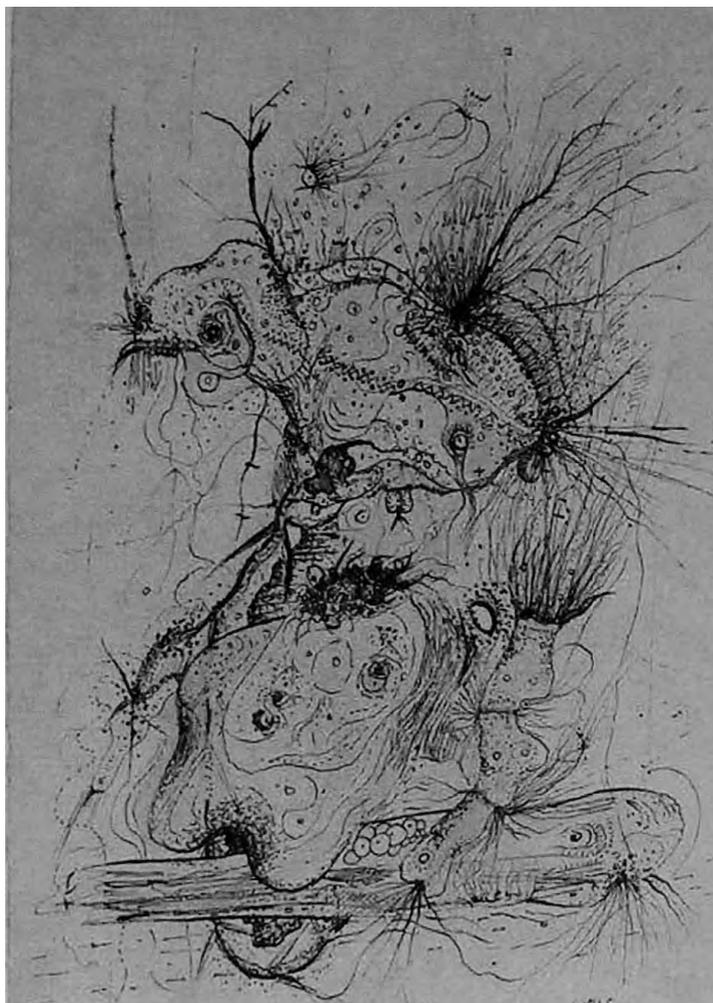


**Exhibition** 14 February – 26 May 2014  
Sabatini Building, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor

# Wols

## Cosmos and Street



Untitled, 1942. Ink and watercolor on paper. 14,3 x 10,1 cm. Datio, 2011. Centre Pompidou. Musée national d'art moderne / Centre de création industrielle, Paris. © VEGAP, Madrid, 2014



Untitled (*Cobblestone*), 1932-1942 / 1976. Gelatin silver print, 18.7 x 24 cm. Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen e.V., Stuttgart. © VEGAP, Madrid, 2014

Wols is one of the most intriguing figures in 20<sup>th</sup>-century art. Born Otto Wolfgang Schulze into an upper middle class family in Berlin, he broke with Germany as the Nazis were coming to power, changed his name to Wols, and lived the rest of his life in France. During the 1930s he was best known as a photographer. The outbreak of the Second World War changed everything. As the citizen of a hostile country, Wols was continuously displaced from one French domicile, prison or internment camp to another. In these precarious conditions he started to draw in earnest, often by candlelight,

lying on his bunk. In the harshness of the camps he developed the alcohol-dependency which contributed to his early death in 1951. At the same time he produced some of the strangest, most intricate and beautiful drawings of modern times.

*Wols: Cosmos and Street* does not attempt a survey of Wols's work, nor a retrospective with a chronological structure. A significant aspect of Wols's practice was that he did not title or date his works. Titles, somewhat over-poetic, were added later by his wife Gréty, and by friends such as the writer Henri-Pierre Roché. Instead, the exhibition presents his work in terms of two distinct kinds of 'graphism': one of the light (photography) and one of the line (drawing). It is true that in chronological terms photography came earlier in Wols's life and was adopted partly for contingent reasons of making a living. He was intermittently a professional photographer but remained always a 'poetic' photographer with a inimitable eye.

In the exhibition title, "Street" stands for the everyday, earthbound, nitty-gritty human world revealed in Wols's photographs. "Cosmos" stands for Wols's exquisite drawings creating a vision of universal energy expressed in fluid constructs of biological and organic forms. The public is invited to come very close to Wols's pictures, to peer into them and savour the details of their forms, the refined articulation of even the minutest mark.

During and after the Second World War Wols's graphic work became increasingly abstract. Its difference from the crystalline and geometric end of the spectrum of abstraction, which is often identified with cosmological speculation, and informed much of kinetic art, could hardly be more marked. Wols's creations are earthbound, biological, hairy and visceral, but they are no less a model of the universe. Tendencies in art which may have been mutually hostile at the time of their inception can now be seen to be two streams which converging in the desire to find a visual language which could encompass the hugely expanded conception of space and time that has come with the discoveries of modern science.

In its immediate context Wols's work represents the turning of the Parisian surrealism of the 1930s towards the existentialism of the postwar years, towards *l'art brut*, *l'art informel*, and to artists like Fautrier, Dubuffet, Giacometti, and eventually Tinguely and Takis. A new conception of space is struggling to be born among those artists, which was in some ways

foreseen in Wols's works of the 1940s, where a gradual transformation takes place of a terrestrial into a cosmic space.

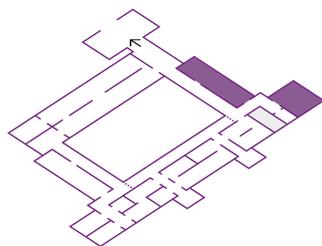
In 1945 the Parisian art dealer, René Drouin, proposed to Wols that he experiment with painting in oils on canvas. Drouin provided the necessary materials, encouraging Wols to work on a larger scale than he could achieve with watercolour on paper. Wols was philosophically and constitutionally against Drouin's idea. Paintings in oil on canvas, he would say, "involve too much ambition and gymnastics. I am opposed to both". Nevertheless, he began to produce oil paintings in 1947. It is as if Wols made paintings by attacking painting itself, an intensely individual position that artist Georges Mathieu at the time described as "shattering, disturbing and bloody".

It is impossible to ignore the impression of ferocity that Wols's oil paintings produce at their most audacious. Yet it was not through a simplistic 'attack' that Wols achieved this intensity since in these oil paintings passages of uncouth daubing alternate with passages of great delicacy.

Taking into account the contingencies that have helped shape it at distinct moments, and its abiding concerns and sensibilities, Wols's work can be seen as a continuous play between abstraction and figuration. One of its special features is that it encompasses both photography and painting. In one sense, and allowing for the different technical procedures, the degree of abstraction in the 'figurative' photographs just about equals the degree of figuration in the 'abstract' drawings, watercolours and etchings. They take part in one another while remaining distinct. A fluid area is created, an area of transition conceived as something vast and tiny at the same time. It is in the creation of this uncertain, 'unnamable' but energized space that the insight and wit of Wols's work really lies.

### **Sabatini building**

3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, Rooms 306 and 307



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