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DOSSIER

EL OBJETO DESBORDANTE. ESPACIOS INMERSIVOS Y ESTRATEGIAS MULTISENSORIALES EN EL ARTE

Editado por Eduard Cairol y Tomas Macsotay Bunt

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LECHE, MIEL, POLEN. EXPERIENCIAS TEMPORALES Y SENSORIALES EN LA OBRA DE WOLFGANG LAIB: *LA CHAMBRE DES CERTITUDES*

Salvador Jiménez-Donaire Martínez¹

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Abstract²

Wolfgang Laib's oeuvre spans through more than three decades and the artist has become one of the most respected figures in the contemporary scene. Profoundly spiritual and imbued with a sense of rituality, his practice includes elements of performance, sculpture and minimal and conceptual art, in addition to references to Jainism, Christianity and Hinduism. Employing mainly natural materials such as milk, pollen, rice and honeybee, his body of work is both sensual and fragile. This text analyses Laib's art proposals not as objects but as a sensorial, physical experience, focusing on their fragrant, haptic and highly aesthetic qualities. In order to do so, one of Laib's lesser known projects are examined here: a beeswax chamber in the French Pyrenees.

Ultimately, this text argues that by virtue of patience, perseverance and continuity, Laib's art process offers a prolonged, transformative temporal conception through contemplation, immersion and sensoriality.

Keywords

Wolfgang Laib; immersive experience; sensorial art; temporality; rituality; installation

Resumen

La obra de Wolfgang Laib abarca más de tres décadas y el artista se ha convertido en una de las figuras más respetadas de la escena contemporánea. Profundamente

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2. Este trabajo ha sido realizado gracias a una ayuda de investigación predoctoral otorgada por el VI Plan Propio de la Universidad de Sevilla.

espiritual e imbuida de un sentido de ritualidad, su práctica incluye elementos de performance, escultura y arte minimalista y conceptual, además de referencias al jainismo, cristianismo e hinduismo. Empleando principalmente materiales naturales como la leche, el polen, el arroz y la miel de abeja, su trabajo es tan sensual como frágil. Este texto analiza las propuestas artísticas de Laib no como meros objetos sino como experiencia sensorial y física, centrándose en sus cualidades fragantes, hápticas y estéticas. Para ello, aquí se examina uno de los proyectos menos conocidos de Laib: una habitación de cera de abeja en los Pirineos franceses.

Este texto argumenta cómo, gracias a la paciencia, perseverancia y continuidad en su proceso artístico, Laib ofrece una concepción temporal dilatada y transformadora a través de la contemplación, la inmersión y la sensorialidad.

Palabras clave

Wolfgang Laib; experiencia inmersiva; arte sensorial; temporalidad; ritualidad; instalación

.....

CONTEMPLATION, SENSORIALITY, TRANSFORMATION: LAIB'S IMMERSIVE PROPOSALS

German artist Wolfgang Laib, trained in medicine, has stated on several occasions to have achieved with his artwork what he wanted to do as a doctor³. His practice resists classification: it includes elements of sculpture, performance, photography and minimal and conceptual art.

Laib lives with his family in the same house where he was raised – a crystal building in a German rural village; a silent, bustle-free environment where he develops his art. To a great extent, this isolated context has shaped his work⁴, which emanates a pervasive sense of reverence and contemplation. His first piece, a *Brahmanda* (Brahma's egg, in Sanskrit), was finished in the early 70's. In relative seclusion, Laib spent months carving out by hand a black rock into the form of an ovoid. He has continuously affirmed that this experience led him to renounce his career in medicine and become an artist.

This kind of committed, perseverant and patient action constitutes the way in which Laib operates, and its consideration is crucial for the full comprehension of his oeuvre. His art making practice is «a meditative and solitary ceremony that requires concentration, devotion, discipline, knowledge, and ritual»⁵, both in the process of collecting the material from nature and in the moment of presenting it in the gallery space. Concerned with a sense of sacredness, timelessness and the eternal reappearance of the same, the work is shaped by Hindu and Buddhist notions that allude to vast cycles of the cosmos. In fact, *Without beginning and without end* is a recurrent exhibition title of Laib's. This cyclic, elliptical and cosmic conception of time is integral to Laib's praxis and creative paradigm. Laib is highly influenced by the spiritual legacy of poet and Sufi mystic Rumi, who analogously wrote: «I have (...) no beginning, no end, no dawn»⁶. In fact, extracts from poems written by the Persian mystic are included by Laib in some of his recent drawings⁷. Although Laib does not adhere to any specific religion, spirituality and art are inextricably linked in the artist's oeuvre. As metaphysician and pioneering historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy stated, «however humble, the functional purpose of the work of

3. See «WOLFGANG LAIB 1/2 - About life», *OurChoices*. 2/10/2017. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIFwr_GIW9c [Accessed 16/03/2021]

4. In an interview with Darren James Jorgensen, Laib confesses about his studio: «I am living outside a small village in Southern Germany where I also grew up. (...) There is my studio there, a large barn from the nineteenth century. (...) And, as you can imagine, I work outside, doing stonework and collecting pollen all around the village where I live. 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. (...) It has had a big influence on what I do». (Laib, 2005).

