

Circus at the End of History: Wols in the Late Thirties and Early Forties

Joseph Monteyne

Volume 18, numéro 1-2, 1991

Questionner le modernisme
Modernism in Question

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1072983ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072983ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)
1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Monteyne, J. (1991). Circus at the End of History: Wols in the Late Thirties and Early Forties. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 18(1-2), 43-56. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1072983ar>

Résumé de l'article

Pour les intellectuels et les artistes français de la fin des années trente, qui rejetaient simultanément la participation à l'*establishment* politique et la résignation démissionnaire, il ne restait souvent qu'une sorte de révolte de l'inespoir dont la conduite de Bataille et sa politique de l'impossible offraient le principal modèle de référence. Quant à Wols, cet Allemand devenu apatride qui gravitait autour de ce milieu parisien engagé, il expérimenta dans la montée généralisée de la droite et dans la déclaration de la guerre bien davantage qu'une forme d'aliénation morale : il fut incarcéré pendant plus d'un an dès le début du conflit.

C'est dans ce contexte qu'il faut replacer la production de dessins, la rédaction d'aphorismes et la préparation d'un vaste projet multi-média, itinérant et populaire, le *Circus Wols*, qui permirent à l'artiste d'exorciser une période apparaissant à plusieurs comme une véritable fin de l'histoire. Voués à l'informalité et à l'insignifiance radicale du gribouillis, les dessins où la figure humaine effectue un repli vers l'animalité et la vie cellulaire, se présentent comme une stratégie d'ultime résistance face à la désintégration. Il en va de même de l'élaboration du cirque, un lieu symbolique dont la visée principale serait de rendre l'homme heureux.

Circus at the End of History: Wols in the Late Thirties and Early Forties*

JOSEPH MONTEYNE, UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Résumé

Pour les intellectuels et les artistes français de la fin des années trente, qui rejetaient simultanément la participation à l'establishment politique et la résignation démissionnaire, il ne restait souvent qu'une sorte de révolte de l'inespérance dont la conduite de Bataille et sa politique de l'impossible offraient le principal modèle de référence. Quant à Wols, cet Allemand devenu apatride qui gravitait autour de ce milieu parisien engagé, il expérimenta dans la montée généralisée de la droite et dans la déclaration de la guerre bien davantage qu'une forme d'aliénation morale: il fut incarcéré pendant plus d'un an dès le début du conflit.

C'est dans ce contexte qu'il faut replacer la production de dessins, la rédaction d'aphorismes et la préparation d'un vaste projet multi-média, itinérant et populaire, le *Circus Wols*, qui permirent à l'artiste d'exorciser une période apparaissant à plusieurs comme une véritable fin de l'histoire. Voués à l'informalité et à l'insignifiance radicale du gribouillis, les dessins où la figure humaine effectue un repli vers l'animalité et la vie cellulaire, se présentent comme une stratégie d'ultime résistance face à la désintégration. Il en va de même de l'élaboration du cirque, un lieu symbolique dont la visée principale serait de rendre l'homme heureux.

This article takes as its focus drawings and aphorisms produced in France in the late thirties by Otto Wolfgang Schulze, more commonly known under the pseudonym Wols. The account that follows will attempt to retrieve traces of an individual history from a period viewed at the time as the end of history, a period that almost succeeded in rendering a figure like Wols, a German-born artist in France on the eve of war, into complete anonymity. Drawings such as the two-headed *Janus portant l'aquarium* (fig. 1), and *Le cirque que j'adore* (fig. 2), his written aphorisms, and his intended multi-media project *Circus Wols* will be viewed as mediations seeking to continue a critical project within a politics of the impossible.¹ European events of the late thirties placed tighter and tighter constraints on Wols' personal freedom, and it became increasingly difficult for an engaged artist and intellectual to have any faith in traditional systems of politics and thought. Wols' angry and frenetically scribbled drawings, his pathetic and pessimistic exhortations in writing, will be seen as objects representing his own particular state of nothingness and displacement at the end of history.

To put it another way, this essay will attempt to construct a history of someone who has no history. Already problems arise: how is it possible to keep an account of Wols from turning into a study of the individual artist/author's interior emotive state, since the only traces that are left from this time are the works themselves? How can a history of "le peintre maudit," a tormented and misunderstood genius driven by the inner turmoil of his creative life to an existence tragically marred by poverty and drunkenness, be avoided? These approaches are the take of the majority of the Wols literature, including that of his post-war spokesman Werner Haftmann, who opened his deluxe 1965 coffee table book on Wols with the artist's following aphorism as a frontispiece: "From the outset life acquaints you/ with suffering/ and suffering helps . . . / it brings out/ what is in you (avalanches that cannot be held back)".² And with the social history of art and poststructuralism's assault on the formal and biographical approach to the individual and his or her works in favour of methodology incorporating analyses of institutional and discursive frameworks that are, in the case of art history anyway, circulation, reception, function, and market play of art objects, how can a study of Wols be anything but reactionary? For there is next to no market for his work in this period to study, no

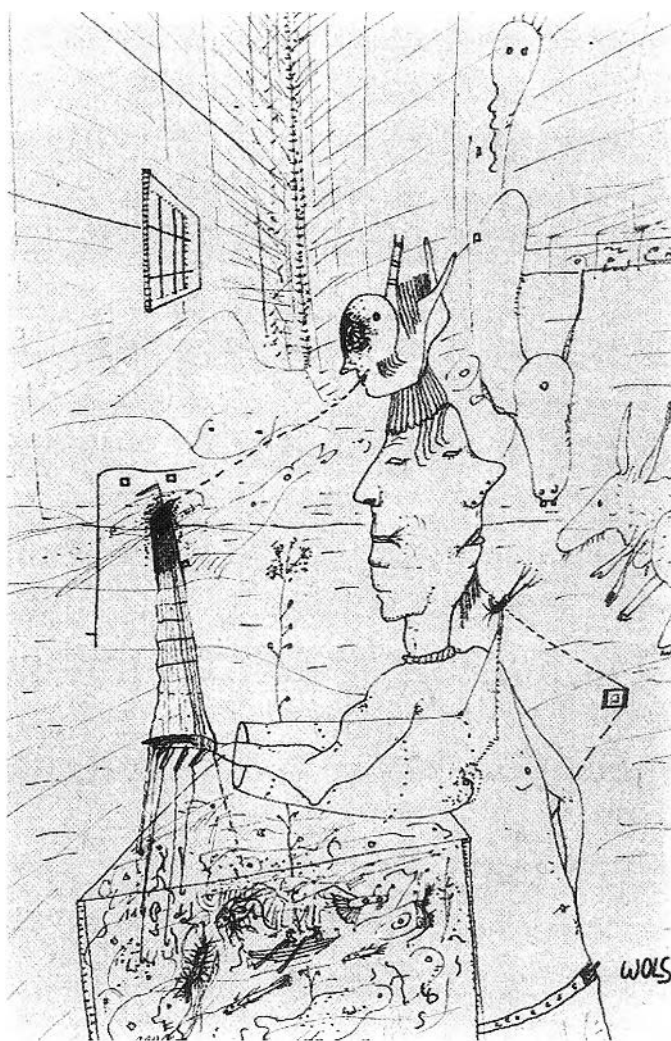


Figure 1. *Janus portant l'aquarium*, ca 1940, pen and ink on grey-green paper, 27 x 18 cm, private collection (Wols 1993/VIS*ART Copyright Inc.).

dealers, no critics, no collectors, and no patronage. Left with the drawings and writings alone, often done on whatever scraps of paper he could scrounge, the aforementioned lacunas could very easily

prompt simply a formal or psychoanalytical reading of Wols' production from this time. This paper will approach these objects on a different tack, by looking at how the pressures of a tense and disillusioning historical moment forced engaged artists and intellectuals into the search for alternate political articulations. Wols' eccentric words and images, those delicate and sensible lines which represent the breathing of a worn out man as one writer saw them in 1947, will be seen to operate on just such a level.³

Jean-Michel Besnier has pointed out the difficult position facing certain politically engaged intellectuals and artists in France in the late thirties. This group, referred to by Besnier as the "révoltés de l'inespoir," the rebels of hopelessness, found themselves in a paradoxical situation, rejecting both political resignation and the political establishment. Some of these individuals, disappointed with the decay of communism into Stalinist totalitarianism and even more so with the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy, were pressured into the articulation of other possibilities for political action and individual freedom. For Besnier the key figure in this group is Georges Bataille, the most vocal individual in working out a politics of the impossible, a way of continuing to believe in and advocate for some kind of political action when "there is no longer a great machine in whose name to speak."⁴ These gestures were serious attempts to salvage some form of a critical political discourse from within pre-war discussions inevitably contaminated with negativity, Hegelian perceptions of the end of History, Nietzschean propositions of the tragic individual, and notions of the impossibility and futility of constructive political action from within traditional Western modes of thought. Wols, though not a direct member of the particular group made up of Bataille and others that Besnier focuses his study on, was living and working in Paris from late 1936–1939 in the same intellectual and political climate. Though it has been intimated otherwise,⁵ Wols was a politically engaged artist. Judging from the evidence of his portrait photographs produced in Paris, he had connections to the Surrealists and other left groups in the latter part of the thirties, for instance the street theater group October and the circle around the proletarian poet Jacques Prevert. For the purposes of this essay Wols will be seen as part of an engaged group of artists and intellectuals in Paris in the late thirties, aware of political and philosophical debates, and also facing the same increasingly impossible political and cultural situation described in the discourses current within the group associated with Bataille. There are differences of course. For Wols this situation was much more acute, due to his position as a foreign national at a time of rising xenophobia, a situation that would ultimately contribute to his incarceration.

