

# sculpture

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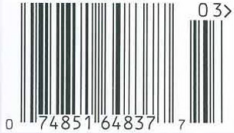
**Wolfgang Laib**

Cuba, Switzerland,  
Finland, and Iran



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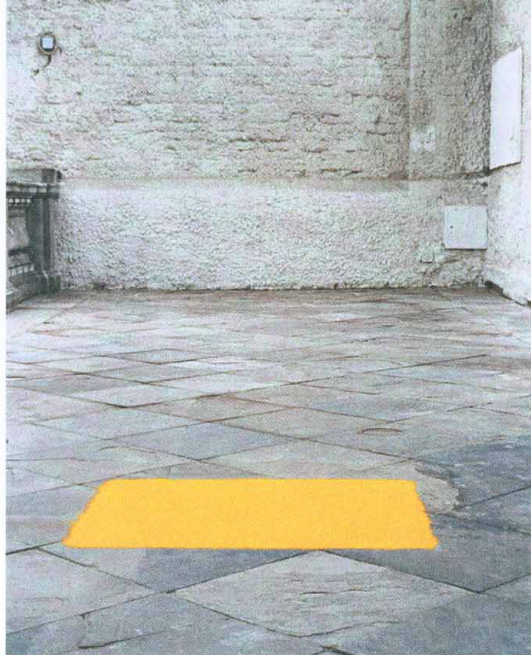
Lodermeier, Peter. "Time-Space-Existence: A Conversation with Wolfgang Laib,"  
Sculpture, March 2008, pp. 24-29.



BY PETER LODERMEYER  
Translated from the  
German by Elizabeth Volk

Left: *The Rice Meals*, 1992. Rice and brass plates, view of installation at the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux. Above: *Pollen from Hazelnut*, 1989. Pollen, 320 x 360 cm.

It is a hot day in southern Germany. The floor of Wolfgang Laib's studio is covered with recent works soon to be shipped to New York for what will be his first exhibition at the Sean Kelly Gallery. "It usually doesn't look like this here. Normally the room is pretty empty," he says. Through the high windows, you can see the meadows of Upper Swabia, where, year after year, the artist collects pollen from dandelions and buttercups. In the 1980s, Laib achieved international renown with his pollen works and milkstones, flat slabs of marble intended to hold poured milk in their slightly concave surfaces. We cross the meadow to the wax room. Due to the heat, Laib can only open the room for a few minutes. Inside, the chamber offers an unbelievably intense experience that engages all of the senses: the golden-yellow color of the wax on the ceiling and walls, the coolness of the shaft that extends 13 meters into the earth, the loud echo that causes you to whisper immediately, as well as the infatuating scent of the beeswax.



**Peter Lodermeier:** *As you know, I am currently working together with the artist René Rietmeyer on a book project called Personal Structures: Time Space Existence. In this connection, it seemed imperative to meet with you, since you are one of the few artists whose work focuses on all three themes.*

**Wolfgang Laib:** I have often asked myself why I am so interested in these themes. I think it has something to do with my studying medicine. A lot of people who do not know me so well fail to see a connection and ask me, “What does art have to do with medicine?” But the way I see it, I have never changed my occupation. I have done in art what I wanted to do as a doctor. I began my studies with all of the ideals you can possibly have. I noticed fairly quickly, however, that medicine has become a natural science no longer for existence, life per se, but only for the material body. Granted, the body is the prerequisite for human existence, but it is not what I have been looking for and am still searching for. I quickly realized that I would only be able to find the things I am looking for in art.

**PL:** *Was it reasonable to expect to find these far-reaching themes in medicine at all? Was this exaggerated idealism on your part?*

**WL:** Yes, it was idealism, but on the other hand, I do not want to be without it even today. And that means very simply: being a doctor and being an artist are the same thing, and this is something I find fantastic. Medicine deals with human existence and with the human body, but not only with its material side. I called my first wax room, which I exhibited with Harald Szeeman in Berlin in 1988, *For Another Body*. At the time, I was already harboring hopes that the concern could be for an entirely other dimension of existence, about what matter really is, about the temporal limits of life, and everything that plays a role in this connection.