5. See «Wolfgang Laib: Polen from Hazelnut. Museum of Modern Art, New York», *Damn Magazine*. 01/2013. Available at: <https://www.damnmagazine.net/2013/01/11/wolfgang-laib-pollen-from-hazelnut/> [Accessed 17/03/2021]

6. AKṢAPĀDA: *The Analects of Rumi*. Independently published, 2019, p. 137.

7. For a series of white drawings shown in *The beginning of Something Else*, a solo show at Thaddaus Ropac Gallery in 2017, Laib wrote by hand on the artworks excerpts from poems by Rumi, the Upanishads – a collection of philosophical-religious texts of Hinduism – and the Tao Te Ching – the main book in Taoism.

art (...) has always a spiritual meaning»⁸. Laib works not only manifest an aura of spirituality; they are the byproduct of an almost monastic practice that is rooted in the study of Taoism, Eastern philosophy, and his experience living in India. Laib's stripped artworks are activated by surrender and abandonment – concepts imbricated in a religious ascetism and deprivation that is not compatible with our consume-more, do-it-faster world. «In renouncing you achieve more», states Laib⁹. Quiet and of serene presence, Laib's works and installations reflect ideas expressed by Meister Eckhart, such as *pure stillness*, the *perfect calm* or the *plenitude of time*¹⁰. It is through detachment (*Samnyāsa*, in Sanskrit) that Laib invites us to go from the sensory to the spiritual.

In 1975 he presented his second piece, *Milkstone*, a slab of Macedonian marble painstakingly smoothed over weeks until its surface became slightly concave. Then, with meticulous care, he filled the created cavity with milk. Suspended by tension, the liquid milk transforms the solid stone into something else. «I think the *milkstone* is about having this concentration of life that only lasts for a few hours on this white marble», Laib states in an interview for *The Observer*: «It was a direct result of my studying medicine for six years and seeing what happens in hospitals, and possibly a reaction to the limits of medicine»¹¹. Laib found in art a means of healing that Western medicine and science did not provide, concluding that the latter treated the body at the expense of the soul. In an interview with curator and writer Sarah Tanguy for *Sculpture Magazine*, Laib is asked to comment on the difference between filling that stone cavity with milk and drinking coffee in the morning before rushing to go to work. The artist recognises the opposition between these two actions¹²: drinking an energetic liquid to maximise the number of things to do in a day is antagonistic to what a *milkstone* is all about. Time, care, attention and devotion are key notions in this artwork; nowadays, all of them are suppressed or blocked by turbocapitalist policies, which demand efficiency and constant productivity – quick profit.

Certainly, Laib's deliberately slow, painstakingly way of doing challenges those late stage turbocapitalism's demands. To the modern psyche, what matters are the results, only the results¹³. Then again, Laib's body of work does not crystallize in a blink, but through a time-consuming, insistent process – and there lies the transformative potential of his practice. Tolentino insists on how:

We have disregarded it [perseverance], 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

8. COOMARASWAMY, Ananda Kentish: *Why exhibit Art?* New York, Dover, 1956.

9. <https://ropac.net/artists/53-wolfgang-laib/>

10. ECKHART, Meister: *Vida eterna y conocimiento divino*. Buenos Aires, Deva's, 2002.

11. DURAY, Dan: «Wolfgang Pluck: Artist Laib Brings Pounds of Pollen to MoMA», *The Observer*. 1/15/2013. Available at: <https://observer.com/2013/01/wolfgang-pluck-artist-laib-brings-pounds-of-pollen-to-moma/> [Accessed 19/02/2019]

12. TANGUY, Sarah: «Making the ideal real: a conversation with Wolfgang Laib». *Sculpture*, 2001, vol. 20, n° 4, p. 28-33.

13. TOLENTINO, José: *Pequeña teología de la lentitud*. Barcelona, Fragmenta, 2017, p.7.

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 harvesting¹⁴.

In Jean-Marc Ceci's poetic novel *Mr Origami* (2015), Kurogiku, an elder Japanese retired in Italian Tuscany, dedicates his life to the intricate production of traditional Japanese paper. In order to create these fragile sheets, Kurogiku must proceed meticulously, treating each *kozo* crust one by one. Devotedly, he washes them in icy water from the river, on his knees. He eliminates even the minutest of the impurities. As Laib's, Kurogi's process «demands time and patience»¹⁵.

Similar in structure to Alessandro Baricco's *Silk* (1996), *Mr Origami* is divided in very short chapters that follow a repetitive pattern –occasionally, almost exact same sentences or even pages are duplicated– conforming an at times *vegetative* narrative tempo. In Ceci's novel, a watchmaker named Casparo arrives at Kurogiku's home with the intention of creating a clock that contains all time measures. When asked about the motivation of his proposition, Casparo tells Kurogiku: «it appeases me. I do as you do: I employ my time in an activity whose utility no one sees»¹⁶.



FIGURE 1 LAIB INSTALLING A MILKSTONE PHOTOGRAPHED AT HIS STUDIO IN GERMANY. ©WOLFGANG LAIB

14. *Idem.*, p.39.

15. CECI, Jean-Marc : *Mr. Origami*. Paris, Gallimard, 2015, p.35.

16. *Idem.*, p.73.

Positively, the act of carefully pouring milk over a slab of marble could be regarded as useless, even trivial, but like the characters in *Mr Origami*, Laib knows that there is power in working from attention and care. In addition to the time dedicated to this gesture, Laib's milkstones require a high level of maintenance and commitment: the marble must be washed and cleaned on a daily basis when exhibited due to the perishable conditions of the poured liquid – which would stain the stone if not removed promptly. As Kurogiku, Laib spends his time doing something apparently insignificant –another way in which Laib sidesteps current turbo-capitalist demands for efficiency. Yet «as usual, the simplicity of the rules complicates the exercise of art»¹⁷. Laib himself states: «The work I make is very, very simple, but then it's also very, very complex»¹⁸.

