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Otro lugar, otro cuerpo, otro tiempo. Transformación, naturaleza y espiritualidad en la obra de Wolfgang Laib

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ANOTHER PLACE, ANOTHER BODY, ANOTHER TIME. TRANSFORMATION, NATURE, AND SPIRITUALITY IN WOLFGANG LAIB'S WORK

ABSTRACT

As one of the most distinguished figures in contemporary art, Wolfgang Laib (1950) bonds in his oeuvre past and present, the ephemeral and the eternal, the sensorial and the metaphysical, conceptual structures and natural elements, the human and the cosmic. Employing highly symbolic materials such as milk, pollen, beeswax or rice, the German artist create powerful installations that are immersive as they are numinous. His work is based on repetitive gestures and long, cyclical processes marked by the seasons and celebrated in communion with nature. Drawing from Eastern philosophies as well as pre-Renaissance thought, Laib distances himself from Western ideas and anthropocentric convictions in order to restore a more balanced relationship between humankind and the natural world. This text examines his disciplinarian, time-based, and ritualistic methodologies for the purpose of manifesting how art can open up unexpected realms of deeply universal knowledge and reflective contemplation. Due to all the above, we argue that Laib's minimalistic yet radical visual poetry can be read as a forward-looking vision of resistance and renewal.

Keywords: Wolfgang Laib, art, nature, spirituality, transformation

RESUMEN

Como una de las figuras más destacadas del arte contemporáneo, Wolfgang Laib (1950) une en su obra pasado y presente, lo efímero y lo eterno, lo sensorial y lo metafísico, estructuras conceptuales y elementos naturales, lo humano y lo cósmico. Empleando materiales altamente simbólicos como la leche, el polen, la cera de abejas o el arroz, el artista alemán crea poderosas instalaciones que son tan inmersivas como numinosas. Su obra se basa en gestos repetitivos y largos procesos cíclicos marcados por las estaciones y celebrados en comunión con la naturaleza. Bebiendo de las filosofías orientales y el pensamiento prerrenacentista, Laib se distancia de ideas occidentales y convicciones antropocéntricas para reestablecer una relación equilibrada entre la humanidad y el mundo natural. Este texto examina sus metodologías disciplinarias, prolongadas en el tiempo y ritualistas con el objeto de manifestar cómo el arte puede abrir inesperados reinos de conocimiento profundamente universal y contemplación reflexiva. Debido a todo lo anterior, argumentamos que la poesía visual minimalista pero radical de Laib puede leerse como una visión prospectiva de resistencia y renovación.

Palabras clave: Wolfgang Laib, arte, naturaleza, espiritualidad, transformación

1 AESTHETICS OF THE ASCETIC: LAIB'S MATERIALS, FORMS, AND IDEAS

There are oriental sages who find the entire universe in their garden, says Mexican poet and writer Jordi Soler in a recent essay titled *La orilla celeste del agua*. In that land delimited by a fence, or by the walls of the neighboring houses, are contained all the elements we need to interpret and to know the world (2021, p. 150). Soler recalls a Zen master mentioned by Erich Fromm, who stated that he would not live long enough to get to truly grasp his own garden. This man, however, was capable of losing himself, for months and years, in careful observation of a tree leaf. The author identifies very clearly the message of these people who know how to observe the gardens: more than the dimension, and the variety, of what you observe, what's really important is to observe with actual attention, for in the leaf of a tree alone it happens as much as in the complete mountain (2021, p.150).

Such a task –losing oneself for months and years in committed observation and communion with nature– is exemplary carried out by German artist Wolfgang Laib. Over the past five decades, he has developed a reduced, singular visual vocabulary that seeks notions of universality, timelessness, and transformation.

He employs materials that come from the natural world and have a profound nourishing potential, both literally and metaphorically speaking: milk, rice, pollen, beeswax. Their common premise is that they are living, organic substances able to fertilize and feed. These generative substances are displayed in simple, archetypical, and universally recognizable shapes: as white and yellow rectangles or forming little cones or piles, houses, stepped pyramids, and ships.

1.1 Another place

Figure 1. Wolfgang Laib's family glasshouse in Biberach, Southern Germany. © Art21

Born in Metzingen in 1950, Laib lives with his family in Swabia, a small village near Biberach in southern Germany. Such a silent, seclusive enclave has played a decisive part in Laib's approach to art making. The family's property, a spartanly furnished, modernist glass house built in the late 1950's (fig. 1), is surrounded by the Black Forest's meadows and serene vistas that inspires his works. They also provide some of the natural materials employed for realizing his oeuvre.

> For me the choice is to live outside of a village. I really want to be independent from a situation, a city. I feel that living in a city makes you more or less dependent on what the actual situation and the actual thinking is, and I hope to be outside of that, to be more independent. Then when I come into the city, into different cities, nowhere really is my home. I can see and watch these things much better from the outside. I'm not really belonging anywhere and this gives me, I hope, an incredible freedom (Ottman, 1986).

Laib seems to enjoy this sense of detachment from a set place, a condition that has come to shape his art in time. However, he also appreciates having a studio as a place to connect with his artworks. In the beginning, and for years, he recalls, he had no studio at all, working predominantly in contact with nature:

> I collected my pollen from early spring to August/September, and then, in the late fall, I started to be very free, not being fixed to a space. So my studio was where I collected my pollen. Then, when I was doing more and more work, I bought a beautiful space, but it's less of a studio and more like a space where I want to see my work in and be with it (Ottman, 1986).

