all kinds of things. Then there's another house that is contemporary architecture - a glass house, a Bauhaus building that my parents built in the 1960s, late 1950s. It is very important for me just to sit there and experience, because you can't sit outside in Germany, it is too cold. But you can sit in the glasshouse. The windows go all around to the floor and you can just sit even while there is snow outside. It is in the middle of the landscape, which is very rare in Germany, because you're normally not allowed to have a house outside because it is so crowded, densely populated. We usually have to build new houses inside a village or inside a town. It has had a big influence on what I do.

DJJ: How does your work come to conception? How long does it take for a work to come to fruition?

WL: It comes to a point in your life where it is just there. You can also see that I am not having a new idea every other week, which would destroy everything. All of these works came out of my life until now.

DJJ: It seems you have an austerity, you maintain a truth in your work.

WL: My life is my work. I have nothing else. [laughs]

DJJ: Finally, I wanted to ask you about the context in which you are being shown here in Perth. The title of the exhibition is called transcendence. I wonder what you think of the word, and the other works on show? There are some Rothko canvases too.

WL: Oh, that's fine. [Transcendence] is fine. Also, you can find many articles that compare my pollen pieces with Rothko's paintings and I was never so happy about this because, as I just told you before, a pollen piece is not a painting. It is not about colour, and Rothko was really mainly interested in colour. I mean, there is certainly a connection but it's not between the [feathered] edge of the pollen piece and the edges of Rothko's paintings. I think the connection is more that he was striving and hoping for the same thing as I. But the visual similarities, they are very different. But you can find many articles that say the pollen piece is a Rothko on the floor.



Wolfgang Laib, *Ziggurat* 1999, beeswax, wood, 460 x 450 x 130 cm, Collection of ifa Stuttgart, Image courtesy of the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia.

DJJ: The same thing happens here to Indigenous art. People make paintings in communities in the desert and when they come into the gallery people compare them to Jackson Pollock and other American abstract artists. Have you seen much of that Indigenous work?

WL: Yes, yes, you can see many exhibitions in Germany. It's very popular. There were big exhibitions. And here, at the [Perth AGWA] museum, there are many.

DJJ: Have you connected with the Indigenous work?

WL: When I came first to Australia I was very impressed, and I also really informed myself a lot. But after, when I saw much more, I had trouble with the acrylic paint. I never understood it. Because all the thoughts and what is behind the paintings are beautiful, but when they are just made with the same [medium], it looks like a Western painting. It looks brand new, it looks so commercial sometimes. Why do they look like they belong in a commercial gallery?

DJJ: A lot of market pressure.

WL: But it also looks like that. That's a pity, because it has that inner quality. I mean I find that a pity.

Wolfgang Laib exhibited at the Lawrence Wilson Gallery, University of Western Australia, Perth from 11 February to 3 April, 2005. At the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, from 27 May to 24 July, 2005. At the Art Gallery of NSW from 6 August to 10 October, 2005. Finally, at the Auckland Art Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand, from 10 December, 2005 to 5 March, 2006.

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