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Galerie
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A Detail of the Infinity: The Art of Wolfgang Laib

by Kim Carpenter

A grain of rice, a speck of pollen, a drop of milk. By themselves, these unorthodox artistic media do not amount to much; but in the hands of Wolfgang Laib, a German artist based in the Black Forest region, they evolve into archetypal emblems of purity, radiance, and simplicity. Rice becomes a reliquary, pollen a painting, and milk a sculpture. Each ordinary item evolves into a metaphysical object that is simultaneously simple and complex – and deeply spiritual.

And this is precisely how one can describe the artist himself. Although Laib shows his work throughout the world, the fifty-seven-year-old artist eschews the hectic energy of an urban environment in favor of rural solitude. He still lives outside the small town in southern Germany where he was born and raised, and he spends months in the fields surrounding his home collecting pollen from dandelions and pine trees, slowly moving through fields with nothing more than a glass jar and his own thoughts. It is a simple life that allows him to focus on creating art rather than navigating the vagaries of the contemporary art world. In a catalog for his 1991 exhibition *Light Seed*, Laib explained: "I'm living very isolated outside of a small village – it is, maybe, like on an island – isolated from people, from society, but also from art and artists. For me it is very important to be independent and to be forced to do my own things."

However, this simple lifestyle

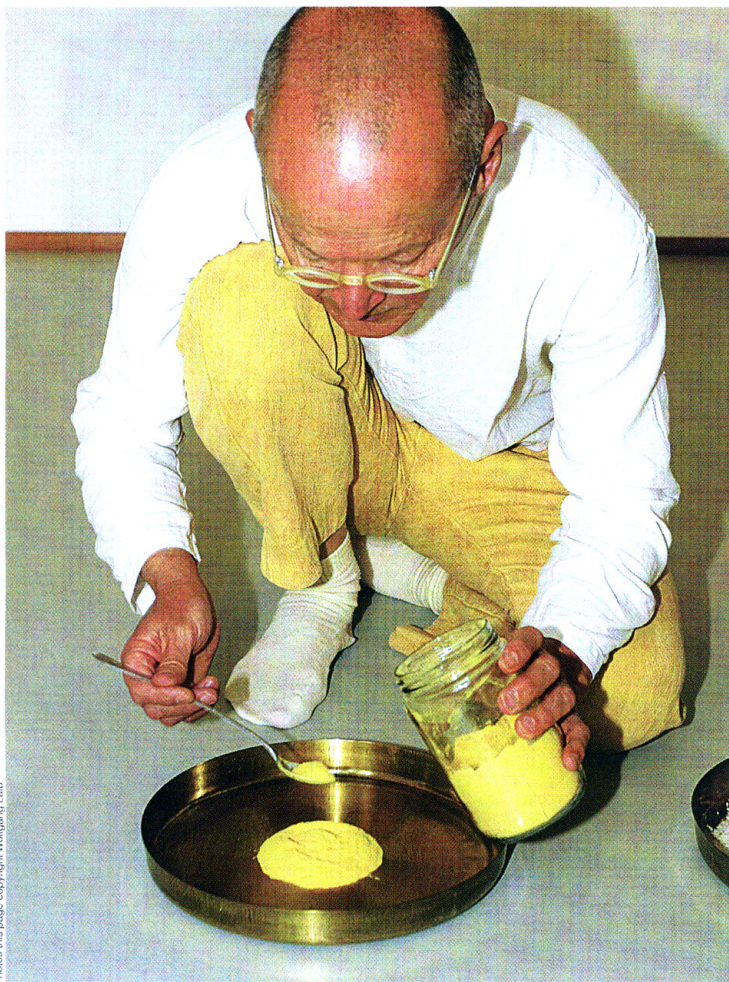
only underscores how complex the artist's own life has been. Laib began his professional pursuits in science and trained as a doctor at the University of Tübingen, where he wrote his dissertation on the purity of drinking water. This topic led him to spend three months researching in India, a country with which he was already familiar. As a child, he traveled with his family to places such as Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and India, and the ancient monasteries and tombs appealed to his intellect and, more importantly, captured his imagination. Closer to home, he visited medieval churches and towns, like Assisi, the town in Italy where St. Francis renounced worldly possessions in favor of an ascetic life devoted to God. This theological eclecticism influenced Laib to abandon medicine in favor of art. After receiving his medical degree in 1974, he left the medical profession behind to pursue art. "The more I knew about the natural science," Laib has since reflected, "the more I saw that they were too narrow for me and it's just not what this body, what all these things are all about."