Currently, however, Laib has two studios, one in his natal small village in Germany and another in Southern India, where he also spends part of the year. (This country has left an indelible mark in the artist's way of seeing the world, and this connection will be explored later in this text.) He claims to find it "a luxury" to work alone and live in such remote areas whilst being able to exhibit in the most important museums around the world (MoMA, 2013). In an interview with Darren James Jorgensen, Laib emphasizes how significant it is for him to be with his artworks in this intimate space, and the vital role reflective contemplation plays in his creative process:

> 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. (...). It has had a big influence on what I do (Jorgenssen, 2005, n.p.).

Laib's works are relatively unphotogenic. Realizing that early on, he assumed the role of documenting each piece himself in order to retain full control on how the work would be presented. Thus, Laib also uses his studio as a place to register and install his new pieces, photographing them in a particular light or effect (fig. 2). Laib has declared to be very frustrated with how his works were registered by professional photographers commissioned by galleries. In his first exhibitions, he only presented *milkstone*s and pollen:

> I was truly disappointed when I saw that the *milkstone* looked like a white square of paper lying on the floor and the pollen like the same in yellow, usually shot from an angle to one side to make them seem more three-dimensional, like sculptures. And I thought: this cannot be. So I started trying to photograph them myself. I also did not find it easy, but I believe that down through the years several quite exceptional photographs of *milkstones* and installations involving pollen have arisen as a consequence (Sönmez, 2009, pp. 29-30).

Figure 2. Wolfgang Laib installing a pollen piece in studio in Germany, circa 1987. © Wolfgang Laib

This process of discovering how to illustrate the work in the most convenient manner took place in his studio. The artist recognizes that any professional photographer would shoot the works leaving the windows behind so that the shapes and materials appear clear and hard in definition, but he seeks the opposite. "It actually all started with photographs in my studio", Laib states, "(…) I photographed my work there against the light shining in through the windows – on the gray studio floor, in as deep a position as possible. And that creates a quite unique loss of materials qualities, it almost conjures up an aura" (Sönmez, 2009, p. 33). Regarding this, in another interview with gallerist André Buchmann, Laib praises the privacy and quietness of his atelier in the following terms:

> My studio is a place that I created myself, more than twenty-five years ago. It is a modest, small space. The secret is probably that it is not so large and has an inner coherence. With three simple, large windows, it not only has a special light but also a connection to the landscape that (…) is unbelievably important to me. (…) My studio is a place where I work and can be completely alone with my works, isolated and very conscious. After all, I did not move to a big city but live a secluded life, undisturbed. In these surroundings I create out of my own life the works that then surround me (Buchmann, 2007, p. 36).

1.2 Another body

Laib stands resolutely apart in today's art world. Not having received any formal training in art, and not having taught any students, he adheres to no school or movement. Instead, he positions himself and his life at the center of his creative task: "For some artists, life is something completely different from what occupies them in their work. My work emerges from my life. [It] provides the basis for how I do my art" (Zumthor, 2022, p. 55). This does not mean that his works are based on autobiographic anecdotes –in fact, his persona is somewhat irrelevant in his proposals–, rather that Laib regards his way of living and art as one indissoluble, inextricable whole, for his artworks determines his way of living and his way of living shapes his artworks. He has also claimed to have little interest in contemporary art, apart from his

own practice (Ottman, 2000, p. 11), and declares to be most influenced by ancient cultures and pre-Renaissance thought. In fact, as it will be argued later in this text, Laib pursues a deep, meaningful connection with past civilizations, dissolving time and history, Eastern and Western thought, the rational and the sensorial, the temporary and the eternal, and decay and renewal.

This holistic perception of art and life comes, partially, as the byproduct of having studied medicine for years at the University of Tuebingen, in his natal Germany. The contact with sickness and death left a profound mark in the young Laib, who was dissatisfied with the limitations of medicine as a science that only cared about the physical body – an approach he considered insufficient.

> For me, the most difficult thing about studying medicine was that is a natural science which follows only logic. It sees the body as a material body. Our whole culture is based on such thinking. It seems so successful and yet it is so limited, limited to the material world. The more I studied, the more I heard what I was taught, the more sensitive I became about all of this. I just couldn't believe what I was taught. I couldn't believe that this was all there was. I think it is a part, but then there is much more. These bodies I saw in the hospitals were human beings. So I began to search for something else –for another body (Menegoi, 2017, p. 52).

In spite of his frustration, he completed his medical studies but, unlike his father, an esteemed specialist, he never worked as a doctor. He wrote a graduation thesis on the drinking water of Athoor Block, a region north of the city of Madurai. In order to carry out his research, he moved to India for six months, a country he was no stranger to. Laib's father, an art collector, was very interested in eastern art and culture, especially India, and the family has had a strong connection to this place for decades:

> In the '60s, there were some exhibitions that my father saw in Europe of tantric art, abstract drawings and so on from the 16th or 17th century. He thought they were like Mondrians, so he bought a few of these drawings and said, "I want to see the country where this is coming from." That was his first interest in going to India. (…) My father had much to do with creating this way of life (Bui, 2018).

Thus, the Laib family visited Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, and other countries in Middle Europe and Asia. Additionally, from 1970, they would spend every summer in South India, supporting a village near Madurai, an experience that reconfigured their lifestyle.

> (…) there was this travel to Turkey. People in small villages invited us into their homes: simple houses with rooms totally empty with some pillows. My parents came home, and all the furniture disappeared. The main thing was that we wanted to have only the art in the space, and not be disturbed by anything else (Art21, 2014).