Wols presents an intriguing historical case study in disappearance. He is like Bataille's old mole, not a bourgeois like Breton advocating revolution while soaring above the base matter that is to be its source,⁶ but a figure who is forced to embrace stinking decomposition. Sartre would refer to him after the war as a termite, but a splendid one at that, building "great palaces out of his own droppings."⁷ Wols was a figure who desired to take part in the

Figure 2. *Le cirque que j'adore*, ca 1940, pen and ink and watercolor on blue rag paper, 31.5 x 23.5 cm, private collection (Wols 1993/VIS*ART Copyright Inc.).



optimistic social restructuring advocated by theoreticians and practitioners of modernism, reinfusing art into social life in the hopes that it would aid in bringing about a democratic, socially transformative project. Wols traveled to the centers of modernity across national boundaries that modernism, in its most optimistic forms, sought to erase, and entertained plans of creating a traveling multi-media project that would popularize certain artistic forms and serve an educational function, a mobile spectacle not unlike a circus, a metaphor he would indeed pick up in the late thirties for both his life and work. But the events of the pre-war years would color Wols' circus and shape its content, as everywhere he traveled in the thirties—Berlin, Paris, Barcelona—modernity was collapsing. The teleology of political, cultural, and technological modernism had led to Nazism in Germany, Franco in Spain, and the collapse of the socialist Popular Front coalition in France leading to a xenophobic and swift rise of the right. And in every one of these locations Wols was an odd man out, an outsider—shapeless, formless, homeless, and stateless within a social and political structure that had no place for him, and one for which he quickly had neither the faith nor the desire to participate in. Continental European states were very much in the process of redefining their concepts of na-

tionality and nationhood in the late thirties, and naming their “others.” Wols became a wanderer, and then a prisoner, unattached to his native German culture or soil, forcibly rejected and distanced from his adopted culture of France and Paris. Constructed and educated, brought into place as a human and political subject by nationalist pedagogy and its cultural expressions, Wols was then cut loose from them, and forced to become all too aware of his new marginal position.

It is useful to conjure up what Homi Bhabha would call the “ambivalent margin of the nation space” in trying to uncover the place from where Wols was articulating his artistic project. For Bhabha the nation is one of the principal structures of ideological ambivalence within the cultural representations of modernity, a concept made Janus-faced by the growing awareness and exposure that, in spite of the certainty historians may wield when they discuss the origins of a nation as a sign of the modernity of its society, “the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality.”⁸ On the ambivalent margin of the nation space forces of social power and authority, and “otherness,” “may emerge in displaced, even decentered strategies of signification” where individuals are both the objects of a pedagogical nationalist discourse and the subjects of a continually renewed performative process of signification.⁹ The actions of the performative and the pedagogical, or, as Bhabha would say, the processes of gaining and losing identity, are in continual tension. As a pedagogical object, an individual is passive, written and constructed by the nation through its appropriation of such discourses as history and culture, and put into place as an anonymous member of a national population. The performative, on the other hand, can be an intervention. It can be a conscious and active strategy of individual signification, and it is the gap between the performative and the pedagogical that can form a space of representation of cultural difference and contestation that is not outside or “other” to dominant culture but within it, destabilizing its hegemony from inside its very boundaries. Wols was one of Bhabha’s wandering people, a figure that would not be contained within national cultures. His artistic project articulated a voice of opposition or “otherness” on the ambivalent margins created by the tension between a conscious strategy of individuation and the interpellation of a subject position by the powerful and subsuming discourses of nationalism in the tense pre-war environment of Europe. Wols’ marginality cannot be seen as a space or site of a celebratory self-marginalization, as the majority of the art historical views on Wols adopt, rather, as Homi Bhabha would argue, as a “substantial intervention into those justifications of modernity—progress, homogeneity, cultural organicism, the deep nation, the long past—that rationalize the authoritarian, ‘normalizing’ tendencies within cultures in the name of the national interest or the ethnic prerogative.”¹⁰ The ambivalent marginal space of Wols, the literal and metaphorical Janus-faced tension between outside and inside in his drawings, the instability and hybridity of his political, cultural, and representational project served, as will be shown, as the chiasmatic crossroads to a new transnational, even

trans-biological, culture. To place the work produced in the late thirties and early forties by Wols within this space, and root it in the context of intellectual, political, philosophical, and cultural debates of his historical moment is the intent of this study.

Wols was raised in a liberal, upper-bourgeois Protestant environment in Weimar Germany. His father was a diplomat, eventually coming to hold the highest administrative position in the Chancellery of Saxony, and collaborated in the drafting of the Weimar Constitution in 1918.¹¹ He wrote several books on legislation and law, and traveled to the United States where he was received by President Hoover. Clearly Wols was no stranger to political and legal discourses, and he grew up instilled with great faith in high culture as well, for his family environment was completely saturated by the arts, crafts and sciences. According to Wols, his father purchased and donated works by Klee and Kandinsky to the Museum of Dresden, the first examples of the art of these two modernists in the museum’s collection. As a teenager Wols was both an accomplished violinist and an amateur biologist. He played the compositions of J.S. Bach as a soloist in Protestant churches, and bred a new species of tropical fish in his home aquarium which was accepted into the collection of the Dresden Zoo. He left school in 1929, the year his father died. Some associates, including his wife Grety, claim this departure was due to his coming to the aid of a Jewish boy during an altercation. He was employed in a shop repairing Mercedes Benzes, studied navigation at a marine academy, and worked with Leo Frobenius for a short time, who encouraged him to use methods acquired at his institute to write a history of music. Music, ships, and interests in the biological defects of nature remained central items in Wols’ work until his death.

In 1927 Wols saw the work of the modernist artists Kokoschka, Dix, Klee, and Moholy-Nagy at the International Exhibition in Dresden and, already an accomplished photographer, felt inspired to become an artist. At the Berlin Bauhaus he sought out Moholy-Nagy, who encouraged him to travel to Paris to practice his art, giving him letters of introduction to Léger, Ozenfant, Arp, and Giacometti. Wols was living in Paris by 1933, but was unable to secure a work permit and, rather than return to a Germany becoming increasingly fascist, he traveled to Spain with his future spouse Grety, the former wife of the surrealist poet Jacques Baron. While making a living as a portrait photographer and a chauffeur, Wols produced several portraits of Communists in Barcelona during 1935–1936. In 1935, while in Barcelona, Wols received his call-up to report to the German labor service, a request he refused, turning him officially into a “stateless” person. Harassed by Nazi officials from the German Consulate in Barcelona, watched by the Falangists, he was finally denounced for his moral and political views and imprisoned in a Spanish jail for three months before being deported to France, where his Spanish police dossier followed him into the hands of French authorities.

It is important to keep in mind the kind of pressure an individual of non-French origin underwent in France in the late thirties, especially one who had a criminal record from another country, in discerning the narrow and claustrophobic space Wols found him-

self working in. Already by the mid-thirties the issue of foreigners in France had become a problem for some people. Georges Mauco, for example wrote in the *Revue de Paris*, 1935:

Trois millions d'étrangers en France! L'équivalent d'une nation numériquement plus importante que la Norvège, presque aussi importante que la Suisse. Et pratiquement aucune administration pour ordonner cette masse énorme qui s'insère sans directives dans nos frontières.¹²

France was becoming a place where all the human flotsam and jetsam from Europe's troubled areas was gathering, and concern originated from some quarters with regards to the lack of supervision or control. Immigration and naturalization policy were outdated, inadequate, and arbitrary, allowing political asylum to refugees who were wealthy and idle, while refusing it to those who came to France and desired employment. The issuing of identity papers and visas was equally as inept and misdirected, and there was virtually no way of knowing the quality and quantity of "ce désarroi national issu de nos luttes intestines," as Albert Sarraut, président du Conseil, had referred to the situation in March of 1936.¹³

There was hope for a short time for the political refugees and foreign workers in France with the coming to power of the Popular Front, as free circulation and more liberty in the choosing of a living location were established.¹⁴ But immigration and naturalization were not big issues with the Popular Front coalition despite the efforts of French Communists. The Popular Front relied on its fragile link to the bourgeoisie for the preservation of power, and was much more concerned with maintaining order and protecting the status quo in order to appease both the middle classes and the French working classes, themselves becoming more xenophobic and insular in a time of economic hardship and labor unrest. Members of the main trade union confederation, the Confédération générale du travail (C.G.T.), feared losing control of the syndicats to foreign influence, and protested against the perceived intrusion of aliens into the French syndical organization.¹⁵ By 1937 even the Communists in France had reformed their position, accepting a platform of "France for the French," and the Popular Front increasingly adopted severe policies in regards to foreigners in the country, including tough punishments for foreign workers active in political and social agitation, increased surveillance, and even tax levies on employers of foreign workers.¹⁶ Ironically, the democratic and progressive platform of the Popular Front resulted in restrictive controls on foreigners in France; as Simone Weil wrote in her 1937 *La Condition ouvrière*, "le progrès social dans un pays a comme conséquence paradoxale la tendance à fermer les frontières aux produits et aux hommes."¹⁷ Many intellectuals and artists had been optimistic and embraced the Popular Front when it had come to power, not the least of them being Bataille and André Breton briefly in *Contre-Attaque* (1935–36), but, for someone in Wols' situation, the Popular Front offered no positive prospects.