The third group of artworks presented by Laib in the late 70's was the pollen pieces (*Pollen from pine*, *Pollen from hazelnut*, *Pollen from buttercup* and *Pollen from dandelion*): bright yellowish fields made of this life-containing dust. These pieces are probably his most iconic works, to which he has been associated ever since. They constitute a work he continues developing thirty years later. He hand-collects this precious material in the vicinity of his house in Germany. The varieties of pollen (Laib presents most often pollen from hazelnut, the most brilliant, intense one) are usually shown sifted directly onto the floor, although he has also exhibited this material in crystal jars or forming tiny piles. When asked about the significance of the pollen, Laib refuses to give a straight answer:

Every human being should know what the Sun is, [...] I don't have to explain to somebody what the sun is, and I don't want to explain what pollen is. That is something which I sifted in there to enjoy and to share it with many people, but it's not my task to explain this. That is the secret and the beauty and the power and the potential of all this¹⁹.

In the same interview, published in *Art:21*, Laib later recognised that for him, pollen is «the beginning of life of the plants, and not less»²⁰. Although it shows an exuberant, vibrant yellow, it is not presented as a pigment: the pollen itself is the artwork. On several occasions, Laib has admitted attempting to amplify the experience of perceiving pollen (its colour, its perfume and its fragile beauty) by collecting it and sifting it on the neutral space of the gallery. In *Posthuman Spiritualities in Contemporary Performance*, Silvia Battista states that the sense of separation created by such spaces «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»²¹. Thus, the fragrant quality

17. *Idem.*, p.54.

18. TANGUY, Sarah: *op. cit.*

19. «Wolfgang Laib in Legacy», *Art:21*, 7/11/2014. Available at: <https://art21.org/artist/wolfgang-laib/> [Accessed 15/02/2020]

20. *Idem.*

21. BATTISTA, Silvia: *Posthuman Spiritualities in Contemporary Performance: Politics, Ecologies and Perceptions*. Berlin, Springer, 2018, p. 183.

and the affective presence of this material is enhanced in the isolating context of the «immaculate, clean and eternal-like space»²².

In 2013, his largest pollen piece was exhibited in MoMA's atrium in NYC, *Pollen from Hazelnut*: an 18 x 21 feet bright yellow field hovering at the heart of the museum. One must realize that only two or three jars can be yielded over a whole season in order to fully understand the dedication, time and transformative and subversive potential condensed in this piece.

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 month²³.

Once again, Laib is not interested in accelerated, easily digested proposals. His praxis is connected to nature, its seasons and circadian rhythms: a methodology that collapses with our fast-paced, digitalized, full-of-events routines. He spends so much of his time just to obtain a little of the treasured yellow dust. In this process, nonetheless, he finds transforming potential and value.



FIGURE 2. LAIB COLLECTING POLLEN IN A MEADOW IN SOUTHERN GERMANY. «FOR ME, THE SKY IS MUCH MORE IMPORTANT THAN TRYING TO MAKE A PAINTING THAT IS A SYMBOL FOR THE SKY. FOR ME, IT'S THE POLLEN ITSELF—THAT IS THE MIRACLE IN WHICH I PARTICIPATE IN MY DAILY LIFE WHEN I COLLECT THE POLLEN. IT'S NOT MINE»*. ©Wolfgang Laib

* TANGUY, Sarah: *op. cit.*

22. O'DOHERTY, BRIAN: *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Oakland, University of California Press, 1986, p.15.

23. «Wolfgang Laib in Legacy». *op. cit.*

Many artists including Tehching Hsieh²⁴, Roman Opalka, Marina Abramovic and Carali McCall²⁵ have also engaged in artistic projects that involve extremely long durational schemes, but Laib has actually been doing the very same works (through the very same process) for more than three decades now. That degree of perseverance in time has to modify one's perceptive ability and the way one understands their surrounding world. In this regard, Marina Abramovic states:

I can't compete with Tehching in any way, but I have had my share of long durational performances, and I know that when you are working in this way, psychological and physical change takes place. You are affected by duration: your perception and your reality become different. So, if it is done truly, (...) transformation takes place²⁶.