Despite ending up not working in medicine, Laib feels he never changed profession, for he does with his art what he wanted to do as a doctor. When asked about how he got the idea for creating his artworks, he argues: "It think it's not an idea that you get on an afternoon or so. I think it's the – If I look back it's the intense experience of studying six years medicine and seeing hospitals, seeing sick people, experiencing death… I think this is the answer to all what I had seen before" (MoMA, 2013). In 1972, after having returned from collecting material for his thesis in India, Laib, deeply moved by the country's poverty, started carving a sculpture from a big black rock he found in a quarry near his home in Swabia. This is the first artwork by Laib: an ovoid stone that he titled *Brahmanda* (fig. 3), which translates to "Brahma's egg" and alludes to the origin of the universe. (In Hindu mythology, Brahmā is one of the three major divinities and sources of creation.) The title of the work itself proves how travelling to India and seeing the country's ceremonial and everyday objects influenced Laib.

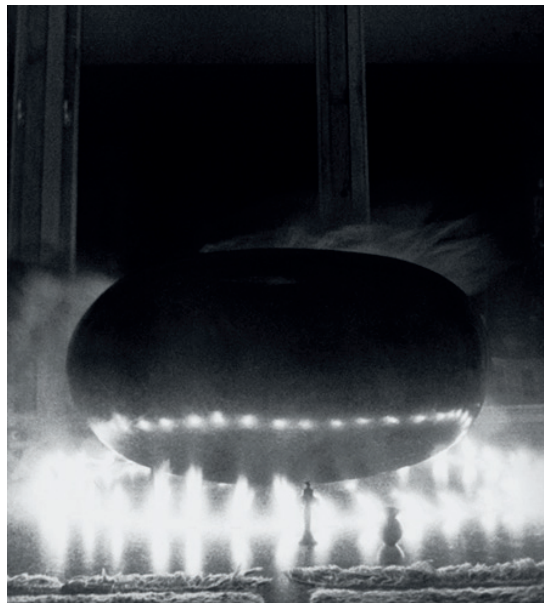

Figure 3. Wolfgang Laib's first *Brahmanda*, installed in the artist's house in 1972. Natural black boulder, 68 x 68 x 120 cm. © Wolfgang Laib

The task, which required physical work –the stone is carved out with hammer and chisel– ends when Laib gives the surface a fine polished finish. This is the only work Laib has chosen to live with on a daily basis, remaining in his home ever since its completion. The experience of creating this egg-shaped sculpture led him to the conviction of wanting to become an artist. First, however, he would finish his medical studies, which he continued in parallel to taking courses of Sanskrit, Hindi and Tamil, as well as Indian language and culture.

In the meantime, Laib returns to Konya with his parents and begins working on a second *Brahmanda*. This piece is larger than the first one and is made out of a red stone found at a nearby quarry. The work is to be a homage to Jalal-ud-udin-Rumi, the Persian mystic whom Laib admires deeply, on the 700th anniversary of the poet's death. When the stone is finished it is laid near the entrance of Rumi's tomb, located in a former cloister in Konya, now turned into a museum. However, it remains a relevant place of worship for the order to this day. Interestingly, the stone soon started to attract people, particularly women, who believed it was a meteorite with the power to enhance fertility. In time, the local authorities had to relocate the artwork to a less accessible spot, moving it to the museum's back garden.

The years 1973 and 74 are tough for the artist. The exposure to death that came with his work at hospitals led him to turn to Buddhist and Jain texts. The Jain code of noninjury and non-harm as the most essential duties of every person attract the young artist, who finds a stimulating counterbalance to the ideas of body and soul that he had studied in medicine. When asked in an interview if he ever considered exploring holistic medicine, Laib firmly replied: "No, because that would have been too small a step, and I tried to make a big step. It's not about homeopathy

or anything like that" (Ottman, 1986). For Laib, art possesses a spiritual healing function (Tanguy, 2001) and, therefore, he saw it as a more expansive field than science: "when I made my first *Milkstone* in 1975 it was a direct response to what art can do where medicine can't" (Phong Bui, 2018).

> I felt that the human body, life, the threat of death, that there must be something else – purity, that there had to be something else besides the purity of hygiene in this century. Through my medical studies I got very sensitive to the body, the limits in time and space of the body, to suffering, illness, death. On the one hand I was observing operations and on the other I was reading the scripts of Buddhism– the compassion of Buddah–and the scripts of the Jains: I was fascinated by the extreme purity and no-violence –*ahimsa*– the extreme meaning of things too precious to be touched. (Menegoi, 2018, p. 54)

This last statement on preciousness and beauty as a delicate thing is interesting, for it represents one of the most notorious oxymorons in every Laib's work: the materials are sensuous, evocative, tangible, yet somewhat volatile, too fragile to be touched. Equally paradox is the color of the pollen, or the aroma of the beeswax: saturated, uncanny, yet pure and natural. Laib oeuvre's aura, says Margit Rowell, "cannot be measured or contained" (2005, p. 26).