With the collapse of the Blum government and the Popular Front coalition, priority in France shifted more than ever to the

maintenance of public order in the face of an increasingly unstable European situation. The press, until that moment relatively silent on the immigrant question, suddenly took notice of undesirable figures like Wols and launched a xenophobic crusade in late 1937. The right wing press was extremely active in this campaign, as *L'Action française*, *Gringoire*, *L'Ami du peuple*, *Le Petit journal*, and *Le Jour* all worked to manifest doubt in their reading publics about the physical, sanitary, and mental health of the foreign population in France.¹⁸ The new Daladier cabinet also became concerned with the so-called clandestines at this time, seeing them as a potential threat to national security, and several Draconian decrees followed each other in rapid succession aimed at giving the policing forces—the Deuxième bureau, the Sureté nationale, and the individual préfetures—more power and the legal means to enforce control over the uninvited guests, the "hôtes irréguliers" who lived in France, desired to have rights in France, but were unwilling to become French. An individual named M. Millet resurrected Mauco's cry of 1935 in a publication of 1938 entitled *Trois millions d'étrangers en France*. In this text Millet wrote:

Notre peuple commence à considérer avec méfiance, en ces jours de crise économique, les catégories d'étrangers inassimilables qui vivent entre eux, se marient entre eux, ont leur religion, leur prêtres, leur journaux, leur moeurs, mais sollicitent et souvent reçoivent les secours du chômage.¹⁹

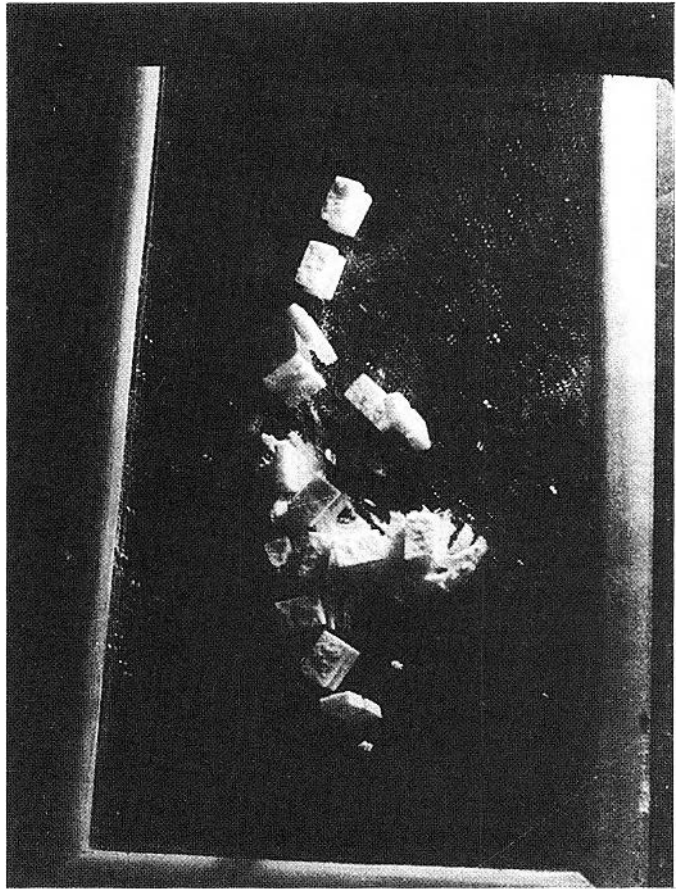
According to writers like Millet, and he was far from being alone, in a time of international political crises and continent-wide instability, France's passivity and congeniality were inadequate and anachronistic measures. Tough action would have to be introduced to counter this unseen threat and by March 1939, one could even read in the relatively conservative *Le Temps*, in an article calling for tighter immigration policy, that current conditions forced the question of foreigners in France to be approached from the angle of internal security and national defense, and that "notre libéralisme parfois exagéré doit céder le pas à notre sécurité."²⁰ In April the Chamber passed laws designed to strictly control foreigners and their organizations, be they artistic, cultural, philanthropic, or athletic, citing that they were often not what they seemed, and that "on constate, depuis quelques temps, que certains de ces groupements exercent une activité autre que celle pour laquelle ils avaient été constitués."²¹

Wols, as a German exile in Paris, found himself in the midst of what was rapidly becoming a no man's land. He had to regularly report to the prefecture of police, keeping them posted of his activities and the location of his lodgings. Despite the odds, he still managed to land a job as photographer attached to the Pavillon d'élégance, a pavilion exhibiting French high fashion at the 1937 Exposition universelle. From these years his artistic production seems predominantly photographic. In his commercial work, for example that which he executed for the Pavillon d'élégance, he made use of the abstracted, dismembered, and sexualized body of Surrealism, entirely appropriate in light of the fact that the movement had

become a particularly commodifiable and commercialized aesthetic by 1937, especially in the fashion industry. In contrast, his personal work adopted some distance from the surrealist mode in favor of a program designed more to disgust than play with a viewer's desire, or even to club a viewer over the head through the sheer banality of subject matter. For example he produced photographs of singular undramatic objects, such as a kidney, a skinned rabbit, sugar cubes (fig. 3), even a flower in a toilet bowl — perhaps a wry comment on what Surrealism had done with human sexuality. He also worked on views of the streets of Paris and direct unembellished self-portraits and portraits of friends and associates, such as the members of the left street theater group October, the proletarian poet Jacques Prévert, and even Max Ernst. Wols had seen the failure of the modernist avant-garde in Surrealism, it seems, and the incorporation of its aestheticized shock aspect into the world of middle class fashion. Perhaps he was choosing in his personal work to strip the fraudulent formal embellishments and the sexualized body of the movement away in an almost painful overemphasis on some kind of documentary fact with the photographic medium. Soon the freedom to move through the spaces of the city with a camera, even the freedom to have a camera, would be denied Wols, and he would be pushed to pencil and paper in search of representational forms that would allow him to come to terms with the perceived impossibility and futility of taking part in culture at all. The isolated singular objects in his photographs, imprisoned by the heavy darkness and the edges of the negative, could stand as metaphors for Wols himself: isolated and alone, slowly and surely being locked up in a prison as tight and claustrophobic as the photographic space he had created.

In September 1939, with the outbreak of war, Wols was immediately arrested and interned because of his German nationality, regardless of the fact that he harbored anti-fascist sentiments.²² Until early 1941, when he was released by the victorious Germans, he spent time in four different disciplinary camps. In the absence of Wols' own voice on these matters, Arthur Koestler provides a vivid account of this moment in French history in *Scum of the Earth*.²³ Koestler calls up the psychologically and physically brutal and degrading process enforced on foreigners in France at this time, and details the maneuvers of the right against any taint of radicalism in the ranks of foreign workers and intellectuals. With the outbreak of the war, France found itself living under the "Loi des suspects," which granted the police virtually unlimited power over the individual. The Sureté nationale, the Deuxième bureau, and the préfectures of police were dominated by men of the right, that is, individuals associated with the fascist Parti populaire français (P.P.F.), Colonel de la Roque's Parti sociale français (P.S.F.), or the royalist Action française. Koestler hints at a silent pogrom being carried out against the left as pro-Bonnet groups in the Sureté—Bonnet was then Minister of Foreign Affairs, in charge of immigration and openly linked to the Action française—were trying to get rid of the anti-Munich camp and keep Spain out of the war. Rumors were circulating that Marshal Pétain had made a promise to then Franco

Figure 3. Untitled, black and white photograph, ca 1938/1939 (Wols 1993/VIS*ART Copyright Inc.).



Foreign Minister Lequerica that all foreigners in France who had supported or fought with the International Brigade would be interned for the duration of the war.²⁴ If this was the case, Koestler would certainly have been on the Spanish blacklist for spending one hundred days under sentence of death in one of Franco's jails, as would Wols, due to his incarceration in Barcelona for moral and political transgressions.²⁵

In the late thirties a combination of the collapse of democratic reforms, the rise of the right, and the approaching possibility of war were pushing the intellectual and artistic life of France into a coma. The nation was embarrassed by its parliamentary government, as Denis Hollier has written, and "had been deserted by current events." The entire culture felt captive, and there was no longer the desire to speak on its behalf for no one was listening.²⁶ Artistic and literary production of the period was riddled by motifs of the depersonalization of the consciousness — Bataille wrote works under a pseudonym and never even bothered to publish, and Wols took his pseudonym at the same time, in a move specifically designed to render himself invisible. He became a tunnel, and a microbe.²⁷ Such an erasure, the absence and presence of the author at the same time, this self mutilation or decentering of the subject was picked up by Jean-Paul Sartre as well, who employed the metaphor of the actor

for the age. As he wrote, whenever this “consciousness without a person” spoke in the first person, the voice was always someone else’s.²⁸ A moment that had led to Bataille’s theorization of a politics of the impossible had also led to the impossibility of politics in France. The Chamber in 1940, after the fall of Finland to the Soviets, called for the resignation of Daladier. His resignation was not effected by a majority vote against him, but by abstention — the Chamber simply did not vote; it could not, as political decision making had been paralyzed, and the Daladier government fell. Shortly thereafter, so did the entire country.

