

XAWERY WOLSKI

Curatorial Texts

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XAWERY WOLSKI. PLACE AND FORM AS ACTIVE STRUCTURES

ANNA MARIA LESNIEWSKA, 2022.

A large part of our spiritual space, of how we interact with the world and other people, is informed by stereotypes—spontaneously forming quasi-empirical generalizations that—once they've become entrenched—are nearly impossible to correct with subsequent impartial experiences. A stereotype can hold us in its grip for a long time because it ensures the stability of our position that we live in a state of constant sensitivity that sets our mind in a mode of endless investigations, which can be noticed in art, for example. In analyses of the work of Xawery Wolski, the *Infinity Chains* series, i.e., the chains which the artist started in the 1980s, and continues with to this day, have usually been discussed by way of syllogism in a socio-political context, a practice that effectively reduces his oeuvre to a single—and not really dominant—trope.

Today various motifs are recognized in this body of work, informed by the material, situational, and cultural contexts that have been presented in the solo show at Orońsko. This exhibition is a natural recapitulation of the long-standing and multifaceted oeuvre. Unexpectedly, it may conclude various surprises that make sense only by way of a distanced view.

Owing to a number of coincidences that materialized in Poland after 1989, with the socio-political system in flux, Wolski's family succeeded in reclaiming a confiscated estate, which eventually led to Wolski, also many years later, creating an art place where his identity had formed, where his mental and material heritage had their roots. This place is Dańków, which should be looked at as a palimpsest, filled with the past and *being* filled with the artist's constantly recorded activity. In creating an open-air art gallery, Wolski proposed a "self-turn," employing self-analysis to encourage, in himself and others, reflection in natural surroundings, where form functions in constant negotiation of its relations with the place's physical and symbolic spaces, seeking to integrate the sculptures with the environment. The context of the place as well as the context of viewing comes from the experience of the artworks according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who stressed that objects are never self-sufficient because we always see them from inside our bodies. Producing a new situation, one that can be taken in and admired quietly, Wolski causes us to intuitively sense the place's spiritual harmony. This gentle gazing serves contemplation. Wolski returns to sensations, to more originary, immediate, pre-textual knowledge. The choice of an outlying, non-central place became a step towards the presentation of his own work, which fit in with the "ethnographic turn," something that Hal Foster wrote about as early as the 1990s.¹ Although this "ethnographicness" was rooted in a PLACE here, the move outside, towards a different and peripheral social world, contributed to finding there the forces of revolt, resistance, and subversion that superimposed themselves on the processes, shared by the Wolski family; of agrarian-culture emancipation. It is precisely here that the practice of engaging with non-mainstream, non-art worlds, where artistic work takes on a particular significance, is developed. As Foster suggests, the artist works like an ethnographer, among subjugated groups, in places of social tension, experiencing a self-othering. Through his artistic presence, Wolski revived a sense of connection with the place and its tradition. But the return took place on different terms, something that Joseph Kosuth noted as early as the 1970s—artists naturally enter the role of militant, committed subjects, operating in opposition to the inherited cultural forms in which they live their lives and which they are dependent on.²

At the same time, a different situation appears, that of a *home*, but also a gallery/museum, where no mementos of the owners' one-time presence have survived, but this presence can be attested to by the artist's memory, his family's, and the local community's. Creating anew a home-gallery-museum, Wolski shows a point of junction of different conceptual fields, with marks of the past, where the preserved historical material substance remained in ruin, including the house itself, mutilated like the other buildings. Now it has become a lively place, where Wolski's art collections fill the interiors, fulfilling the idea of the "living home" on which the artist's personality has left its stamp. Mario Praz called them mirrors of the soul, reflecting his interests and tastes, knowledge, social and material status; and also, to some extent, his dimensions, the shape or mechanics of his body.³ What emerges is the image of a man for whom interiors and furnishings are a means of satisfying the needs of belonging, aesthetics, security and so on. This place is not a contemporary projection of a "*theatrum* of the past,"⁴ but a true, genuine home, where art from different parts of the world has been gathered, becoming part of Wolski's own practice, creating a space for values, and lending the place a wholly new dimension. Hans-Georg

¹ Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer?", in *The Traffic in Culture. Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

² Joseph Kosuth, "Artist as Anthropologist", in *The Everyday, Documents of Contemporary Art*, edited by S. Johnstone (The MIT Press: Cambridge, 2006).

³ Mario Praz, "General considerations: Furniture", in *Encyclopedia of World Art*, vol. 5, (New York: Mc Graw-Hill, 1961), p. 688; quoted in Z. Dolczewski, "Przemiany wnętrza mieszkalnego", in *Dom w zwierciadle minionego czasu. Przestrzeń kulturowo-społeczna na przełomie XIX i XX wieku*, edited by Ryszard Gładkiewicz (Kłodzko: Muzeum Ziemi Kłodzkiej, 2001), p. 35.

⁴ Phrase used by Jerzy Świącimiński in *Muzea i wystawy muzealne*, vol. IV (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe DWN, 1996), p. 39.

Gadamer's notion of the experience of art, expressed in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* (1974),⁵ where an analogically indicated experience of the world is based on hermeneutical elements—understanding and interpretation—comes in very handy here. After Joanna Winnicka-Gburek, we can assume that the “home, like the artwork, is a place that calls for understanding, and whose success is determined by understanding.”⁶ The mutual relationship, noticed by Winnicka-Gburek, stemmed from a need to legitimate the concepts of both art and home, as well as from Gadamer's recognition of art as a “suitable standard serving potentially to reveal the properties of all processes of comprehension, and of the aesthetic experience—the art experience—as a model of an hermeneutical experience of reality”⁷ that conforms to the logic of the successive experiences of the persons present there.

The space of the home is open to the space of nature; in the home you live in the care of objects, the artworks, and a friendly host. Art is what mediates between home and nature, filling the successive spaces, including interiors that have been transformed into art zones. Among those is also the studio, where new works are produced. It is a conceptual “playground,” where the commensurable cubature of the work space becomes a relaxation for incommensurable forms.

In most cases, Wolski's works remain close to him (except those, of course, that have been permanently installed elsewhere, such as in Mexico City or Sopot), and they mature with him as well, condensing their physical and spiritual presence, domesticating, absorbing new contexts hiding between the layers of perception, from time to time leaving the gallery for an exhibition to then return and set a stabilizing tone for the surroundings. One can say that Wolski has become a collector of his own art, in the place where the act of creation occurs, as a result of which his own message has gained full credibility. Temporariness has become an attribute of recent art. Through the extraterritoriality of the place and its aesthetic aura, Wolski demonstrates a susceptibility to change, but also a profound respect for the legacy and memory of the past, retaining their material traces. As his bio shows, he travelled for many years as an artist in Europe and the Americas. Being stretched between rootedness and mobility, he has inscribed himself in a number of networks, functioning connections, that increasingly demonstrate the need to connect the idea of the home with the idea of good living, where art in Wolski's case includes him in the social space; thus reinterpreting the concepts of the spatial boundary between interior and exterior.

Becoming an object of social imagination, the home relates to new social and philosophical concepts, situating itself in the outside space, as suggested by Ewa Rewers, who seeks the idea of good home and good living in the modern social imagination.⁸ Rewers introduces three vectors of relational space: philosophy of rootedness, philosophy of language, and philosophy of action, which complement the propositions of Iñaki Ábalos (whose thought focused on the overlapping of lifestyles, philosophical concepts, and architectural forms). We can specifically define Wolski's place/gallery through the first of those, where “memory, nature, authenticity, patriarchal authority, nostalgia, anti-technologism, emotions are basic terms to describe the deep-rooted, localized culture of inhabitation whose diametrically different, negative version is the philosophy of uprootedness, Marc Augé's *non-place*, Gilles Deleuze's nomadic subject, and Zygmunt Bauman's liquid modernity.”⁹

In the space of the Dańków open gallery, Wolski's works function on the basis of Robert Smithson's concept of the site,¹⁰ understood as a form in landscape, consisting of elements that can be observed and experienced through senses other than sight alone, comprising the complete work with their specific location. Individual experience, the act of exploring the given site, and the artist's intentions together build the artwork's integrity. “Site-specific” is a complementary term, coined for works functioning in—and transforming—a specific space as a result of artistic intervention. Such works can be installed permanently, but their existence in a particular place can be temporary, something we can fully experience in Dańków.

Reflections on the art of Xawery Wolski, whatever the context, circumstances, or place of its making, possess a spiritual element, expressed in the primal feelings that it evokes. It does not stem from a traditionally conceived religiousness, but from being considered by the artist as a primary value, a horizon of his work. As a result, it finds meaning expressed in ever new works, formally different, but always informed by basic shapes. The viewer becomes a curator of another perspective: relying on their own intuition, on the one hand discovering an artistry of execution—always an indicator of technical proficiency—while on the other picking out a profound message. Spirituality is everyone's attribute, something that Wolski draws on, probably considering it the human

⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful. Art as Play, Symbol, and Festival”, in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, translated by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁶ Joanna Winnicka-Gburek, „Jeśli dom, to i 'gra', i 'symbol', i 'święto' z inspiracji 'Aktualnością piękna' H.G. Gadamera”, *Konteksty*, 2/3 (2010), p. 222.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁸ Ewa Rewers, „Dom w intelektualnym krajobrazie XX/XXI w. Od filozofii ku aktywizmowi”, *Konteksty* 2/3 (2010), pp. 41–45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁰ See Robert Smithson, “The Symposium,” in *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations*, edited by Nancy Holt (New York: University Press, 1979), p. 160.

being's fourth dimension, superior to the other ones; but the beginnings of his sculpture work can be traced back to an awareness of the multidimensionality of his own body.

Driven by an imperative to act, Wolski explores simple forms, such as the grain, the cross, the chain link, or body parts, for they hold interpretative potential on different levels, among which materiality has become particularly important. The artist does not fight it, does not wrestle with it, but rather tries very carefully to extract from it the origins of this materiality, i.e., to achieve the pre-forms of structure. He notices in it the "basic elements," drawing attention to the vitality and energy of matter. Still, he does not search for aesthetic alternatives to the beauty of nature, but actually relishes in the numerous sights of simple shapes, manifested in various materials. What does this mean? The works are arranged in a series to which he returns, pursuing new outcomes, extending their meaning. They are a form of constant dialogue, when the successive objects or sets of objects are analysed by the artist in detail, evaluated in different spatial situations, including in direct contact with the viewers, who in turn activate their own system of sensory perception. The work's true value can be realized only through the superimposition of these two visions, comprising a reasoning sequence. Aware of the difficulties and stereotypes of judgement, of habits in sensory perception, Wolski strives for the works to speak more loudly, more emphatically than past comments engraved in memory. Working with classic sculpting materials, he draws attention to matter's natural, unflagging primal power of impact, where a stone block under the bolster or soft clay between the fingers receives the artist's gesture, which is preserved, safeguarded, remaining invariably a medium of his ideas about our existence.

Terminus (2000) is an extremely simplified, minimalistic sculpture, perhaps even an example of the "ecstasy of the blank sheet"; it remains a perfectly white slab, suggesting it has been carved in noble marble. What a surprise when it turns out to be made of clay (terracotta)! The form's simplicity activates the viewer's bodily awareness through a direct confrontation with it. Exactly! In the exhibition *Sculpture in Search of a Place* at the Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw (2011),¹¹ the piece, despite its material substantiality, was displayed in the section titled *Space*, confirming its multifarious rather than purely visual significance in defiance of the "ideal of pure opticality". But the title *Terminus* is actively connected with the place, as a result of which the original semantic intention has been reinstated: a name denoting the mental categorization of existence. Slightly earlier, at the Robert Miller Gallery in New York, the same work was featured in a show about absence, which in turn allowed Wolski to confront the theme of infinity. The experiment, according to the artist, consisted in rejecting all classic sculptural solutions and instead reducing the volume so that lack became a presence. One actually gets a quasi-physical sense of confronting something that doubtless used to be, but is no longer. This particular fusion of sensuality and spirituality brought to mind a yearning for spirituality not confined to the concept of the absolute; implying a body that is absent but filled with a sphere of (un)real sensuality. Wolski seeks to explore reality construed as a transgression of the visible, for it is precisely reality that is "to be interpreted, in the visible, as a symbolic record of the invisible, and in the ungraspable, as a standard and measure of what we grasp with comprehension only."¹² Wolski describes his works in a moving and emotional way, almost as if he considered them pieces of poetry, whereat he inserts the descriptions in diary entries concerning events from his life, doing so in the third person. This intended distance ensures critical judgement, particularly with regard to *Terminus*: "X didn't know how else to call it, but he identified most of his emotions and anxieties with emptiness. With that which, like love or faith, cannot be cast in a finite form. 'Terminus' means the end, an inaccessible space beyond the horizon. When we look at it, an afterimage of light reflected off its shiny surface remains on the retina. The light wanders away like a spirit detached from matter. Velvet dust settles on the piece. The rectangular slab is like a *tabula rasa*, a metaphorical place of awakening, a clean, unwritten slate onto which we can project our own history. It takes up little space, and yet the space it evokes is immense—it is the whole world."¹³

The other sculptures from that series drew directly on nature in its most rudimentary dimension. It was a formally reduced description of a world presented in its simplest yet incredibly moving scenes, consisting of minimalistic images of a bare hill with a flat top, overscale replicas of plump grains, or rhythmic compositions of clouds reduced to a three-dimensional sign. Their lyrical potential determined the treatment of the surface, the polished white seemingly merely a pretext for showing the bright, warm light spilling over it—the essence of these representations.

Today, when *non-places*—highways, train stations, airports, supermarkets, public transit—are anonymous spaces of our everyday life, it is in them that we experience the "new loneliness" that defines the individual's status in the contemporary world. The current notion of the term "space" is highly ambiguous; becoming increasingly vague, it leads to the experience of *non-place* as a main characteristic of individual experience. But

¹¹ *Sculpture in Search of a Place*, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, 1 February – 25 April 2021, curator: Anna Maria Leśniewska. The show's division into natural-element sections became a key to reflections on the processuality of sculpture's transformations, factoring in diverse fields of creative practice, in which the spatial experience revealed the anticipative nature of sculpture in its expanded field.

¹² Wiesław Juszczak, „Uwagi o kulturze symbolicznej,” in *Wędrowniki do źródeł* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz terytoria, 2009), p. 163.

¹³ Xawery Wolski, *From the Diary*, 1994, fragment. (Unpublished)

Wolski shows to us—as if to contradict that experience—that our **individual places**, resulting from the places of our identity, are still valid and important, on a full scale of different references. Although *non-places* multiply constantly, filling the spaces of our thoughts and reflections like sand, **individual places** remain as a primal “innate strength” that preserves the **home** as a spiritual heritage.

Another work that, using the simplest forms, reveals something mysterious, magical even, is *Retablos*. A project born of a fascination with Peruvian sculpture and culture during Wolski’s residency in the country in the 1990s. The connection is not based on formal solutions, but on an emotional intensity contained in the artworks. Drawing on historical references, Wolski evokes the beliefs of those who worshipped the sun: “The shoebox-sized reliquaries with an openable hinged door that he had sculpted with warm clay were an expectation of fulfilment. When the door was closed, nothing remained except a memory of a distant sanctity tinged with mystical anxiety.”¹⁴ An instinct that the artist follows, creating a work that is an essence of intense feeling and engenders a heterogeneous visual space. The way the work contains lived experiences and the resulting emotions, playing out in the human consciousness simultaneously on many levels, is expressed in the phrase “it makes sense,” which integrates the sensible with the sensual. Aspects of the functioning of the human consciousness, with accompanying terms relating to society, i.e., power, knowledge, experience, have become key to unlocking individual artistic biographies.

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I was encouraged to draw a parallel with medieval religious art by Jakub Woynarowski’s essay *Templum. The Esotericism of the White Cube*,¹⁵ in which he discusses Alexander Nagel’s book *Medieval Modern. Art Out of Time*.¹⁶ In this extremely interesting publication, the author takes up the topic of an affinity between twentieth-century artistic practices and “pre-modern site-specific art,” pointing to a process of “constant circulation” and demonstrating that the “strategies of the founders of twentieth-century art correspond—consciously or not—with models from a distant past.”¹⁷ Among the many tropes followed, Nagel reflects on the concept of the ready-made in the context of holy relics, writing that before bourgeois art, as Duchamp said, art was literary or religious: everything served the mind. Relics, he continues, are physical things, but they are also conceptual objects; their status is simultaneously lower and higher than that of painting. In the case of both the ready-made and the relic, Nagel argues, an ordinary object, indistinguishable from others like it, is singled out as something extraordinary. Relics, he says, used to be recognized rather than consecrated; their power stemmed from the stories attached to them.¹⁸ Through this analogy, *Retablos* can be seen as a (hi)story with a universal message, where references to its genesis become a pretext because the essence is always hidden in these boxes, serving as votive offerings conceived as a “symbolic object deposited on the altar to beg for a desired result or make thanks for one.” Wolski, in turn, shows us that when these sacred connotations are absent, such archaic forms of religious art can perform the function of “logical models”¹⁹ and thus be invested with a new meaning. Wolski makes us aware of the looming continuity of this *sacrum*, today hidden so deeply that we lose faith in its existence.