Laib has stressed many times that his training in medicine has been fundamental for the development of his work, and that studying art would have probably been detrimental. In fact, he firmly advices young artists not to enroll in art courses but to experience life so that they can better articulate their creative projects:

> When I see somebody 20 years old and they are caught into traditional art college… that's very sad, I find. They have such an energy that they should use… Have some job for a while and do this or that and see the different possibilities. Just see what the world is and, and (…) live and (…) enjoy (…) the richness of the world and experience the world as much… I think – I mean the art college is a big problem (…) because it's very (…) restricted, it's not open, (…) it's not the world. (Our Choices Art, 2017)

In addition to Rumi's spiritual poetry and Buddhist and Jain scripts, Laib has been deeply influenced by Christian sage Francis of Assisi and Chinese sacred literature –he claims he could recite by heart Laozi's *Tao Te King*, the most essential manifest in Taoism, by the age of 15 (Art21, 2014). To these sources he arrived partly thanks to Jacob Brackle, a local artist who lived nearby Laib's home, who became a friend of the family. Described by Wolfgang as a quiet man leading a very simple life, Brackle passed on to the young artist a fervent interest in Asiatic philosophy and a modest way of existing. Moreover, despite the intentionally sought separation from the modern and contemporary art trends, Laib acknowledges to have been influenced by fellow countryman Joseph Beuys, whom he met several times before he passed away, and Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi, who was considered a semi-god by Laib's parents. With the first one, Laib shares a fascination with beeswax, a substance that for both of them symbolizes warmth and maintenance of life. However, like curator and art critic Guy Tossato has pointed out, in contrast to Beuys's overbearing public commitments, Laib has preferred solitude and silence (1999, p. 9). And, although surprised at how close some of ideas are to Beuys's, he kept a cautious distance in order to avoid becoming his pupil. The other main artistic reference, Brancusi, also contributed to shape Laib's aesthetic sense – pristine, simple, stripped down. A trip to Paris allowed him to discover the artist's studio –a recreation built in the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris–, and in 1965, at age 14, he visited Tirgu Jiu in Romania with his parents to see some pieces by the sculptor: *Endless Column, Gate of the Kiss*, and *Table of Silence*. The impact is clear: some of Laib's work titles seem to echo those of Brancusi, like his recent *City of Silence* (2022); formally, too, there are indeniable connections: the Romanian's *Sculpture for the Blind (Beginning of the World*, for instance, resonates deeply with Laib's *Brahmandas*.

1.3 Another time

With all this baggage –the exposure to Asian cultures and ceremonies, the miseries he witnessed in hospitals, and the aesthetic influences he found together with his family since his teenage years– Laib created his first *Milkstone* in 1975. The work, which he continues to produce to this day, is a white marble rectangle –most often squared– which is hand polished to create a shallow depression. Onto the deepened surface, milk is poured carefully as to cover it completely (fig. 4). The artist describes the work as a participation in something universal and timeless:

> It's a small slab of pure white marble which has a very, very fine indention on the top with a rim. I work first with a small machine, but most of the rim and everything I grind by hand with sandpaper and water, which is a lot of work. But it's a very beautiful, meditative work, which I always like to do. I participate in something which I feel is very independent of myself and also has a universal meaning. And you pour milk into this on the surface, which is only for some hours, and then it has to be replaced. I mean the stone is like millions of years old and the milk is just there for some hours. It's a very very simple thing, but the milk surface can contain everything you can think of. (MoMA, n.d.)

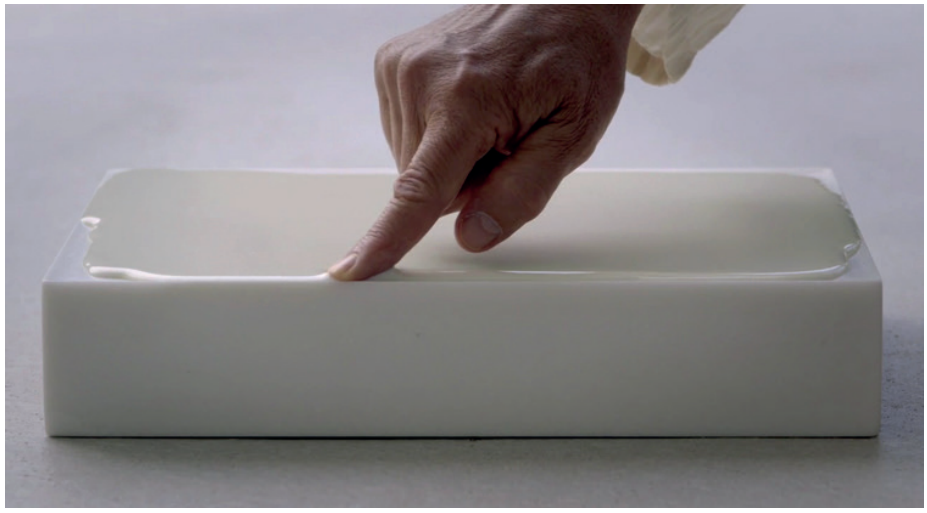

Figure 4. Wolfgang Laib, *Milkstone*, date unknown. Milk and marble. 68 x 68 x 120 cm. © MoMA

This tension between the longevity of the stone and the perishable liquid is arresting. The eternal and the fleeting, the organic and the mineral, hotness and coldness, life and death – they all spring in temporary indetermination and serene harmony. Guy Tosatto describes a *Milkstone* as an "enigma" (1999, p. 24), a "fragile equilibrium where time seems suspended, in this immaculate union, whence arises the pure song of the whiteness" (p. 10).

Time has always been a major theme in Laib's work. His work is based on repetitive gestures and long, cyclical processes. There is a deliberate slowness in Laib's working methodologies, something ceremonial and ritual-like. By way of illustration, milkstones must be washed at the end of the day and carefully washed, for ruined milk could stain the marble. When exhibited,

Laib initiates this procedural and then the museum or gallery staff continues throughout the show. After the stone is washed, fresh milk is poured again, and the stone comes alive once more. The rite goes on, evoking ideas of elliptical time and eternal recurrence. Certainly, this level of intense commitment can be defiant for buyers, and even institutions and their staff. As a matter of fact, in a 1977 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Laib's *milkstone* remained unfilled during the weekends due to budgetary reasons. Such a circumstance was apparently permitted by the artist, but not condoned.