Yet, at the same time that events were enervating intellectuals and artists, they were also activating them. In the latter part of the thirties many disillusioned thinkers were attending the lectures on Hegel at the *École pratique des Hautes Études* by Stalinist Russian exile, Alexandre Kojève. In these lectures Kojève revived interest in the thought of the German philosopher in France, returning to his work its negativity, contradiction, and dialectical properties removed by its chief French translator, Cousin, around the mid 19th century.²⁹ Kojève lectured that for Hegel history was fundamentally tragic, it functioned through struggle and war, and that individuals had to conceive of the present time—the time of Stalin, Hitler, and the failure of popular democracy—as the conclusion of the process of history. For a figure like Bataille, in attendance at Kojève’s lectures, the major question that presented itself was how could it be possible, at the end of history, not to descend into the nothingness and lifelessness that such a termination entailed, and still retain his humanity? Kojève forced intellectuals to abandon any attempts to explain or rationalize the world. As Jean-Michel Besnier states: “À la veille de la guerre, nul n’aurait pu dire avec certitude si le siècle serait nietzschéen ou hégélien mais chacun savait du moins que la rupture avec les façons anciennes de penser était consommée.”³⁰ Bataille, through Nietzsche, ultimately chose to set himself against the “ruptured existence,” the “torn consciousness” of the Hegelian system, in the hope of discovering “under what circumstances the ‘unemployed negativity’ which the end of history forces him to be, will be recognized, and under what circumstances a need to act, which lacks a purpose, will be legitimated.”³¹ The answer to this question would form the basis of Bataille’s politics of the impossible.³²

The paradoxical embrace of both pessimistic fatalism, from Kojève’s theorizing of Hegel’s end of history and its subsequent “unemployed negativity,” and revolt, drawn from Nietzsche and his refusal of the subjugation of thought to any political system, led to an almost insurmountable impasse: “the unwillingness to submit what has been instituted to any recuperative dialectic.”³³ Nietzschean nihilism could relieve the misery of those who had sunk into hopelessness due to the contemporary European political situation, as it rejected utopian dreams of idealized future states in its acceptance of the current experiences of danger, adventure and war, and its absolute refusal of accommodation, restoration, conciliation, and reconciliation. Such a rejection and refusal was then to restore to the world its opacity by resisting rationality and by reviving a con-

quering and creative energy. In other words, the contemporary political situation of France in the late thirties could be experienced as liberating and euphoric.³⁴ It must be noted that Nietzschean nihilism and individualism could help make the current situation euphoric for some French intellectuals only, those who remained relatively free. Bataille could meet with a close community of intellectuals and exchange ideas, this group becoming known as the College of Sociology, and publish a journal, *Acéphale*, whose title was derived from the metaphor of the headless figure, illustrated by André Masson in each of its four issues. This figure represented, amongst other things, absolute freedom for Bataille, who claimed that human life was exhausted from serving as the head of, and the reason for, our universe, a role that condemned it to servitude. With the adoption of the acephalic figure Bataille could boast that “man has escaped from his head just as the condemned man has escaped from his prison.”³⁵ For Wols, there could be no such escape. Faced with similar disillusionment, he moved in the opposite direction. In fact, as will be shown shortly, while Bataille lost his head Wols grew two. The head was all Wols had left, and into his interior visions he retreated, abandoning as much as possible the compromised outside world. As a stateless person, as an “uninvited guest” on French soil, and soon to be a French political prisoner, the disorder of the times could only be experienced by Wols as narcotic, rather than euphoric. All he could do, and this became part of the construction of his artistic persona, was sleep and collect images from behind the lid of his right eye, which he would then sketch or write from his recumbent position in bed. In the late thirties and early forties even painting had become too ambitious and no longer served any useful purpose for Wols, as he stated in an aphorism at the time: “les mouvements des avant-bras et des bras pour peindre une toile/ c’est déjà de l’ambition et de la gymnastique, je ne veux pas.”³⁶

Since history had been declared finished and no longer an active process, and Nietzschean individualism had called for the complete refusal and rejection of any traditional form of political system and thought, how then could it still be possible to undertake some kind of political action? As Bataille saw it, the impossible was equivalent to heterogeneity, to the object, base matter that resisted any kind of appropriation. A politics of the impossible was then inextricably linked to spontaneous movements of the masses, manifested in unplanned uprisings, in the pure expenditure of energy at this heterogeneous base level. According to Besnier, this political strategy led to “the project of establishing a ‘popular philosophy’ which would be subversive insofar as it was motivated by a movement swelling up from the bottom.”³⁷ Ultimately, a politics of the impossible would reject anything that claimed to be completed, full, transparent, and necessary, and avow powerlessness as its central and controlling motif: it would be, in the words of Maurice Blanchot, “that in which we are no longer able to be able (ce en quoi nous ne pouvons plus pouvoir).”³⁸ The human being at the end of history, that political events of Europe in the latter part of the thirties were perceived to be leading to, unearthed in themselves “negativity which discovers itself to be useless.”³⁹ In other words, the species discov-

ered itself to be useless and, for some, being useless became a political activity.

Seen in this light the written and visual production of Wols from these years takes on a much greater complexity and resonance within a political and intellectual climate than it has previously been given. A self-portrait photograph exists from the early forties showing Wols seated on a step outside a building (fig. 4). On this photo Wols inscribed a large question mark in the center of his forehead. To the side he wrote the word “apatride,” meaning stateless, and above his head “vent,” literally meaning wind, but also carrying the figurative connotation of emptiness. Made into an empty shell, and severed from the structures that construct and allow identity, Wols was confronted by the same negativity that faced Bataille, and was led to express that this nothingness could become a resistant political activity. For example, he announces in an aphorism from the period:

pour résister efficacement dans ce
fourbi dégoûtant, j’ai commencé
à me laisser pousser la barbe
seule activité honnête
pendant ma courte vie⁴⁰

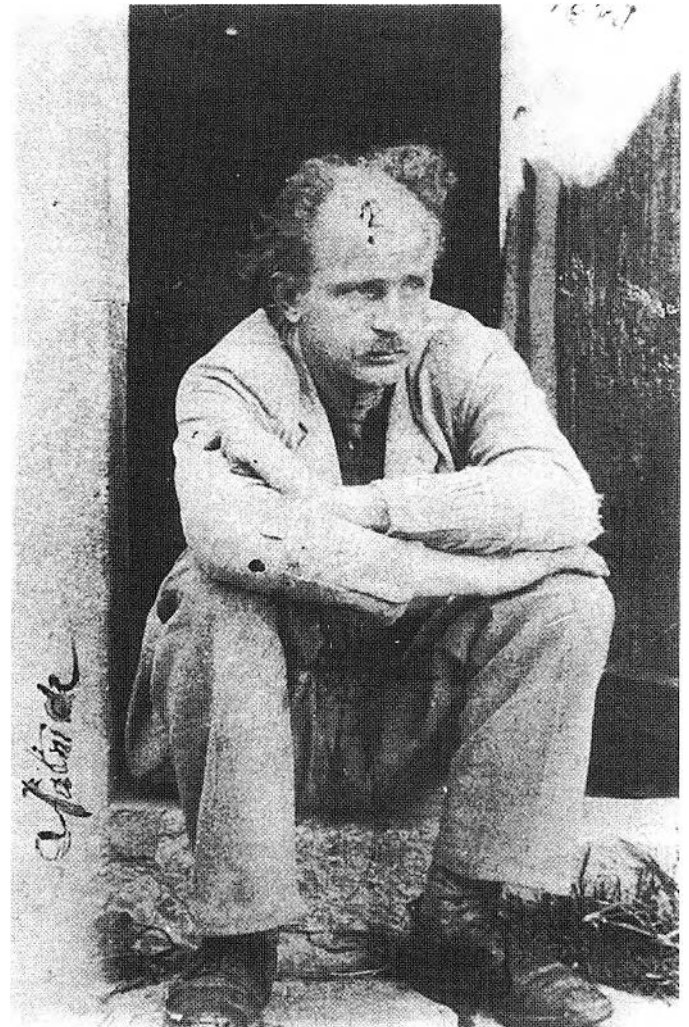
Natural bodily functions and processes, akin to spontaneous expenditures of energy from the base level, become both the only honest activities possible and the only effective means of resisting and opposing the symbolic order — the law of culture, politics, and ideology — that has succeeded in forcing a figure with circumstances like Wols into an increasingly claustrophobic and dysfunctional space. Natural biological function was the only thing that could resist being drawn into the construction of a subject through the pedagogical coercions of the social order: for Wols the growth of his beard became an intervention of the performative, an intervention that carved out difference and subjectivity, and therefore resistance. In so much, this single honest act was imbued with political significance.

That Wols rejected contemporary politics and the possibility of effecting any kind of structural or societal change through current systems of thought, and flatly acknowledged that the current historical crisis had reduced him to a state of unemployed negativity, was made even clearer in another aphorism:

vu politiquement je suis zéro = 0 je n’ai pas le sens
politique qui est si commun; je crois que la politique est
surestimée aujourd’hui. J’ai le sens pour le travail
et je suis contre la grande politique—
(pas toujours d’ailleurs)
la politique n’est presque jamais la chose qu’elle
apparaît être.
C’est très répandu de faire une sorte de sport
d’elle
(Moi), je trouve qu’il faut se tenir aux faits et aux résultats.⁴¹

Like Bataille, Wols opposed “la grande politique,” the great system in whose name it was no longer possible to speak. Rather than

Figure 4. *Apatride*, ca 1944, black and white self portrait photograph of Wols in Dieulefit, Glozer Archive (Wols 1993/VIS*ART Copyright Inc.).



attach any faith to political theories or to philosophical systems of thought, Wols claimed it was necessary to stick to what he called facts and results, and advocated the simple notion of “work” over the idealistic “great politics.”