**PL:** *Could you explain what you mean by “other body”?*

**WL:** This is precisely what I find to be important. I believe it is crucial that art gives no definitive answers to these questions, unlike the natural sciences and philosophy which attempt to do

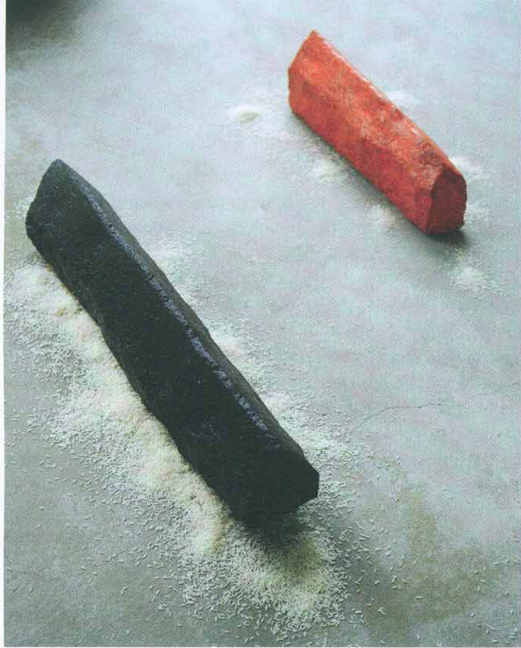
**Left:** *Milkstone, 1998–2001. Marble and milk, 6 x 59.7 x 73 cm. Above:* *Pollen from Dandelion, 1988. Pollen, 61 x 76 cm.*

this through their development of whole doctrines. I find it a greater strength that art instead shows designs in their totality—unexpected things can then suddenly happen, which would not be possible within scientific systems. After six years of studying medicine, using this approach of the natural sciences, in which everything must be proven and explained by means of scientific evidence, I found the openness in art to be far superior. It lends the whole an entirely different dimension.

**PL:** *This brings me to a question that I often think of concerning artists: the relationship between intention and the work of art. There are artists who claim to know everything about their work because, after all, they were the ones who ultimately made it.*

**WL:** No, I see this completely differently. The power of art lies in striking a completely open path. In the 1970s, I was totally unknown and had no contacts in the art world, and then, here in a village in southern Germany, at the end of the world, I began collecting flower pollen in a meadow and bringing it to people in New York, Japan, and elsewhere. And then something happens, worlds begin to change, in your head and everywhere else. This is because of the openness of art. I do not know myself what it all means. For me, it is different than for a painter, for example. For me, it is less about creating than it is about sharing in something already there, and I find that much better. A painter paints a picture, and then it is he who made it. But I did not make this flower pollen. I collected it. I have initiated it all somehow, but what happens with it, what it sets off, is something that happens in much greater processes.

**PL:** *Lately I have been grappling with the concept of presence. If we see one of your pollen fields or wax works, we feel the presence of these substances—and we relate to them immediately without questioning their meaning.*



Above: *Rice Houses*, 2007. Black and red Indian granite, sunflower oil, black smoke, ghee, and cinnabar, two elements 17 x 12 x 76 and 16 x 8 x 46 cm.

Right: *There is No Beginning and No End*, 1999–2001. Beeswax and wood, 620 x 130 x 570 each.



**WL:** Yes, exactly. But nevertheless, these things contain symbolisms and meanings that may be connected to them, although to define those meanings and limit the works to them would be a pity. Putting a stamp on something is the worst kind of thinking. If you want to determine the meaning once and for all, then it is all over. It is all about, for example, simply looking at the milk in the milkstones, experiencing its presence and thinking about it, where it might lead us, and what it might mean at this moment. To feel what an openness such an experience can evoke—this is what I find decisive.

**PL:** Without Place—without Time—without Body, *your installation at the Konrad Fischer Gallery in Düsseldorf, consists of a large number of mounds of rice, with five mounds of pollen in between. This is like an open dream world, an imagined landscape of boundless expanse.*

**WL:** In recent years, I have used this title several times, because I consider it to be very important and central. You have to be careful with titles. If you use too many, it compromises the whole too much and they no longer bear much meaning. There have been, over the decades, only a very few important titles, one of them being *The Five Mountains Not to Climb On*, used in reference to the mounds of flower pollen.

**PL:** *That is an especially quiet and fragile work, though it shows how vulnerability and gentleness can exert great power. But gentleness is not always answered with gentleness. On the contrary, I could imagine that it invites aggression in some people.*

**WL:** Oh, yes. Milkstones and pollen can trigger unbelievable responses, even at exhibitions. In 2002, I had a large-scale show in San Diego. A woman came to the museum with a water bottle,

passed all the guards, stepped into the flower pollen, and began dancing in it. She was just about to pour out the water bottle when the guards intervened. After that, the woman ran out of the museum and disappeared.

