

Sean Kelly Gallery

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TURIN GOES VEDIC

Dramatically realigning his culture-bridging practice, Wolfgang Laib brought 45 Brahmin priests from India to the Fondazione Merz in Turin to perform a weeklong fire ritual.

BY KLAUS OTTMANN

LAST SUMMER, at the Fondazione Merz in Turin, the German artist Wolfgang Laib unveiled his most ambitious installation to date, made up of 20,000 conical accumulations of rice and nine of pollen, each barely 3 inches high. These "mountains," as Laib calls them, were arranged in parallel rows surrounding a 20-foot-high ziggurat made of beeswax. The size of this piece, while far exceeding that of Laib's previous installations, exemplified his recent practice of expanding modest floor works into large compositions in which serially repeated mounds of rice are configured with a smaller number of pollen mounds (either hazelnut or buttercup) at the center.¹ In the brochure for the Fondazione Merz exhibition, Laib wrote, "I made so many exhibitions over the last thirty years, hundreds all over the world, but there must be something more." The "something more" in this case was *Fire Ritual*, which took place in June, during the final week of the exhibition. For this ceremony, Laib arranged for 45 Brahmin priests from southern India to perform Vedic fire ceremonies in the courtyard of the 1930s industrial building (formerly belonging to the Lancia automobile company) that has housed the foundation since it opened in 2005.

Identifying with no artistic school or movement, Laib has



Left, view of Wolfgang Laib's exhibition "From me alone all has risen, in me all exists, in me all dissolves (Kaivalya Upanishad)," 2009, beeswax, rice, pollen; at Fondazione Merz, Turin. Photo Klaus Ottmann.

Above right, *mahayajna* on Silver Mountain, Melavalavu, India, offering ceremony to inaugurate Laib's exhibition in Turin, Feb. 18, 2009. Photo Wolfgang Laib.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

A solo show by Wolfgang Laib at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Oct. 30-Dec. 5.

distanced himself from Western European esthetic traditions. Specifically, he rejects the notion of the autonomous creative ego, an idea that emerged in the Renaissance and has led, he believes, to the concept, prevalent in the West, of the unique artistic self. He has little interest in contemporary art apart from his own practice and has forged few friendships with other artists, remaining true for more than 30 years to his solitary pursuit. He is inspired equally by the natural environment of his native southern Germany, where he lives in a small village outside of Biberach, and by non-Western art and religion, especially those of his second home near Madurai, in Tamil Nadu in southern India.

One European artist with whom Laib has always felt an affinity, however, is Mario Merz. Their friendship began in 1982 when Merz invited Laib to place a jar of pollen on *Spiral Table*, a work Merz was showing at Documenta 7. The connection endured even after Merz's death in 2003, when Laib was invited by the German Academy in Rome in 2006 to select an Italian counterpart for a two-person show. He chose Merz,

although the guidelines specified the participation of a living artist. An exception was made, and Beatrice Merz, the artist's daughter and director of the Fondazione Merz, agreed to lend one of her father's paintings. It hung directly across from a pollen mountain by Laib, which was installed on a shelf. This, in turn, led Beatrice Merz to invite Laib to create an installation at the Fondazione, which was established not only to preserve and exhibit works by Mario Merz, but also to promote contemporary art and culture in general. When she expressed a desire for something unique, Laib showed her a photograph of Vedic fire rituals and proposed that they bring 108 Brahmin priests to Turin to perform the ceremonies at the exhibition. (They eventually settled on 45.) In a note written after she visited Laib's studio in Germany in July 2008, Beatrice Merz described her feelings about his proposal as "curiosity becoming anxiety and anxiety the desire to make it concrete."²

BORN IN METZINGEN, Germany, in 1950, the son of a physician, Laib initially followed his father's path. In 1972, upon returning to Germany after a three-month stay in India, where he was studying the quality of the local drinking water for

his medical dissertation, Laib discovered a large black rock, about 3 feet long, in a field near his house. Inspired by his memories of the simple shapes of quotidian and ceremonial objects in India, he brought the rock home and, although he had never studied art formally, set to work carving it into a perfect ovoid object called a *brahmada*. (In India, a stone *brahmada* symbolizes the unity of male and female principles and the wholeness of the universe.) As he worked, Laib realized that he had become dissatisfied with medical science, which he felt addressed human needs imperfectly. He decided to become an artist instead of a physician.