I believe there are three ways of approaching the question of temporality in Laib's work.

First, there is the idea of actual time – time literally invested and condensed in the work, such as suggested with his *milkstones*, where two records of temporality are met and dissolved: the eternal and the transitory embracing each other. In Laib's own words:

> Milk, pollen -a liquid, a powder- so ephemeral and yet so dense. Milk on stone, it is so still, so incredibly still. It seems like it can last forever... and it lasts only for a few hours. It has this high concentration, this density, because it lasts such a short time. And grinding the stones or collecting the pollen, slowly and at the same time with incredible speed, with no patience, because you cannot be impatient... (Pagé, 1989, p. 54)

Secondly –and in opposition to our accelerated, artificial, and digitalized time of screens and electronic devices, which need no rest and mark our days and routines with their burning rhythms–, Laib returns to a circadian tempo, that of nature and its cadence, shaped by the seasons and the weather. His work is fully dependent on the pulse of nature and its slow-changing pace. The season, the hour of the day and even temperature influence the work. For instance, Laib starts collecting pollen in the forest near his studio by mid-February, as hazelnuts blossom, using his own fingers to brush the pollen into a jar. This task goes on until late August or September. Dandelion, however, starts blossoming in June and only lasts for a month. Each variety of pollen appears at a different time, and there are so many conditionings:

> Pines have so much pollen and dandelion or buttercup - so little... There are warm days with a lot of sun and I collect much pollen, and there are cool days, windy days, when I collect very little... After all these months I then have four, five or six jars of three or four different kinds of pollen. (Pagé, 1989, p. 55)

In the fast-paced, achievement-minded contemporary world, such a deliberately unhurried way of producing work comes as a big statement. The artist has reflected on such fact in the following terms: "When you sit days and days in a dandelion meadow, it's an incredible experience. And it's something totally different from what our society thinks of what you should do or what you should achieve in an hour or in a day or in a week or in a month" (Art21, 2014). In syntony with this way of consciously and willfully experiencing time, José Tolentino writes about the notion of perseverance and the vital role that slowness and awareness of temporality play in our lives.

> We have disregarded it in a culture dominated by the provisional, that uses and abuses temporary contracts (...), both in personal relationships and in a broader social environment. To persevere is to endure, to persist in an orientation (...), to believe that the present maintains an alliance, which is neither accidental nor absurd, with the future: the gesture of sowing is rationally associated with the expectation of harvesting. (2017, p. 39)

The Portuguese author, like many other voices in contemporary philosophy, claims the social need to slow down and alter our de-naturalized existences, a suggestion very present in every Laib's artwork.

Lastly, there is this other relation to time, or absence of time, for Laib's aesthetics and materials seem to elude historic contextualization, and he finds satisfaction in making works that could have been made thousands of years old. Laib's reduced and rigorous visual vocabulary draws from ancient archetypes and symbols, which has led curator Damian Jurt to describe the artist's work as "a tale that stretches back into the past and can be found in cultures all around the world" (2022, p. 63). Indeed, with works such as the *milkstones*, Laib awakens new –old– sensibilities. When asked whether his way of working the marble is rather an attempt to rediscover a kind of primary state beyond a more emphatic cultural use, the artist answers that, for him, a stone is a living thing, just like milk (Pagé, 1989, p. 54). Not coincidentally, Australian Aborigenes consider rocks a living being, too. Laib has stated how his work resonate deeply with these thoughts and ceremonies that are 40000 years old. In Zoroastrians and Hindu rites, milk is offered to water and fire in order to return to these elements their force and keep them pure and abundant. For Laib, this is proof of the universality of those ideas on the sacrality of the earthy elements, and hopes "we won't always be so far from this" (Pagé, 1989, p. 55). For him, these notions do not respond to an escapist desire or the will to live an exotic adventure. They constitute a search and a hope for a radical change.

2 SPIRITUALITY, NATURE, AND SCARED PLACES

As suggested earlier, Laib aspires in his works to transcend the self, which is why he employs natural materials –that he did not create– and keep them as pure and untouched as possible. The potential of these substances and materials are presented as art itself, not only because of their unique aura or their incredibly sensuous aroma or evoking color, but because of what they are – nurturing, living, organic substances. Worded as follow, Margarit Rowell has praised the disciplinarian character of the work and the timeless quality of their presence:

> It is obvious that Laib's choice of materials and his identification with their seasons, life spans, and essential properties are the manifestation of a philosophy and a way of life in which individual needs, desires, or practical concerns are of little importance. It is as clear that the painstaking attention and concentration which are necessary to control his repeated gestures in order not to violate the materials but to realize their potential purity and perfection are dictated by an extreme spiritual discipline. Thus the works themselves are the manifestation of a relation to and a vision of the world which may be defined as fundamental, holistic timeless, rather than personal or individualistic, or related to the contingencies of a given historical time or place (Rowell, 1989, p. 52).