**PL:** *You could see it positively; after all, the work had a great emotional effect on her.*

**WL:** The quieter something is, the stronger the answers and reactions. And it is good that it is this way.

**PL:** *You are very interested in Indian religions, but also in Christian mysticism. What do you think of Western philosophy? For example, I think it is interesting that Martin Heidegger also comes from this area, from Meßkirch, only a few kilometers away.*

**WL:** Particularly at the beginning of my studies, I attended a lot of lectures in philosophy. I have also read Heidegger, and it was important to me at the time. But that was a long time ago. What always bothered me were the university philosophers. They stood there in their perfect suits and talked about all sorts of things. But you felt that these people were just so ordinary and normal. What they talked about did not have anything to do with their lives. Ultimately that repulsed me. In Indian philosophy, I feel that they do not philosophize so much about things—it is life per se. Having to do with people in India, who may not be able to read and write but still have the Upanishads in their blood and live every minute according to them, is something unbelievably important to me. This is no romantic notion à la Gauguin, it is something very intense. At the time, I began learning Sanskrit, which fascinated me in contrast to these stiff philosophers. Indian philosophy has much more to do with the art I was looking for, precisely because art is life in itself. If I sit in a meadow and collect flower pollen, then it is not some philosophical structure I erect. It is at all times the reality, a reality that is so open, so indescribable, so free, and so exciting.

**PL:** *You used to emphasize that you regard your work as political. Do you still see it this way today?*



*La Chambre des certitudes*, 2000. Beeswax and wooden door installed in a granite cave. Work located at the Roc de la Maure and accessible only by footpath, Prieuré de Marcoval, Pyrénées, France.

**WL:** I know that some people think I am an apolitical nature romantic who sits in the meadows and takes no interest at all in social relationships. But a politician has influence today, at most he influences tomorrow, but culture and art exert influence over centuries. This sounds very naïve to some people because they claim that matters are decided on entirely different levels—in politics, in economics—and art plays absolutely no role. But this is not the case if you look at matters over longer periods of time. You can see it from the past: ultimately art and culture, not wars and confrontations, have stimulated change in people. Wars may have shoved this or that boundary or shifted the balance of power back and forth, but art and culture have carried mankind further, brought them somewhere else, and it has always been this way. I am still of the opinion that—and this may sound insanely naïve—art changes the world.

**PL:** *You refer to longer periods of time. How do these different time spans relate to the theme of perceived time?*

**WL:** Time is unbelievably relative. Collecting pollen is a very special activity, challenging everything in our society that has to do with time, what you do in a day, what you do in a week, in a month, why you do a thing, and the way you do it. This reverses all such activities. This is why time is so central to my work. And a cosmic world is also involved, in which human life is like a spark and no longer plays any role at all because it is so short in relation to cosmic time relationships. This has always fascinated me, if you imagine what a human life is and what the life of a star is by comparison. And thus, time has always won a central importance in my work. For example, the fact that a milkstone is only filled for a few hours. What then is an eternity, and what is transient? This theme of what is transient and what is eternal has repeatedly taken on a central role in my work.

**PL:** *Your works always relate to space. They influence space and are themselves influenced by their environment. And then you create rooms directly, not only in museums, but also in nature.*

**WL:** This takes place on wholly different levels. I am extremely spoiled in matters concerning exhibition galleries and also very radical in this respect. I have no desire to put on exhibitions in mediocre museum spaces. I have had the opportunity to exhibit in some of the best museums and was very particular when it came to the rooms. What was important to me (and what has hopefully always been the case) is that the radiance of these rooms will have been changed by the few works that were exhibited there. If it really works, then it happens that these are no longer merely artworks in a gallery, but the works mesh with the space, forming a unity, which makes possible an entirely new experience.

**PL:** *You have also created two wax rooms in outdoor spaces.*

**WL:** I love both, the presence of the artwork in a natural space, but also just the presence in a more neutral environment.

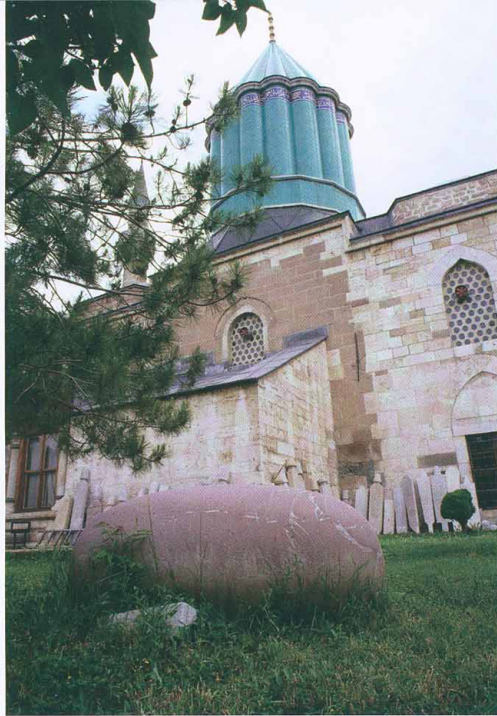
**PL:** *For years there have been polemics against these neutral rooms, against the white cube.*

**WL:** I like it. It enables concentration and calmness, an intensity that does not otherwise exist. Anything else would merely distract our attention from the works.

