

Wolfgang Laib: Without Place–Without Time–Without Body

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Gallery L8

Well hello everyone. I'm Leesa Fanning, Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Today, July the 8th, 2009, I'm here to talk with artist Wolfgang Laib. Laib is known for his *Pollen Fields*, *Milkstones*, *Rice Houses*, ziggurats and more. And many world-wide exhibitions acknowledge his importance. *Without Place–Without Time–Without Body* is a sculpture of hundreds of mounds of rice laid out in a grid, including five mounds of luminous yellow pollen at the heart of the work.

LF: Wolfgang, I respect your belief about the openness of art and your preference for the fluidity of interpretation. Let's talk about *Without Place–Without Time–Without Body*. It's a relatively new sculpture. I've proposed that one of the ways of thinking about it is that it suggests a kind of mythical mountain landscape of infinite proportions. What are your thoughts?

WL: I like very much what you say—it is a mythical mountain landscape of infinite proportions. Myself, I always saw it as a detail of an infinite ocean—a detail not only in place, but also in time and physically.

LF: *Without Place–Without Time–Without Body* is an extension of an earlier work, *The Five Mountains Not to Climb On*, which consisted of five mounds of pollen about three inches high. I understand that the earlier work was inspired by a trip to China during which you climbed the Five Sacred Mountains of China thought to be the abode of the gods. Could you talk about how *Without Place–Without Time–Without Body* evolved from *The Five Mountains Not to Climb On*?

WL: [It was] a long time ago. I even forgot that this had to do with my trip to China in 1983, but it's actually true. *The Five Mountains Not to Climb On*, I realized in 1984. Over the years to come, I realized how important, how central this work became, for my other artworks and for my life. I showed it the first time with Harald Szeemann, in 1985—our first exhibition together—*Weak as the Monument, Strong as the Echo*—which was the beginning of a long friendship. This was the starting point, and it contained all the visions and dreams about art, about life, about what is important. And only 20 years later, like four years ago, I began to enlarge this work with hundreds of rice mountains.

LF: I'm interested in the ways the small mounds of rice in *Without Place–Without Time–Without Body*, repeated hundreds of times, paradoxically suggests the monumentality of the cosmos.

WL: You know the exhibition I just mentioned—*Weak as the Monument, Strong as the Echo*, which was the title that Harald Szeemann gave to this exhibition—we realized very quickly that these small mountains of pollen contained the whole cosmos—the beginning of life and everything. We felt this was so important, and therefore it became such a central thing of our visions and of our dreams.

LF: Many of your forms—the mounds of rice or pollen mountains and ziggurats—suggest transcendence or ascension, even, and your beeswax chambers are a place where a kind of meditative experience might occur. Does your art suggest transcendence?

WL: I do hope so. (Leesa and Wolfgang laughing.) It is about the possibility of something else—something else or of another world, which we can be part of.

LF: The title of the work, *Without Place–Without Time–Without Body*, evokes a realm beyond place, time and body. What is the significance of the title for you?

WL: This title became very important over the last years. Already in the 80s I made this wax chamber, I think it was in 1988. It was first a wax chamber which had the title *For Another Body*. It is about the immaterial. I started studying medicine, but I very quickly found out that medicine is a natural science which only is about the physical body, but our life and our existence is not limited to this physical body, it goes far beyond. And, I think this title [*Without Place–Without Time–Without Body*] is about that.

LF: The placement of the five mounds of pollen in the center of the sculpture seems symbolic to me. I think of T.S. Eliot's "still point at the center of the world" or the centermost point of a mandala or even Buddha's "immovable spot" at the foot of the bodhi tree, which for me serves as a metaphor for a state of mind or even a mythical point around which the universe revolves. What's the significance of this central location of the mounds of pollen?

WL: Certainly they are something like a symbol of the central mountain of the world.

LF: This particular work is quiet and still and offers a meditative counterpoint to the harsh realities of life, as if it offers healing possibilities. How do you see it?

WL: I started to study medicine with all the ideals you can have as a doctor. Being very disappointed quickly, I did with my art and my life what I wanted to do as a doctor. But it is also much more than just healing, I think. Many people, especially in the art world, find it is impossible and naïve to believe in beauty in a world which is dominated by the opposite. But I think it is very important. Something else is possible in our own life and future but you have to live and work for it.

LF: I agree completely and I do totally agree with the idea of beauty and how important it is. Let's talk about your relationship to India. I understand that you consider India your spiritual home and the ritualistic activities you've seen in India—the pouring of ritual libations such as milk over icons on altars and the accumulation of ritual substances on sculptures, as well as flowers and food placed on altars—have informed both your art and your artmaking process. Could you tell us about this?

WL: I think it is complex. From the outside it looks like this, and it is like this, but I came to India already in my childhood. And for me both worlds became normal in my life, and to live equally in two different worlds, like Europe and India creates an extreme richness, openness in your mind, life and work, and that was, I think, very important for me over the many years since my childhood.

LF: That's wonderful that you have the best of both worlds.

WL: Hopefully.

LF: Yes. (Laughing)

WL: (Laughing) Not always.