As Wols stated in the previous aphorism, contemporary politics could no longer achieve facts and results. It had been made into a game, into sport, and, as it almost never was the thing which it appeared to be, it was false and fraudulent. Notions of fraud and authenticity show up in a few other aphorisms, and invariably systems of politics and culture as experienced in contemporary Europe were associated with fraud, whereas an authenticity equivalent with individual experience was understood to be revolutionary. For example, Wols made the simple equation that what was not anarchism was fraud, robbery, and the murder of the poor.⁴² An undated page from one of his sketchbooks (fig. 5) bears two portions of aphoristic text framing an automatic looking pen-and-ink scribble. Above this drawing Wols wrote:

depuis 1913 (MDCCCCXIII) tout le monde
me prouve que ni dans la vie, ni dans
les sciences, ni dans les couers [sic] ou les
cerveaux un progrès soit possible.

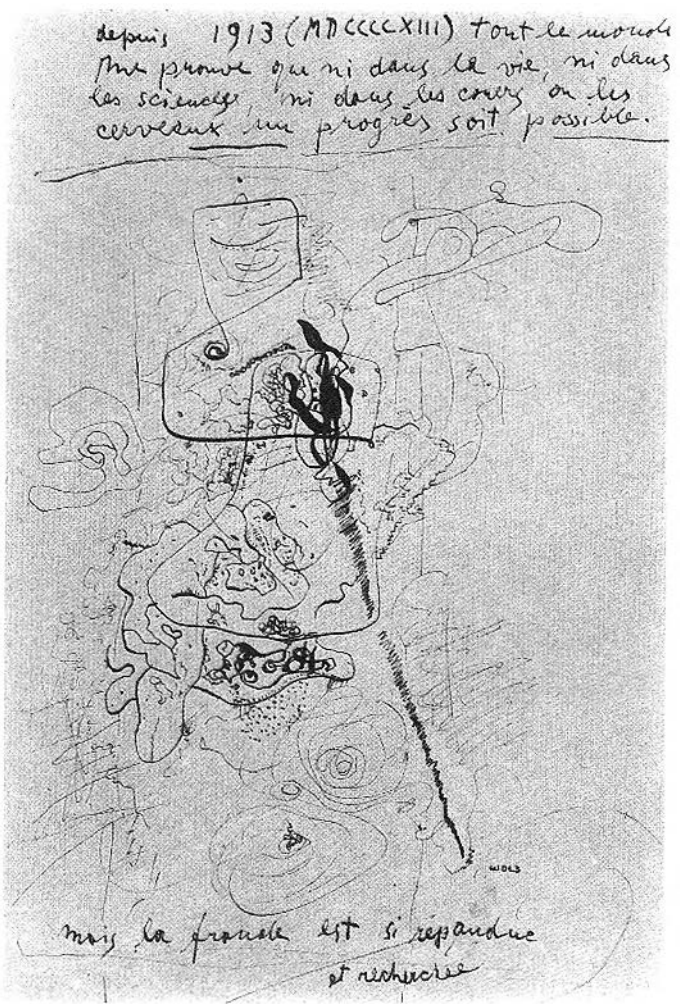
and below the image,

mais la fraude est si répandue
et recherchée.⁴³

In this image Wols expressed his disbelief that any progression and transformation of society was possible, as far as he had seen since 1913, the year of his birth. The idealistic belief that through the union of culture, or “life,” and the sciences, religion, or “hearts” as Wols wrote, as well as intellectual endeavors, the “brains” of men, society could somehow achieve the goals of modernity was a bogus claim. These notions, though, were still pervasive and enjoyed great faith, yet they were condemned by Wols as fraudulent and inauthentic. If all of these institutions that Wols cite were frauds, then where was authenticity to be found? For Wols it was in the drawing itself, in the scribble, a base, cathartic, individual act. Though similar formally, this drawing differed from surrealist automatism which sought the representation of the processes of the unconscious, an automatism that was at the same time both the liberation of unconscious desires and a universal spontaneous language common to all men. Automatism for the surrealists, and for Breton in particular, denied conscious individuality while liberating an anonymous form of universal expression.⁴⁴ Wols was already aware of the failure of the political project of surrealism, as mentioned earlier, and by his inclusion of this type of drawing with such a text, Wols implied that automatism was fraudulent, its claims for universality and the liberation of desires in aid of a political project were utopian and false. They operated only on a philosophical level, and had nothing to do with specific, individual lived experience, a critique similar to the one that Bataille would also level at the Surrealists.⁴⁵ For Wols this drawing was authentic due to the fact that it made no claims for either liberation or universality, its equation was “I draw, therefore this is a drawing,” a meaningless and insignificant scribble that in the end was representative of the individual and not the universal. But it was an authentic scribble, and therefore a radical political act for, as Wols implied, authenticity in a world of fraud was revolutionary.

All of Wols’ production was presumably to make up a part of a multimedia project which he began to theorize sometime after 1937. This *Circus Wols*, as he was to call it, would be comprised of three categories: thoughts gathered from the poetry and philosophy of others—Poe, Kafka, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Artaud, to name a few; thoughts culled from his own poetic experience, presumably the aphorisms; and finally visual and aural images, that is, drawings, photographs, film, sound, and music. Already by 1933, returning to France after the settlement of his father’s estate, Wols had intended on traveling from locale to locale, both rural and urban, in a car loaded with cameras and projection equipment, performing some kind of multimedia event, predating Popular Front

Figure 5. Drawing with autobiographical text, ca 1939/1940, 24.5 x 16.4 cm, private collection (Wols 1993/VIS*ART Copyright Inc.).



programs to circulate modernist art to the provinces. Yet it was more than likely in 1939, influenced by the downturn of events in his life, that Wols began to specifically adopt the image of the circus, as seen from his statement of 1940–1941: “Le principal manuscrit sur lequel j’avais travaillé pendant deux ans a pour titre *Circus Wols*.”⁴⁶ Wols was not alone or completely original in adopting the circus as part of his artistic program in the thirties. Alexander Calder, the American sculptor whom Wols had tutored in German, returned to Paris in 1937 after a four year absence and had been giving numerous performances of his mini-circus to groups of artists and intellectuals. Ferdinand Léger as well entertained a great interest in the circus as a popular form, drawing from it in the thirties, and later in his life culminating this interest with a lithographed book entitled “The Circus.” Furthermore, as the circus became increasingly commercialized and spectacularized across Europe at this time, it became an object of history itself, as several detailed and encompassing histories were published in the decade leading up to the war, for example Ramón Gómez de la Serna’s *Le Cirque* of 1927, Denys Amiel’s *Les Spectacles à travers les ages*, and Pierre Bost’s *Le*

Cirque et le music-hall, both of 1931.⁴⁷ For modernists like Calder and Léger, aware of Popular Front cultural policy, the circus was seen as an authentic form of cultural expression disappearing from the level of the popular classes, and something that needed to be saved.⁴⁸ This salvation was to be achieved by incorporating it into the protective and embalming realm of high art. Wols was, of course, linked to this larger revival of interest in the circus, but he shifted the discourse. For Wols the circus was not something to be saved by high art, but was, symbolically, the vehicle utilized in its destruction. The *Circus Wols*, at the end of history, was a celebration of the final and irrevocable destruction and dissolution of the narrow and compromised categories of high modernist culture, which, despite its grand claims, had done nothing to stem the tide of destructive events in Europe leading to another world war.

For Wols the utilization of the circus metaphor has to be seen on multiple levels. It was pessimistic, fatalistic, and ironic in that he saw his life and the contemporary political situation literally as a circus or a game.⁴⁹ The metaphor was also profoundly political, as out of the anarchy of the circus he drew his progressive and transformative representational visions, his own politics of the impossible. In describing the *Circus Wols* he wrote:

Pendant un an de concentration la nécessité m'est advenue de généraliser tous mes problèmes pour le but inconnu de ma vie; j'ai donc créé une hypothèse que j'appelle: *Circus Wols*. Je crois ce nom logique parce que le cirque contient toutes les possibilités d'être une centrale de mes occupations, même s'il ne sera jamais réalisé.⁵⁰

Wols conceived of this circus as a revolutionary multimedia spectacle designed to democratize certain forms of representation:

Ce travail est un manuel qui n'envisage pas seulement une nouvelle façon d'utiliser la technique mais qui se propose aussi d'établir une relation entre l'art en général, la science, la philosophie et l'existence humaine. Ce *Circus Wols* est une proposition pour réaliser d'une façon démocratique l'éducation du goût et de l'opinion publique, en popularisant les domaines qui jusqu'alors étaient réservés à certaines classes.⁵¹

Wols intended to bring the high down to the low, making no distinction between the two in an organized spectacular chaos, out of which one could politically educate and give aesthetic pleasure. Here Wols linked up with Bataille's desire to establish a popular philosophy catering to the heterogeneous masses. The condensed space of the circus could function as theater and classroom, and with Wols one cannot escape the impression that it was an anatomy theater where he, the head anatomist, could perform a *post mortem* on the corpse of European culture of the pre war years. For Wols this morbid operation orchestrated within the spectacular chaos of the circus could bizarrely function as a way of making sense out of reality, and resurrecting something constructive from the ruins of a post historic world.⁵²