**PL:** *Years ago you built a wax room in the Pyrénées. You have built a second wax room outside here on your property in Upper Swabia. What does this terrain surrounding your studio mean to you?*

**WL:** I like to show my wax room here to visitors, but it is not open to the public because I need a place where I can be alone and work. Otherwise, the things I have made so far will no longer exist. This is the reason I like to be here so much and work here in seclusion. It is simply because of the intensity I can experience here, and that is very, very important. Other artists need the intensity of great cities in order to be able to work. I have repeatedly returned to this place and experience here the intensity and independence that allow me to create something from out of my innermost, something no one else does. This is the simple mystery of my life.

**PL:** *Your most recent works are granite sculptures that you made in India with the help of native stonemasons. What surprises me is the color. I would have expected you to let the stones speak for themselves in their materiality as stones. I thought at first that the stones were painted. But they are not, are they?*

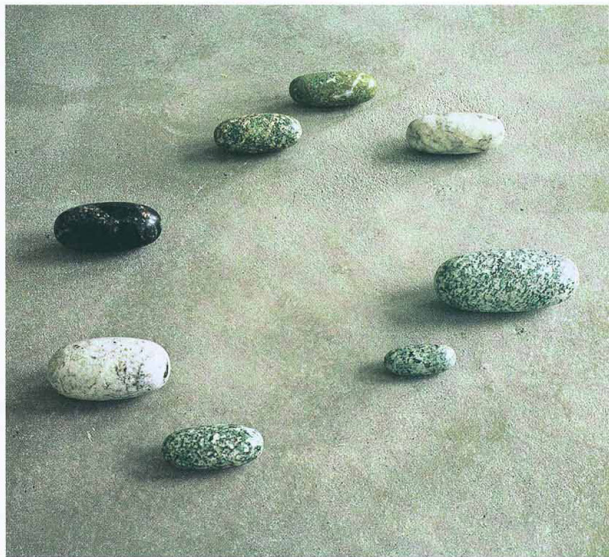


Above: *Brahmanda*, 1973. Pink marble, 60 x 60 x 150 cm. Work at the grave of Jalaluddin Rumi, Konya, Turkey. Right: *Brahmandas*, 1972–74. 8 stones, 9 to 18 cm.

**WL:** No, this is not painted stone, though it may look like it at first glance. But this is, of course, not the concern anyway. I find it exciting that although my works look very different visually, still they have always remained the same in their content and what is fundamental to them. These stones have a long history behind them. Already in 1983, in my first works with rice, I included a black stone, though in a somewhat different form. In *The 63 Rice Meals for a Stone*, mounds of rice were distributed throughout the various rooms at the Konrad Fischer Gallery, and then there was a stone. I have never gotten this out of my head. I was also always fascinated by the figures in Indian temples. These figures are something entirely different than the material presence of a sculpture. When I then see the best and most beautiful figures at the Metropolitan Museum, they have been scrubbed, and everything important about them has been polished away. This is what art historians consider good, the purely material form—but what is really important is gone. By contrast, there is the way that people in India treat these figures every day, how all kinds of things are poured over them, like milk and honey, and how the figures turn black from the votive lights and incense. What happens to such figures visually is what I am concerned with in my new works.

**PL:** So it is oil and lampblack for the black stones and pigmented ghee for the red. This has to do with the connection of art, life, and time. Use is shown by these traces. In them, time is condensed.

**WL:** Yes, I have been rubbing the substances into my stones about every two weeks. And now I am sending them to New York for the



exhibition. I have told the people at the gallery that they have to keep this up, that they should continue to rub the stones every two weeks. The time is important in order to put depth into them. On the invitation, there is a photograph of the stone quarry in southern India where I work, titled *Artist's Studio in South India*. I find it nice that such a process of creation has happened on a much wider scale and not, for example, in a loft in SoHo. This is a much more open process, the concern is for much, much more. And then the rice also belongs to the stones. This black together with the white rice—it is unbelievable what happens here.

**PL:** Do you have other projects you want to realize?

**WL:** I would like to create artworks that belong together in different places throughout the world. So far, I have three ideas for works. One I would like to make in America, in New Mexico, for example, one in India, and one in Tibet. These works would be connected to one another by content and idea in such a way that they form a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, so to speak, that spans the world. I also have more concrete ideas. Back in the 1970s, I made an egg-shaped sculpture for the grave of the poet and mystic Jalaluddin Rumi in Konya, Turkey. It is an entirely traditional sculpture, just like a Brancusi. But already at that time I realized that it was not my form: the egg is simply a universal. I chose it very consciously. And in doing so, I already had the idea back then to have a very large egg made by several hundred stonemasons in India.

**PL:** What dimensions are we talking about?

**WL:** Maybe 10 or 15 meters. I would just love to do this. This really would not be a sculpture by me, it would be a world egg, or as they say in India, a *Brahmanda*.

*Peter Lodermeier is an art historian living in Bonn, Germany.*