Laib similarly found art schools with their rigid curricula as impediments to the creative process. For that reason, he rejected the usual path followed by artists and simply began creating, drawing inspiration from his spiritual influences as well as from artists such as Joseph Beuys and Constantin Brancusi. While still in medical school, he began sculpting perfectly shaped ovoids and



ellipses, forms he called "Brahmandas," the Hindu word for universe deriving from the religion's creation-myth. Soon thereafter he created his first "Milk Stones," rectangular blocks of polished white marble carved with slight depressions that hold a thin layer of milk. These two materials combine to create the illusion of one, solid form; an immovable yin meets a liquid yang. "Milk on stone," Laib has said, "it is so still, so incredibly still. It seems like it can last forever...and it lasts only for a few hours. It has the high concentration, this density, because it lasts such a short time."

Whereas the Milk Stones are tranquilly muted, his celebrated pollen pieces are brilliantly kinetic. The glowing rectangles and softly formed pyramids are composed entirely of yellow pollen and gleam with the brightness of icon paintings. In contrast to those kinds of permanent works, though, Laib's pollen pieces are ephemeral – though not necessarily fleeting. The artist painstakingly collects each speck of bee pollen by hand, which takes months working in solitude, an endeavor he has described as "a detail of the infinity." He distills this "detail," by carefully sifting it onto an exhibition space, usually a floor, where airflow and movement by viewers dispel the pollen and eventually make it almost disappear. However, that kind of transience is integral to the work, and it focuses the viewer on something usually not noticed in day-to-day contemporary life. In explaining his decision to



OPPOSITE PAGE: Wolfgang Laib *Pollen from Pine* 1999. Four jars with pollen and sieve spread on area. **LEFT:** *The Rice Meals* – rice, brass plate, and hazelnut pollen. **ABOVE:** *The Rice Meals* detail. Installation: Museum Villa Rot, 2004, private collection.

work with such an unusual medium, Laib has stated: "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."

Laib's handling of rice presents yet another facet to his body of work. Using a food source that the majority of the world's population relies upon for sustenance, the artist builds small houses or pyramids. In describing these works, he has reflected, "The Rice Houses have

the form of a house and also of reliquary of the Middle Ages or of a Muslim tomb, which contain the bones of saints. And these rice houses now contain food – maybe that is even the same, I think so. But still it is neither an altar nor a reliquary, it is much more complex." For this reason, these works are spiritually nourishing, while simultaneously addressing worldly issues concerning shelter and sustenance, two of humanity's most basic needs. Says Laib, "For me, it's the most beautiful sight – it opens up so much. It's just like the Milk Stones, where the milk is no longer food for the body. It's something much more universal."

Despite the lack of overt theology in Laib's work, viewers nevertheless respond with reverence and awe, almost if they are encountering sacred spaces. Maureen Bray is a director of Sean Kelly Gallery, which featured Laib's solo exhibition *Without Time-Without Body-Without Place* in New York this past fall. Regarding audience reaction, she says: "The pieces interact with viewers on a very fundamental level. They become very emotionally moved by their beauty." Noting the frenetic pace of New York, she continues, "People walk into the gallery and suddenly stop. Even if they can't identify what they are seeing, they



Copyright Wolfgang Laib

Wolfgang Laib pours milk for the *Milk Stone*, 1987 to 1989, white marble, and milk.

are somehow affected by it. It's a transformative effect that is a wonderful moment. When they leave, they have made an emotional connection. That is a real gift to the viewer."

In a contemporary art world often devoted to the sensational and the secular, Wolfgang's Laib's ascetically transcendent work stands apart. They are, he offers, "basically concerned with one and the same

thing: with a journey, with the concurrence of motion and stillness, of material and immaterial, of the durable and the ephemeral, with balance and transformation, with the attempt to explore the irrational or the impossible, and with the search for an entrance or a passage to another world." In this regard, his ephemeral art – Milk Stones that last only hours and pollen paintings that vanish into thin air – provides

viewers with a split-second view into the eternal.

And what does this mean? Perhaps the artist himself articulates it best: "I have always had this almost naive belief that a pollen piece, or a milk stone, contains a message that could change the world." **GL**

Kim Carpenter spent several years living in Heidelberg, Frankfurt, and Munich. She currently writes about history, art, and culture for a number of publications.