In the context of the above examples and how they are embedded in the space of diverse circumstances, it is worth quoting Xawery Wolski on what sculpture means for him: “Sculpture, rejection of the superficial, forge of contingency, virtue of metals, prime matter of the alchemists. Glow of generosity, haven of equilibrium, perpetual transmutation. Inertia of eternity, healing, immortal field of attraction. Timeless source, amulet, adornment, glassy fruit under a sooty coat. Limit of logic, initiation, rebellion, flight, excitement of the senses. Synthesis of the imperishable, ungraspable, inexpressible.”²⁰

In an age of multidirectional investigations into what sculptural form is today, we can refer to it in a clear-cut manner—whether it is minimalistic or figural—because on the level of perception and emotions we perceive the surrounding reality and the processes occurring in it. There is a profound meaning in experimentation itself, in constant exploration, in blazing ever new trails by means or with the help of art; in this way, remaining distanced towards the surrounding world, art orientates also our thinking. It is like a flash of light, a source of aha-experiences through which one connects with something indeterminate and mysterious that, in turn, lends its power to those who wish to see and know more.

¹⁴ Xawery Wolski, *From the Diary*, 1994, fragment. (Unpublished)

¹⁵ Jakub Woynarowski, „Templum. Ezoteryka białego sześcianu”, *Elementy*, 2 (2022), pp. 129-150.

¹⁶ Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern. Art Out of Time* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), p. 235.

¹⁷ J. Woynarowski, *Templum...*, op. cit.

¹⁸ A. Nagel, *Medieval Modern...*, op. cit., pp. 236–238.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²⁰ Xawery Wolski, *Litany. Knowing Myself, I Can Understand the Land and the People*, Mexico, 2000. (Unpublished).

MEMORY OF CLAY

ANTONIO ZAYA, 2004.

When Xawery Wolski left the Judeo-Christian heart of Europe to come to the American continent, he had already chosen his main instrument of work—one that came from a millenary aesthetic order: the memory of clay. This memory, which would later become American, is made of earth and water. When added to his European memory—his ancient memory—it is nothing less than an unnamed form of clay's rebirth as a living entity. It is a language of work, configured by the man upon whom it bestowed life as well as his eternal return as memory, in which each fragment corresponds to a plural universe that multiplies its significance—its free, open and vulnerable meaning. According to the relevant logic of meaning, this apt choice supposes that anyone can alter the conditions of this malleable instrument, and even increase its historic significance and that of its ancestral poetics, thus confirming its mythic profile, its vital revolution, its change. Such a transcultural and transatlantic arrangement leaves the Polish sculptor with no other choice than to open himself up to dreams and to initiate interpretation but, above all, to feel not only with his hands but also with his thoughts—ideologically, but beyond geography, feeling the word “America” as just another of Pachamama's children.

This experience is neither inexpressible nor non-transferable, as some believe, nor is it something alien to the Other, nor is it intangible. Dreaming and interpreting life and the history of the earth from a different contextual perspective can become not only a collective, shared and public feeling in which these works engage in debate without endeavoring to make themselves understood or to build one-way bridges toward the Other. They can also become a vision of the world in communion with the body of the earth—the first body of human beings. Migrations are the most convincing proof of this sentiment. In these works, there is no longer a single, repressed, excluded, buried voice, and even less so a unique meaning where the Other will always be outside the private experience of the artist—that is, his spirit. On the contrary, the meaning of Xawery Wolski's work is no longer the last impregnable refuge of defeated individuality and of the past, but rather opens itself up until it merges with the individual, the Other, the self—to paraphrase Octavio Paz. Nevertheless, it is not a memory mortgaged by European reason and injustice, trying to approach the Other while aware of its certain failure and of the fact that they will never be able to understand each other. Xawery Wolski's memory, which provisionally places the grammar of clay and its unintelligible universe in transit, is articulated as the instrument—impervious to corruption—of that which is not only a symptom of emotion but rather has become his cultural heritage.

In these works of the earth, Xawery Wolski is very conscious of the fact that his emotional and poetic experience is not contradictory to or at odds with the very history that this same earth has conferred on us as an expression of pre-Columbian cultures. His work neither negotiates the minefields of written language nor does it avoid establishing its own rules as a basis from which the Other can be approached without restraints. Without codes, without absolute concepts, his entire body of work boasts of a freedom of movement that allows him to more freely approach the Other by means of the invisible but solid gaps in a vision of the foreign world—a vision from which and through which he appropriates and communicates with history and his memory. In this sense, his works set themselves up as integral ways of communicating memory without time—as simultaneous memory.

Someone once said that communicating meaning and emotion, and being the image of the non-existent—of what one is not—could be among the most significant metaphysical or conceptual missions of art from any culture, time or history. The communion between the individual and the Other and its virtual extension is clearly an act of faith and liberation—a liberation that establishes the desire that perhaps will never be realized. However, it is unusual that the artist now speaks from his memory and from the future to a time when the end of history is still unpredictable, and even uniqueness and novelty continue to be tools of his work. It is a symptom of Xawery Wolski's humility that unlike Novalis and Fukuyama, he never considers his own time to be the end of time, nor does he believe that we will be “the last ones to see certain things.” Each time Xawery Wolski does not find convincing responses to our context, he does not seek to escape into the future nor into the end of time and history, but rather, gives his ex-votos or homunculi their memory, ancestors, earth and water, in order to freeze and to flow, to pacify the tides and favor the life to come, which must necessarily come with creation.

Life goes on because death continues to recite from memory. Before works that are so expressive yet so simple (because they are essential), like these by Xawery Wolski, the viewer ends up convinced (if he isn't already) that art is not dead (unlike what some still like to say) and that art has not come to its end. However, it is still at risk of being lost in its terminal stage, beyond which it could only aspire to the fire at the base of reality that Artaud talked about, which would celebrate the possibility of saying nothing, of remaining silent before death and oblivion in writing. In this sense, compared to these works, today's art has given up that already traditional possibility of transcendence and innovation and has lost, or is about to lose, its communicative point of reference in order to probe the labyrinths of the most desolate mirage which produces the sand in which we fight without faces. And it is not true that today's art has become an addendum to anthropology, a theoretical narrative that refers artistic creation only to its own coordinates and to itself. We can still speak of what is represented in art, of our as yet multiple identity, because the art object has not died either, nor has it stopped speaking about both things equally.

Xawery Wolski apparently theorizes about his own creation through the aesthetic presentation of his polyvalent and essential oeuvre that on the one hand, saves him from the death of art and on the other, satisfies the critic's interest in gaining access to a memory also constructed from innumerable presumed and susceptible omissions.

A love for the land and for the world is merely a continuation of the ability to speak to it while avoiding and discarding technical innovation (potting wheel, metal, glazes, memory...). When we reach the point where art objects speak to us of the body of the land and the land of the body, where we find it possible to contemplate the Other—all that is not the body and land of art and of the artist—that terminal stage we mentioned above dissolves, and we reach its mirage, where movement toward the Other becomes a possible experience. The artist speaking with the Other in his foreign expression then becomes a demiurge. In any case, as on many previous occasions, these moments of transition into creation are difficult times for plurality and dialogue but, whether we like it or not, they are also like all irreversible times, times of memory and forgetting, of amnesia and archiving. The formal plurality of these works by Xawery Wolski is no longer a tendency of a unique truth or the representation of what is established and irrefutable. Distanced from the aimless search for new forms, his experience—like his creation—essentially focuses on the transitional nature of earth and water. Xawery Wolski situates his work in the margin where form and content are associated with meaning. His meaning is nothing less than bringing into memory what is no longer present, and dreaming it from its very genesis. Able to walk toward what will come from the hand of the Other, Xawery Wolski is indebted to the Other (a lotus from the mud), to the life of the exceptional beings that populated the earth and created meaning, creating beyond innovation, anticipation and premonition.

At times it may seem that Xawery Wolski's work lives solely off that debt and in the service of the reconstruction of dreams more so than in that of the deconstruction of this American memory. The representation of the future of memory—not to mention that of its rhetorical and conservative maneuvering—is right here, between the uncertain and the impossible, in the story of Otherness, of what can be found beyond the utopia we never had, of what can only exist in some promised land without space and without time. That is his creation. This is the narrative of that creation, the constant intention of Xawery Wolski's work: to narrate the impossible—the metaphor of the creation of a new world that is ignorant of Columbus and of which Columbus is ignorant.

Art is thus a political action. To retell creation is that common dream. Xawery Wolski's politics lie in the story's transition from halfway between Poland and Mexico (with all the resonance that both nations may have with the spirit, with death and with the worship of the earth) to halfway between imagined reality and the dream surrounding him, between his body and his voice and the dream of the Other: the master of his story. These bodies of memory transformed into dreams of light have been created by walking among the real bodies floating in memory like landscapes reinvented in the void, in silence and in the snowy nothingness of his embroidered tattoos.

A story of the Other, of displacement, where the process that casts a shadow over everything else seems so decisive and noteworthy, because the very act of creation is situated right here. Beyond meaning, we are left with the actual sculptural object which traverses the limits of time and separates reflection from reality in this mirror of earth. This transition toward Otherness cautiously submerges us in a memory that contextualizes Xawery Wolski's sculptures, causing them to return to a temporal dimension, a relationship with time in any of its forms. The profoundest meaning of this artistic experience is precisely that of sharing the meaning that connects the

creator and the spectator by way of the art work in a possible relationship of true communication. In that sense, the artist of communication is today—in my opinion—a revolutionary artist.

As I mentioned earlier, Xawery Wolski's commitment to spirituality—that is, to that which cannot be represented—is very close to a faith, which implies accepting what we are not able to see even when in its presence. As an art object, faith and the unrepresentable presuppose a desire for representation that will never be fixed, complete, definitive. This devotion to mysticism—and to what the rest of us presuppose we would not be able to see—and the devotion to that which cannot be represented is the destiny that Xawery Wolski has chosen.

In any case, let us recall that we are dealing with something as complex and plural as memory and the clay of creation, which makes us seem effectively transitory, and malleable in the eyes of the Other: in his, your or my eyes.

Platja d'Aro. August 2004.

TATTOOS, A PROJECT FOR ATLANTICA

ANTONIO ZAYA, 2001.

Links, spaces, beads, these rosaries or light mandalas, empty in series, going beyond genetic geometry, beyond draw-thread embroidery, beyond their own weave and weft, are ancestral geometry, the degree zero of the work of xawery wolski. We could consider this project to be the origins or me luminous celli upon which he weaves the anthropomorphic and polymorphic aspect of his sculptural elements and his human tools, his votive offerings and organs. All of which offers us creation par excellence and the subject matter of which dreams are made.

XAWERY WOLSKI : INTERSTICES OF TIME AND SPACE

EDWARD J. SULLIVAN, 2020.

I first came to know the work of Xawery Wolski through friends in Mexico City. The great Mexican painter and sculptor Juan Soriano (whose death shortly before I began to draft this essay has created a sad gap in the chain of original visual creators of the Mexican tradition) spoke to me in enthusiastic terms of the achievements of Wolski, as did my friend and colleague Marek Keller, supporter of the arts, both visual and musical, in Poland. However, I first saw Xawery's work in Madrid, several years ago at the by-now well-known art fair, ARCO. I was intrigued. What I saw at that moment, exhibited at the stand of a distinguished Mexico City gallery, was not an example of Wolski's characteristic large-scale, monumental work, but, rather, a small fragment. I remember distinctly how compelled I was by that bone-white piece, a component of a larger composition. It was only about a year later in New York where he had come to live, that I was able to meet Wolski and learn more about his spectral sculptures, which, I soon came to learn, formed part of an intensely cohesive group of works that constitute a veritable galaxy of forms. Xavery and I have had multiple discussions about their shapes, materials and meanings, yet no experience is as convincing as seeing together a large selection of his pieces in one place. This book is published in conjunction with a large-scale exhibition of his art in Warsaw. It is thus a perfect opportunity to inhabit his universe and to be immersed in Wolski's fertile imagination. I am privileged to be able to put down on paper some thoughts on the individual pieces and series that have preoccupied him over the years. I divide the following observations according to a quite subjective set of criteria and discuss them within a pattern that does not conform to chronological order but to my own manner of conceiving their beauty and importance.

Clouds:

As in so many of the series or individual pieces by Xawery Wolski, his "Clouds" display elements that both sooth and disconcert. Entering an exhibition space where they are hovering above the floor, the viewer is at first amazed by the artist's ability to conjure up the suggestions of the rounded, sensuous forms of cumulus and cirrus clouds within a gallery setting. Wolski concretizes and makes formal that which is by definition evanescent. The

Cloud series represent Wolski's most ambitious attempt to create an environment, a parallel world for the visitors to his exhibitions in which to lose themselves amid reverie. However, the reverie often comes to a quick end when the contemplation entails the realization of the means by which the artist has achieved his illusion. In a way analogous to the feeling one has when confronted by a massive sculpture by American artist Richard Serra, a master of the dualities of substances and weights, an observer of Wolski's clouds soon fancies that he or she may suffer potential damage by the great weight of the spheres that represent the clouds should they fall from the wires that suspend them from the ceiling. In this series the artist creates a rumination on impossible binaries, and, in effect, on the conundrum of existence. The inherent weightlessness of a cloud is juxtaposed with the inevitable corporeality of a work of sculpture. In another ironic twist that is present in virtually all of the artist's creations, the substance from which the work of art is made itself offers a fundamental contradiction. We are confronted here with representations of the clouds – entities that are formed by the conjunctions of evaporation of water and the wind, the most ephemeral of elements. Wolski's clouds are made with clay, the most earth-bound of substances. In this series of simple yet psychologically multivalent forms, the artist offers a solution for this, bridging the impossible gap between stasis and evanescence, weightlessness and substance, the earth and the sky.

In art historical terms Wolski's obsessions with cloud forms represents his point of entry into a coterie of artists who have been experimenting in both two and three dimensions with this same theme. The shape and "color" of the cloud, its infinite variations of form, and its meanings as metaphors of celestial grandeur were all at the heart of the sensibility of many of the European Romantic painters. The northern countries produced the richest roster of artists who experimented with cloud forms. Perhaps less well known than some of the others, but certainly of tremendous importance to our subject here is the Norwegian Johan Christian Dahl whose small studies of clouds were done out of doors in preparation for his large-scale studio-produced canvases. In their immediacy and freshness they anticipate the significance of plein air spontaneity in the art of the later nineteenth century impressionists. Caspar David Friedrich, hero of the German Romantic Movement, also concentrated on these evanescent forms. Playwright-painter August Strindberg contributed a series of dramatic, if somewhat little-known, paintings of troubled landscapes in which the clouds set the mood of disquietude. In the English Romantic era, John Constable contributed immeasurably to the iconography of the cloud in his evocative landscapes of the British countryside while J.M.W. Turner employed cloud forms in somewhat more overtly dramatic ways, especially in the quasi-abstract canvases of his later period.

In a more contemporary vein, Brazilian conceptual artist Vik Muniz realized a fascinating project in the autumn of 2001 in which he engaged in what could be called "sky drawing" when he fashioned the shapes of clouds in the sky over Manhattan by having a tiny airplane fly over New York City and outline the forms of clouds for the observers below. Xawery Wolski is therefore within a long line of artists (which includes many more than those I have mentioned here) for whom the cloud form serves as a vehicle for contemplation and creativity.

Chains

The definition of a chain involves both positive connotations (as in linking together of friends, or like-minded people), as well as negative associations (bondage, slavery, indebtedness). Xawery Wolski has spent a great deal of artistic and emotional energy on decoding and re-configuring all of the possible metaphors inherent within this shape in the creation of his multiple series of terracotta chains. Outside the Rufino Tamayo Museum of International Contemporary Art in Mexico City there is a large sculptural mass by Wolski. It is formed of seemingly hundreds of intertwined chains. They are a shiny, polished white. This mass of chains is not threatening; rather, it is comforting and reassuring, as the potentially oppressive energy represented by these forms has been harnessed and rendered harmless. It is, instead, an intriguing study in mass. Each link is an organic, rounded, sensual form. The tactile qualities of each component beckon the viewer to caress them and experience their substance. However, in other situations Wolski has created chains that are more serpentine, more threatening, conjuring up mostly-forgotten memories of servitude, slavery and forced movement of people from one environment to another. His black chains have often been exhibited in neat rows – one after another. These are especially sinister in so far as they suggest the inevitable lines of enchained slaves as they made their ways in the bowels of ships crossing the Atlantic from Africa to the Americas. The often-rough surfaces of the terracotta speak eloquently of the flesh that has been constrained by them, making it coarse and jagged. Here Wolski plays and experiments with the denial of the inherent properties of materials. Terracotta simulates a far heavier

substance – iron. The clay from which his chains are fashioned could be easily cracked and broken while the iron or steel or “real” chains is virtually unbreakable. Illusion and reality are penetrable, interchangeable, and our senses are confused when we observe these fragile yet resistant pieces.

Retablos, Ex-Votos, Love Letter

Forty elements: 40 boxes set in four rows of ten boxes hanging on a wall. Each box is made of the inevitable terracotta, the primal earth element. Each is provided with two doors that open onto an inner niche-like space. These retablos call to mind much more than simple containers. They are connected by a thread of space and time to the traditions of many societies who carefully guard relics or mementos of sacred persons within a covered space. Within the aura of this piece the wall plays as integral a role as do the elements themselves. It is a support, a backdrop or screen against which we observe the individual components of the work, each functioning in tandem with the other, to conjure up, for example, the screens in Byzantine churches that shield the mysteries performed by the priests from the worshippers, or the altar screens or church walls of other Christian denominations on which are hung the relics of long-disappeared but revered saints. “Retablos” has the connotation of absence. The boxes may have contained sacred substances, but they have been removed, plundered perhaps, and their doors are left ajar or as gaping holes that lead only to dim memories of the miraculous.