The drawing entitled *Le cirque que j'adore* (fig. 2) depicts a scene

from some part of Wols' envisaged circus. The viewer sees both interior and exterior spaces simultaneously. Two inchoate biomorphs, life forms that seem to be evolving or continuously mutating as the performance progresses, dance for an audience, one inside the circus tent, the other outside in the "*Plein Aireeeeeee*," as Wols has written on the drawing. The dancing shape on the inside of the tent has the letters "*Vu*," meaning seen, or observed, inscribed upon its body, while to the left, above a camera-like device held by an almost human looking shape appears the word "*Son*," or sound. This is Wols' depiction of an imaginary process he referred to as the Hefiscope which, in a letter to his wife Grey, he described as "mon invention au sujet de la prise de vue et de la projection simultanément (Hefiscope)."⁵³ This simultaneous shooting of film and its projection would make the immediacy of experience of the spectacle available to a much greater audience. Wols has crushed and condensed categories and hierarchies of objects and experiences, from the audience that is not recognizably human to the performers that are not quite animal. The boundaries of objects and kinds of viewing are effaced, and the performance is viewed equally by an audience inside the arena as outside, as well as simultaneously by an audience of unknown quality and quantity by way of transmission through the Hefiscope, and by the viewer of the drawing. In the sky next to the mutating animal shapes floating to the ground attached to unusual parachutes is a wheel, something like a ferris wheel, made up of words. Rotating on this wheel can be made out the words "art," "drawing," "surrealism," "circus," "sciences," "conscience," "studio," "viscous circle," "Einstein," "Nietzsche," "method," "Polyscope," "sound," "color," "Bach," "kidney," "fleas," "vamp," "crook," "King Alcohol," and "Bacchus." Here Wols is proposing a circular and self contained popular philosophy.⁵⁴ In annotated form Wols articulated a dizzying and intoxicating stew of devices, methods, and objects associated with the *Circus Wols*: it comprised elements of both high and low, it derived from both elevated matter and from heterogeneous base matter. It was the intersection and fusion of these seemingly incompatible elements which prompted Wols' *Circus* into action, and allowed this ferris wheel to complete its revolution.

What Wols seemed to be advocating in drawings and aphorisms from the late thirties and early forties, in addition to his pessimism towards traditional modes of thought, politics, and cultural life, was a total dissolution of classical Western constructions of humankind. Wols was not alone with these thoughts at this time, of course, as others felt that the rejection of traditional political and philosophical concepts equaled the end of the concept of humanity. Kojève's annunciation of the end of history sentenced humanity to insignificance and repetition, wherein the only possibility left would be to perpetually rethink the historic process concluded and understood by the great sage, Hegel. In other words, to eternally reread the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In the Hegelian model mankind is defined by desire drawn from its animality, and this desire is only human because it bears desire for another human desire and engages history as a march towards universal recognition.⁵⁵

When history is finished, this process is also finished, and “l’Homme meurt et ne ressuscite pas.”⁵⁶ Influenced by Kojève’s reading of Hegel, Bataille would come to incorporate the notion of the acephalic man, ran through the thought of Nietzsche, to represent both the death of God and the death of the classical conception of humanity.⁵⁷ Bataille wrote in “The Sacred Conspiracy,” published in *Acéphale* in 1937: “It is time to abandon the world of the civilized and its light. It is too late to be reasonable and educated—which has led to a life without appeal. Secretly or not, it is necessary to become completely different, or to cease being.”⁵⁸ Bataille began in the late thirties and early forties to advocate the establishment of small secret societies and the revival of myth and ritual as a way of achieving this expressed transformation. The production of Wols, at the same time, can also be seen as striving to construct a completely different kind of social being. Many of his drawings depicted men and women of different nationalities in the process of changing into animal or cellular life forms, their skin color changing, their eyes, heads, and limbs mutating into different shapes, as in *Les hommes-singes* and *La foule* (fig. 6).

In aphorisms from the same period, Wols dreamed of a world without human beings populated by animals and insects. He claimed the fact that the white race had been able to produce a sage like Johann Sebastian Bach was a miracle, and, in general, expressed his embarrassment for being a member of the human race, “parmi tout ce qu’on trouve sur terre/l’homme est le plus gênant.”⁵⁹ Even Sartre would later write about Wols that “he could never get over belonging to the same species as the rest of us.”⁶⁰ The physical shell known as the human body was the object no longer capable of inducing change, no longer capable of inducing any kind of social transformation. Therefore, for Wols this body itself had to change. Wols’ solution was drastic indeed, and his representational system encompassed a transformative equation worked on the body of the species itself, in the hope of creating a new form of biological life as he had done in his aquarium as a young boy. Humanity was reanimalized at the end of history, reconnected to its animality and instinctual states in accord with the natural world. As Kojève had argued:

La disparition de l’Homme à la fin de l’Histoire n’est donc pas une catastrophe cosmique: le monde naturel reste ce qu’il est de toute éternité. Et ce n’est donc pas non plus une catastrophe biologique: l’Homme reste en vie en tant qu’animal qui est en accord avec la Nature ou l’être donné. Ce qui disparaît, c’est l’Homme proprement dit, c’est-à-dire l’action négatrice du donné et d’Erreur, ou en général le Sujet opposé à l’Objet. En fait, la fin du Temps humain ou de l’Histoire, c’est-à-dire l’anéantissement définitif de l’Homme proprement dit ou de l’Individu libre et historique, signifie tout simplement la cessation de l’Action au sens fort du terme.⁶¹

In this post-historic world, this “insignificance without name,” the species disappeared and with it history, that is wars, revolutions, and even philosophy. What would remain, according to

Figure 6. *La foule*, ca 1939/1940, pen and ink and yellow watercolor wash on brown rag paper, private collection (Wols 1993/VIS*ART Copyright Inc.).



Kojève, was everything that made man happy—art, love, and play. The new life form survived as human only in the activities that assured the satisfaction of desire in a manner irreducible to pure and simple animal consummation.⁶² Perhaps there was a different kind of desire delineated in the work of Wols than in that of the surrealists, not written across the bodies of women in the guise of unconscious liberating forces, but in the satisfaction of his new form’s desires through a process of reanimalization. With this in mind, Wols’ circus made perfect sense, as the metaphor for an ideal and original state that would logically come into being after history had been declared finished and with it the destruction of traditional hierarchies and categories of objects, institutions, and species. It was a way of acknowledging the end of history, as Wols himself stated, but refusing the self-destruction that such an acknowledgement entailed.⁶³ The spectacular and condensed space of the popular circus could become a world enlightened by art, love, and play.

The drawing now entitled *Janus portant l’aquarium* (fig. 1) articulates notions of rebirth, reconstruction, and reanimalization on many levels. Wols pushed the two-headed figure to the forefront of the drawing, imprisoned by a narrow claustrophobic space. In this narrow space float a few deformed and mutating animal shapes. The

two-faced Janus figure holds a hand suspended above an aquarium, as lines descend from his hand into the primal broth, conducting the current of a life force into a broiling genetic chowder. While Bataille's representation of a new human form lost its head and became the acephalic figure, Wols' grew two. This figure of Janus, which appeared in many of Wols' drawings from this period, derived from Roman mythology and was no doubt culled from the debris of his classical, liberal education as an upper class German bourgeois, and was a complex metaphor tying Wols' representational project to its historical moment. Janus, as the god of doors and gates, derived his name from a particular gate in the Forum that served no purpose, being not aligned with any wall. Wols' use of a classical figure associated with the Forum can only be seen in direct reference to both the circus and the prison. Legend has it that Janus was responsible for saving Rome from invasion and occupation by the Sabines, and therefore, in times of war his temple doors were kept open, and closed in times of peace. As the mythology developed, the Janus figure became representative of departures and returns, for he looks both ways, a god of beginnings, considered a promoter of human initiatives, god of all means of communication, and most important, given an essential role in the creation, or re-creation in our context, of the world.⁶⁴ Interestingly enough, with regards to the historical moment giving light to the thoughts of Bataille, Kojève, and Wols, in Ovid one can find Janus called Chaos at the time when the essential elements of life—air, fire, water, and earth—were a formless mass. With the separation of these elements Chaos took the form of Janus, his two faces representing the confusion of his original unformed state.

The figure of Janus was reactivated, his temple reopened, so to speak, by Wols as a deity linked to turbulent times and also as a metaphor for the ambivalent and marginal space he was forced into in the late thirties.⁶⁵ Janus looks both ways at once, forwards and backwards, and therefore could be a metaphor for the revolutionary and the reactionary, and could serve to advocate both political involvement and pessimistic fatalism. The figure of Janus could stand as the cipher for Wols' difficult mediation between the forces of national and social power and the intervention of his "otherness" manifested in the construction and positing of his representational project. Again Wols was not the only individual who felt like he was looking in two directions simultaneously at this time. Bataille's work of the late thirties was equally bi-directional, valuing political community over unknowable and intangible negativity, articulated in the work of the College of Sociology on one hand, and on the other hand *Acéphale*, advocating largely individual experience manifested beyond the constraints of any organized social group.⁶⁶ For Wols the condensed image and metaphor of his transformative system was bicephalic: he refused to lose his head because it was the only thing he had left that had not been completely compromised. Janus represented both the chaos of the historical moment and the return of human life and the world to an original unformed state, prior to the law of culture and the symbolic order. It was at the same time an act of rejection and engagement, a termination and a reproduction.