In our hyper individualistic era –selfies are the sign of our contemporary societies–, proposing an artwork that is more an act of participation and communion than one of narcissistic creation is as challenging as it is refreshing. The anonymous character of his work, which shows little or no trace of the artist's gesture, reinforces Laib's conception of art as a vehicle for articulating both universal ideas and sensorial experiences rather than a medium for self-expression or self-discovery. Laib has stressed many times that pollen shows incredible yellow colors, ones that you never could paint, but it is not a pigment: "blood is red but it is not a red liquid, and milk is white, but it is not a white liquid. It is the difference between a blue pigment and the sky" (Pagé, 1989, pp. 54-55). Thus, he would never make a painting using the pollen. Instead, he presents this flower dust simply as it is, either sifted directly onto the floor, piled up in small mountain-like forms, or simply shown in industrial glass jars on a shelf. For Laib, either format equally renders the encounter with this precious material, which he extracts from nature, isolates, and

shares in the context of the gallery space. In her essay *Posthuman Spiritualities in Contemporary Performance*, Silvia Battista argues that the sense of separation created by such a neutral space "offers the perfect conditions for the pollen to emerge in its full aesthetics/numinous quality, via a visual arrangement that has not previously existed in the context of the meadow" (2018, p. 183).

Interestingly, pollen is highly praised in Navajo Amerindian mythologies as a substance that sacralizes any space, for it produces and multiplies life. In contrast, in his aforementioned essay, Jorge Soler reflects on how the modern world now regards this substance with certain contempt:

> that dust that tortures the inhabitants of Western cities, which is the "yellow road" that the Navajos look forward to each season, because (...) it leads those who follow it to the origin of the world, which is where the pollen settles and spreads like a magical mantle, to resurrect nature. We city residents see a plague where the Navajo sees the origin of life: we mistake allies for enemies. We are more interested in the aggressiveness rates of pollen and the protection offered by an antihistamine capsule than in the yellow road that the Navajos expect (...). We have stopped observing what is happening around us; We only have eyes for the filtered, biased, accommodating reality that runs without interruption, like life itself, on the screen. (…) [Those symbols] that mean so much to the Navajo, only make sense to the Western citizen if they appear on the screen; Reality is no longer what is outside, but what is concentrated on the iPhone: this is how it is interpreted and controlled more easily (2021, pp. 13-14).

With his artistic proposals, Laib embraces the inextricable relation between humanity and nature – which, as Soler claims, is now veiled by electronic devices and portable technology. The ultimate pontential of artworks such as the milkstones or the pollen pieces is that they challenge our gaze and enable a new one. Rather than a cumulation of works distributed in the gallery room, Laib's exhibitions constitute a space for reflective contemplation. Attentiveness and active observation are, in our context of binge-watching, constant multitasking, and instant scrolling, simply revolutionary. In this frenzied, accelerated context, Laib's work catalyzes detention: an alternative –pre-modern– way of seeing the world. As Soler suggests, it is worth delving into that sacred space that others perceive very clearly as an escape route, a form of liberation, for the only thing you have to do to reach such space is to redirect your gaze (2021, p. 14).

This adjustment of the gaze and re-alignment with nature is, for Laib, a process of spiritual caliber. "Spirituality is realizing and living the beauty of nature", says the artist (Bentini, 2014, p. 12). Having rejected any attachment to a particular religion or faith, his work attempts to link the natural world with a metaphysical one. When questioned about the ideal environment in which his works could be shown, Laib talks about the need for a place where their sensibility corresponds to that of the place and the people visiting, and comments "exhibitions in galleries or museums can sometimes be very beautiful, but that cannot be the aim. We need much more" (Pagé, 1989, p. 56). This is perhaps why the artist has attempted, more intensely so in the recent years, to create site specific projects in unique, historic, and highly rich venues and sacred places. Three fine examples of the former are the solo exhibitions conceived for the Byzantine Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe (Ravenna, 2014); the gothic Chiesa della Spina (Pisa, 2017); and the complex, multi-site project in the most important architectural monuments in Florence: Cappella Pazzi, Cappella Rucellai, Cappella dei Magi, and Museo di San Marco (2019-2020).

All these culturally and historically relevant locations have in common, besides their set in Italy, a certain majesty evoked by their centuries-old architecture and their sacred atmosphere – most of them are, in fact, still used as places of religious encounter. But this is not the only reason why Laib is attracted to them. For instance, he justifies his attraction to Ravenna with

the parallelism between his ideas on art as an act of participation rather than creation and the Byzantine Eastern thought, in which the individual is dissolved in the collective, always a part of something bigger. Laib himself explains:

> The mosaic of Sant'Apollinare in paradise is just about this. We are so much in need of this again, six hundred years after the Renaissance. It is time to change our culture, to see beyond the individual, to see something much bigger. This is something I dream of, asking for something else for the future (Bentini, 2014, p. 11).

In the magic space of mother pearls, marble, gold mosaics and colorful glasses, the German artist installed one of his *Ziggurats*, a six meters tall stepped pyramid made of beeswax, and a large group of small brass ships sitting on a row of rice (fig. 5). The imposing pyramid appears almost petite in the immensity of the Basilica, and the boats' golden brass shines bright in harmony with the mosaics in the space. The shape of the ziggurat, which has been frequent in Laib's work since 1995, is reminiscent of ancient Mesopotamian architecture. The steps of the ziggurat allude to a spiritual journey, one of ascension, and symbolizes the link between the material and celestial realms. The ships evoke the idea of other journeys, as they sail we know not where across the sacred space's floor.

The installation invades the nave and yet somehow seems to have been created together with the place. The scent of the beeswax conquers the church. The rice carried by the ships is nourishment not for the body but the soul. The temporary installation includes a group of tiny pollen mound placed on the steps of the church's altar for only three days, until the celebration of the Sunday Mass, which reinforced the imbricated nexus between the work and the Basilica.