Related to the implied miracles within the retablos are the artist’s representations of organs, small depictions of lips, a nipple, a nose or clasped hands. While a sense of concrete physicality is brought to our minds, so is the ancient tradition of ex-voto sculpture. In many societies the fashioning (usually from wood) of parts of the body is a sacred occupation. Such images are used in rituals of supplication. They are offered to a church or chapel and are hung on a wall as thank offerings to God or the saints who have seen to the healing of a diseased part of the body or a broken limb. The disembodied hand, head or heart may be conventionally defined as a simulacrum of the wholeness of the man or woman, but more correctly, it is to be understood as a trace of sanctification, the mark of saintliness on the body of an infected person. Magic is present in these works.

“Love Letter” of 1998 is also related in a strange way to the retablo series in that it is another piece which deals with the positioning of individual components of clay tablets on a wall. The placement of the pieces, each inscribed with a letter of the alphabet, is crucial to the comprehension of the work, which, at first, resembles a game of dominoes or scrabble. This, like so many of Wolski’s works, is deeply rooted in the history of both arts and letters. “Carta de amor” is another in a long line of projects that constitutes the quintessential intellectual quality of this artist’s production. In the case of this piece Wolski turns his imagination to the 1930s and to the relationship of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam and his wife Nadiejda, who wrote to him while he was in a Stalinist work camp in Siberia in 1938. (I write these words, incidentally, on the anniversary of Stalin’s death, March 5). She would never see her husband again and did not, in fact, know where he was. “...I don’t know if you will hear me. I could never tell you how much I love you...” words that describe the desperation of her pain. Each word of this desperate letter is like a prayer, each syllable articulated so that it forms part of an echo against the void that is the distance between the writer and her husband. Wolski has made of this prayer/letter a concrete entity, emphasizing not only each word but each letter of every word. The letters are the (literal) building blocks in the construction of the overarching sentiment. We read the letter in slow motion? sounding out each word, just as a child learns to read. It is a process of re-construction of emotion and re-articulating in visual terms of the visceral impact of the verbal components of the love letter.

Column

This work of 1998 represents the concretization of Wolski’s connections, both literal and figurative, to visual traditions that came before him. When we enter a gallery where this Column is displayed – this huge, imposing piece made up of hundreds of individual components of terracotta disks, each one larger (or smaller) than the next – we immediately think, however, not of the history of art but the history of our planet. The viewer has a momentary sense of ‘déjà vu’ remembering his or her visits to the local natural history museum to see displays of ancient dinosaurs and other types of pre-historic monsters. A frisson of recognition of the wonderment of our

earliest childhood comes immediately to our minds...only to be dissipated by the fascination with the potential of expression of this natural form, a skeletal image of the object that allows for mobility. But then, however, we remember the passage of time within the context of modern sculpture, remembering Tatlin's tower, Brancusi's endless column, each of them projects that played upon the notion of infinity, uprightness, movement and energy. Wolski has taken these concepts and inserted them into the context of the organic. Human/animal bones shown upright in the gallery create a powerful metaphor for dynamism and vitality.

Body Parts

In his piece "Fragmented Body" Wolski created synecdoches of the human form that are inevitably reminiscent of the "milagros" or small representations of individual parts of the body that are used in religious rituals of thanksgiving for miraculous favors received. Even more mysterious and evocative is the series of works depicting larger portions of the figure. "White Body," "Body with an Arm" or "Legs" exist within a void of loneliness and self-questioning. They conjure up not only the artist's own ruminations on the palpability of human fragility as the starting point for visual representation itself, but they also establish a myriad of connections to the development of visuality itself. Any student of the history of art will immediately suffer a shock of recognition on viewing these works for the first time because they conjure up direct predecessors from a multitude of time periods. Wolski has become an astute observer of the nature of representation, starting from the Greek world. I do not refer specifically to the 'heroic' period of the Classical or Hellenistic phases of ancient Greece, but, rather, to the shadowy, mysterious and thus even more tantalizingly vague early beginnings of Greek visual expression. "White Torso" inevitably brings to mind the small, usually white figures fashioned by unnamed artists from the Cyclades Islands. These masters of the third millennium BCE made objects that stylized the human form, both male and female, to emphasize the barest outlines of the body. The Cycladic sculptures, many of which were found in tombs, massed together, probably serving as votive offerings, carrying the deceased into the next world so as to provide company and beauty, show with the barest subtlety, the elegance of the slender, youthful form of the body in its first state of perfect development.

Fruits

Like many of Wolski's sculptural projects, the untitled pieces also known as "Fruits" (1998) set up deliberate tensions between the concepts of weight, mass, substance and touch. Composed of approximately 600 individual elements, and nearly filling the space (both physical and psychological) of a medium size gallery, this piece is one of the artist's most organic works. Each "fruit" is attached by wires to a main spine or column (making this work, in effect, a distant "relative" of "Column" discussed above). It is even more flexible and sensual as it meanders at will throughout the space. There is also an implied olfactory and gustatory sensibility here; on entering the room where this piece is displayed our immediate instinct is to consume it and revel in its powerful tropical scent. Yet we are deceived and frustrated. This dichotomy of desire and disappointment, presence and absence, sensuality and coldness is at the root of much of Wolski's art of contradictions and is perfectly encapsulated here.

Terracotta/Textiles

Of all the manifestations of Wolski's characteristic plays on illusion and reality, those that constitute his series of works simulating the tactility and sensuousness of cloth are perhaps the most appealing as well as the most intellectually compelling. We might begin by considering the 1993 "Curtain." This large scale work is one of the simplest and most monumental statements of his career up to the time of its creation. The long, sensuous folds of drapery dip and bend, almost as if they were blown about by the breeze coming through an invisible window. Here Wolski's understanding of the dichotomy between mass and diaphanousness, weightlessness and substance is borne out in a highly sophisticated manner. The eye and hand are engaged in game of definitions. What do we perceive here? In studying this piece I am reminded of nothing less than the seemingly-effortless expertise of the great masters of modern sculpture in their creations of allusions to fabric. Rodin, Bourdelle, Maillol, Renoir, Matisse and others were all able to suggest the supple, graceful fall of silk or muslin draped over

the body of a (most often female) figure. Wolski's years in Paris afforded him the opportunity of first-hand observation of such phenomena in the museums and galleries of that city. However, within a consideration of the extraordinary series of articles of clothing and personal adornments, also created in the inevitable terracotta, we come face to face with the artist's blending of stimuli, from the hieratic art of ancient Egypt to the secret formalities of Inca or Aztec societies.

The concept of "influence" presents us with a pronounced conundrum in the case of virtually every artist. The critic wishes, for the most part, to make connections between one creator and another, to search for the roots of both form and content in the art of other peoples and times. As an art historian – and not an art critic – I am equally attracted to chronological explications and patterns of ingenuity and originality. Searching in the past for the "source" of an idea, the foundations of an artist's understanding of visual phenomena is a significant part of our work of visual archaeology. Yet in the case of the artist in question, there are many complicated layers, or even barriers that prevent us from insisting on a specific prototype for any single composition or individual piece. For one thing, Wolski is a peripatetic artist. While his initial development and training came about in his native Poland, it has been his years in Western Europe and Latin America that have molded his sense of visuality. His long years in Peru and Mexico have particularly marked him in an inevitable fashion. There he was able to observe the grandiloquence as well as the intimacy of the productions of the great indigenous civilizations. His unique melding of the things he observed in those places with his European vision created patterns of understanding that resulted in compellingly unique, and compelling modern, images. His series of clothing and adornments are among the most outstanding of these manifestations.

Wolski's "Dresses" (Vestidos) made of terracotta and silk thread are among his most haunting works. As they hang in a gallery, mutely, strangely attesting to the body of no one, the viewer is given the impression of clothing belonging to beings from a parallel universe. These are elongated, phantasmal garments seemingly worn by ghosts or sleep walkers – women of the night or women of our dreams. Are these items of clothing shrouds that once covered the bodies of long-disintegrated mummies from a nameless ancient civilization, or are they post-modern variations on impossible, un-wearable haute couture? Such are the eerie and confounding questions raised by the presence in our consciousness of these peculiar fashions. As in the case of other pieces done to imitate cloth, these dresses defy – or rather, enthusiastically respond to – gravity. Their weight is ponderous, their textures impossible from the stand point of wearability. Yet they are not, in essence, unlike the most ambitious or the most outrageous of contemporary fashions. They are coherent with the creations that have been witnessed on the runways of Paris in October or those of New York Fashion Week each September.

Stelae

The brilliant Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska has written eloquently about the series of large-scale clay stelae that Wolski executed in Mexico City.[i] I could not attempt to equal her trenchant, evocative analyses of these pieces, but I would like to offer, nonetheless, a few observations. On the primal, physical level these stelae are marks of presence – grand statements about the artist's physicality within the urban fabric of the world's largest, most congested and confusing city. Wolski spent long periods of his creative life in the Mexican capital and these pieces serve as testimonies to his interaction with the physicality of the urban atmosphere and the people of the metropolis. However, unlike most public sculptures, they were not meant to be seen on a principal thoroughfare or a grand public place that might be used during ceremonial occasions. There are virtually no government officials who regularly pass by and there are certainly no tourists who frequent this neighborhood whose principal marker is the Zapata subway stop.

These stelae commemorate no major public holiday, no historical event and bear no coat of arms or other stamp of civic pride, as is the norm with traditional celebratory sculpture. These pieces serve, in fact, as an anti-celebratory statement, marking not the noble or the memorable achievements of individuals, but tracing – both literally and figuratively – the presence of the most reviled, or at least the most forgotten elements in contemporary society – homeless children. Wolski had made other public sculptures previous to the creation of these Mexico City stelae, most outstandingly a major public intervention on the shores of the Pacific Ocean in Lima. In 1994 he executed the "Pulmones de Barranco" (the "Lungs of Barranco," referring to the district of the city in which the piece is set up). It is a massive, organic-shaped work that serves as something of a reminder of

the impressive portal-like monuments of the ancient world. It is a pleasing, sensual shape, and stands like an imposing presence in the ocean-side landscape. The Mexico City stelae are completely different, and infinitely more unconventional. Observed from a distance the viewer would not be mistaken if she or he would make an immediate visual reference to the grand architectonic forms that stand in the courtyards of such sites as Tikal or Copan. Indeed, we have already seen that ancient structures of the Americas haunt the dreams of Xavery Wolski, and he naturally responds to them in both his formal concerns and his use of terracotta, the primal material of autochthonous craftsmen. Up close, however, the stelae take on a very different, more complex and more disturbing (but, at the same time, reassuring) character.

In his creation of these pieces the artist recruited a group chosen from the thousands of young Mexican children who, abandoned by their families, have forcibly chosen the streets as their places of residences. These boys and, to a lesser extent, girls, forage for food among garbage dumps, sleep wherever they can find shelter, and cope with the exigencies of life as best as they can in one of the most unfriendly of environments. They are utterly transitory forces within the pattern of existence in this metropolis – they disappear as quickly as they come onto the scene, leaving virtually no imprint on the mind of residents or passers-by. Wolski, realizing the transitory quality of these children who, in the minds of most, have no names and no personalities, wished to memorialize their presence and testify to their attendance within the process of life. He decided to utilize their physicality, having them imprint their hands, arms, legs, chests and feet onto the surfaces of the stelae. These monuments do not contain whole human forms, but simply reminiscences, suggestions and echoes of the children's presence. These are, then, haunting, moving and, in many senses, positive confirmations of the lives of the otherwise overlooked individuals.

Final Comments

In the sculpture of Xavery Wolski we perceive a careful craftsman at work. In his employment of materials nothing is left to chance. He has metaphorically connected himself, in his adaptations and re-inventions of the medium of terracotta, to the grand traditions of both the ancients and the modern masters. References to the clay vessels of prehistoric societies such as those that existed at Oslanski (near the modern-day city of Ód , and abandoned some 4000 years ago), those at Bonampak in Mexico or at Chimu in ancient Peru, inevitably spring to our minds. At the same time, visiting the Musée Rodin in Paris, for instance, also offers to the devotees of Wolski's art another sock of recognition, as that quintessential figure in the history of modern sculpture created his sketches and, sometimes, highly finished works in the medium of terracotta. In fact, Wolski constantly bridges gaps from ancient to modern and is forever walking a line that both divides and unites periods of time and forms of artistic expression in his search for unique modes to define his own indelibly personal language of shapes and meanings.

[i] Elena Poniatowska, "La estelas," Xavery Wolski (Mexico City: Landucci Editores, 1999), pp. xii-xvi.

LAS ESTELAS

ELENA PONIATOWSKA, 1999.

Whoever leaves an imprint leaves a wound, writes Henri Michaux. To leave an imprint, the Polish sculptor Xavery Wolski chose the hands of Mexican children – and not just any children, but rather those who have been wounded and beaten, those rejected by society. Having rendered a series of clay stelae, he had these children circle the pieces and press their hands, elbows, arms, knees, fists and cheeks into the clay when it was still fresh. One child asked Wolski: Lift me. I can't reach. And the sculptor lifted him so that his torso would forever sink into the surface of the stelae.

Wolski's experiment on the corner of Universidad de Heriberto Frías in Mexico City, and the exit to the Zapata metro stop, shows no sign of happiness. It hardly exacts a smile. It is disturbing and grim. It produces a sense of anxiety and loneliness. Passersby ask if they are cornestones because these stelae must commemorate some death. And what's this all about? The man who shines shoes doesn't know, nor does the man selling Mexican sandwiches, or tortas. The man behind the juice stand expresses his discord. Before, the kids used to play soccer there.

Within this immense wound called Mexico City there's an open sore on a corner. There, a tall, elegant Polish artist- a gentleman of yesteryear- chose to leave his imprint. He had already done something similar in Lima, Peru, where he inscribed his inner body, his dialogue with matter, creating chains, spheres and circles from terracotta, iron, metal, coffee beans and the sea-snails that are the oceans teeth. Having graduated from École des Beaux Arts and from Aix- en-Provence, the recipient of prestigious fellowships like the one awarded by the Krasner-Pollock Foundation, Xawery Wolski has chosen countries in Latin America as if to sculpt us in stone or to expose our organs like ex votos and milagritos that hang in the church where we bring offerings by hook or by crook. Those tiny lungs, hearts, kidneys and the double take of those whirling paper eyes. In Peru, Wolski selected a space where there was no grass, a dirt field overlooking the gulch in front of Mario Vargas Llosa's private residence. People left their garbage in that lot. Wolski transformed it into a plaza by building a clay sculpture measuring fifteen feet called "Pulmones de Barranco" (Barranco Lungs), a specific moisture-resistant mix so that mold wouldn't eat away at the clay. To this clay Wolski adds plaster, cement, lime – it depends on the place and the climate- so that the piece endures at a time when everything crumbles because we use materials devoid of noblesse. According to the artist, clay is the material of the indigent. It suggests durability and the existence of an eternity defined by geological cycles. Clay is earth and memory. It is fragile in the way our bodies are fragile. It points to the precarious nature of life and to social reality, which is so difficult for some Modern urban life eliminates imaginary reality. There is no time, no will, no space. Men and women, children and street dogs are joined by one resolve, though they aren't even aware of its magnitude and magnificence: to resist.

In Mexico, there are children everywhere in the flesh and blood. They live on the streets. According to statistics published by the Comisión on Human Rights, they total 16,000 – boys, for the most part. They live, they roam, they steal, they get high and perish on the streets. More than 3,000 are under the age of six. More than 1,000 are two years old or younger. They sniff glue or paint thinner through a ball of crumpled rag soaked in blue or some other solvent. They seek escape. They dissipate I like it. I see shapes. They have no future.

They sleep in culverts and drains, at the Dico store in front of the Buenavista train station, at all the bus terminals in the city (the North, South and Tapo stations) as well as the Insurgentes roundabout, in the empty lots of the Juarez or Roma districts, among the ruins left by the 1985 earthquake. They come and go, unassailable. They run by without a trace. Wolski caught them in mid-flight and told them. At least a hand; at least a foot. It is more than most Mexicans have done for their neighbors. The sculptor transformed their hands into clay, into pigment, a landscape and, most importantly, a presence.

One child asked Wolski: Will my hand always be there? There is no one more removed from the notion of eternity than a hungry child, unless of course he or she moves on to a better life, and as we all know, death is eternal. Children live for the day. To fulfill a day is an incredible effort in itself. To reach the evening and bundle oneself in newspaper under a marquis is to be enveloped in a shroud. A child doesn't know this. A child intuits this. Death among these children is a daily familiar thing. When one of them dies, that child will be buried by the other street children who will burn his clothes. Belongings are not kept. When there's no future, nothing is left to be inherited. If Wolski could have covered them with his marvelous terracotta curtain nearly six feet high he would have done so- but he produced that work in 1993 before meeting these children of Mexico.

For now, neither the viewers surfacing from the Zapata metro station, nor the transients, nor those that park their car and slam the door with a brittle swoop so as to get out of there quicker, have realized yet that Wolski has done them a favor. On that corner there is no time to think about the pre-Columbian period or the seismic nature of our country: Mexico. There, Gaston Bachelard's poetics of space isn't worth shit-if I may be somewhat crass: after all, were outside on the street. No one is integrated, no one reflects on his or her own destiny, no one searches his or her identity and much less his or her own corner. There is no house no roof, no protection whatsoever. There are accidents though- you can bet on that. Noise is infernal and the screech of buses is as deafening as the motorcycles. Pizza Hut deliveries –pepperoni and peppers- are made on motorcycles that crash

against walls, at least one casualty for each of the 365 days of the year. Truth be told> that corner has a lot of pizza, pizzazz and pick-a-peck-of-pickled- peppers, even if no one gets their pizza.