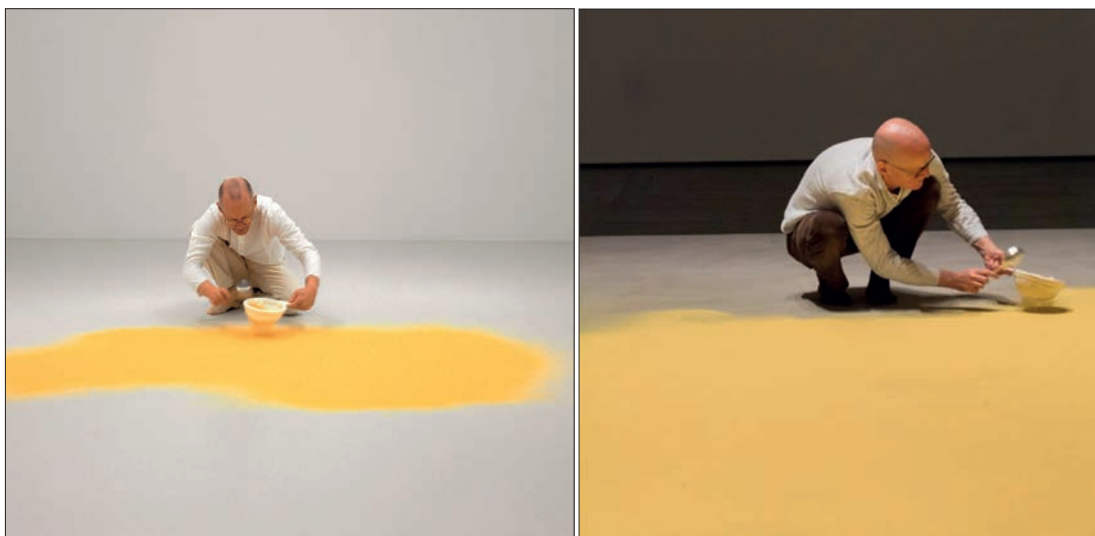


FIGURE 3 AND FIGURE 4. LAIB INSTALLING *POLLEN FROM HAZELNUT* AT THE TOYOTA MUNICIPAL MUSEUM OF ART, TOYOTA (JAPAN) IN 2003 (LEFT) AND LAIB INSTALLING *POLLEN FROM HAZELNUT* AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IN NEW YORK (USA) IN 2013 (RIGHT). ©MoMA

In this introduction we have argued how Laib's meticulous, painstakingly long processes of making work are executed in a slowed down, ritualistic way. Every season for over three decades, Laib has been collecting pollen, every single day of the summer.

24. Taiwan-born, Hsieh approaches art through long durations that hybridize art and life. He is arguably one of the most radical performance artists in the contemporary scene, even though he has made less than ten artworks over his career. In *One Year Performance 1980-1981 (Time Clock Piece)*, Hsieh punched a time clock every hour, on the hour, 24 hours a day. Every time he would take a picture of himself both as an investigation of the nature of time and as a proof of his methodical observation of its passing.

25. McCall's performance drawing involves a mix of speed and slowness. Duration and endurance are central elements to her actions, in which she draws infinite circles with her arm completely extended. As the gestures repeats more and more, she has less and less energy to keep going. It is the herculean effort; some sort of contemporary Sisyphus: she knows she will fail –either the material (paper) or herself (body) will break. Her performances are usually recorded, so both the work in the gallery (drawing) and the work in video (action), though inextricable one from another, demand a different way of paying attention.

26. ABRAMOVIC, Marina: «When Time Becomes Form», in HEATHFIELD, Adrian (ed.), *Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 2009, pp. 351-2.

In his practice, and through this act of ceremonial solace, Laib himself becomes a vehicle for ideas of universality and timelessness inherent to nature. The power of renewal and boundless energy; the temporal and the eternal; the rhythm of our bodies and the rhythm of the seasons... all these notions collapse in Laib's proposals, which demonstrate that a sense of the sacred is very much alive in contemporary art.

In the following section we'll examine one of Laib's more sensorially stimulating and seductive proposals: his beeswax chambers.

LA CHAMBRE DES CERTITUDES: A BEESWAX ROOM IN THE PYRENEES

In Roc del Maure, the last high peak before the Pyrenees descends into the Mediterranean, Wolfgang Laib has created a timeless space that apparently grows naturally from the earth. Realised in the year 2000 and only accessible by walk, *La Chambre des Certitudes* (The Room of Certitudes), is a rock cave chiseled out of granite. Protected by a simple wooden door, its walls and ceiling have been covered with beeswax, creating a sublime, yellowish space. The hot wax was directly applied to the stone with the help of an iron. Beeswax's color varies from yellow to an almost blackish brown depending on factors such as the age and diet of the bees. With a honeylike odor and soft texture, it is obtained by melting the honeycomb and carefully removing impurities. The resulting product is a purified, aromatic, golden liquid that Laib also employs to build small symbolic sculptures.



FIGURE 5 AND FIGURE 6. ENTRANCE TO WOLFGANG LAIB'S *LA CHAMBRE DES CERTITUDES* (LEFT) AND ITS INTERIOR (RIGHT), Roc del Maure, Macervol, France, 2000. ©AEWL

A key factor to this proposal is that the installation can only be reached by foot. The long hike would then be a crucial aspect of the experience, as it forces the viewer to walk through nature, at a human-pace, until arriving to the installation. This requires an effort from the visitor, and it generates a predisposition to *encountering* the work rather than just *seeing* it. Positively, the sterile space in the gallery, the neutral white box, is nothing like the open, wild path where *The Room of Certitudes* is located. In this regard, the artist has affirmed that one of the premises of the proposal was to expand the museum beyond its walls²⁷.

Michel de Certeau described the mystic as someone «who cannot stop walking»²⁸. This idea of wandering, sauntering is essential for Laib, as he himself spends many hours marching around meadows while collecting pollen. In this context, the necessary promenade to *La Chambre des Certitudes* comes close to the notion of pilgrimage.



FIGURE 7. VIEW OF THE DISCREET PATH LEADING TO THE CHAMBER. ©AEWL

Curator Guy Tosatto described this walking as sometimes difficult, and wrote that there is:

A physical, sensory experience aroused by it. An interior experience too, which allows one to get rid of the dross of social conditioning. And in doing so, it brings us closer to the ritualized activities of Wolfgang Laib and prepares us for a better understanding

27. GAMONEDA, Antonio; MARÍN-MEDINA, José, & ORTEGA, Carlos. *Wolfgang Laib*. Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2007, p. 60

28. CERTEAU, Michel de : *La fable mystique* /1 XVI. Paris, Editions Gallimard, 1995, p.299.

of his universe. As we know, there is in the artist's creative dynamic a repetitive form of physical activity which borders on asceticism. The whole days spent crouching in the fields collecting pollen, or the weeks occupied by the slow and demanding work of polishing marble, are all exercises which turns time back to its real duration (...). In short, it is a question of tuning the body and the spirit to the rhythm of nature, which has been fulfilled, for millennia, following the succession of the seasons²⁹.