Laib has ever since created objects of great simplicity and purity: rectangular slabs of polished white marble with barely perceptible depressions on their upper surfaces that he fills with milk (his "milkstones"); fields of yellow or orange pollen that he sifts onto the gallery or museum floor; rooms lined with beeswax. Although he continues to create milkstones and pollen fields that have remained formally unchanged since the mid-'70s, his part-time habitation of the house and studio he recently constructed in Tamil Nadu has spurred him to expand his formerly circumscribed vocabulary to materials and forms

that are closely connected with the religious rituals of his adopted home.

In 2006, for example, during the first winter after the Indian studio was completed, Laib made a series of "Rice Houses," long rectangular blocks of stone (indigenous granite) or beeswax that are exhibited on the floor with rice grains spread around them. He covers the houses with red ghee (clarified butter mixed with red pigment) or black soot and sunflower oil, materials related to fire rituals in which ghee is the principal fuel, producing smoke that covers most of the bronze deities inside Indian temples with layers of black, oily soot.

This page, views of *Fire Ritual*, 2009, at Fondazione Merz. Left, photo Klaus Ottmann. Below, photo Wolfgang Laib, courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

Opposite, view of the exhibition "without place—without time—without body," 2008; at Musée de Grenoble. Photo Jean-Luc Lacroix. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery.



BREATHING IN THE PUNGENT AIR FILLED WITH A MIXTURE OF SMOKE AND THE SCENT OF BURNING SPICES WAS A SENSUOUS EXPERIENCE, NOT OUT OF PLACE IN THE CONTEXT OF LAIB'S ART.

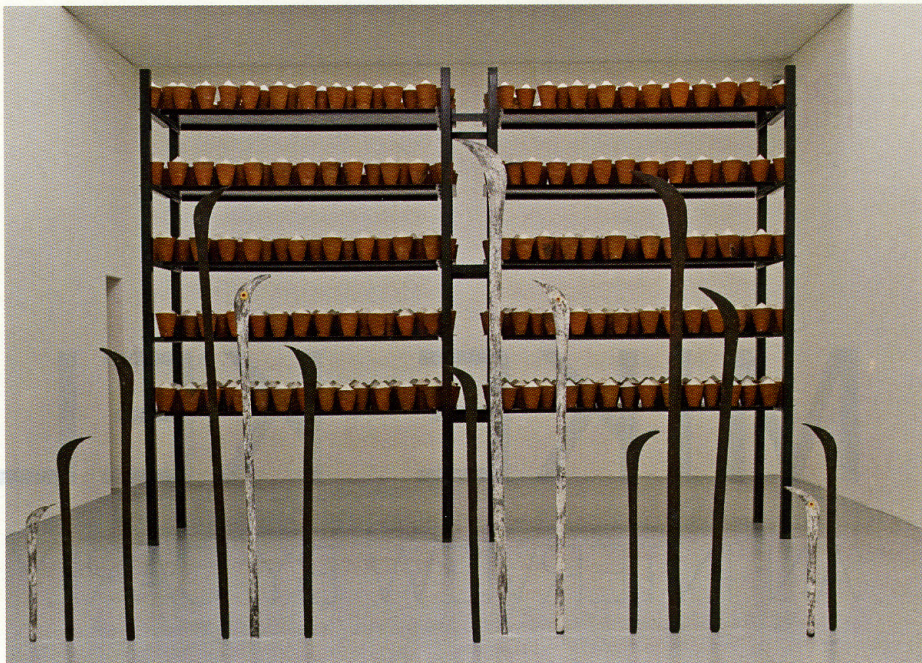


The following winter (2007), Laib produced a series of snake-shaped, painted metal sculptures that refer to both the cobra that is central to Hindu mythology and the actual serpents that climb out of the well on his Indian property at night. In 2008 he began incorporating clay pots used by Indian plant nurseries into his installations. Laib fills these pots with ashes, associated with *vibhuti* (the sacred ashes of cremation), which remind believers to cast aside selfish and worldly desires. The pots with ashes are frequently shown with rows of burning oil lamps arranged on long metal tables.