Octavio Paz wrote that happiness is a chair in the sun. No chair here. These are vertical tombstones marking the place. I don't know if they suggest durability of existence or the limited nature of the earth and its natural resources. What I do know is that a child forgotten- no daffodils, no cotton-asked Xawery Wolski if his hand print would stay there forever. Yes responded the man from Poland.

To give a homeless child that kind of hope is no small wonder.

FRAGMENTS AND SEEDS OF A BODY OF EARTH: SOME THOUGHTS ON XAWERY WOLSKI'S WORK

FERNANDO CASTRO FLORES, 2003.

Peter Brooks states that modern narrative arose to produce a semiotization of the body, which was matched by a somatization of the story: the body must be a source, a place of meanings, and these stories cannot be told without making the body itself the primary vehicle for narrative significance. Without a doubt, this century of abstract poetics has not succeeded in concealing the insurrection of the flesh, the extreme exigencies of the figure, or that preoccupation—mystical to some—with the Face. Whether it be in a sexualized dimension, in a wide arc from abjection to the aesthetic of the post-human, in an existential re-contextualization, or a carnivalization (which I prefer to denominate "buffoonery"), the corporal element continues to be the remains to which—why not?—we assign all kinds of desires. In recent years, ideas like that of the Organless Body have had a certain repercussion on significant artistic practice, as has the allegorical dissemination of "invisible" subject fragments, like those found in Xawery Wolski's sculptures. The Organless Body may be understood as the unproductive aspect, "and nevertheless, it is produced in the right place and time in the connective synthesis, like the identity of production and of the product."

It is not the testimony of an original void, as if it were the remains of a lost totality, nor is it a projection of "body image." That corporality of which we possess diverse organs and multiple vestiges presupposes, in the case of Wolski's work, an elliptical description of the subject by means of rituals and objects, a plastic obsession with things belonging to antiproductivity or to the classical attempt to represent time by nullifying it (marked by melancholy) in the still life: objects or images that circulate, leaving behind, initially, the signs of their absence in the place they came from.

Wolski persistently explores the body in terms of dispersed fragments and organs, with a presentation style reminiscent of the *ex-voto*. We must keep in mind the fact that the (postmodern) recovery of the body is allegorizing multiple dispossessions. That is to say, dislocation also affects the corporality that we consider a refuge from certainty: "What I call the body," writes Jacques Derrida, "is not a presence. The body is—how might I put it—an experience in the most mobile (*voyageur*) sense of the word. It is an experience of context, of dissociation, of dislocations." As Michaux pointed out, the artist is an individual who resists the impulse to not leave clues, using materials in a territorial situation similar to the scene of a crime; the clue is that which indicates and is indelible, that which is never present in a definitive form. In an age when we have perhaps too calmly assumed a certain *distinerrancy* before the ideology of the virtualization of the "world," several veiled situations have appeared, traces of differentness, indications that propel us into creative drift: "We leave traces everywhere: viruses, lapsus, germs, catastrophes—the signs of imperfection which are like man's signature on the heart of the artificial world."

The forceful presence of Wolski's work does not conceal the fact that they constitute a subtle poetics of vestiges, in a narrative with elements of a coded love story. Faced with a metaphysics of total presence, and especially by means of deconstruction, contemporary thought has vindicated difference, the vestige, the supplement, the whole periphery that tradition has ignored. For Ortega and Gasset, the painting and the text "are vestiges, their imprint

upon the materia full of meaning. The fact that the material—the furthest thing from the soul—is what makes the latter come to life is not a lesson to be disdained.

In fact, Wolski's monumental (whatever their size) works are vestiges of emotion and testimonies to life, whether in a subjective reference or in the need to define the Other, as occurred in the case of his dramatic Steles. Xawery Wolski displays a confidence in the profound reality (to paraphrase Paul Valéry) that is the skin. This discovery of the surface, together with the criticism of profundity is a constant of modern art, as well as of the contemporary recovery of that which has only apparent existence. For example, in *Basement Project* (1992?1993), he recorded the traces left by his own body in terracotta, fusing his identity with the material, and managing to make contact with the essence. The hands sculpted by Wolski, or those other hands belonging to Mexican children who left their prints on the steles like wounds, are signs as ancient as prehistory, apotropaic prints: seeds of abysmal origin. The bone or white forms of Wolski's rigorous and subtle sculptures incite touch, but they also hold back, keep a distance, as if trying to protect their enigma.

I recall the impression I had when contemplating a wall at the María Martín Gallery (1999), upon which he had placed what appeared to be viscera, free of any sinister connotations, introductions to a subject that only exists as long as it remains incomplete or absent. Wolski dialogues with what I will call a "formalizing feminization," especially in the case of the dress or tunic made with round beads that does not belong to any body whatsoever. The meaning of material imagination, as Bachelard would have understood it, assumes that elements converge to animate intangible space and to unleash the action of the imagination: "If the present image does not make one think of an absent image, if an accidental image does not determine the provision of aberrant images, an exhibition of images, then there is no imagination."

The dynamic of absence and presence, the evocation and the opening of the hermetic—or symbolic—enclosure, oblige us to liberate our gaze from the conditioning that is supposed to come with hereditary habits. Anything that can be transmitted in the symbolic exchange is always as much absence as it is presence, and works so to have this kind of fundamental alternation which means that after appearing at a certain spot, it can disappear to reappear in another: it circulates, leaving behind the signs of absence in the place from where it came. The work of art is understood as a veiling function, established as an imaginary capture and place of desire, and presupposes a relationship with some afterworld, fundamental to any articulation of the symbolic relationship: "It means a descent to the imaginary plane of the ternary rhythm subject-object-afterworld, fundamental to the symbolic relationship.

In other words, in the function of the veil, it is the projection of the intermediate position of the object." Consider the massive veiling implied by Wolski's terracotta *Curtain* (1993), or his extraordinary dresses that link corporality with the poetic experience of the Earth: "Perhaps the piece that best illustrates this transition from humus to human is the Dress made of terracotta and Alpaca wool, whose verticality in the shape of a cross disguises a truly humble image of the human body as dust that must return to dust." Dust (the explicit title of this show of Wolski's work at the Carrillo Gil Museum) that simultaneously veils and exposes a body which, as I have pointed out, is absent in its totality, encoding a strange eroticism, a sensuality that I would go so far as to qualify as hermetic. Bataille feels that the dialectic of transgression and prohibition is the condition and even the essence of eroticism. As a field of violence, what occurs in eroticism is the dissolution, or the destruction of the closed being that is a normal state for any participant in the game. One extreme form of violence is nudity, which is a paradoxical state of communication, or more precisely, the tearing apart of the being, a pathetic ceremony in which we see humanity's transition to animality: "The decisive action is to undress. Nudity is the opposite of the closed state, that is to say, the state of discontinuous existence. It is a state of communication which reveals the search for a possible continuity of the being, beyond its folding in upon itself.

Bodies open themselves to continuity by way of those secret conduits given us by the impression of obscenity. Obscenity means the upheaval that disturbs a bodily state similar to possession—the possession of enduring and stable individuality." The body parts that Wolski sculpts, like his other unique pieces that contain floral elements or amplified views of the epidermis, bear reference to a kind of erotic theater or a hieroglyph of desire. According to Lacan, what the subject encounters in the (specularly) altered image of his body is the paradigm of all the forms of the likeness that will apply a veneer of hostility on the world of objects, projecting upon it the avatar of the

narcissistic image which, for the exultant effect of the encounter in the mirror, becomes, in confrontation with a fellow human being, the expression of the most intimate form of aggression. Sometimes we become engrossed not so much in the reflection as in a transitional object: "The loose thread, the beloved piece of junk that will not be separated either from the lip or from the hand." The chain links, balls, teeth and hands without the rest of the body lead us to the certainty that detachment and castration intervene in the emergence of the subject: "Castration means that it is necessary for pleasure to be rejected in order to reach the inverted scale of the Law of Desire."

What makes the image remain defiant are the remains. According to Lacan, an analysis of love and desire demonstrates that they are essentially narcissistic: bodily pleasure depends upon vestiges, inasmuch as the body symbolizes the Other. As for a being that postulates itself as absolute, though only in the sense of the image, it will only appear in the rupture, in the interruption of the formula "sexed being." The figure is what is produced, something inhibited in the design of desire: the body cut into pieces, as seen in Xawery Wolski's masterful works, may form part of the seduction or even of perversion's unfocused movement, in an aesthetic that goes beyond the paradigm of obscenity or the disturbing aspects of coarse humor, in formlessness as the "disorder of the unconscious order." Cultures that develop a true corporal symbolism can be understood in the way they compare experience with their inevitable losses and suffering. In this sense, as Mary Douglas points out, they confront the great existential paradoxes. When faced with such a forceful presence as the spinal column that Wolski placed in the middle of a gallery, we may have to question how to guide subjective experience back from the domain of works of art, or perhaps how to deal with temporality—between triviality and vertigo—when we cherish the pleasant memory of an afternoon eating pumpkin seeds.

The still lifes of fragmentary desire proposed by this artist truly hit the mark; the lack of rhetoric and the visual silence they transmit are the signs of an essential plastic behavior. In many of his works, Wolski resorts to a strategy of repetition, in a code that, as Deleuze would put it, produces a kind of exhaustion. Series and progression, variations on a theme or slight differences, ritornello are facets present in an oeuvre which always gets past geometric formalism. But Xawery Wolski's work possesses a superfluous tonality that leads us to a revision of the meaning of the word "decorative," evading the criminal conception of the ornament held by, for example, the architect Adolf Loos, when he considered it a sign of aboriginality superseded by the logic of progress and comfort. We know the two principle historico-critical characteristics of the theory of the ornament which views it as organic expression or an asemantic abstraction are concordant, given that they occupy the precarious terrain of the struggle between secularization and symbolic-religious art. In essence, the hierarchy where ornament is situated is typical of the metaphysical difference between substance and accident.

Before Grombrich's notion that there exists an art that we look at and pay attention to, and other creative manifestations—the decorative ones—that can only be the object of a sideways glance, we may formulate the hypothesis that many artistic manifestations which are determining factors in contemporary art consist precisely of the act of bringing to the center, to the focal point of perception, that which normally remains on the periphery. We can understand ornament in Xawery Wolski's work as a gift: for backing away from significance, from the excesses of gratuitous and unfounded reality. Derrida has suggested that there is no talent without an event taking place: in other words, it cannot exist without "surprise," nor can it exist without losing what is given; all that is left is smoke, rather than ash, the vestiges of sacrifice and pleasure. Insistence becomes excess, the image is multiplied until it offers an epic tale or the meandering story of a dream: what is produced is time, without the suspension of presence.

"Desire and the desire to give would be the same thing, a kind of tautology. But it could also be the tautological designation of the impossible. And if giving and taking are also the same, the impossible could be the same thing as what a thing would never be." Wolski presents an incarnation of desire, gives body to poetic visions, delivers the fragments of a search for the Other, makes vestiges acquire a memorable or even monumental dimension. Perhaps the sculptures that Wolski denominates Fossils (1995) are in fact seeds, elements that speak of future fertility. These paradoxical (petrified) seeds converge in the protected heart of poetry: that attempt to approach the original moment. There are works that manifest themselves as a compact block of earth that oppresses us and alludes to something other. Contemporaneity is plunged into a time prior to chronology; if we consider the primitive work of art, we notice that what fascinates us is the experience of time without intermediaries, an event without a date.

"The beginning," writes Octavio Paz, "resembles the end. But the primitive is a spiritually less defenseless man than we are. The seed has barely fallen into the hole when it fills the gap and swells with life. Its fall is resurrection: the gash is a scar and the separation, reunion. All times live in the seed." Xawery Wolski's sculpture is a swollen seed, a plethora of forms: junction of times, meeting place of all points in space. A previous time is revealed. Works that, rather than giving a sense of proximity, are presences, which bestows upon them a special temporal condensation, their particular position of nearness that is set aside, a synthetic definition of aura. Blanchot considered art to be our date of birth, a power of commencement, an act that arouses a present.

The seed is what is repeated, the original metaphor: it falls to the ground, into a rift in the land and is nourished by the essence of the earth. The idea of the fall and of torn space are inseparable from our image of the seed, as for Heidegger the *Da-sein* (the being-there) remits to the state of de-jection. Time exhibits its cracked structure, the work of art passes through that breach, the seed contains the global view that makes the fall and resurrection simultaneous. Wolski heads determinedly toward the seminal reasons, or, better said, fecundating reason. In *Claros del bosque*, María Zambrano points out that seeds are forms that sparkle in the "night of being," cries that seem to become obsessions, like that labyrinth that corresponds to the scale of one's body, figures that appear to be the origins of a reason that conceals itself in order to give signs of life, vestiges of the future. I must reiterate that Wolski's pieces are like a gift, a geode or a treasure, elements that are literally tempestuous when the aesthetic of traumatic ornament and hyperbolic banality triumphs on all sides.

Wolski's work—obsessed with chains, vertebrae, bunches of fruit, the beads making up a dress—reminds us that we require the hand's sense of touch and the most elemental gestures. That aesthetic of such elemental material can lead to the image or the dimension of dispossession: "Inorganic vitality is the relationship of the body to certain imperceptible forces or powers that possess it and which it possesses, like the moon possesses a woman's body." The sculptor leads us from the darkness of the world to an excessive whiteness, to the evocation of the serpent, that crown of formlessness. From the classicism of *Torso* (1994) to the strangeness of *White Organs* (1995) where corporality is shattered or even tends toward the grotesque.

It may be that in his sculptures, Xawery Wolski is establishing a certain fetishist drive, in a complex sedimentation of desire. The fetish, whether that be for a body part or for an inorganic object is, according to Freud, simultaneously the presence of the void that is the maternal penis and the symbol of its absence. As the symbol of something and at the same time, of its negation, it can only be maintained at the price of an essential laceration in which the two reactions constitute the nucleus of a true disjunction of the ego. What Wolski does not want to lose is his sense of the Earth, that storehouse of meaning in which Heidegger located the "staging of the truth of art," and thus he converts his sculptural activity into a concatenation. "Wolski invites the viewer to share his dialogue with the minimal form of original material and situates us in a realistic timelessness, almost devoid of meaning. The Chain, nevertheless, is full of times, and spaces where 'we hear' about pathetic, cruel or mythological pasts, about unknown presents and hopes still shut in a box; about the oppression of freedom, diaspora or settlement; it is also a fundamental symbol, the link between two beings." This artist is a traveler, someone who has experienced the deep territorial connection of the nomad (to a world in which, to use a nihilist metaphor, the desert is growing) who seeks the land, draws the roots, submerges desire in the dark bowels, accompanies the seeds in their fall.

Wolski manages to unite the hard and the soft, which reveal the dynamic existence of the resistant world, the sumptuousness of the form and the humility of the material. "Clay is the material of the poor: it suggests durability and the existence of an eternity defined by geological cycles. Clay is earth and it is memory; it is fragile just as our bodies are fragile. It has everything to do with the precariousness of life and social reality, which is so hard for some." From those steles that seemed to give a name to nameless death, to the Lungs of the cliff in Peru, in which he once again gave form to his criticism of a world of agglomeration and misery; from his fascinating terracotta dresses, to the drawings (*Tattoos*) made with a needle piercing paper, Wolski has gradually defined a sculptural territory of extraordinary beauty, where one surely rises up from the ground and darkness "to reach the light."

XAWERY WOLSKI

FERNANDO CASTRO FLORES, 1999.

Xawery Wolski's sculpture is a swollen seed, a plethora of forms: junction of times, meeting place of all points in space. A previous time is revealed. Works that, rather than giving a sense of proximity, are presences, which bestows upon them a special temporal condensation, their particular position of nearness that is set aside, a synthetic definition of aura.

That corporality of which we possess diverse organs and multiple vestiges presupposes, in the case of Wolski's work, an elliptical description of the subject by means of rituals and objects, a plastic obsession with things belonging to antiproductivity or to the classical attempt to represent time by nullifying it (marked by melancholy) in the still life: objects or images that circulate, leaving behind, initially, the signs of their absence in the place they came from.

FORMING THE INFINITE

JAROSLAW LUBIAK, 2022.

Everything plays out between word and physicality; a substance that can be body. Or at least it so happens in Xawery Wolski's art. Between breath, spirit, and ghosts on the one hand, and clay, bronze, and marble on the other (to mention the media he uses most frequently, but not exclusively), an ongoing process of spiritualization and materialization can be seen to take place at the same time. What makes their simultaneity possible is formation—in the literal and metaphorical sense. In the former sense, the titles' words sculpt the works equally as do the hands pressing the clay or hammering stone away. In the latter, images, metaphors, or figures interweave and merge with matter, allowing it to transgress itself. The stakes of this game of simultaneous materialization and spiritualization involve rethinking some of the questions posed by metaphysics, one of the key traditions of Western thought. The fact that the artist has spent many years living in the non-Western world means that he has been in a position to bring such questions to the fore.

This simultaneous materialization and spiritualization define the basic dynamics of Xawery Wolski's work, dynamics that enable formation; while metaphors, images, and figures are manifestations of this formation.