The concept of journey, a spiritual journey, is recurrent in Laib's praxis. Laib himself has stated that his work «is not only something visual. It takes you somewhere different. That's also what art is about — being transported»³⁰. His ship-like sculptures, made from beeswax, too, evoke this idea of going *somewhere else*³¹. As the artist states himself, his work «is concerned with the search for an entrance or a passage to another world»³².



FIGURE 8. WOLFGANG LAIB, *UNTITLED*, 1995. MADE ENTIRELY OF BEESWAX, THESE SOFT-SCENTED SHIPS ARE OFTEN DISPLAYED ON THE FLOOR IN GROUPS OF 6 OR MORE, AS IF NAVIGATING AN IMAGINARY SEA; OTHER TIMES THEY ARE HELD WITH WOODEN PIECES ON THE WALL, ONE AFTER ANOTHER, AS ANCIENT RELIQUARIES. ©Sperone Westwater

The location of the chamber is not accidental. The chosen mountain for the installation is considered to be sacred by the Catalonians, and the area is famous for its many Romanesque churches and monasteries. After a trip to Tibet in 1994, Laib was very moved by the monasteries and the liturgy that took place in them. This

29. See «La chambre des certitudes», *Wax Room* Available at: <http://waxroom.fr/chambre-certitudes.php> [Accessed: 27/02/2021]

30. VOGEL, Carol: «The Phillips Commissions Wolfgang Laib Wax Room». *The New York Times*. 19/07/2012. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/20/arts/design/wolfgang-laib-to-install-wax-room-at-phillips-collection.html> [Accessed: 27/02/2021]

31. In 2017, Laib presented a group of new works in the Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, under the title *The beginning of something else*. This allusion to what's beyond the realm of the Real or what does not belong to the physical, material world is also remarked in other exhibition titles such as *Somewhere else* (installation at the Chiesa di Santa Maria della Spina, Pisa, in 2017), in which Laib presented six wax ships and a mountain of pollen.

32. FANNING, Leesa: «Wolfgang Laib: Without Place–Without Time–Without Body». 2009. Available at: <https://www.leesafanning.com/exhibitions#/wolfganglaib> [Accessed: 1/02/2021]

experience ratified Laib's conviction that the beeswax rooms should be understood, contemplated and experienced as sacred places³³. As curator Leesa Fanning states:

In his *Wax Chambers*, Laib overlays the walls and ceilings with intensely fragrant, golden beeswax. The meditative spaces are renowned for their aromatic scent, silence and sanctity. They automatically awaken one's senses, not only through scent, but through their tactile surface texture and feeling of enclosure in a space that alters ambient sound. *Wax Chambers* are unique in the world – they offer the possibility of altering one's state of consciousness³⁴.

Laib's wax chambers offers an overwhelming experience to the visitor: in addition to the alteration of sound and the haptic and fragrant qualities of the space, when entering the cave, one also notices a difference in temperature, not only because the cave offers shelters from the natural environment outside but because the honeybee covering the walls adds warmth to the room. There is a softness to the wax-coated stone that resembles smooth skin, a bronzish color similar to old gold. Its perfume, delicate and soft yet pervasive, surrounds the visitor. As the room is rather small, the intensity of the scent is heightened; as the space is completely void, light, sound and temperature become a main part of the work. It is because of all the former that one's senses are not only awakened, as Fanning suggested, but truly magnified. Certainly, there is a shift in one's state of consciousness: the visitor becomes more aware of the sensorial aspects of space, reality and even their own bodies. But time plays another main role in experiencing the work, and paradoxically, after being inside the chamber for a while there comes a dazzling sense of evasion: «The intense smell and color of these rooms are overwhelming, almost to the point, should one stay inside long enough, they induce a loss of awareness of self or place»³⁵.

Indeed, *La Chambre des Certitudes* is an oxymoron: both womb and tomb, maternal refuge and funerary enclosure, burial chamber and sarcophagus, corner of inner retreat and aperture to the outside world.