Laib insists that the elements he borrows from Indian religious practices are universal symbols that transcend their original contexts. He explains that he is not a practicing Hindu or Buddhist, and is not interested in promoting specific religious beliefs or practices. He does, however, firmly believe in the power of art to heal and transform society—to, as he once put it, “change the world.”³

LAIB'S EXHIBITION at the Fondazione Merz, titled “From me alone all has risen, in me all exists, in me all dissolves (Kaivalya Upanishad),” opened and closed with rituals. The title is a quotation from one of the main Vedic scriptures or Upanishads, which deals with the study and practice of *kai- valya* (aloneness or detachment). Laib inaugurated the show off-site, in India, with a *yajna*, or Vedic fire ritual, which took place on Feb. 18, 2009, on a granite hill in Melavalavu, north of Madurai. As he later explained it to me: “[The show] is not limited to one individual, neither to one place, neither to a certain time,”⁴ indicating his goal of overcoming the temporal and spatial limitations typical of museums. The Turin exhibition concluded in June with a seven-day-long *yajna* called a *mahayajna*.⁵ Each day, between two and four different *homams* (fire rituals) were performed, beginning with repetitive, melodious mantra-chanting and ending with the lighting of 33 traditional fire altars (built especially for the occasion and dismantled afterward) in which fruits, vegetables, spices and medicinal herbs were burned. The duration of each *homam* (one to three hours), type of offering and specific mantra depended on the purpose for which it was performed (good health, prosperity, the cancellation of negative energies, marital felicity, universal peace, etc.). According to Laib and the priests themselves, with whom I conversed, it was the first time that traditional Vedic fire ceremonies had been performed publically outside of India (with the exception of Malaysia, which has a large Tamil population).

Laib requested that the rituals not be altered in any way for a Western public. While the appearance of the altars, including their dimensions, has not changed for thousands of years, Laib did decide on their location outdoors (*homams* are traditionally performed inside temples or private homes) and disposition in rows, thus making them resonant with his rice-and-pollen installation inside the Fondazione. Sitting close to the burning fire altars for several hours at a time among Laib's attentive audience was an unusually sensuous experience. Breathing in the pungent air filled with a mixture of smoke and the scent of burning



spices, and listening to the melodious, repetitive chanting of the priests, was like nothing I had encountered before; yet it did not feel out of place within the context of his art.

Laib plans next, with the help of stone quarry workers, to carve a monumental *brahmada* about 60 feet long on the same mountain in India where the inaugural ceremony for *Fire Ritual* took place. With the performance in Turin—the fruit of his immersion in Indian culture and his esthetic pursuits of the past 30-odd years—Laib appears to be reaching a new level in the scope of his endeavors, even as he continues to honor his influences. ○

¹ Such installations were seen first in 2006 at Galerie Beyeler in Basel, and subsequently at Konrad Fischer Galerie in Düsseldorf and Sean Kelly Gallery in New York (both 2007). ² Published online at the Fondazione Merz website: fondazionemerz.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/testo_critico_laib.pdf. When I saw Beatrice Merz in Turin on the second day of Laib's *Fire Ritual*, her anxiety had given way to guarded joy. ³ In a conversation with Harald Szeemann, in Klaus Ottmann, *Wolfgang Laib: A Retrospective*, Ostfildern/Ruit, Hatje Cantz, 2000, p. 152. ⁴ In conversation with the author, Turin, June 4, 2009. ⁵ A *mahayajna* is a large *yajna* comprising a series of *homams*. It is usually performed in a temple for a specific purpose with massive participation and worship. *Homams* are fire offerings that combine mantra-chanting with *pooja*, the worship of the divine performed to keep one in harmony with cosmic forces, thereby removing and overcoming the sorrows of life and bringing spiritual elevation.

“From me alone all has risen, in me all exists, in me all dissolves (Kaivalya Upanishad)” was on view at Fondazione Merz, Turin, from Apr. 9 to June 7, 2009; *Fire Ritual* took place there during the last week. Laib had a solo exhibition at Gian Enzo Sperone in Sent, Switzerland [Aug. 15-Sept. 30]. His current show, “Wolfgang Laib,” is at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York [Oct. 30-Dec. 5].

KLAUS OTTMANN is a curator at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, N.Y. He organized “Wolfgang Laib: A Retrospective,” which traveled to six museums in the United States and Germany between 2000 and 2002.