A good starting point for an analysis of this creative process can be found in one of the most extraordinary works of Wolski's oeuvre, *Terminus* (2000–2001), a low slab of whitewashed terracotta lying on the floor. At first sight, it could be mistaken for a podium of sorts, before the fineness of the material becomes apparent. Then, one thinks of a minimalist object, a connotation that is, however, contradicted by the nature of the material, encountered in traditional rather than modern sculpture. This anachronism provokes further investigation, which leads to the monochrome; but even this finds no confirmation, as a monochromatic picture should hang on a wall rather than resting on the ground. We are therefore left uncertain as to whether we are looking at a podium, a minimalist sculpture, or a picture placed down on the floor for a given moment.

The title offers no clue, but actually makes the confusion greater. The Latin word brings to mind the adjective "terminal," as in a "terminal state," i.e., approaching death. This ushers in a recognition: not a podium, but rather a tombstone. Other artworks by Wolski support this interpretation. The white surface carries no signs whatsoever, therefore the question to whom or what the grave is devoted remains unanswered; perhaps to all that will inevitably pass. The work would then be the metaphor of a gravestone, a visual prefiguration of the loss of all that elapses. In this context, the material is noteworthy: instead of the usual hard stone, identified with nearly eternal durability, this "epitaph" was made by using terracotta—hard indeed, and quite durable, but also fragile and delicate. The work's materiality casts the sepulchral interpretation into doubt, but does not necessarily annul it.

Of greater importance is that this interpretation relies on a metaphorical translation of the title. However, a more literal rendition is possible as well: *Terminus*, in Roman mythology, is the god of boundary markers; his name is also the word for the boundary stone and his "worship [...] centred on this stone [*herma*], with which the god could be identified."²¹ At the same time, the term can also be found in the Latin phrases *terminus ad quem*, "a final limiting point in time," and *terminus a quo*, "a first point in time."²² *Terminus*, therefore, stands for the opening time and the closing time, the beginning and the end. Xawery Wolski's work relies on a certain temporality and this condition is conveyed by the empty, clear plane (when we think of it as a picture) or the empty, clear space above the object's surface. On one hand, such a space can be considered as a place where images, metaphors, or figures appear, and on the other, as a place where they disappear. It thus becomes a figure in the artist's

²¹Terminus (god), The Free Dictionary [online], [https://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Terminus+\(god\)](https://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Terminus+(god)) [accessed 18 July 2022].

²²Terminus ad quem, The Free Dictionary [online], <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/terminus+ad+quem> [accessed 18 July 2022]; Terminus a quo, The Free Dictionary [online], <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/terminus+a+quo> [accessed 18 July 2022].

reflection on becoming, transience, and time. *Terminus* functions simultaneously as a metaphor, an image, and a figure, producing slightly different meanings: in each of these cases the materiality of the work transgresses towards different semantic values; this transgression is what I call formation. None of the meanings emerging from the work thence are ultimate; nor do they preclude others.

Chain Link: Beginning and End

Terminus addresses this issue of time, through which Xawery Wolski renews and reformulates metaphysical questions. Here, the opposition between beginning and end is erased to the point where the two become virtually indistinguishable.

In fact, the artist had by then found a form that allowed him to do away with the distinction between beginning and end by reducing them to fictional moments—which are necessary for us in our building of personal and global narratives. This form, the chain link, is a loop around emptiness. Even though it is, in its essence, a complete form, the link can connect with other links. This connection does not change its form, but occurs through emptiness. The chain is therefore paradoxical insofar that it creates a connection without violating the integrity of its components. A single link illustrates the formation of time as its beginning bends towards its end, and vice versa. Links can connect infinitely. In Wolski's art, the chain becomes a figure of infinity, as a fragment of a virtually endless sequence. It thus exemplifies the formation of infinity.²³

Wolski started working with the chain form in the second half of the 1980s when he permanently left Poland to avoid the repercussions of his political activism.²⁴ Having settled in Aix-en-Provence, he ceased sculpting with marble—which, up until then, had been his primary medium—and began to work with clay, as he was attracted by its malleability, combined with his pleasure of working manually with the soft material. The pliable character of sculpture made it possible for Wolski to render physical both time and infinity.

In 1988, Wolski created the work *L'image de l'image*, which consists of terracotta chains. Their thick bundles are arranged in the shape of two interconnected links, producing the titular "image of an image." Tautology here serves to augment the formation of infinity. Its figure is constituted by two large links composed of bundles of chains consisting of many small links. Their countless number evokes the sensual image of infinity. It is materialized in a mass of clay forms laboriously hand-sculpted by the artist over the course of several years.

In this period, chains appear in many of the artist's works. One of them being the *Beginning of the End* (1992). The title implies the formation of time; but interestingly enough, it has an underlying apocalyptic tone. The work, a mass, consisting in an uncountable number of links, has been arranged in a shape reminiscent of a small tumulus—a neolithic burial mound. In the artist's testimonies from the period, the chains become a metaphor of oppression and solidarity in times of resistance; of binding shackles, and of human relationships. Metaphorization here becomes a means for spiritualization.

In many of his works, the hand-made hand and finger imprints—traces of the effort of forming matter into the image of infinity, i.e., that of which goes beyond matter.

Imprint: Durability of the Trace

The materiality of the trace in Xawery Wolski's work can be related, on a counterpoint basis, to the philosophical discussion of the concept of trace, dating back to the second half of the twentieth century. Such a concept was crucial for Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence.²⁵ According to the French philosopher, forming and imprinting, is a movement of the trace, of its production and creation. At the same time, he stresses, the trace is constantly on the point of erasure. Moreover, the erasure of the trace is a means for preserving it, for if the trace were impossible to erase or obliterate, it would not be a trace, but an indestructible substance of some sort.²⁶ The trace is not material, but rather structural: it makes possible the appearance of all that exists. Derrida also uses the concept of a chain to describe reality as a "structure of generalized reference," composed of chains of traces cross-referencing each other and comprising a matrix from which emerges time and space.²⁷

Wolski's series *Sea Line* (1997/2010) portrays traces left on the sand by sea waves crashing against the shore. One can hardly think of a more ephemeral "drawing": each successive wave erases the former line to trace its own. The series consists of seven photographs of different lines. They are nothing but the erasure of a drawing

²³ I hereby thank Isabella Czarnowska, who in our conversation in Dańków on 6 July 2022, suggested tracing a connection between Xawery Wolski's work and Emmanuel Lévinas's idea of infinity. The latter's *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1961) remains an important reference here.

²⁴ Between 17 and 23 March 1985, Wolski participated in a hunger strike "for the release of Marek Adamkiewicz, sentenced to 30 months' imprisonment for refusing to take the military oath of enlistment," held in a church in Podkowa Leśna near Warsaw. *Kalendarium*, in *Archiwum Fundacji Wolność i Pokój*, [online], <https://archiwumfwip.wordpress.com/kalendarium/> [accessed: 29 June 2022].

²⁵ The concept of trace appears in the writings of many thinkers, which allows Derrida to encompass and incorporate in the work of deconstruction several seemingly distinct, if not antagonistic, schools of thought, but this movement is neither reconciliation nor opposition. Derrida juxtaposes Husserl and Freud on the one hand, and Lévinas and Saussure on the other, in order to extract from all these references such a formulation of trace that relates to all these sources without being contained within any of them.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Différance*, in idem, *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), 24. Cf. Derrida, *Freud and the scene of writing*, in idem, *Writing and difference*, translated by Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 289.

²⁷ Derrida, *Différance*, op. cit., 24.

created by the sea in an image evoked by the artist with the intention of preserving that which appears for an instant only to then instantly disappear. Does this not constitute the ultimate spiritualization of the most transient? Spiritualization materialized in a photograph.

There is a paradox in the way that the photographs look rather like art prints. In a similarly paradoxical way, a printmaking quality is also present in other works of the artist, notably from the *Tattoos* series (1997–1998). Here, paper becomes a metaphor of skin. Needle-pricked holes puncturing it produces a “drawing.” These constitute barely perceptible images: lines, constellations of rings, the human spine, or its vertebrae, etc. There is therefore an unstable equilibrium between preservation and erasure taking place. The shapes rendered with the needle pricks are barely visible, forcing the spectator to position themselves in front of the work in order to properly see them, with a slight movement triggering the same shapes to merge back again into the background. This persistent disappearance of the imprint relates these works back to the aforementioned Derridean notion of trace.

This same issue gains another dimension and perspective in *Cave* (1993), a series of works in dark terracotta. The work again consists mostly of imprints of the artist’s body, such as his hands or legs. The work *Body Imprints*, on another hand, resembles a thick roll produced by enwrapping the artist’s body in a thick wad of clay. Furthermore, *Tunnel* consists in a vertical cylindrical form where Wolski has manually removed the clay from its inside, leaving finger imprints. The piece evokes an archaic, arm’s-length-deep vessel; prototype, or “archetype,” of all ceramic vessels. Another work from this series, *Wall I*, consists of twelve quadrilateral terracotta panels, hanging very close to each other, forming a continuous but uneven surface bearing traces of lines or dentures impressed by finger strokes. This may bring to mind the most primal prehistorical manifestation of visual expression that could be found on cave walls. The whole series is a fantasy about what is the most primitive, the “cavelike” needs of body shelter, stocking up, and marking one’s immediate surroundings.

This motif of extracting clay returns in *Well* (1993), a work consisting of a low octagonal prism. The material itself has been removed from inside, with the hand movements having left perpendicular grooves on the walls. This casing has interestingly never seen water, the well is always dry, complicating the metaphor introduced by the title. In *Fingerprints* (1992–1993), Wolski grabbed and squeezed handfuls of clay, producing sculptures that resemble prehistoric hand axes, but which do not serve their original purpose. The artist arranges them in a heap or mound, investing them with a commemorative function—this is a figure of commemoration devoid of a specific object.

Something archaic infuses Xawery Wolski’s work, as if the ancient and past were both demanding their return; or at least the right to reveal themselves, as well as their underlying and secret control over us. This hypnotizing effect caused by these works is doubtless based on the mechanism of what Friedrich Schelling called *unheimlich*, “uncanny,” which is “what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open.”²⁸

The motif of the imprint recurs constantly throughout Wolski’s work, with one case in particular pertaining to social issues. *Las estelas [Stelae]* (1997) consists of thirteen monumental objects installed in the public square by the entrance to the Zapata metro station in Mexico City, made in collaboration with the homeless children living there.²⁹ The kids left imprints of their hands and knees, with one of the boys even producing his self-portrait, impressing his face into the clay. Regarding the context of the creation of this work, Edward Sullivan writes, “[Children] are utterly transitory forces within the pattern of existence in this metropolis—they disappear as quickly as they come onto the scene, leaving virtually no imprint on the minds of residents and passers-by.”³⁰ The Zapata Station stelae elucidates the entire problematic nature of the imprint in Wolski’s art: the purpose is to represent what has been doomed to disappear, to make clear what has been condemned to invisibility, and to manifest what has been passed without a trace.

We should however not succumb here to the temptation of a superficial interpretation; the point is not to replace that which disappears with a monumentalized presence, but to preserve the trace for eternity, meaning a return to the classic interpretation of metaphysics. Grappling with the Derridian logic of erasure, Wolski wants to capture in the imprint, to reveal in its trace both disappearance and erasure. This is a form of mourning, but perhaps more than that.

Organ: Spirit and Prosthesis

The body will always change and pass away, but its imprint will remain—not forever, of course, but will remain nonetheless. For some reason, this brings a certain consolation, along with a slight sense of unease. What the imprint shows is a kind of spectre of the body. The works from the *Cave* series are a materialized spectre of Xawery Wolski’s body from the period of when he made them. This body is no longer, and the works are traces of

²⁸ Friedrich Schelling (2.2, 649) quoted in Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, translated by David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 132.

²⁹ In an essay about the project, Elena Poniatowska emphasizes the scale and effects of child homelessness: “In Mexico, there are children everywhere in the flesh and blood. They live on the streets. According to statistics published by the Commission on Human Rights, they total 16,000—boys, for the most part. They live, they roam, they steal, they get high and perish on the streets. More than 3,000 are under the age of six. More than 1,000 are two years old or younger. They sniff glue or paint thinner through a ball of crumpled rag soaked in blue or some other solvent. They seek escape. They dissipate. ‘I like it. I see shapes.’ They have no future.” Eadem, *Las estelas*, in *Xawery Wolski*, (Mexico City: Landucci Editores, 1999), XV.

³⁰ Edward J. Sullivan, *Xawery Wolski: Intimate Conversations with Nature*, in *Xawery Wolski*, (Milan: Skira, 2020), 26.

what has passed. At the same time, there is a spiritualization of clay or terracotta that is occurring here. The materials are therefore transubstantiating themselves towards that which is not.

Here, we are touching upon the crucial issues of spirit, spectres, and matter. Let us start with the first, the most complex of the three—a term that has been consigned to religious and theological contexts. As Nick Land notes, “In the course of its recent history this word has been inflated by Hegel into the cosmic medium of transaction—the super-heated lubricant of global eventration—and then trafficked to the edge of worthlessness by the culture succeeding him, before finally succumbing to an irreparable marginalization by the scientific advances of experimental and behavioural psychology, neurology, neuroanatomy, cognitive science, cybernetics, artificial intelligence, until it becomes a sentimentalism, a vague peripheralized metaphor, a joke... [...] Who could still use such a word without humour or disdain? Spirit is less a misleading or dangerous word than a ridiculous one; a Coelacanth of a word. Yet it persists: the mark of a clownish incompetence at death.”³¹ One could hardly ask for a more fitting and succinct recognition of the condition of the spirit in contemporary discourse. But the last sentence of the quote marks a sudden twist in the argumentation, a shocking punchline.

Spirit not only persists, but also returns in a stubborn manner. Land’s essay is a vehement critique of Derrida, even if the latter was one of the few philosophers who revived this term for contemporary thought in his book *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*.³² But Land thinks he did not go far enough in terms of meeting the challenge of spirit.

Without going into the details of the dispute, let us rather put its propositions to use. Derrida’s text is worth comparing with his later book, *Spectres of Marx*.³³ In *Of Spirit*, Derrida performs a fundamental transition in the metaphysical tradition, contesting the crucial opposition between spirit and spectres. Spirit, he argues, is haunted by its spectre. For a philosopher, this haunting, as a kind of relation or structure, makes possible the appearance of both spirit and spectre; as they precede all that appears and disappears so as to perennially return. Traditional notions of spirit are a metaphysical or theological reduction of a more originary spectrality. If spirit appears, it is solely as its effect.

In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida extends his field of analysis to include contemporary society, positing that it is undergoing increasingly intense spectralization. This happens because “media tele-technology, economy and power,” which determine the functioning of contemporary societies, have an “irreducibly spectral dimension.”³⁴ Crucial for spectrality is its medium, or rather the “medium of media themselves (news, the press, tele-communications, techno-tele-discursivity, techno-tele- iconicity, that which in general assures and determines the *spacing* of public space, the very possibility of *res publica* and the phenomenality of the political),” an element that “itself is neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes.”³⁵ Derrida made his analysis in 1993. However, today, with the “tele-techno-medio-economic and scientifico-military forces”³⁶ he wrote about having been joined by social media and universal digitalization, the spectralization of reality has intensified and accelerated, claiming nearly all of it.

In this context the stakes of Xawery Wolski’s art are revealed: which is what makes it so simultaneously attractive and disturbing, and above all so extraordinary and unique. The artist sets spiritualization and materialization in opposition to the contemporary world’s dominant spectralization. This game is based on subtle distinctions: it is difficult to separate spiritualization from spectralization since they emerge from the common matrix of spectrality, a matrix composed of chains of traces. Confusion can therefore easily occur. Furthermore, Wolski—unlike Derrida, who revealed the spectres haunting every spirit—subjects spectres to formation, conjuring spirit, or at least its effects.

I have already begun to mention the spiritualization and materialization of spectres that take place in works from Wolski’s *Cave* series. These works are negatives of the fragments of the artist’s body impressed in terracotta. But throughout Wolski’s oeuvre, many positive images of the body or its fragments can be found as well (with two exceptions: *You Were Born Like a Saint with the Consciousness of a Snake*, 1995–1996, and *Dream*, 2004). Most of such are schematic in their treatment: more figures than representations. The schematization and abstraction disembodiment them to some extent, and biological organicity is replaced by the sensuality of terracotta.

One of the most moving works featuring this motif is *Hanging Body* (2001). Suspended upside down, the body lacks feet, hands, head, as well as sexual characteristics. The effect produced is based on a meeting of opposites: the appealing sensuality of the material and aestheticization of form on one hand, and the striking brutality of representation on the other. No solution is offered to this contradiction, as if the work were meant to illustrate the figure of the oxymoron. Still, this is an image of a decapitated, mutilated body, hung by its legs. Was

³¹ Nick Land, *Spirit and Teeth*, in *Of Derrida, Heidegger, and Spirit*, edited by David Wand (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 41–42.

³² Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

³³ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York & London: Routledge, 1994).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 50–51.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

it sacrificed, executed, lynched? Aestheticization here obscures the violence, transforming the image of a corpse into an object that invites contemplation or the study of its references to ancient sculpture.

The effect of *White Organs* (1995) is underpinned by a similar mechanism. This work consists in a set of small sculptures, each a representation of a bodily organ. Made of white terracotta, they resemble a collection of fine, precious objects serving unknown but higher goals. They were inspired by pre-Columbian votive vessels, but are not vessels themselves. Again, aestheticization hides from view the violence of dismembering, partitioning, eviscerating. Presented in groups, they may bring to mind the image of organs being set aside during an autopsy, removed ahead of an embalming procedure, or destined for some special preparation.