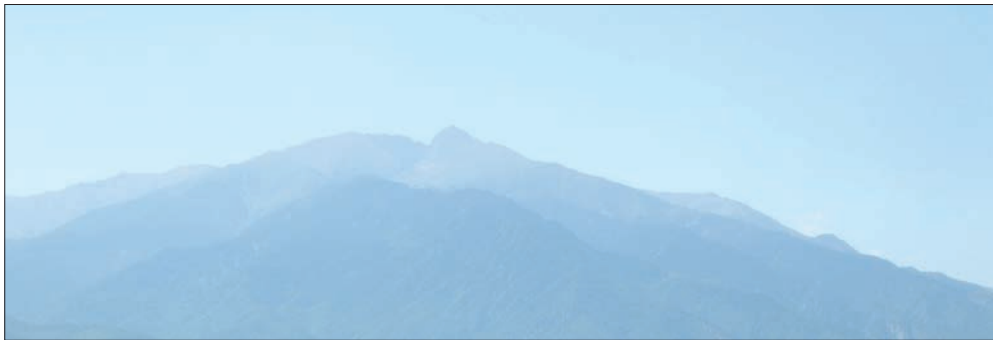


FIGURE 9. VIEW OF THE SACRED MONT CANIGOU FROM LAIB'S *LA CHAMBRE DES CERTITUDES* ON A SUNNY DAY. ©AEWL

33. GAMONEDA, Antonio; MARÍN-MEDINA, José, & ORTEGA, Carlos: *op. cit.*, p. 60.

34. FANNING, Leesa: *Encountering the Spiritual in Contemporary Art*. London, Yale University Press, 2018, p.74

35. OTTMAN, Klaus, & ROWELL, Margit: *Wolfgang Laib: A retrospective*. New York, Hatje Cantz, 2000, p.16.

The idea of pilgrimage, the required promenade to the chamber, and the notion of shelter (the cave as a warmth, silent refuge from the external weather and ambient sound) have already been explored. Now let's focus on another key factor of Laib's proposal: light. Lacking any artificial lighting system, the chamber's illumination depends entirely on the time of the day (and season of the year) when one visits. Thus, arriving at dawn would allow a completely different experience than arriving at dusk, as well as visiting during a hot, sunny summer morning would not be the same as visiting in a rainy, dark winter day. Changes in humidity, light and even color do affect the work and its experiencing. Laib's chamber offers the opportunity to experiment and perceive changes in daylight, as pursued by other artists such as James Turrell, Robert Irwin or Olafur Eliasson. All of them invoke slow time and the attenuation and/or intensification of sensory aspects of light, space and the body within them. As Eliasson describes,

One way in which to perceive changes in the daylight is to be in a landscape, where you are called upon to negotiate your relationship to the changing light conditions. After having been away from artificial light for some time, you will begin to adjust yourself according to the natural light and darkness; a full view of the sky makes a difference to your perception of a rainbow, a blue sky or the varying positions of the clouds. Because these phenomena constantly change, it is possible to register more acutely the relativity of light and the changes of atmosphere that it brings about³⁶.



FIGURE 10. WOLFGANG LAIB, WOHIN BIST DU GEGANGEN – WOHIN GEHST DU? (WHERE HAVE YOU GONE – WHERE ARE YOU GOING?), 2013. PERMANENT INSTALLATION AT THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION. ©Phillips Collection

36. ELIASSON, Olafur: *Life in Space 3*. 09.05.2008, edited by Anna Engberg-Pedersen and Camilla Kragelund. Dornbirn, Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2008 [n.p.]

Other wax rooms have been made by the artist after the creation of *La Chambre des Certitudes* –although none of them were created in such a wild, remote environment.

Comissioned by the Phillips Collection in 2013, *Wohin Bist Du Gegangen – Wohin Gehst Du?* (Where Have You Gone – Where Are You Going?) is a 6-by-7feet with a 10-foot ceiling space lined with fragrant beeswax. In these institutional incarnations of the work, natural light is substituted for the artificial: a simple, bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. According to Laib, «the spare light gives off a beautiful golden glow»³⁷. Accommodating only one to two people at a time, the room provides an intimate, contemplative experience. Small, echoing, and cocoon-like, the chamber is full of meditative, comforting potential.

Wohin Bist Du Gegangen – Wohin Gehst Du? is the first permanent installation of a wax room in a museum by the artist, who was attracted to the Phillips's intimate and experiential character. While participating in the Conversations with Artists series celebrated at this museum in 2012, Laib visited the Rothko Room for the first time, and was profoundly impressed by it. Laib explains that «A wax chamber has a very deep and open relationship to Rothko's paintings» as entering a wax room is to be «in another world, maybe on another planet and in another body»³⁸. The title of the work reinforces the already explored idea of journey that is implied in the conception of these rooms.

A year after installing *Where Have You Gone – Where Are You Going?* at the Phillips Collection, Laib was invited to create another wax room at La Ribaute, Anselm Kiefer's gigantic studio in the south of France. There, Laib created *From the Known to the Unknown - To Where is Your Oracle Leading You?*, the first of a series of works by other artists that Kiefer commissioned in order to transform La Ribaute into a public exhibition institution. This chamber is larger in scale than any other Laib has previously –or since– made, and it was installed underground. Over 130 feet (more than 40 meters) long, the chamber is rather a corridor, and therefore it allows the visitor to actually cross the space. Lit with only a few bare bulbs, there is a sense of being given access to a magical, otherworldly place, one powerfully aromatic and meditative. The spiritual journey that Laib insinuates is catalysed by the senses.

When interviewed about the creation process and meaning of these chambers, Laib stated:

A wax room is a (...) very, very small room but has a (...) beautiful concentration and intensity. (...) When you come into a wax room it's like coming into another world, you are enclosed with your own body by the space wax, which is not man-made. It's something (...) totally different: nobody can make it; it's about going somewhere else. We applied this wax in this small chamber, we melted the wax and applied it nearly like plaster, directly onto the wall. It's like one piece: it will be permanent – you can't take it away. To do this is a very beautiful process, with the smell, with the material of the beeswax, which you can really feel. (...) I think what is important is that it's

37. VOGEL, Carol: *op. cit.*

38. <https://www.phillipscollection.org/collection/laib-wax-room>

not me, it's much, much more than myself. And I think that is the secret why this is so powerful³⁹.