LF: Tell me about the experience of collecting the pollen.

WL: Collecting pollen. I'm doing this now so many years—more than 30 years actually, every spring just sitting on [in] a meadow for days and days. [It's] something extremely beautiful, also challenging for myself, for everything around me. I think it's a totally different idea of what you want to do with yourself, with your time, your life. What you do in one day or one week or one month. It is still like the first years I did it so it is, I think, something very, very essential.

LF: It's a different kind of experience of time.

WL: I think so. I hope so.

LF: What does pollen mean to you? It seems like it's life and light, a regenerative sacred substance. I know that you once said that pollen was a detail of infinity.

WF: The pollen is the potential beginning of the life of the plant. It is, I think, as simple, as beautiful and as complex as this. And of course it has so many meanings. But, I think everybody who lives knows this is important.

LF: It's sort of a universal substance.

WL: Yes, yes, what else.

LF: Rice is a humble, life-sustaining food, and its symbolic cultural, historic and religious significance is really very well known. What is the meaning of rice for you in the context of your work? I know you've used it extensively.

WL: I've used rice as a symbol of food, but then not only food for the physical body, but also food for another world. Therefore the works, the first works that had rice had the titles *The Rice Meals for the Sun*, *The Rice Meals for the Nine Planets*. You can see that it goes far beyond food for this body. And that's the background of medicine. It was, for me, extremely important to go beyond all that.

LF: Wolfgang, let's talk a little bit about your process. It all seems very meditative and ritualistic.

WL: I think the process is in my own life. And everything has to come out of this. And there's, and there's not more, there's not less. (Laughing)

LF: (Laughing) Yes. Yes. Another different kind of question: I've looked at many photographs of you with your works of art and you're always kneeling or crouching close to the ground or floor and you're always very absorbed and focused on the act in which you're engaged. And, this image of you as an artist is so different from a typical photographic portrait in which the individual looks directly at the camera. Your approach implies a kind of reverence and humbleness.

WL: I think that's very beautiful, what you're saying. I think that the typical photographic portrait which we are still used to goes back to the Greek and to Roman culture and was reinvented in the Renaissance and still defines our thinking today. The artist is the individual hero and the individual creator who makes the artwork, but I think other cultures in human history had a totally different idea about this. I think change, which I deeply believe in, is really possible in our culture. I think the artist is part of something much bigger.

LF: I think we share the common belief that art can change the world.

WL: Yes.

LF: (Laughing)

WL: Otherwise I wouldn't be an artist.

LF: Well let's go back to your recent project at the Mertz Foundation in Torino, Italy. This consisted of hundreds of rice mountains, pollen mountains and the large-scale beeswax ziggurat combined to create one monumental work. And then I believe it was 45 Brahmin priests who came to perform an ancient ritual which concluded your exhibition.

WL: Yes. It's now about one month ago that it's finished and the Brahmins are back to India. It's such an event it's hard for me to comprehend. We started with, actually it was not hundreds, it was about 20,000 rice mountains surrounding this big beeswax ziggurat and nine pollen mountains not in the middle, but somehow (laughing) in between. For the end I had invited 45 Brahmin priests from different temples of south India to make this big fire ritual for seven days. And I think altogether it became one artwork with a complexity I'm still trying to comprehend—something like this. It is after, I feel like, the first time I saw the milk on my *Milkstone* or when I saw the first pollen piece on the floor. It is something I had never experienced before, and also for the Brahmins—they had never experienced something like this because for them it is a ritual which is 2,000 years old which was done 2,000 years ago exactly the same. But then they never did that as part of an art exhibition.

LF: So, you were bringing two very different cultures together.

WL: We did something together. I mean there was the pollen as the beginning of life, the rice as the food and the fire as the end of the material world, but then also as the potential beginning of another world. Things were going on like you couldn't believe, on such different levels. And then it caused so many questions—what is an art exhibition, what is art or what is an artist? And all these things are very exciting, I think.

LF: That's an amazing project. I wish I could have seen it.

WL: (Laughing) It's too late. It won't happen again, because it was practically, it was not so easy, as you can imagine.

LF: I can imagine.

WL: I worked for nearly one year now with help from many, many people. We will make a really good book I think, I hope.

LF: Oh I hope so too. What's your next project?

WL: I have already (laughing) another big project. I have a dream I am dreaming 30 years of, which has to do with my first *Brahmanda*, which is the egg of Brahma, which is the egg of the Universe, I made in 1972. This sculpture was five feet long, and shortly after I had the dream to make a very big *Brahmanda* somewhere in India. I would like to carve out a rectangle/cube and then have an egg inside this rectangle, inside the mountain, but on a scale like 20 meters, that means 60 feet long or something.

LF: I'll look forward to that. (Laughing)

WL: I spoke to some people in India, and it's still a way to go, but I think we can find the means to do it and to find the support of the village people there. I think it looks, it looks really promising right now, but I think it's a huge project.

LF: Wolfgang, I can't tell you how much I appreciate just taking the time to speak with me about your work. Thank you.

WL: Yes Leesa. Thank you very much for the beautiful questions.