In the case of *Hanging Body* and *White Organs*, sculpting becomes a complex process of formation. An original image (of the human body or a particular organ) is abstracted and schematized so that the resulting shape can be materialized in terracotta. At the same time, the materialization relies on the aesthetization of the precision of the execution and the fineness of the finish. This leads to spiritualization. Moreover, the sculptures seem to be surrounded by an aura, suggesting that they are objects used in secret and solemn ceremonies.

At precisely this moment, the indistinguishability between spirit and spectres comes into view. Aestheticization with abstraction and schematization leads to spiritualization, as it forms matter according to an image, whilst allowing it to transgress itself. Spiritualization produces only the effect of spirit, and the organs being actually devoid of spirit, are seemingly waiting for it to enter. The organs are like prosthesis, and the body like a phantom for spirit.

But it can be said that the appearance of an aura belongs already to the realm of spectrality. Since spiritualization produces only an effect, it is all the more difficult to tell it apart from a spectral aura, which presence transforms sculptural bodies and organs (this is true also for other works with corporeal motifs) into metaphors, but even more so. When these works appear in greater concentration, as it happens in Wolski's installations in Dańków, they are like a dream image. Entering the space where they have been brought together resembles an immersion in a dream; we can observe huge lips (*untitled*, 2012) protruding from the wall as if they were a body, moments later, a constellation of organs appear, unknowingly arranged a, whereupon one encounters a schematically rendered bone (*untitled*, 2006), hand (*untitled*, 1996), and female body without a head, arms, nor feet (*untitled*, 2006). All this seems to have been dreamed into being by a character that is a complete human figure (*Dream*, 2004). This collection of phantoms and prostheses combines oneiric poetics with the horror of phantasmagoria. Spiritualization wrestles against spectralization, which means that the sculptures can function as aesthetically-sophisticated objects of contemplation, or even as haunting spectres.

At the same time, however, abstraction and schematization both enable the representations of bodily fragments becoming something archaic, as if the past were pouring into these figures, and their damage were an effect of the destructive forces of time. More importantly, they do not relate to any specific examples identifiable in art history (which would've made this a case of spectral return), but rather, are synthetic figures of past images.

Vertebrae (2011) can serve as a counterpoint to *Hanging Body*. The works' juxtaposition makes one conjecture: whether the latter might be the effect of an ultimate dismemberment of a body, of trimming it down to the bone, to the spine? Or, alternatively, whether the passage of time spares all but the mineralized parts of the body, dooming soft tissues to a quicker disintegration? The latter interpretation seems to be more in line with the work, which itself has been produced by multiplying a single animal vertebra. This is therefore a figure of the backbone, furnishing the image of a fossil and producing the metaphor of the resistance to the passage of time. This metaphor gains a material dimension, the sculpture being made of bronze. It is a monument, as it were, of all that remains.

Circles: Pneuma and Echo

In *On Spirit*, Derrida discusses two different ways of understanding the titular concept in Western tradition: one connects it with breath, as in the Greek *pneuma* and Latin *spiritus*, the other, according to Heidegger's analyses, relates to flame, as in the German *Geist*. He notes that an "immense semantics of breathing, of inspiration or respiration"³⁷ is imprinted in the Greek and Latin notions of spirit.

These are the semantics that precisely define Xawery Wolski's series of *Pneuma*, made between 2010 and 2020, some of the works being presented by the artist in exhibitions titled *Pneuma—Air and Spirit*.³⁸ Spiritualization is not only fully revealed here, but is also brought to its final manifestation. It looks as if, under the pressure of the aerial element, Wolski's art were to airify. The motif of the *pneuma* seems to appear in many of the works. For instance, *Circles*, made of terracotta beads or grains, finds a complement in *Air Circle* (2010), and tunics or dresses, rendered with pumpkin seeds (*Origen*, 2009), bronze (*Aurum II*, 2013), or stale bread (*Without Memory*, 2016), in *Air Dress* (2010). It could be assumed that Wolski's pneumatology is accomplished through a double sublimation: material—a transition from a solid to a gaseous state (terracotta circle and air circle), and symbolic—the sublimation of art through the spiritualization of an artwork.

And indeed, when we look at *Air Circle*, we cannot resist the sensation of lightness, especially due to the fact that we are looking at a form made of air. This happens until we realize that the work has been crocheted with wire. The loops of this knitted fabric enable the flow of air and reflections of light. The spirit effect emerges from the material of metal. This makes us aware that air is also matter but also has amass, and that further, the

³⁷ Derrida, *Of Spirit...*, op. cit., 99.

³⁸ Xawery Wolski: *Pneuma—Air and Spirit*, Museo Diego Rivera Anahuacalli, Mexico City, 2011; Xawery Wolski: *Pneuma—Air and Spirit*, Liu Haisu Art Museum, Shanghai, 2016.

aerial works are both composed of metal and air. In this case, metaphorical spiritualization is conditioned by specific materialization.

In his deconstruction, Derrida stops at Heideggerian conclusions, which considers the Greek and Latin notions of *pneuma* and *spiritus* as secondary to the meaning manifest in the German word *Geist*. Derrida quotes Heidegger as saying that spirit is the “flame which flames,” and adds parenthetically: “or inflames itself, *entflammt*: what is proper to spirit is this auto-affective spontaneity which has need of no exteriority to catch fire or set fire, to pass ecstatically outside itself...”³⁹ Incidentally, what is striking in this debate about what spirit is or what it materializes into is a return of the most primal mythology of the elements – two of the four. Which makes one wonder whether terracotta, which combines them all: earth (clay), water (needed to soften the medium), as well as fire and air (in firing), would not be the most complete form of materialization of spirit.

The spontaneity of self-excitement, the renouncement of any reference to externality, is what makes Nick Land vehemently critique Heidegger’s concept as postulated by Derrida. Unlike them, he perceives spirit as bound up closely with matter. He writes: “Wild matter is untouched by its difference from spirit, insofar as this is supposed to depend upon a logical disjunction.”⁴⁰ And he further adds: “There is no concept of particularity that is not theological: aligned with the phantasm of a transcendent spirit that stands disjoined from the ineliminable materiality of all spiritualization processes—to steal Nietzsche’s term. That matter is volatilized to different degrees of spiritualization is not in the least dependent upon spiritual causalities of any kind.”⁴¹ Land confirms emphatically that spiritualization is an effect of material transformations.

Xawery Wolski’s work, in my opinion, is informed by concepts approximating Land’s arguments. But unlike the philosopher’s casual statements, it is a developed and subtle practice of forming together matter and spirit.

We have already had an opportunity to recognize this, but I would like to return to the chain as an image, metaphor, and figure that evokes other images, metaphors, and figures. The chain link as an image enables Wolski to give rise to two other distinct, yet interconnected, tropes in his art, those being the twine and the circles. Let us put the first aside for another occasion and consider the second.

This trope unfolds through a sequence of transpositions: chain link—vertebra—circle. The sequence is revealed by work order: *Column* (1998), *Infinity Chains* (2009), *Vertebrae* (2011), *Crossover of Voices* (2009), *Irregular* (2007). This list clearly demonstrates that the chain is not only a shape that is employed in Wolski’s actual creative process, but also a manifestation of the artist’s thinking. Indeed, the relationships between his works resemble his link connections and chain arrangements.

The link and the chain appear in Wolski’s work as a way of reviving the metaphysical notion of infinity. This led to him confronting Constantin Brâncuși’s postulations in *Endless Column* (1937–1938), a monumental hanging sculpture composed of rings that resembles the petrified part of a plant or the spine of an unknown animal species. This biological metaphor allows us to see in the work a figure of potentially infinite growth or expansion, interrupted by some tragic event that, annihilating the organism, has produced this fossil. With *Column*, Wolski was able to experiment in a way that made him rethink the form of the chain: *Infinity Chains* are suspended vertically, from where it is close to the *Vertebrae* of the suspended spinal column. The link here becomes a vertebra. Importantly, both forms, being modifications of the loop, surround an emptiness. It is in this emptiness that breath can enter to produce sound. *Crossover of Voices* is a beautiful suggestion of such a possibility: it makes one think of an unusual instrument that could capture, produce, or convey whispers, songs, or calls. This soundless work in fact resounds with countless voices and melodies; or at least is a metaphor of such resounding. (Which invites the question how spirit, as *pneuma*, breath, relates to word and music). In *Irregular*, the suspended rings form a horizontal composition. They inevitably bring to mind the idea of a skeleton. Nudged, they begin to swing majestically and make metallic sounds. The intensity of these sounds gradually decreases, and a silence falls, which can still be interrupted by a sudden clink, like a delayed echo.

In Wolski’s art, the relationships between the different works can be described through the figure of the chain in moments when they are connected closely like links, or metaphors of echo, when there is a resonance of some sort between their material, verbal, or conceptual forms.

Grain: Formation of the Infinite

There are also visual echoes in Wolski’s oeuvre. Made especially for this exhibition, *Shadows* (2002) is an echo of *Irregular*. On the wall of the Museum of Contemporary Sculpture, not far from *Air Circle*, circles materialize themselves—painted with grey clay like a mural, then meticulously worked with sandpaper like a relief, they become an image of disintegration, a metaphor of transience, and a figure of time as that which establishes an end and brings destruction. The work contrasts itself through the character of its sketching, an intentional carelessness of execution: the often smudgy traces of the charcoal underdrawing have not been removed, and the dry clay flakes and detaches from the wall in large patches. Moreover, unlike the other artworks, devoted to that which resists the flow of time, this one highlights and affirms disintegration. Forming consists here in a radical decomposition of form.

³⁹ Derrida, *Of Spirit...*, op. cit., 98.

⁴⁰ Land, *Spirit...*, op. cit., 47.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 47–48.

This makes it clear that Wolski is not motivated by a naïvely understood desire to commemorate. He is aware that the durability offered by terracotta, stone, or bronze can aspire to “eternity” only in the perspective of a single human lifespan. In longer—non-human—temporal perspectives, the form the artist lends his works to is merely a moment in a never-ending transformation of matter. Time in this context should be construed as the duration of constant transformation. *Shadows* introduce a radical metamorphosis to the exhibition space, making it a reference point for Wolski’s entire oeuvre.

The self-transgression of matter in constant transformation encapsulates here the notion of time and infinity. But Xawery Wolski achieves much more—he discovers a material form of infinity, discovers what has always existed and, more importantly, what has always been present in his life. At some point, he realizes that DNA chains are part of the science of genetics, and interestingly enough, genetic research into cereal grains was conducted by his father and ancestors in Dańków.

Present in his life from the outset, grains would become the principal materials and motifs in Wolski’s art. He uses them to produce tunics, shirts, necklaces, gyres; they are made of terracotta and bronze.

More importantly, however, in the biological sense, a grain is the beginning and conclusion of a plant’s life. Whereas a chain link is an image of completeness, a metaphor of the elimination of the distinction between start and finish, a figure of infinity, the grain is all that is material. It is a nub of matter that is not alive but can come to life in contact with the four elements: earth, water (moisture), air, and fire (warmth). At the same time, it is a germ of spiritualization, when the operation of the elements causes it to transgress its form and sprout as a plant. It is also a supreme materialization of spirit as an infinite metabolism of matter.

Finally, the grain is crucial for Xawery Wolski’s material poetics, containing as it does a trace, an imprint of the genetic chain, a seed of transformation, and the beauty of form.

THE PLACE

JOANNA M. SOSNOWSKA, 2022.

Intersected by a small river forming a large pond with an island in the middle, surrounded by woods and shrubbery in the distance; extensive flat grounds dotted by old trees form a frame and a background for an original sculpture park. At the centre of this landscape is a manor house, its foundations dating back to the nineteenth century, with detached outbuildings that have now been converted into a sculpture gallery and an artist’s studio. Dańków, a former noble residence, is both a specific space and PLACE, where, according to the anthropologist Marc Augé, the old world, fenced-off and culturally self-contained, enters through the individual into a symbiosis with a world of open, postmodern places.⁴² Xawery Wolski has created in Dańków his own sculpture park. Such initiatives are rare, but not unheard of. Their origins should be sought in Baroque gardens adorned with statues, albeit not in their original, orderly form; but rather in how we often see them today, with nature and art in close proximity to one another.... intertwining. Such parks are scattered around the world, and range from publicly accessible to highly exclusive. What makes them different is the local landscape and the nature of particular collections. Some are strictly auteur projects, developed in a symbiosis with nature; whereas other exhibitions are often open air and feature artworks by different sculptors as selected by the park’s owner.

The mansion stands at the very centre of a park space that Wolski has overseen the transformation of. The most important building within the complex though, one that is not centrally-located, is the Laboratory, where Wolski’s works are displayed on three levels. Other artwork by the artist can also be found in the other buildings; and of course throughout the park itself. Xawery Wolski spent his early childhood on the family estate, until it was confiscated by the communist authorities. In the early 2000s it was returned to its rightful owners; and a few years ago it became his place of residence... his dwelling. And a dwelling, as Martin Heidegger argues, is a building.⁴³ This historical and familiar space, a space of identity, has been rebuilt by Wolski, with it becoming a PLACE.

“We know that the body occupies physical places in the world,” Hans Belting writes, “and it is only this that makes them [the physical places] unique and impossible to confuse with others. But the body itself is a place where we perceive and remember images, a *locus of images*.”⁴⁴ He begins his argument by stating: “All theories of perception agree that our consciousness is a *locus of images*. We not only see images of the world, but also the world in images, in such images that we produce for ourselves.”⁴⁵ Indeed, the author of one of those theories, Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, posited that the image exists only insofar as we shape the same based on our own observations: “Consequently, the number and diversity of images will depend on one’s own body, one’s sensory mediators (the five senses) and the motors (gesture, voice) that participate in the shaping of sensorial and concrete representations.”⁴⁶ The artist is therefore, like any one of us for that matter, a carrier of images; but,

⁴²Marc Augé. 1995. *Non-Places. Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, translated by John Howe (London & New York: Verso).

⁴³Martin Heidegger. 1971. Building, Dwelling, Thinking. In A. Hofstadter (Ed.), *Poetry, Language and Thought* (143-162). New York: Harper & Row.

⁴⁴Hans Belting. 2009. *Miejsce obrazów*, translated by Mariusz Bryl. In M. Bryl, Piotr Juskiewicz, Piotr Piotrowski, Wojciech Suchocki (Eds.) *Perspektywy współczesnej historii sztuki. Antologia przekładów „Artium Quaestiones”*, (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, 1045–1060, here 1046; cf. Hans Belting. 2011. *An Anthropology of Images. Picture, Medium, Body*, translated by Thomas Dunlap (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press), 37–48.

⁴⁵Hans Belting, op. cit., 1045.

⁴⁶Jean-Jacques Wunenburger. 2011. *Filozofia obrazów*, translated by Tomasz Stróżyński (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria), 15; originally published as *Philosophie des images* (Paris: PUF, 2001).

being an artist, they transform them in a special way: "Although the image is a psychological fact, it has always been the object of material transposition to an external medium, one independent of the subject."⁴⁷ Or, we might rather say, *distinct from* the subject, for the work is never truly independent, even when spatial contact has been cut off. In Dańków, this connection with the subject is perceived as very strong, inviting symbolic interpretations of the individual artworks.

Leaving Poland in the 1980s, Wolski took with him a store of accumulated mental images – the events of martial law, the death of Fr. Jerzy Popiełuszko, flower crosses in the streets, Dańków visited on All Souls' Day, and the Laboratory, where his father ran technological experiments with cereal grains. He travelled with those images, and they would return to him in a more or less conscious way wherever he stayed or lived; as he also became familiar with other cultures. The natural, individual body is also a medium of collective images, images produced by culture: of environs and experience. All of these images remain in "corporeal memory," accruing, engendering, and finally constituting identity. Xawery Wolski once wrote that "The accomplished work remains open to contemplation, i.e., a focusing on the content of the given image, and that, I believe, is the most important aspect of my work."⁴⁸ In order to contemplate a work, one needs to see it, to possess it in the form of an image. The Dańków Sculpture Park, seen as an entity and in different parts, represents scenes captured by our seeing.