FIGURE 11. WOLFGANG LAIB, *FROM THE KNOWN TO THE UNKNOWN - TO WHERE IS YOUR ORACLE LEADING YOU?*, 2011-2014. Studio Anselm Kiefer, La Ribaute, Barjac, France. ©Sperone Westwater

With his work, Laib makes a big statement – but he delivers it in a quiet way. As argued here, these wax chambers offer a multisensorial, profound and meditative experience. Klaus Ottmann, Chief Curator at the Phillips Collection, has stated that a wax room has the «ability to temporarily suspend reality»⁴⁰. We suggest here that they also suspend time, for they recover a form of attention, slowness and silence rarely found in our everyday life. Through contemplation and the sensory, they amplify our awareness and extend duration. Laib himself has admitted being in search for «the timeless»⁴¹ and the wax chambers seem to hold space for such a purpose.

39. «Installing the Laib Wax Room. *The Philipps Collection*» 14/03/2013. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=49&v=TBXHGsy8_jo&feature=emb_logo [Accessed 11/02/2020]

40. CHIU, Rowena. «The third in our series on meditative art – Glass profiles Wolfgang Laib's Wax Room at The Phillips Collection». *Glass Magazine*, 2020. Available at: <https://www.theglassmagazine.com/the-third-in-our-series-on-meditative-art-glass-profiles-wolfgang-laibs-wax-room-at-the-phillips-collection/> [Accessed 29/02/2021]

41. BERNASCONI, Francesca & FRANCIOLLI, Marco. *Wolfgang Laib*. Lugano, Edizione Casagrande, 2017, p.64.

PATIENCE, PERSEVERANCE AND CONTINUITY: WORKING OUTSIDE OF TIME

«It's never too late to save time. You can start today, if you want to»⁴².

This is how in Michael Ende's novel *Momo*, a group of insidious grey men attempt to convince people to accelerate their time under the promise of a better life. They represented the Timesaving Bank. Mr Figaro, a joyful hairdresser in the story's remote town, fell for the grey men's enticing proposal: *Of course, I want to!* –he exclaimed, and asked what to do to achieve it. Working faster and sticking to essentials were indispensable conditions. Mr Figaro agreed to follow them and, indeed, he earned more money and had more to spend, but he also started to look tired and sour. He did not allow himself any leisure time: the maximum of profit should be extracted with the minimum of delay. Notices to this effect could be read in every office building and factory: «TIME SAVED IS TIME DOUBLED!»; «TIMESAVERS ARE GOING PLACES FAST!» OR «THE FUTURE BELONGS TO TIMESAVERS!».

Written in 1973, *Momo* is somehow a premonitory tale on how efficiency policies would exploit our schedules in the screen-dominated, click-and-collect, digital era – leading to an overwhelming temporal compression. Ende was right, he suggested that the Timesaving Bank's impositions would extend like a catchy cold –and they have.

Wolfgang Laib, however, has not succumbed to the grey men's enticing deals. So it has been proved by the reverence put into his work and the prolonged dedication that it requires, as described with the Brahamanda, milkstones, pollen, and beeswax pieces.

Over the past three decades, Laib has employed a restricted selection of natural materials to generate a body of work with only subtle variations. For the artist, «repetition is the most beautiful thing that exists»⁴³. Laib only uses a reduced range of chosen materials. In opposition to current demands for originality and forced updates of our consumer society, Laib is more concerned with the notion of continuity than with innovation or formal development. Beeswax, pollen, rice, milk, marble... they all show a changeless quality: they could have been gathered and obtained today or thousands of years ago. In this too, he shows a firm opposition to current turbocapitalist policies, as today's mass products are made for maximal impact and instant obsolescence. In a culture that, like Bauman affirmed, has become liquid, Laib's proposal is thrown out there as an offer of firm, solid ground. His is not only a physical insistence⁴⁴ –in terms of action–, but also a formal perseveration: a declaration against use-and-throw policies and to the obligatory, constant innovation demanded

42. ENDE, M. 2009. *Momo*. London, Penguin Books Ltd, 2009.

43. OTTMAN, Klaus & ROWELL, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

44. Laib spending whole seasons harvesting pollen, standing and walking several hours a day, sifting the yellow powder onto the floor while on his knees or carving out stones by hand... all these strenuous processes emerge not only from patience but also from a physical effort – especially when considering that he is currently 71 years old, and he is working in exact same manner as he did when he was 30.

by a system that seeks continuous profit⁴⁵. Thus, working and reworking the same pieces over the years, Laib shows a long-term dedication that is highly unusual in (and defying to) our disposable, interrupted and ever-changing contemporary context.

In a 2012 interview entitled «Still being: a conversation about time in Art», Michael Newman asks Antony Gormley about the importance of emphasising stillness in relation to our way of experiencing time. The British sculptor recognised that

We now live in bits and bytes, at broadband speed. We have moved through industrial time and have forgotten biological time. The exchange of imagery now happens so, so fast and everything is so available that the idea of resistance and just being has, for me, become more important⁴⁶.

Serene and delicate, Laib's materials are utterly linked to the natural cycles of time, and his installations are displayed for the viewer's detention.

In 2019, Arden Reed published an essay on «Slow Art». The professor suggests that this art category has appeared only 250 years ago, as a movement of resistance contesting dominant social conditions: acceleration and secularization. Due to their interaction, and by experimenting unprecedented speed, people sought «breathers, breaks and oases –if only to prevent cognitive and emotional fatigue»⁴⁷.

