Wols: Retrospective is curated by Toby Kamps with Dr. Ewald Rathke. This exhibition is generously supported by the National Endowment for the Arts; Anne and Bill Stewart; Louisa Stude Sarofim; Nina and Michael Zilkha; Skadden, Arps; and the City of Houston.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS
Panel Discussion
Thursday, September 12, 2013, 6:00 p.m.
Following introductory remarks by Frankfurt-based scholar Dr. Ewald Rathke, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art Toby Kamps is joined by art historians Patrycja de Bieberstein Ilgner, Archivist at the Karin and Uwe Holleweg Foundation, Bremen, Germany; and Katy Siegel, Professor of Art History at Hunter College, New York, and Chief Curator of the school’s galleries, in a discussion of Wols’s work.

BOOK
WOLS: Retrospective
Texts by Ewald Rathke, Toby Kamps, Patrycja de Bieberstein Ilgner, and Katy Siegel
300 pp., 266 illus.
Hardcover $65
Available at the Menil Bookstore

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Photo: Paul Hester

The Menil Collection, Houston.

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WOLS, Untitled (Chicken and egg), 1938 or 1939, printed 1976. Gelatin silver print, 8¾ x 5⅞ inches (22.2 x 15.3 cm). The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Photo: Bill Estes/Maximages, Los Angeles.

A tiny sheet of paper can contain the world.

—Wols¹

D uring his short, star-crossed life, German artist Wols created a spectacular body of paintings, drawings, watercolors, gouaches, photographs, and engravings that flow freely and inventively between representation and abstraction, raw, mysterious, and heedless of aesthetic niceties. Wols’s ever-evolving images earned him a reputation as the prime progenitor of art informel, or “formless art,” a term coined by critic Michel Tapié to describe new developments in nonobjective painting in Europe in the mid-twentieth century. Yet today he is woefully under-recognized, particularly in the United States, where his accomplishments and those of his like-minded French successors have been overshadowed by related experiments by Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Tobey.

Michel Tapié’s description of Wols’s ever-evolving images earned him a reputation as the prime progenitor of art informel, or “formless art,” a term coined by critic Michel Tapié to describe new developments in nonobjective painting in Europe in the mid-twentieth century. Yet today he is woefully under-recognized, particularly in the United States, where his accomplishments and those of his like-minded French successors have been overshadowed by related experiments by Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Tobey. Wols was, however, one of Dominique de Menil’s favorite artists, a figure she described as having a “total disregard of ‘society,’ ‘rules,’ ‘law.’ He was the absolute rebel who does not even care about rebellion.”² Because of this passion, the Menil Collection possesses perhaps the most wide-ranging, if not the largest, public collection of the artist’s works. So it is fitting that the museum has co-organized this exhibition, the first comprehensive retrospective of Wols’s work in an American museum, introducing this inspiring artist to a new audience.

Wols: Retrospective
The Menil Collection
September 13, 2013–January 12, 2014

In 1946 and 1947, Wols made the first of two groups of approximately forty oil paintings. Previously, the artist had dismissed the medium, saying, “The arm and forsaken movements in oil painting are so ambitious, like gymnastics. That’s not for me.” But when his dealer gave him paint and canvases, he did not hesitate, tackling the challenge in what the critic described as a “female fury of creativity.” The resulting paintings are abstract, with heavy impasto and tentacle-like drips emanating from a central mass, suggesting otherworldly flowers or violent eruptions. When Wols’s first canvases were exhibited at Galerie Drouin in Paris in May 1947, they were a critical success. The influential painter and writer Georges Mathieu was enthralled.

Forty masterpieces! Each more shattering, more thrilling, more wounding than the others: a great event, surely the most important since Van Gogh, I walked out of the exhibition utterly shaken. Wols had destroyed everything. After Wols’s everything has to be done over from scratch…

In Europe, as in the United States, the late 1940s saw a strong desire for a fresh cultural start after the terrors of World War II. In painting, conditions on both continents were right for new forms of gestural abstraction—one that accounted for the turmoil of the time and a new, existentialist understanding of the individual. In Paris, it was called by Wols, and within a few years the term and informed the names of the artists associated with it, including Jean Dubuffet, Pierre Soulages, and Georges Mathieu, would become part of common art-world parlance.

By 1951, Wols’s second round of oil paintings, made between 1949 and 1951, are generally larger, more “arm-driven,” and more gestural. They exist in a delirious spectrum, from the theriomorphic brushwork and canvases, he did not hesitate, tackling the challenge in what his wife described as an “inward art. As his friend and writer Henri-Pierre Roché recounted, ‘Before he started a picture, he would close his eyes and wait. What he was going to paint, he used to say, accumulated gradually under his right eyelid.’” At great cost, Wols worked to make himself as inscrutable as the entire range of forces shaping consciousness and the world. Perhaps the last word on Wols’s oeuvre, alternately agile and playful or crabbed and hermetic, belongs to the artist himself. His goal, as he alluded in an undated aphorism, was not to illustrate a primal life force but to conjure it on his own terms.

The image may be related to nature as a Bach fugue is to Christ in which case not a second copy but an analogous creation.

Text adapted from Toby Kamps’s essay in the accompanying publication

Notes
2. Translated by the author.