That sculptures produce images always in connection with the space in which they are displayed is a banal observation; but still one that needs to be foregrounded here, because a private sculpture park created on the property of such a distinct identity, represents a special space... and a PLACE. Its openness and changeability, resulting from the artist's constant interventions, as well as the place's interaction with nature, the changing seasons, times of day, and weather, correspond with the character of Wolski's sculptures, which are originally conceived as potentially transformable. Although they have not been made specifically for the park – they are universal and can be displayed in various spaces – the pieces nonetheless take on a special significance here. Some, like the huge chains rising between the massive old lime and maple trees, like statues in Baroque gardens, adorn the surrounds. Others grow together; and one can actually stumble over them when walking across the lawn; and be surprised by the sight of forms hanging on a tree. You may also pass by a heap of chains, and think they are scrap metal. At closer inspection the seemingly rusty links turn out to be ceramic, like most of the sculptures in Dańków Sculpture Park. Resting on a flowerbed, two white connected links are, one might say, the essence of a chain – the chain *per se*. They make us aware that the chain not only serves to fetter, to enslave, but also to connect permanently that which binds. Lying in the grass, small crosses, ceramic also, connecting like paving blocks, are some of the many versions of works composed with these forms. They are a distant echo of the flower crosses of Martial Law, when the paramount touched the ground. Part of the park, the Laboratory, houses works that could otherwise get "lost" in the open space; like the *White Organ*, reminiscent of votive offerings displayed in churches. While such offerings are common throughout the world, they are deeply rooted in Mexican culture, which the artist feels an affinity with, having spent several years in Mexico. White ceramic forms, resembling body parts, limbs and inner organs, hang on walls or are arranged on special display tables. Votive offerings, reinterpreted by Wolski, make us think in the first place of mutilation, especially when displayed next to sculptures of fragmentary bodies, limbless and headless. They are white and beautiful, but also poignant, bringing to mind the idea of mutilation, particularly when they hang upside down. Similarly ambiguous are the tunics-surplices-mortcloths, which are simple forms executed in various media, suspended or arranged into the shape of a cross, evoking notions of absence and emptiness. Made of ceramic elements or small forms cast in bronze, every element is different, because, as Wolski contends, "Recurrence within a work is not precise, like in factory production, but approximate, as in nature." A profusion of small details and their accumulation in the form of specific artworks resonates particularly strongly in works most closely connected with the PLACE – in *Grains*. The grain motif recurs throughout Wolski's work in various forms. Circular shields reminiscent of mandalas or solar discs are composed with dozens of round seeds of exotic plants. Other works use ceramic beads instead of actual seeds. Cast in either bronze or ceramic, familiar-looking cereal grains, sometimes larger than life and arranged on the ground, at other times rendered in natural size and woven into the delicate structure of a mesh comprising a tangled fabric, symbolise images of origin, source, rebirth of life. Indeed, the grains here are an extremely potent symbol, reclaimed here as a return to place, to the Laboratory, where experiments aimed at improving crop yields were once conducted. *Grains* are in fact the materialization of an image conveyed by the artist.

Analysing the Heideggerian concept of space, Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz writes, "The surrounding world (*Umwelt*) is always an understood world, and the work of exploring the meanings and places of the things that compose the world can be called a hermeneutics of space."⁴⁹ In order to fully understand Xawery Wolski's art, one needs to see it *in situ* in Dańków as an element of a particular, meaning-imbued space. Images "aggregated" by the artist elsewhere intertwine with those made here, producing the PLACE.

⁴⁷Ibid., 42.

⁴⁸Xawery Wolski, typescript. 1992. Espace Lyonnais d'Art Contemporain (ELAC) (July 16).

⁴⁹Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz. 2005. Język przestrzeni u Heideggera, (part 1), *Teksty Drugie* (4), 9.

THE INTERSTITIAL SPACE (IN TIME). NOTES ON APPROACHING XAWERY WOLSKI'S WORK. OCTAVIO ZAYA, 2006.

What is given is not a massive and opaque world, or a universe of adequate thought; it is a reflection which turns back over the density of the world in order to clarify it, but which, coming second (après coup), reflects back to it only its own light.

— Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Reviewing the texts that Xawery Wolski often writes to clarify certain aspects of his sculptural work, one comes across quotations from such canonic philosophers and authors as Plato and Walter Benjamin, Pythagoras and Martin Heidegger, Nadiejda Mandelstam and Maurice Blanchot. Other renowned Polish sculptors are also in the habit of elaborating complementary texts and notes for their work. In this sense, Wolski is participating in a well-known European tradition. Unfortunately, certain critics have used this practice to justify drawing a parallel between Wolski's work and that of a number of other creators, but this really only serves to expose the fact that these critics' so-called analyses are improvised and inexperienced. They make no mention of the work's language nor of the world into which it is inserted; they never explain their gratuitous references nor how these contribute to an exploration or clarification of the ambiguities and enigmas presented by Wolski's creations. As a result, the quotations that the artist uses in his writings and notes have a silencing effect, and his intentionality is weakened by the incoherent cacophony of academic rhetoric and the inconsistencies of those who impose their premeditated notions on his work. In any case, Wolski's artistic production since the late 1980s is not simply an accumulation of quotations nor an attempt to illustrate them, because it is based on experience and is understood through the viewer's experience of it. In fact, the development and growth of a sculptural oeuvre obeys its own imperatives, not those of confessional literature or the private journal. But it would be a rash and dangerous act to ignore the artist's notes, because these often condense and elucidate situations, ideas and references that help give shape to his artistic production. The work itself, however, has other intentions.

Since the late 1980s, a relationship has been developing between what is understood to be sculpture and other disciplines, especially architecture, installation and painting. They have become so closely connected that in many cases, we can even speak of a merger and a convergence, in a direction or scenario that is more complex than it may appear at first sight. Both in the magnitude or dimension of their creations and in their comprehension and handling of space, some sculptors have appropriated certain attributes of architecture and painting, while many architects and visual artists have experimented with the creation of sculptural spaces within their own languages. Technology is certainly one of the reasons for this convergence, and for the interdisciplinary wrinkle that proposes to narrow the gap between different practices and categories. But there are situations that point us in another direction altogether.

Following the sociopolitical convulsions of the 1960s and 1970s and the experimental urge that led to the development of land art, body art, process art, performance, conceptual art and the earliest examples of video art, and faced with the growing cultural disenchantment that accompanied the widespread commercialization of art in the 1980s, many contemporary sculptors have revisited and revised—systematically at times, intuitively at others—some of the expansive and tentative concerns and strategies of minimalist and post-minimalist sculptors. In the indirect attraction and affinity for permanence and change, strength and vulnerability, stability and fragility, and in the dispute between order and fragmentation, a new understanding and adaptation of primary forms helped give shape to a sculptural language that combined ontological minimalist rigidity with the inconsistencies in the eccentric interconnections that post-minimalism had borrowed primarily from surrealism. This language proposed a syntax that could accommodate what might be characterized as the space-time of radical change, where signification—the meaning of culture—was conditional and based on the adoption of an expansive, dilated perception.

Xawery Wolski's work has something in common with this tendency, and that is a desire to transcend the Greenbergian fixation on the "invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors." [1] Wolski's sculptures are not only developed or defined based on the parameters of the medium and the technique, but also as a kind of materialist formalism like the one Barthes spoke of—a formalism that is in some sense based on an analysis of the world that attributes signification to the materials themselves or inscribes them with a linguistic code. And at the same time, a formalism that through its materiality, is sustained by a renewed relationship with, commitment to or dialogue with questions of being, society and transcendence. [2]

In Wolski's sculptures, the manifestation of this materialist formalism is at times based on material simulations or reconstructions (as in the "chains" series) and at others, on the human condition that inserts itself into the materiality of things and of existence (as in the "caverns" series); at times on material subjectivity (in the "caverns" and "observatories [caves]," and in the artist's sculptural fragmentations based on the "body"), and at others, on extreme materialism (as in Wolski's works which we access through "touch," like his rooms, caverns and caves).

Wolski always bases his work on simple, primary forms, or on elemental and intelligible proposals, most of them in clay, in order to develop an evocative and open language. The artist's medium, the simplicity of his forms and the "phrases" deployed by his work all contribute to an elucidation that provides the viewer—inasmuch as his or her ability and imagination permit—with a glimpse of the artist's intentions. So as a medium, the industrial clay that Wolski works with, "is related to the idea of (my) work, which reflects time, the planet's cycles, variability and dislocation." [3] Clay is a primordial element, with a history that goes back to the creation of man in the Judeo-Christian Genesis. Because of that, because of its infinite references, it evokes not only the notion of durability—"Existence in an eternity whose rhythm has been created by geological cycles," writes the artist—but also man's relationship with the earth. Thus, clay is charged with memory. Moreover, when worked by the hands with the addition of water—as Wolski does—and then fired at high temperatures, the clay undergoes an irreversible transformation, a transition to a new identity, no longer malleable, but hard and solid. All these associations arising from the artist's medium deal in some way with time, memory, human intervention, transition and transformation—all of which are direct or indirect themes of Xawery Wolski's work.

While sculpture may present itself as a clearly materialist art form, it also inspires a transcendental desire, an aspiration to be "somewhere else," a will that is nevertheless an integral part of the medium in which the artist works. These sculptures are minimalist in the sense that they allow us perceive how simple, basic visual forms are used and displayed, and how structural components and qualities such as repetition, accumulation and serialization are employed. But if by this we mean that these sculptures and their materials have been stripped of all subjectivity and emotion—that they only express the obvious and only respond to a tautological knowledge which states that "what you see is what you see"—then this oeuvre could be characterized as the exact opposite of minimalism. Barthes proposed that minimalist literalism replaced the historical responsibility of forms.

In effect, Wolski's work occupies an interstitial space. It implies a combination of both intentions, and the artist is quick to say that the forms he uses "are charged with symbolic meanings from ancient and present-day cultures. But it is not my goal to give my work specific meanings." Wolski begins by acknowledging the significance of the medium he works in, and the difference between working with clay and working with another medium such as iron, which may seem more appropriate or predictable in the case of his chains, for example. Nonetheless, the medium's significance appears merely fortuitous to the viewer who has access to this primarily material oeuvre. Apparently "chains," "links," "containers" and "clouds" never cease to be simply what they seem: "Despite the unconventionality of the medium I used, the chain is still easy to identify. [...] My work comprises a return to the elemental form—in other words, to that which defines the object. The attributes may be modified without changing the object: a chain will always be a chain."

Nevertheless, like many installations by Félix González-Torres (I am thinking of his masterful candy series, Placebo), Xawery Wolski's monumental work wavers between desire and play on the one hand, and ambiguity and surprise on the other. While the artist does not appeal directly to the viewer's responsibility, as in the case of González-Torres, Wolski's work has no resolution without the viewer's direct participation. It is not so much that Wolski is particularly interested in transmitting the work's precise meaning to the viewer, as we have just pointed out, or in eliciting a specific response. Instead, the artist proposes to achieve an interaction between being and

action, and to facilitate that which can conjugate and combine the two. On the one hand, these sculptures reflect Wolski's interest in pursuing the transience of beauty and perfection, which functions both in terms of how the work is perceived and on a conceptual level, and which engages the viewer in the physical experience of an abstract concept; the circle transformed into chain, the darkness of the room which encourages touch, the fragmentation of the body that blends in with its context, etc. On the other hand, those symbols subscribe to a very constrained play of forms, materials and colors which propose situations and questions to the viewer.

Indeed, unlike minimalist sculptures, Wolski's sculptures are questions without any pretension, perhaps without answers. In any case, in his drive to make the medium question itself (the soft clay that is literally transformed into terra cotta), Wolski invites us to question—and invites the work to help us question—our own materiality. In his chain series and cloud series, for example, the artist modifies the work at every opportunity, every time it is exhibited: "The work is determined by the location," writes the artist. "Each installation is new, different, and provokes a new perspective on my work. When choosing the piece to be exhibited, I take the architectural and social context into account every time." Further on, he writes, "The conflict between the transformations and the immanence of being is one of the fundamental problems with this work. When making changes, I modify the appearance and the form. This constant manipulation in acts of creation and installation allows us to reflect on the limitations of the artwork."

So, this body of work functions as a space for reflection in time. Referring to his chain series, the artist explains that, "The sculpture physically perpetuates itself in space, while the number of segments is unlimited, as are the natural possibilities of space. I seek to continually add new segments. Time forms a part of the piece's very structure, its variability, the symbolism of the circle and the notion of sequence that is the basis of the totality. The work creates a landscape that is interactive, structured by the repetition that exists in relation to a given space." Here, it becomes clear that Wolski is as concerned with the piece's location and its relationship with space as he is with the experience of the artwork.

In the first case, Wolski's work initially reflected a formal iconography (like an accumulation of objects delimited by the square, rectangle, circle), but the arrangement of the pieces, their dimensions and configuration soon resolved themselves in relation to the architecture of the space where they were presented. In the second case, as we have suggested, the viewer arrogates the space in relation to time, and the body becomes the benchmark for our perception. In neither case is the sculpture ratified or affirmed in images. What we retain from that sculpture is not necessarily the image of the chain or that of the cavern, or even that of the fragments of a body. As in the case of Richard Serra's sculptures, what we retain is the realization or fulfillment of the experience, that which keeps the work alive. This is because his body of work does not allow us any closure, a definitive lock on the meaning after we have assumed its image. Circles and hexagons, lines and spirals, repetition, accumulation and colors do not provide us with a definitive and particular image. In Wolski's case, the evocation of the experience is always based on abstraction, which has not been influenced by the culture of the image, of the media which govern and dominate all visual culture.

The media image, the ready-made image, would not facilitate the artist's intention to question our own nature, to understand what we are, nor his search for meaning. On the contrary, and after the fashion of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Wolski explores the simplest and most primitive aspect of our relationship with the world—the "present-at-hand," as Heidegger would have said—and what he discovers is that we originally experience things in their richness and in the multitude of their resolutions, always in a particular context. Things are not imposed on our consciousness as sensorial impressions of atoms, nor do we construct things in our mind. In our experience, we discover things based on a dialogue between subject and object. And that dialogue is made possible by the body.

For Wolski—unlike Decartes and Deleuze—the body is not a machine but rather a living organism with which we improve our possibilities in the world. Our intentional existence is lived through the body and we are our body. The body is at once transcendent and immanent. It is the "third term" to which Merleau-Ponty refers^[4]—the term between subject and object. But the body can never know things in their totality—only from an embodied perspective which assumes that things exist "in themselves" because they resist allowing the body to know them in all certainty. Things exist, then, "for me," because I experience them in relation to my own body.

In this philosophy which we can apply to our approach to Wolski's work, space always exists in relation to my body as it is situated in the world. And the same can be said about time. As a body, I can never be in two places at the same time. I am always in the present, on my way somewhere, having been somewhere. For that reason, experience—and also the experience of this oeuvre—is always in the process of being realized, of becoming. And as soon as I become aware of reality or this sculpture as something determinate and specific, new possibilities emerge and are projected onto a horizon as the past fades away. What we say about Wolski's sculptures, then, is always provisional, because the space-time context in which we necessarily experience it is temporary and develops over time. As such, it is subject to change. “[The work] may be contemplated thanks to the immobilization of the object, the immediate reception (the famous ‘here and now’) and the absence of reasoning,” says Wolski.

If at first I accede to the work's confusion and ambiguity, this begins to resolve itself in accordance with how I become corporeally involved with it. If I don't know what I'm looking for, it's because the work is beyond my total comprehension. At any given moment, the work may include that which is revealed to me but also that which is hidden. As we have seen, to Xawery Wolski, experience precedes abstract reflection (absence of reasoning); it has no premeditated or pre-established theme. This manner of relating—this “present-at-hand” commitment—is the primary basis, the basis of experience, that makes reflection possible.

In this reflective process, I have referred to time because the artist's texts have demanded it, though I know that time is the primary theme of every creative project and that philosophically, we cannot comprehend time in its totality. Beyond mere speculation about its nature, our need to understand time is stimulated and compelled by the inevitable reality of our mortal lives. It is our fate to watch how our lives become elusive and pale when compared to the age of clay, the stars and the galaxies: it is our affliction, our poison. But Wolski does not refer to time as simple chronology.

Interrogating the work's present, Wolski helps us to intercept and interrupt any efficient closure in order to capture and define being and its meaning. Throughout his body of work, time becomes humanized because it is articulated based on a narrative, because—to paraphrase Paul Ricoeur—we definitively cannot think about time. We can only experience it and retell our lives.

Nonetheless, Wolski's sculptures are not intended to reproduce man. That was the theme of classical sculpture—of the entire history of sculpture and its verticality. On the contrary, the kind of sculpture I have been referring to throughout this article is conditioned and articulated in horizontality (that of the earth). Still, through his own perversion, Wolski's sculptures, which are sustained by any architectural element besides the floor, stand as “testimony to the traumatic apprehension of the extended idea of verticality and its correlative dependence on the ground.”^[5] There is an aspect of Wolski's work that understands the body to be skin (again, for Merleau-Ponty, the body is made out of the skin of the world, which is why we can know the world and understand it): that of his caverns and observatories, his dark, gloomy rooms. In this oeuvre, physical contact is fundamental, not only in order to understand the medium and the work through space, but in order to extend our sense of touch in such a way that the space of the void becomes tangible as a form. We feel involved in these pieces, and they affect our bodies more than ever, because we finally understand space to be a substance. Finally, the time has come to experience content as space in Wolski's work.

[1] Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961): 3–21.

[2] Roland Barthes, “On the Fashion System,” in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985): 51.

[3] All unreferenced statements and comments in this article are Xawery Wolski's, and are taken from a limited special edition published, but never released to the public, by UBS in Mexico City in 2005.

[4] For an introduction to Merleau-Ponty, see M.C. Dillion, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, 2nd edition (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1998). [5] Robert Pincus Witten, *Postminimalism* (New York: Out of London Press, 1977): 23.

CHAINS AND CROSSES: THE POLITICAL ICONOGRAPHY OF XAWERY WOLSKI'S DARK SERIES (1988-1992)"

PATRIK P. TOMASZEWSKI, 2020.

Dark Mass

On November 3, 1984, Xawery Wolski attended the mass funeral of Rev. Jerzy Popiełuszko in Warsaw. A prominent Polish Catholic priest with an extraordinarily large following, Popiełuszko was assassinated by the communist authorities who feared that his activism might help galvanize a political revolt. After being kidnapped and severely beaten, Popiełuszko was bound to a heavy weight and thrown into the Vistula river. The news of the reverend's death, along with the gory details of his murder, spread across the country and made international headlines. Popiełuszko's funeral brought together over 250,000 people and became a major manifestation of the anti-government Solidarity movement, marking, as some have noted, the beginning of communism's demise in Poland. A photograph from the funeral illustrates the sheer magnitude of attending crowds (Fig. 1). With their faces obscured by the distance and their silhouettes appearing nearly identical, thousands of attending individuals seem to turn into a unified and powerful mass.

