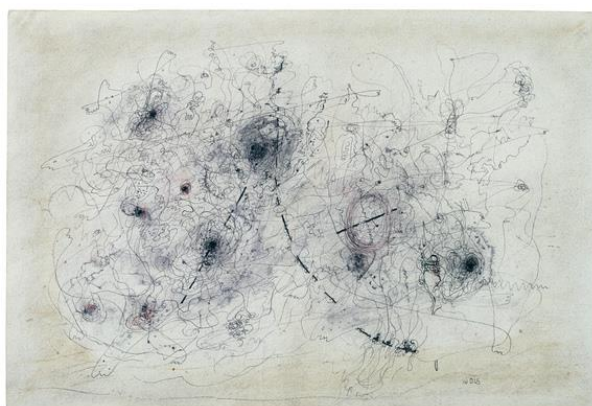


GALERIE KARSTEN GREVE



Untitled, ca. 1942, Ink and watercolour on paper, 18.5 x 27 cm / 7 1/4 x 10 2/3 in

WOLS

April 13 – June 29, 2024

Opening on Saturday April 13, 2024, 5 p.m. – 8 p.m.

with an introduction by Prof. Dr. Christian Spies

In 1998, 25 years ago, Galerie Karsten Greve presented a retrospective of WOLS (1913 – 1951) in Cologne for the first time. The selection of more than 50 works on canvas and on paper, photographs, prints and archive material from the collection of Karsten Greve in the current exhibition is the result of over 40 years of intensive study of the artist's work – a collection unique in its scope and quality, made accessible to the public with this exhibition.

"WOLS, a little man from the moon who has landed among us, keeps up his stubborn monologue with the obstinacy of one both loyal and conscientious. His mysterious hieroglyphs, so fine as to challenge spiders, teach us the interplanetary poetry of the stars and reconstruct, under the subtle refractions of their iridescent light, the fauna, flora and even humanities of a dream of invisible", microcosms",

wrote Jean Sylveire 1943. Wols' visionary work reflects the artist's time and life story, which is defined by war and exile and symbolises the unspeakable pain and bitterness in the face of the omnipresent situation of persecution in Europe before and during the Second World War.

Musician, photographer, artist, poet - the universal extent of Wols' (born Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze) creativity over the course of his short life testifies to his exceptional sensitivity to the world around him. During the growing threat of the Nazi regime, he moved to Paris in 1932, where he initially focused on photography and its technical possibilities. His motifs and image details, especially close-ups and contrast and solarisation effects, reflect the influence of New Objectivity and Surrealism. In 1933, after Wols was declared a deserter and stateless in France, he travelled to Spain with his partner Gréty Dabija, first to Barcelona, then to Ibiza and finally to Mallorca, where he devoted himself to watercolour painting - while the couple survived through occasional work. He was arrested in Barcelona as a deserter, but managed to secure his deportation to France. Back in Paris in 1937, Wols received international recognition for his photographs of the "Pavillon de l'Élégance" at the World Exhibition and was honored with a solo exhibition at the Galerie La Pléiade.

After France entered the war in 1939, Wols was imprisoned as an "enemy subject" in various internment camps, including the Camp des Milles near Aix-en-Provence. He continued to draw, which became a survival strategy for him along with other interned artists such as Max Ernst and Hans Bellmer. During his internment, he developed *Circus Wols*, a project conceived as an educational and democratic show accessible to all, using the best technologies to meld popular and scholarly culture, art, music and cinema. Resembling a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork), *Circus Wols* was to help him obtain a visa for the United States; however, he was not able to board the last ship from Marseille. Although only a few notes, schemes and watercolours of that concept are left, such as

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Untitled, dated around 1940 (W/P 22), Wols' curiosity about shows and cinema attested to his desire to offer a new kind of art. With its intentionally fragmented structure and the artist's refusal to put forward a meaning or long speech, *Circus Wols* was a practically dystopian project that foreshadowed post-modernism and showbiz society.

When he left Camp des Milles in 1941, Wols set off "*imperceptibly and secretly on a motionless journey*".ⁱ His escape from the authorities led him via Cassis near Marseille to Dieulefit in the department of Drôme, where he lived an existence in extreme poverty until the end of the war. He escaped into his drawings and poems and searched for alternative realities. In his *Aphorisms*, he expressed his desolation regarding the human condition and the ravages of war. This is also evident in his watercolours from the period, such as "*Untitled*" from around 1942 (W/P 2), which oscillate in rich detail between abstract compositions and imaginary worlds. The infinitely large becomes infinitely small; his precise penwork allows him to create microcosms of organic and urban elements, which are enhanced by ink and watercolours. From weightless cities to a flotilla of dream ships, Wols built a utopia that enabled him to confront reality.

The majority of Wols' paintings were created from 1945 onwards with the support of the gallery owner René Drouin, who had met him through the writer Henri-Pierre Roché. René Drouin provided him with oil paints and canvases and exhibited his works in the gallery on Place Vendôme. Despite the disastrous post-war context, the exhibition sparked a keen interest among the artistic and literary spheres of Paris, making Wols one of the major figures of the new world. Wols created no more than around 80 paintings in total. The works represent a tumultuous pandemonium with ever more abstract compositions, determined by technique and material. "*The old painters went from meaning and found signs for it, but the new ones go from signs that need only to be given a meaning*"., said Jean Paulhan in 1962, when defining the new turning point in art. Wols, who is often associated with the Informel movement defined by Michel Tapié in 1963, was a key figure of the post-war period who redefined artistic thinking. Despite the very difficult living conditions, he managed to preserve his artistic spirit. As a loner with limitless freedom of personal imagination, he was always on the edge of contemporary artists' groups and movements. Wols, "the little man from the moon", transcends every category and embodies freedom - of thought and being.

A comprehensive catalogue was published on the occasion of the exhibition in 2023.

Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze, known as Wols, was born in Berlin in 1913 into a family of high-ranking civil servants. After moving to Dresden, Wols became acquainted with many important artists, such as Paul Klee, Otto Dix and Oskar Kokoschka. He was musically gifted and played the violin and banjo. After being introduced to photography by Genga Jonas, he came to Paris in 1933. He married Gréty Dabija in 1941. Defended by numerous Parisian artists and writers, Wols remained in France during the war, developing his artistic work until his death on September 1, 1951 at the age of 38. In 1951, Wols work was exhibited together with Jackson Pollock, marking a historic encounter between the French and American non-figurative schools. In 1958, his work was shown at the Venice Biennale and in 1964 at the *documenta* in Kassel. In 1974, the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris dedicated a retrospective to him, followed by Kunsthaus Zürich and Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf in 1989, and later by the Menil Collection in Houston (2013) and the Centre Pompidou in Paris (2020). His works can be found in the world's most important collections, such as the MoMA and the MET in New York, the Menil Collection in Houston, the Art Institute in Chicago, Tate London, the Nationalgalerie in Berlin, the Kunstmuseum Basel and the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

PRESS CONTACT

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We are pleased to provide you with images of the exhibition.

ⁱ 1 Deleuze Gilles, Guattari Felix, *Mille Plateaux*, Paris : Minuit, 1980, p. 244