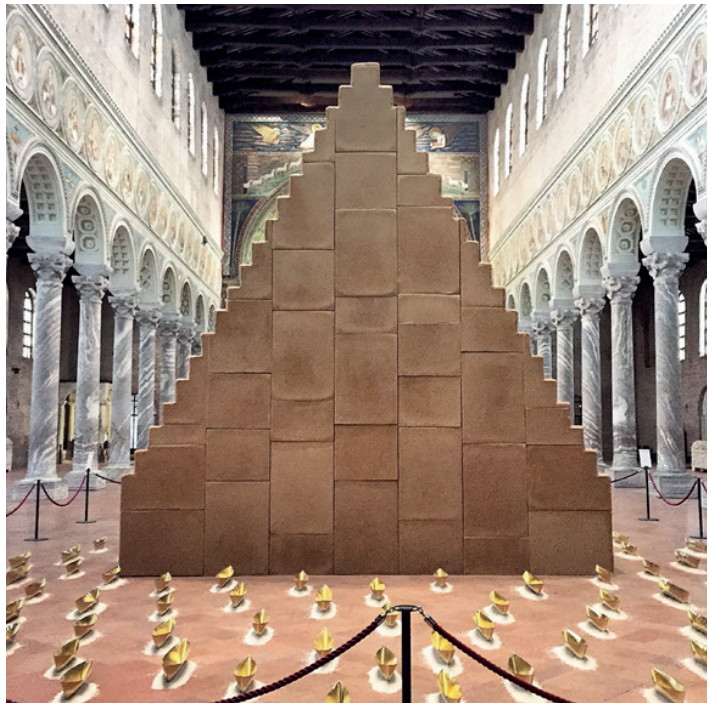

Figure 5. Installation view of Wolfgang Laib's works at Sant'Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna. © Luke Curtis

This intense visual and symbolic dialogue between the installation and the Basilica is further reassured by Apollinare's leyend. The city's patron is represented in the church's main mosaic wearing a cloak of bees, insects associated to a bold naturalistic and esoteric allure. As Maria Grazia Marini explains,

> The mystery of the bees that have adorned the robe of Sant'Apollinare for almost 1,500 years remains, the same bees whose symbolic meaning has not been thoroughly investigated yet. They are associated with the production of wax and candles, and therefore with the act of giving light; they are connected to the sweetness of Apollinare's message as a preacher, or to his purity, or even to his tirelessness. Although we have no answers, the 203 mosaic bees have decorated the robe of Apollinare in his Basilica since 549. The same bees that used to inhabit the meadows of the pine forests surrounding the abbey of Classe and that have been reintroduced here in modern times by Silvio Gardini, Eleonora's grandfather. The same bees that enable pollination, flowering and life (2014, 53).

Laib's employment of beeswax and pollen for his installation in the Basilica stresses once again the fascination that these natural materials have caused throughout history and their strong, universal symbolic significance.

The German artist often brings these external references into his works. For instance, in the year 2017, Laib was invited to create an installation at the Chiesa della Spina, a 13th Century Gothic church in Pisa. Situated next to the river Arno –the building had to be relocated in the 19th Century due to the ground's instability–, the small space of the church retains a sense of simplicity and intimacy that contrasts with the highly decorated façade. In its interior, Laib presented six large, beeswax ships (fig. 6). With no oars or sails, and showed sitting directly onto the marble floor, these boats seem to navigate unknown waters – an idea emphasized by the very title of the exhibition, "Somewhere Else". The allusion to the ancient Pisan maritime republic doesn't go unnoticed. The warmth of the wax and its golden color is juxtaposed to the coldness and whiteness of the marble. On one of the ships, Laib created a small pollen mountain – the ships carry the beginning of the chain of life. To strengthen the correlation between the proposal and the sanctity of the place, Laib requested that the relic that gives the name to the church was part of the exhibition (a thorn, putatively, that was part of the crown placed on Christ during his Passion and Crucifixion). Exceptionally, the archbishop of Pisa granted permission and the relic, kept in the church of the Hospital of Santa Chiara, returned to their original place from 2 to 8 April.

Figure 6. Installation view of Wolfgang Laib, *Somewhere Else*, Chiesa della Spina, Pisa. © Nichola Gronchi

More recently, in 2020, Laib presented one of his most extensive and ambitious projects: a multisite exhibition that occupied some of the most prestigious cultural institutions in Florence – Museo di San Marco (Polo Museale della Toscana), Cappella dei Magi (Palazzo Medici Riccardi), Cappella Rucellai (church of San Pancrazio, Museo Marino Marini) and Cappella Pazzi (Monumental Complex of Santa Croce). In the aforementioned sacral spaces in the city, five works were installed in direct response to the sites' serene and holy character. 600 years of history separated the works and the buildings. In this context of early Renaissance frescoes and architecture, Laib brought delicate, small pieces that converses with the art of great past masters: Filippo Brunelleschi, Leon Battista Alberti, Benozzo Gozzoli and Beato Angelico.