The circus is the perfect union of humanity and nature. In Wols' post-historic circus, the human species was reanimalized, and made subservient to natural processes. The human would no longer be master to the animal slaves, as both were to be fused into new anthropomorphic forms and new species. Wols' drawings, writings, and his intended project *Circus Wols* advocated this ultimate goal, a goal that was both baptism and funeral. The feeling cannot be shaken, though, that Wols derived some sort of satisfaction at being the ring-leader of a circus that was to bury Western culture permanently. In the late thirties and early forties history had been declared finished, and with it the death of traditional Western conceptions of humanity had been announced. In the post-historic world of Wols, humanity was reanimalized, reunited with its natural origins, and made content with the satisfaction of its desires. Surely this would have been the function of *Circus Wols*, a mobile spectacle that could travel and bring with it art, love, and play, the things that would make humanity happy. This circus was almost, but not quite, like the one Ramón Gómez described in his 1927 account of the circus: "le cirque est la vraie et pure diversion qui n'est que diversion. C'est la diversion par la diversion."⁶⁷ This diversion of Wols' was of great complexity and firmly embedded in a historical moment that forced many intellectuals and artists to somehow skirt their disillusionment and disappointment with contemporary culture, and keep articulating other possibilities for political action and thought. Wols the outsider, an artist in search of the progressive project of modernity, witnessed and felt its collapse acutely. The category of the circus stands as a metaphor for the figure of Wols himself in an unusually appropriate way in the late thirties and early forties, being an entity that exists within many cultures but belongs to none. Like a circus Wols always found himself on the fringes, a figure who sought the center of culture for his survival, but was forced to exist in the ambivalent spaces of its margins.

* This paper was written for a graduate seminar at the University of British Columbia under the direction of Serge Guilbaut. My thanks to him, for making me go to the blackboard with my argument, and to the other participants in the seminar for several rounds of input and criticism.

1 Titles and dates of Wols' work are approximate, and have been largely given to his work after his death in 1952 by close friends, collectors, and his wife Grety. The works looked at in this paper are all assumed to be from the period 1937–1941. The pseudonym Wols derives from this time period as well. Apparently, it comes from a garbled telegraph transmission to Wolf Schulze, the name he sometimes signed to his earlier works.

2 See Werner Haftmann, *Wols: Watercolors, Drawings, Writings*. (New York, 1965). Haftmann's reading of Wols is no doubt influenced by the way Wols was picked up by Jean-Paul Sartre after the war because he fit in with the philosophy of existentialism. Sartre's essay on Wols, "Fingers and Non Fingers," is included in Haftmann's book. Hereafter cited as *Haftmann*.

3 The critic was Ione Robinson in an interview with Wols done in 1947, and published as "Wols à bâtons rompus," *L'Oeil*, LX (December, 1959). My thanks to Kersten Orr for bringing this text to my attention.

4 Georges Bataille, cited in Jean-Michel Besnier, "Georges Bataille in the 1930's: A Politics of the Impossible," *Yale French Studies*, DXXVIII (1990), 169. Hereafter cited as *Yale*.

- 5 In particular I am thinking of the recent lectures given in Vancouver by the artist/writer Roy Arden who assumed that because there was no verifiable contact or clearly expressed written statements of any political inclination that Wols was not very concerned with politics. While acknowledging that any analysis of Wols' work must take into account his intentions for the project *Circus Wols*, Arden dismissed the *Aphorismes* as "corny Zen like kitsch" that merely claimed it was great to be poor and to suffer. This paper will take Wols' *Aphorismes* as seriously as his other production from the late thirties, for it is only in this totality that Wols' political project clearly comes into view.
- 6 Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Alan Stoekl, ed. (Minneapolis, 1985), 35-41. Hereafter cited as *Visions*. In "The Old Mole and the Prefix Sur in the Words Surhomme and Surrealist" (1929-1930), Bataille was using Marx's notion of the old mole as the expression of the complete satisfaction of the masses' revolutionary outbursts beginning in the bowels and the excrement of the earth, "the materialist bowels of the proletarians." The old mole revolution would carve out chambers in a decomposed earth matter offensive to the sensitive noses of the bourgeois utopians. One can only assume that Bataille was here referring to Breton and the Surrealists, whom he later addressed specifically in the same essay: "All of existence, conceived as purely literary by M. Breton, diverts him from the shabby, sinister or inspired events occurring all around him, from what constitutes the real decomposition of an immense world. Given the wrongs of the times, the confused and inert stupefaction of a bourgeois existence dedicated to nothing less than the mustiness of the balance sheet, the surrealists find no meaning in an ignoble rout save a pretext for tragic, headlong flight."
- 7 Sartre, "Fingers and Non Fingers," in Haftmann, 32. According to Sartre, Wols had copied a quotation from Maeterlinck which he carried around in his little black notebook referring to termites and how different they were from humans in that they had recourse to the waste products of their own digestive tracts. Sartre wrote further: "It could be said of them [termites] that they are a breed of transcendental chemists whose science has overcome every prejudice, every feeling of disgust, and who have attained the serene conviction that in nature nothing is repugnant, that all things come down to a few simple bodies, chemically indifferent and pure."
- 8 Homi K. Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation," *Nation and Narration* (London and New York, 1990), 1. Hereafter cited as *Nation*. This text and the essays included in it—Bhabha wrote the introduction as well as the final essay in the volume—represent, as he says, "a range of readings that engaged the insights of poststructuralist theories of narrative knowledge—textuality, discourse, enunciation, écriture, 'the unconscious as a language' to name only a few strategies—in order to evoke this ambivalent margin of the nation space. To reveal such a margin is, in the first instance, to contest claims to cultural supremacy, whether these are made from the 'old' post-imperialist metropolitan nations, or on behalf of the 'new' independent nations of the periphery"(4).
- 9 Bhabha, "DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation," in *Nation*, 297. "The subject of cultural discourse—the agency of a people—is split in the discursive ambivalence that emerges in the contestation of narrative authority between the pedagogical and the performative" (299). No doubt Bhabha here is working with notions of the divided subject drawn from readings of Lacan, and the articulations Lacan establishes in his concept of the symbolic order. Lacan's "subject" is constructed at the moment of accession to language and the social order, a construction defined by a set of relationships held in tension between the symbolic and the imaginary. As Paul Smith has written: "Subjectivity is always a product of the symbolic in an instance of discourse; thus, Lacan leaves room for a consideration of subjectivity as contradictory, as structured in divisions and thus as never the solidified effect of discursive or ideological pressures." See Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis, 1988), 22.
- 10 Bhabha, *Nation*, 4.
- 11 This biographical material is drawn from a resume and covering letter that Wols wrote in 1940-1941 just after being released from a French concentration camp, when he was trying to get a sponsor to emigrate to the United States. These documents reproduced in Wols, *Aphorismes* (Amiens, 1989). Other information is culled from various books and exhibition catalogues, such as Haftmann, which contains many personal anecdotes by his wife Grety and friends Henri-Pierre Roché and Jean-Paul Sartre, and the Marc Johannes essay in the catalogue to the exhibition *Wols: Dessins, Aquarelles, Peintures* (Galerie Beaubourg, 1974). Also of great interest is the casual interview conducted by Ione Robinson in 1947.
- 12 Cited in Jean Charles Bonnet, *Les Pouvoirs publics français et l'immigration dans l'entre deux Guerres* (Lyon, 1976), 311. ("Three million foreigners in France! The equivalent of a nation numerically larger than Norway, and almost as large as Switzerland, and practically no administration for ordering this enormous mass that has installed itself without direction inside our frontiers.")
- 13 Cited in Bonnet, 311. ("this national disorder issuing from our struggling intestines.")
- 14 Bonnet, 324, and see also Catherine Withol de Wenden, *Les Immigrés et la politique: cent cinquante ans d'évolution* (Paris, 1988), 67.
- 15 Withol de Wenden, 67. For a good, in-depth analysis of the Popular Front and the labor movement see Jacques Danos and Marcel Gibelin, *June '36: Class Struggle and the Popular Front in France* (London, 1986).
- 16 Withol de Wenden, 68.
- 17 Cited in Bonnet, 317. ("Social progress in a country has, as a paradoxical consequence, the tendency to close the frontiers to both men and products.")
- 18 Withol de Wenden, 70.
- 19 Cited in Bonnet, 349. ("Our people begin to consider with suspicion, in these days of economic crisis, this group of unassimilable foreigners who live amongst themselves, marry amongst themselves, have their own religion, priests, newspapers, and customs, but solicit and often receive political asylum.")
- 20 *Le Temps* (March 26, 1939), 1. ("our sometimes exaggerated liberalism must cede precedence to our security.")
- 21 Cited in Bonnet, 369. ("it can be proved that for some time, some of these groups have exercised an activity other than that for which they had been constituted.")
- 22 In the interview conducted by Robinson in 1947, Wols expresses these sentiments and states that the defeat of Germany did not erase from the earth the evil that fascism had spawned: "Aujourd'hui notre Monde est le Mal. Le Mal est en quelque sorte devenu l'unique expression universelle de notre temps. Je suis Allemand; j'ai vu le mal commencer en Allemagne. Je l'ai fui en 1935. Il n'est rien sorti de bon de cette guerre contre le mal hitlérien. Le globe tout entier se corrompt peu à peu de la même sorte de dépravation, de calamités et de tristesse qui existait en Allemagne hitlérienne."
- 23 See Arthur Koestler, *Scum of the Earth* (London, 1941). Koestler published this account in England in 1941 after being released from the disciplinary camp Le Vernet. As far as I have been able to tell, this is the only account of a period largely written out of French history, the systematic purge of left intellectuals and activists, their imprisonment, and the handing over of the camps and their prisoners to the Gestapo after the fall of France. There are similarities and differences, of course, between Wols and Koestler: both were kept for up to a week in the crowded stadiums Roland-Garros and the Stade de Colombes, but the latter was a celebrity who had international connections to keep him informed and eventually get him released. For Wols, voiceless and invisible, the experience must have been more frustrating and acute.
- 24 Koestler, 33-43.
- 25 Through Koestler we also can see how the campaign against the uninvited guests was used to whip up nationalistic fervor and instill in a public both fear of the "other" and approval of the harsh program. Koestler, arrested in a large sweep on the night of October 2, 1939 describes how the next mornings pa-