Does slow art have a political dimension? In a culture regulated by presidential tweets, might slow art offer forms of resistance? Since classical times, the act of seeing has offered a privileged way of knowing—hence a privileged access to forms of power (and resistance to power). Can slow art contest the contemporary acceleration and automation of seeing? Can aesthetic ways of seeing jam instrumental ways of seeing—like automated vision systems, drone warfare, facial recognition, and related surveillance systems?⁴⁸

Arden suggests that due to the increasing secularism in current societies, traditional forms of retreat such as religious contemplation are being more and more constricted. Reed talks about a «trauma» caused by speed culture and how «we are left speeding along the Autobahn of modernity, searching for rest stops and finding them shuttered. (...) Could “slow art” be a modern, secular displacement of old sacred practices?»⁴⁹.

This association between slowness and sacred contemplation seems to be resonant with Laib's approach to art. Attracted to ascetic life, his work reunites an eclectic range of influence from Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity and Jainism. Although he refuses to be linked to any particular religion, as stated before, his work is described as «spiritual»⁵⁰ and «ritualistic». For his installation of *Without Place – Without*

45. David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989) analyses the capital's operating rules and its employment of speed as a means to keep the flow dynamized by always searching new terms of credit and new forms of distribution.

46. GROOM, Amelia: *Time*. London: Cambridge, MA, Whitechapel Gallery, the MIT Press, 2013, pp. 73-4.

47. REED, Arden: *Slow art: The experience of looking, sacred images to James Turrell*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2017, p. 74.

48. Reed, A.: «On Slow Art: Introduction». *The Brooklyn Rail*. 7/09/2017. Available at: <https://brooklynrail.org/2017/09/editorsmessage/Introduction-by-Arden-Reed> [Accessed 14/03/2020]

49. *Ibidem*.

50. When asked in a 2005 interview about the possible spiritual implications of the experience of collecting pollen, Laib states that: «Other people might think it's a spiritual practice, but (...) it's also something else. If you

Time – Without Body at The Nelsons-Atkins Museum of Art, curator Leesa Fanning wrote: «Like offerings made on altars in India, the act of creating this work is a form of ceremonial offering. The magnitude of the installation transforms the gallery into a secular shrine»⁵¹. It is through slow contemplation and the enhancement of their senses that the visitor becomes an active agent of that ceremony.

Performance-like as Laib's installations may be, they are not necessarily an integral part of the work. His obsession for control made him photograph every piece by himself, shooting them intimately at his studio. However, the act of installing the work, which is private by nature, has sometimes become public. For instance, during the opening of his retrospective exhibition at MASI (Museo d'arte della Svizzera Italiana) in Lugano, the German artist did a live installation of one of his milkstones in front of visitors, allowing them to experience the whole temporal arc of the work. For his MoMA show in 2013, the installation of his largest pollen piece to date was recorded in video and showed to the public as part of the work's explanation in the museum. Although these two processes (live and recorded) relate to the viewer in very diverse ways, they both offer descriptive, new insight into the work and its understanding. By revealing those processes, Laib allows us to witness the intense care and affection put into his creative action and holds space for our eyes and senses to perceive and pay attention to the pouring milk that slowly covers the surface of the stone; the fountain of pollen dust hovering before falling onto the floor; the intense fragrance of a beeswax room and its haptic appeal; the role of time as a main part of the work or, better yet, the work as a defiance to time itself.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

In agreement with the words of Odile de Loisy, we consider Laib's oeuvre to be an initiation journey. «What is at stake for Wolfgang Laib through this unique physical and sensory experience is attention, slowness, silence and listening, that is, intimate communion with what surrounds us and surpasses us»⁵².

As Ottman puts it, Laib's works «demand stillness and quiet»⁵³, and therefore they enhance awareness of the transience of subtle phenomena, such as temperature, sound and light. His proposals and installations constitute a multisensory oasis. His wax chambers are a great reference in this regard: they alter space and time, perception and sensation.

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 the work could be or what you would like to achieve», in JORGENSEN, Darren James: «Wolfgang Laib: Returning to What Is An Interview with Wolfgang Laib», *E-maj*, Issue 1, July-December 2005. Available at: <https://emajartjournal.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/darrenjorgensen.pdf> [Accessed 29/02/2019]

51. FANNING, Leesa: *op. cit.* Available at: <https://www.leesafanning.com/wolfganglaib> [Accessed: 29/02/2019]

52. LOISY, Odile de: «La Chambre des Certitudes de Wolfgang Laib, un voyage initiatique». *Narthex*. 27/08/2020. Available at: <https://www.narthex.fr/news/la-chambre-des-certitudes-de-wolfgang-laib> [Accessed: 28/02/2021]

53. OTTMAN, Klaus, & ROWELL, Margit: *op. cit.*, p. 19.

Ultimately, what Laib offers is another conception of time and time experiencing. As it has been underlined throughout this text, his creative process is dependent on a biological *tempo*: the recollection and harvest of pollen, rice, milk or beeswax is regulated by circadian and seasonal rhythms in nature. This natural time cannot be accelerated, and that is why his works are so subversive in relation to the dizzying dynamics of current turbocapitalism.

Laib's oeuvre takes us from the sensory to the irrational and the suprasensory – *From the Known to the Unknown*, as the title of the wax room created in La Ribaute suggests. It is through the physicality of natural materials and his ritualistic, slow methodology that Laib invites to rethink our relationship with time and nature whilst catalysing an intense, spiritual experience.

This article has highlighted how Laib's oeuvre –both at a conceptual and executional level– claims back the contemplative act as a means to experience subtle phenomena in unusual, highly sensorial ways. It is from patience, perseverance and continuity that Laib expands perception and sensitivity, provoking ontological shifts at both the individual and collective consciousness.

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