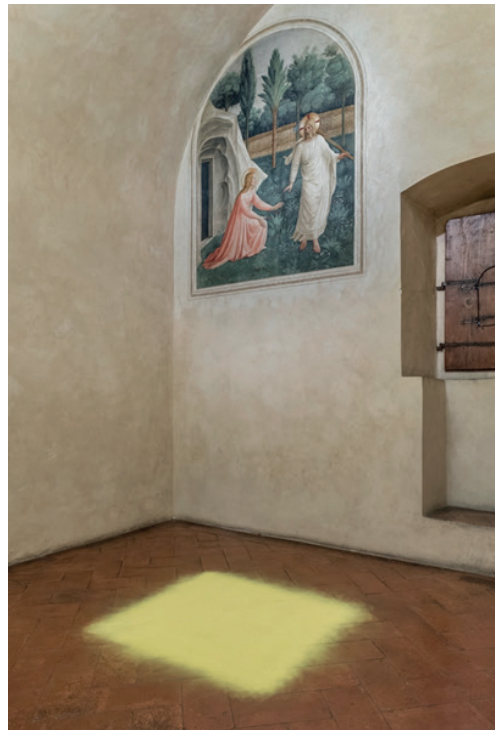

Figure 7. Wolfgang Laib's pollen installation at Museo San Marco, as part of the exhibition *Without Place, Without Time, Without body* in Florence. © Leonardo Morfini

In the Dominican friary of San Marco, and for the first time in the history of the institution, a contemporary artist installed a piece in the cells of the convent, the heart of the San Marco Museum, entering in dialogue with mural paintings by Beato Angelico, which were created between 1436 and 1446. Laib presented two pollen pieces, one of them next to Fra Angelico's fresco, which depicts a lushing garden (fig. 7). The material, either in the form of a tiny heap or sieved on the ground, resonates with this abundance of life, and "contains the potential to connect associatively with gardens of entirely different cultures and eras, from the ancient cultures of all continents to the present" (Thierolf, 2022, p. 47).

When asked about the meaning of nature, Laib points to one of his jars of pollen: "That! (…) In it's entirety. That's potentially the amount of pollen needed for vegetation to cover an area as big as Switzerland. In this one jar!" (Zumthor, 2022, p. 55). Curator Sergio Risalti talks about this incredible density and life-giving property of this precious dust by pointing out:

> As a food, pollen is alive; each grain contains water, a great many proteins, sugars (glucose and fructose), lipids, mineral salts, a number of vitamins, and enzymes or growth hormones. Towards the end of April, the sun astronomically enters the constellation of Aries, the first sign of the zodiac that corresponds to the primitive springing of life. Pollen then is a primary element of air, sun, and life, the solar gold of the flowers (2022, p. 32).

Figure 8. Wolfgang Laib's wax towers presented in the Rucellai Chapel, as part of the exhibition *Without Place, Without Time*, Without body in Florence. © Leonardo Morfini

Inside the Rucellai Chapel, the Holy Sepulcher, a jewel of Leon Battista Alberti's architecture, Wolfgang Laib presented a new group of works made of beeswax (fig. 8). Positioned directly on the marble altar, the small fortification-like figures are inspired both by the architecture of medieval Italy and the Towers of Silence used in Zoroastrian excarnation rites in ancient Persia. Synthetic and essential, their height seem to refer to an ideal ascension upwards. The Renaissance sarcophagus, conceived to repair and isolate the body beyond life, dialogues with Laib's beeswax buildings, for the material has been known all over the world for its soothing and protective properties since primeval times. In fact, ancient papyrus record that Egyptians believed bees had been created by the tears of the sun god Re.

> Honey and wax were also associated with the god's tears. This led to bees being considered sacred, a gift from Re himself, who had bestowed them with particularly beautiful bodies because of their theological importance. Thanks to this relationship with the divinity of the sun, honey was also used in death rituals. The bodies of the deceased were sprinkled with honey to give them a golden complexion, a sign of the link to the sacred splendor of the god. The pollen in the fields and branches full of the joys of spring is gathered by plundering bees that land on the fragrant flowers of countless plants, representing the male fertilizing element, giver of energy and life (Risalti, 2022, p. 32).

It is through this subtle yet strong connection between form and material, conceptual structures and natural elements, the human and the cosmic, body and soul, essence and appearance, the tangible and the invisible… that Laib manages to create a sort of utopia, a forward-looking vision of hope and renewal. "Art stands for something new, fresh, something for the future" (Laib, 2022, p. 138).

3 FINAL ACTS

This text has examined the work of Wolfgang Laib, one of the most relevant artists in the contemporary scene, and the profound symbolic implications that articulates his oeuvre. By focusing on the spiritual and ritualistic content of Laib's proposals, born from and in celebration of nature, we have argued the aesthetic energy that emanates from his stripped-down forms and rich materials. The power of the artist's oeuvre lies, in addition, to their sensorial, appealing qualities, which are immersive as they are numinous, suggesting a new spirituality of the senses. Color saturation, the velvety textures, the utmost respect and kindness with which materials are collected, gathered, and presented, the careful process that his performative actions require… it all seem to transcend perception and invites us to become imaginatively aware, awaken. As suggested throughout the point 2, Laib's installations in revered, centuries old venues and religious architecture are the result of his conception of art as a universal, timeless vehicle for expressing ideas on the human condition.

The eternal circle of existence, the cycles of beginning and ends, transience, beauty… Laib fuses influences from civilizations around the world and, through this very process of cultural synthesis, proves with his art the persistence of similar convictions throughout the history of humankind while raising ecological, global, spiritual, and politic questions. The fact that Laib has worked and reworked the same forms and materials over five decades is proof of how little interest the artist shows for trends or formal innovation. Rather, he aspires to engage in ideas of continuity and permanence – which, in our turbocapitalist, technocratic and ecocidal crises context comes as a huge challenge in itself. For all the former, his artistic commitment and gestures forces us to rethink our relation to time and nature. As suggested before, Laib's revolutionary work skips anthropocentric ambition and technological power while aiming to open space for a new (old) way of perceiving and experiencing life.

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