- pers printed an official communiqué from the Ministry of Information explaining that the "crowd of aliens which had been rounded up in the last two days by 'our vigilant police' represented the most dangerous elements of the Paris underworld" (89). Indeed, in the Roland-Garros Stadium there were three divisions of prisoners: Koestler's, comprised of individuals from twenty three different nations, a German section, and a group comprised of entirely French criminals. This latter group contained all the elements of the Parisian underworld in the Roland-Garros Stadium, and this group even attempted a mutiny requiring the use of force to be suppressed. Again, the next day the press, including the liberal *L'Oeuvre* and the socialist *Populaire*, reported the official government version of the event in that it had been the foreign element who had attempted the mutiny, and since the internment of the foreigners in the Roland-Garros Stadium a marked drop in the number of robberies and violent crimes had occurred.
- 26 Denis Hollier, *The College of Sociology 1937–1939* (Minneapolis, 1988), ix.
- 27 See Robinson, 96, and also Serge Guilbaut's essay "Post War Painting Games: The Rough and the Slick," in *Reconstructing Modernism. Art in New York, Paris, and Montréal*, Serge Guilbaut ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 52.
- 28 Hollier, xxi.
- 29 Elizabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan and Co. A History of Psychoanalysis in France* (Chicago, 1990), 137–140. On Kojève also see Besnier, *Yale*, 173, and Besnier's larger study, *La Politique de l'impossible: l'intellectuel entre révolte et engagement* (Paris, 1988). Hereafter cited as *La Politique*.
- 30 Besnier, *La Politique*, 41. "On the eve of the war no one would have been able to say with certainty if the age would be Nietzschean or Hegelian, but everyone knew at least that the rupture with ancient modes of thought had been consummated."
- 31 Besnier, *Yale*, 175.
- 32 Bataille did not specifically use the term until 1962, in a letter to Jérôme Lindon dated 9 January 1962. He wrote, "La politique de l'impossible est la meilleure voie pour découvrir la politique du possible." Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1970–1988), III, 521.
- 33 Besnier, *Yale*, 175.
- 34 Besnier, *La Politique*, 27.
- 35 Bataille, "The Sacred Conspiracy," in *Visions*, 181.
- 36 Wols, 29. ("the arm and forearm movements for oil painting/they're too ambitious, too much like gymnastics and not for me.")
- 37 Besnier, *Yale*, 177.
- 38 Blanchot, cited in Besnier, *Yale*, 179.
- 39 Besnier, *Yale*, 179.
- 40 Wols, 17. ("In order to effectively resist in this disgusting mess, I've begun to let my beard grow; the only honest activity during my short life.")
- 41 Wols, 19. ("Seen politically I am zero(nothing) = 0 I don't have the political sense which is so common; I believe that politics is overestimated today. I have the sense for work and I am against the great politics—(not always anyway) politics is almost never the thing that it appears to be. It is very widespread to make a kind of game of it (Me) I find that it is necessary to stick to facts and results.")
- 42 Wols, 64. The full section at the beginning of the aphorism reads: "ce qui n'est pas de l'anarchisme/ c'est le vol, l'assassinat des pauvres/c'est la fraude = la guerre/la dynamite."
- 43 This page is reproduced in the exhibition catalogue for the comprehensive show in the winter and spring of 1990 entitled *Wols* (Kunsthau Zürich and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 1990). ("Since 1913 the whole world has proved to me that neither in life, nor in the sciences, nor in the hearts or brains is progress possible, but the fraud is widespread and greatly sought after.")
- 44 As Elizabeth Roudinesco has written, "automatism for the Surrealists appeared as an instrument of the decentering or destabilization of the subject, who no longer recognized himself with any self certainty." Roudinesco, 26.
- 45 Roudinesco, 26. Bataille critiqued Surrealism because the automatism it advocated was to function philosophically, as though consciousness had disappeared. For Breton automatism referred to an idea of the subconscious existing prior to the Freudian unconscious. It effaced the notion (Cartesian) that language was the property of a thinking subject only. Through automatism, poetry could become language itself, objectivized as a form of being.
- 46 Wols, 9.
- 47 This phenomena was not exclusive to France, with several histories being published in the United States, for example E.C. May's *The Circus from Rome to Ringling* (New York, 1931) and I.K. Pond's *Big Top Rhythms* (New York, 1937), and Germany, with Paul Eipper's *Zirkus* (Berlin, 1930).
- 48 See Lipman and Foote, eds., *Calder's Circus* (New York, 1972), Calder, *Calder: an autobiography with pictures* (New York, 1966) 103–107, and 158–162. See also Léger's *Circus* (The South Bank Centre, 1988). Léger was involved with the design of a large backdrop for the circus-like spectacle in 1937 of Jean Richard Bloch's "Birth of a City" at the Vélodrome d'Hiver in Paris, sponsored by the Popular Front government. In the introductory essay to the exhibition of Léger's *Circus* at the Southbank Centre, Peter de Francia claims that "Léger was however unique in using the circus theme as a model for the manner in which a public spectacle could contribute to social well being." If this is the case, then Wols is surely the only artist who employs the theme in commenting on the end of culture and the impossibility of social well being. Having seen the failure of the Popular Front and cultural forms in achieving any social progress, the *Circus* Wols becomes an inevitable approach for Wols.
- 49 See, for example, Robinson, 72, where Wols states to the interviewer: "La Chambre des Députés, le Parlement britannique, le Kremlin, et votre Congrès américain, sont du cirque. Dans la vie, chacun se fait son propre cirque."
- 50 Wols, 7. ("During a year of internment the necessity of generalizing all of my problems for the unknown goal of my life occurred to me; I therefore created an hypothesis that I call: *Circus Wols*. I believe this name to be logical because the circus contains all the possibilities of being a center for my pursuits, even if it will never be realized.")
- 51 Wols, 9. ("This work is a handbook that does not only envisage a new method of using technique but which also proposes to establish a relationship between art in general, science, philosophy, and human existence. This *Circus Wols* is a proposition for realizing in a democratic fashion the education of taste and public opinion, while popularizing domains which, up to now, have been reserved for certain classes.")
- 52 This is greatly akin to the manner of approaching reality that Bataille culled from Nietzsche at the same historic moment, compelling him to approach the world from the point of view of chaos, a viewpoint that would allow one to make light of a reality that continually resisted the grasp of men. See Besnier, *La Politique*, 123.
- 53 Part of this letter is reproduced in the 1990 Wols exhibition catalogue from the Kunsthau Zürich and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen.
- 54 Paul Bouissac, *Circus and Culture: A Semiotic Approach* (Bloomington, 1976). Bouissac has written that "a circus performance tends to represent the totality of our popular system of the world" (7). In this book Paul Bouissac makes the interesting observation that the circus manipulates a cultural system in such a way that an audience is presented with "a demonstration of humanity freed from the constraints of the culture within which the performance takes place" (8). This kind of liberation allows the circus to transgress cultural norms and forms, producing an ambivalent response tied to the poles of repression and fascination: an enthusiasm produced by contact with the freedom from culture, and fear that the potential subversive aspect of the circus may be generalized.

- 55 Roudinesco, 140. History, incidentally, would therefore be the history of desired desires.
- 56 Kojève, cited in Besnier, *La Politique*, 71-72.
- 57 See Alan Stoekl introduction, *Visions*, xx.
- 58 Bataille, *Visions*, 179.
- 59 Wols, 13, 55, and 57.
- 60 Sartre, in Haftmann, 30.
- 61 Kojève, cited in Besnier, *La Politique*, 78. ("The disappearance of Man at the end of History is not, however, a cosmic catastrophe: the natural world remains what it is and has been for all eternity. And it is not any more a biological catastrophe: Man remains alive as an animal that is in accord with Nature or the essential Being. What disappears is Man properly so called, meaning the definitive destruction of so called Man or the free and historic individual, signifying quite simply the cessation of Action in the strongest sense of the word.")
- 62 Besnier, *La Politique*, 82. Incidentally, it is against this view that Bataille would come to revolt, showing much later in *l'Érotisme* (Paris, 1957) that love and play are in no way evidence of a humanity reconciled with itself.
- 63 See Robinson, 72. Asked by Ione Robinson whether he thought the end of an era was upon them, Wols responded by stating that even if it were true, which it was, it was too dangerous to acknowledge it. Recognizing the end of history would allow negativity and lifelessness to take hold, and "vous vous détruisez vous-même," as Wols stated. Though their discussion was tempered by thoughts of the recent nuclear holocaust, the recognition/disavowal of the end of history had been central to Wols' work since the late thirties.
- 64 Stewart Perowne, *Roman Mythology* (London, 1969), 21.
- 65 Wols may even have been picking up on the Janus figure in symbolic opposition to the appropriation of Greek culture by fascism, as Janus is a Roman God that has no equivalent in the Greek pantheon.
- 66 Stoekl, *Visions*, xxii.
- 67 Ramon Gómez de la Serna, *Le Cirque: première chronique officielle du Cirque* (Paris, 1927), 12. "the circus is true and pure diversion which is only diversion. It is diversion for the sake of diversion."