Eight years later, that large mass—now in a sculptural form—re-emerged in Wolski's own oeuvre (Fig. 2). Displayed in a group exhibition at the Musée Saint Pierre in Lyon titled "Collection Muzeum Sztuki, 1931-1992," his *L'image de l'image* (1988-1992) consisted of black terracotta chains proliferated and grouped together to form a mountainous shape. Much like the flowing crowds at Popiełuszko's funeral, the smaller links of Wolski's chains in *L'image de l'image* were multiplied until they became unrecognizable, existing primarily as part of a larger and more commanding whole.

Wolski's Lyon installation was part of the so-called *Dark Series*, a large body of sculptural work which the artist completed between 1988 and 1992 while living in the south of France. Made in an abandoned Romanesque church in Aix-en-Provence, the terracotta- and clay-made installations attempted to establish an environment that would, in Wolski's own words, "perpetuate itself physically in space." While these sculptures—which consisted primarily of chains, crosses, circles, and hexagons—also laid the foundations for much of Wolski's subsequent sculptural vocabulary, little has generally been said about the social and cultural context within which the *Dark Series* originated. Much of the writing surrounding Wolski's oeuvre tends to focus on the work he did after moving to Mexico in 1996, often pointing to the artist's interest in negotiating a space between materiality of the medium and the work's spiritual condition.

Let us examine the iconographical origins of the *Dark Series*—a body of work that became formative in the development of Wolski's artistic career at large—by focusing on two most frequently re-occurring visual forms throughout the series: that of a chain and that of a cross. Recognizing that the *Dark Series* emerged as the Iron Curtain was crumbling, these sculptures and installations should be situated against the backdrop of the artist's own biography, as well as the rapidly shifting geopolitics of his home country of Poland during the late 1980s and the early 1990s.

When seen within this historical context, the works of the *Dark Series* reveal a dual function. For the artist, they became privileged sites of a personal meditative experience and constituted a silent protest against political repression. The iconographical program of chains and crosses specifically reflected the volatile milieu of Wolski's homeland at a time of pivotal transition from communism to liberal democracy. For the outside viewer, however, that iconography remained oblique and largely inaccessible. Exhibited only after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the large-scale works of the *Dark Series* have come to function primarily within the aesthetic realm, while their political resonance was largely eschewed in favor of a more formalist reading.

Dissent

The years immediately preceding Xawery Wolski's move to the south of France were marked by extensive travels and the artist's growing awareness of the political unrest in his home country. In 1980, having returned to Poland after three months spent abroad, Wolski witnessed the rapidly rising popularity of the anti-communist Solidarity faction and subsequently joined the Independent Students Movement in Cracow. While the volatile political

situation at home gradually solidified Wolski's nonconformist sentiments, his many journeys abroad between 1980 and 1987 offered an array of stimuli otherwise mostly inaccessible for artists living behind the Iron Curtain.

Among some of the most important early influences was Wolski's 1981 encounter with Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Fig. 3). *Guernica*—a large-scale oil composition made for the Spanish Pavilion of the 1937 Paris International Exposition as a response to the Fascist bombing of the eponymous Basque town—is widely considered as the paradigm of modern anti-war art. Dismembered limbs, suffering animals, and humans caught in a state of anguish are all locked in a claustrophobic space, making their survival all but impossible. Wolski recalls being astonished by *Guernica*'s overwhelming scale and its daring visual idiom. That a singular painting could so convincingly express an “atmosphere of war's terror,” the artist said, was revelatory.

The pain of *Guernica*, a composition reflecting human suffering during the Spanish Civil War, found its unfortunate parallel in the troubling news of Poland's imposition of the martial law on December 13, 1981. Though the Polish government officially maintained that the martial law was necessary to prevent a Soviet attack, historians have since convincingly argued that the law was implemented merely to tighten the communist regime's authoritarian grip and thwart the Solidarity movement. When Wolski returned to Poland by the end of that year, he was met with widespread police violence, brutal interrogations, and a permeating sense of fear. After the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw was shut down, Wolski joined the student protests. Although the artist managed to evade detention, he was deeply disturbed by the social unrest in his home country and would later describe the martial law, which lasted from 1981 until 1983, as a time when personal freedom was “annihilated.”

Wolski's work of that period, which included a series of large-scale figurative compositions and several self-portraits, was ostensibly fueled by his emotional response to the country's political climate. Stylistically diverse, these works also foregrounded a deeply personal visual vocabulary that became increasingly more difficult to decipher for the outside viewer. In a large-scale work titled [FIRST LARGE] (Fig. 4), for example, severed heads, limbs, and torsos of anonymous men are spread out across the picture plane, echoing the pictorial fragmentation and emotional anguish of *Guernica*. In another composition from the same year, titled [SECOND LARGE] (Fig. 5), a white horse is seen emerging frantically from the left-hand side of the picture plane, making a direct reference to a similar creature depicted prominently in Picasso's 1937 composition.

In both paintings, Wolski also underscores human suffering by alluding to Christian iconography. With traces of stigmata appearing on one of its hands, a figure in Wolski's composition raises his arms in anguish and references the Western trope of deposition, in which Jesus Christ is laid to rest after being taken down from the cross. The frenzied atmosphere evident in each of Wolski's paintings from that period, however, seems to directly contradict a sentiment of redemption that would usually accompany such imagery. Adding to this sense of anguish are the sinister-looking thick yellow, red, and black halos that accompany the severed heads.

That tangible sense of terror also seeped into the artist's own representations made in and around the time of the Martial Law. In one of his self-portraits, the artist violently invaded his previously naturalistic likeness with various geometrical forms, thus rendering it unrecognizable. A drawing titled *Dark Self-Portrait 1* (1984) depicts a pinkish-hued face becomes distorted by a plague of variously sized triangles. As the figure's mouth vanishes and the nose begins to disintegrate, only its eyes remain intact. Distinguished by strong shading, they are fixed on the spectator, commanding one's attention and underscoring a sense of horror. In another self-portrait from 1983, the artist's likeness emerges from the composition's bottom right-hand corner. Wolski's face, suspended in a predominantly monochromatic environment and placed against a red halo, appears devoid of hope. While visually dissimilar, Wolski's frenzied paintings from that period all methodically deconstructed the human figure to disturbing ends and, as such, accurately mirror the dread of political persecution in early 1980s Poland.

Beginning of the *Dark Series*

From 1983 onwards, the artist's travels intensified, while painting began to give way to Wolski's sustained engagement with the three-dimensional form. Arguably, the four years immediately preceding the artist's relocation to Aix-de-Provence in 1987 played a pivotal role in shaping Wolski's approach to sculpture, a medium that would occupy him for decades to come. Having arrived in Paris in 1983, Wolski came into contact with the French artist César, who accepted him as a free student at the Parisian Académie des Beaux Arts and helped him obtain documents to remain legally in the country. César was a major voice of the Nouveau Réalisme

movement during the 1960s, a radical group of artists who embraced the urban detritus of Paris as a medium and ventured to challenge the capitalist threat of consumerism. An experimental sculptor, César became known for his “compressions” and “expansions,” three-dimensional installations made with such diverse media as scrap metal, lead, molten plastic, and wire were used to emphasize and investigate the work’s physical properties. The influence of Wolski’s encounter with César was two-fold. First, it provided him with an opportunity to study and investigate the human form, which the artist cites as a significant influence. And, perhaps more importantly, Wolski’s studies under César significantly fueled the artist’s investigation of sculpture’s materiality.

If César served as a major stimulus for Wolski’s engagement with sculpture as such, then the artist’s subsequent sojourns to Carrara in Italy, first in 1984 and then in 1985, were formative in molding his passion for direct carving. Shortly after his first visit to Carrara, Wolski returned home to continue his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts under Polish sculptors Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz and Grzegorz Kowalski. At that time, Wolski’s political activism was rekindled. He participated in a hunger strike against mandatory army drafting organized together with the Freedom and Peace Party, took part in Reverend Jerzy Popiełuszko’s funeral and subsequent mass demonstrations, and installed a clandestine press in his Warsaw studio used for publishing anti-government pamphlets.

When Wolski went back to Carrara at the end of 1985, his intention was to find a large marble block appropriate for his thesis project at the Academy, which he provisionally titled *You Were Born Like a Saint, with Consciousness of a Snake* (Fig. 5), and then return to Warsaw. Frightened by the news of imminent army conscription, however, he decided not to go back. Settling in a small town of Torano, Wolski remained in close proximity to the Carrara marble quarries and shifted his attention entirely to large-scale sculptural installations. After relocating to Italy, the artist spent his first months working on the thesis sculpture initially destined for Warsaw. The sculpture was ultimately left unfinished, although the original of *You Were Born Like a Saint, with Consciousness of a Snake* survived. It represents a youthful man carved in white marble whose frail physique belies the muscularity of the classical male nude form. A snake moves slowly across the figure’s torso before opening its mouth to engulf the youth’s head, thus permanently corrupting his consciousness. The symbolism of Wolski’s sculpture, in which the snake represents the exact opposite of sainthood, borrows from the biblical story of the Serpent and signals the growing importance of spirituality and religion in the artist’s oeuvre.

Wolski’s spiritual engagement became evident also on a personal level. In the summer and fall of 1986, he visited the Franciscan Monastery in Assisi and each time spent several weeks living with the monks. The Franciscan Order is known for its benevolence, an austere lifestyle, and its devotion to social justice. Departing somewhat from the dogmatic Catholic position, Franciscans stress the importance of creation and one’s existence over the traditional emphasis placed on suffering resulting from the original sin. Wolski described his experience of adopting the ascetic Franciscan lifestyle as one of the “happiest moments of his life,” during which he felt separated from the chaos of the outside world.

Crosses

Although Wolski’s engagement with spirituality was not dictated by Christianity—in fact, his later writings would reflect explicitly non-denominational views—Catholicism played a significant role in shaping both the visual language and the political meaning of his early *Dark Series* installations. When Wolski graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Aix-en-Provence in 1988, finally completing the studies begun in Poland several years earlier, a local priest offered to lend the artist an abandoned Romanesque church to serve as his studio. The spiritual power of the terracotta-made crosses of the *Dark Series*—manufactured in a previously sacred space—mirrored the rising political power of the cross in his home country, where the Catholic Church was becoming a major ideological threat to the communist regime (Fig. 6).

Historians have observed that the strength of the Church in Poland lay in its ability to link national identity with Catholic identity, thus positioning the role of religion as critical in the fight for independence. Consequently, each major public event related to Catholicism—the Pope’s 1979 and 1983 visits, as well as Popiełuszko’s mass funeral—would by default become a site of political manifestation. In some cases, specific geographic locations across the country, previously marked by religious events, would remain permanent sites of protest for months to come. The Independence Square in Warsaw, where John Paul II said a historic mass for hundreds of thousands of Poles during his 1979 pilgrimage and where the funeral of Poland’s Primate Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński’s took

place in 1981, is one such example. In the aftermath of Pope's mass and the Cardinal's funeral, ordinary citizens began to regularly bring flowers to the Independence Square and arrange them to form a large cross. These flowers would be removed by the authorities at night only to be replaced the next day. (Fig. 7)

The situation became difficult to contain by the communist government, which was eventually forced to prevent access completely and fence the square in 1982, allegedly to renovate it. Since then, historian Zdzisław Zblewski notes, flower crosses blossomed across the entire city, having been repeatedly placed near key historic sites that included the Royal Castle and St. Anne's Church. The police grew violent in their efforts to remove the floral monuments, often resorting to the use of water guns and beating up people seen carrying flowers on the streets of Poland's capital. Within the next months, at least eighteen cities across the country joined Warsaw by preparing their own kinds of the flower cross.

One of Wolski's earliest *Dark Series* installations, seen in an archival photograph taken in his studio in Aix-en-Provence in 1989 (Fig. 8), shows a cross made out of terracotta arranged in a manner similar to the flower cross originally placed in Warsaw's Independence Square seven years earlier. With petals replaced by heavy geometrical shapes, the cross seems to assert its physicality and hinder any chances of potential removal. In another iteration of the work, featured in a group exhibition titled *Abbatoirs* and organized in a former slaughterhouse in Marseille in 1990, that sense of physicality seems even stronger. Wolski multiplied the shape, interlocking the crosses in a manner that allows virtually unlimited physical expansion.

In that sense, Wolski's shapes may be read as symbolically achieving the original goal of the flower crosses, which was thwarted by the communist authorities. In 1988, Wolski elaborated on this connection during the International Conference on Sculpture in Dublin where he was invited to speak. Emphasizing the parallels between the political crisis in Poland and his own oeuvre, Wolski presented to the Dublin public photographs depicting Rev. Popieluszko's cross-shaped granite tombstone, the Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers made out of three large steel crosses joined together in Gdańsk (Fig. 9), and flowers arranged as temporary monuments in the streets of Warsaw. These images served as a visual backdrop against which Wolski argued for a type of sculpture that disengages itself from formalism, and instead attempts to express the issues and ideas relevant to its society. The function of contemporary sculpture, Wolski suggested, was to give people hope.

Chains

Hope, as seen by the opposition in communist Poland, lay in effective communication, mobilization, and collaboration. Speaking to these values were Wolski's chains which, next to crosses, would come to occupy a central place in the artist's artistic vocabulary. In an essay focusing on Wolski's typologies, art historian Edward Sullivan points out that chains carry both positive connotations (as individual elements join together to become stronger) and negative associations (related to bondage, enslavement, and suffering). Sullivan further notes that Wolski has spent a great deal of energy on "decoding and re-configuring" the metaphors of the chain, an effort that I believe was most palpable in the *Dark Series* terracotta sculptures made between 1988 and 1992.

While Wolski did not elaborate on the political significance of the chains in his 1988 Dublin lecture, he did point to two crucial aspects of this trope four years later: "The accumulation of chains," he wrote, "suggests at once waiting—a primary existential element, especially in Central Europe—and stockpiling." Notably, the artist narrowed down his reading of the notion of "waiting" by referring to a specific geographical location. In countries behind the Iron Curtain, waiting was not only related to expectations of freedom, but also manifested itself physically in seemingly endless lines formed daily by citizens.

Due to ongoing economic crises and resulting shortages of goods, one queued for hours to purchase even the most basic of necessities, including toilet paper (Fig. 10). Queuing for consumer goods in communist states became so routine that, as a social phenomenon, it developed a unique set of rules. American anthropologist Janine R. Wedel, who spent time in Poland during the martial law, described the phenomenon of "queuing lists" and "queuing committees" both of which were self-regulating groups of ordinary citizens who wished to purchase non-perishable household items, which often required days of standing in line. The list would be verified twice daily and if a person failed to appear at a certain time, he or she would lose their place in line and, subsequently, the opportunity to buy the item. In other words, the life of an ordinary citizen at that time was defined by one's

compliance with the condition of queuing and may have been positively or negatively affected depending on one's ability to navigate its rules.

In Wolski's 1989 *Chains* installation, the pervasiveness of queuing is mimicked by small terracotta-made links are lined up flat to form a rectangular area (Fig. 11). And much like with the crosses, the work appears heavy, signaling strength rather than vulnerability. That strength, it seems, has to do with Wolski's more metaphysical reading of the notion of waiting, in which persistence can eventually lead to change. The artist's reference to stockpiling also appears pertinent here, as one's understanding of the term can be both political (gathering of people) and practical (stocking supplies).

These notions find in turn their reflections in Wolski's piles of chains, arranged as accumulated heaps of terracotta, in which the seemingly endless links appear innumerable. In one of his interviews, the artist stressed the relevance of genetics in inspiring his later interest in reproducibility and natural growth. His father, Tadeusz Wolski, was a prominent botanist who specialized in plant genetics, and Xawery Wolski cites the close proximity to his father's scientific research during childhood as an important influence, especially regarding accumulations. Wolski claimed that the seeming innumerability—as the amount of links used to produce each installation is “muddled” by the work's overwhelming size—is what allows the viewer to achieve a state of contemplation.

When noting the positive and negative connotations of the chain, Sullivan emphasizes its significance in symbolizing oppression throughout history. For Wolski, that sense of oppression was also anchored in specific historical events, relating to the government's crackdown on the Polish opposition following the famous 1980 strike at the Gdańsk Shipyard. The shipyard was the birthplace of the Solidarity movement in 1980 when over seventeen thousand workers, led by the future Polish president and Nobel Peace Prize winner Lech Wałęsa, staged a mass protest on its ground. On a more material level, chains hanging from tall cranes are an integral part of ship construction, and have long defined the characteristic crane-punctured landscape of the Gdańsk Shipyard. On a more symbolic level and placed within its historical context, they speak to the tyranny of the communist government in the aftermath of the 1980 protests, especially during the martial law period.

Protest

When speaking in Dublin in 1988, Wolski argued that sculpture should escape from its “formalist” limitations in order to make social impact. Such ideas about the role which sculpture was to play in postwar society were related to the notion of “social sculpture” coined and promoted by the German artist Joseph Beuys. Arguing that art had the capacity to positively transform mankind, Beuys proposed that anyone can be an artist and that life itself can eventually become a form of sculpture. Wolski's cross installations of the *Dark Series* would necessarily be finite and their space would be limited to a specific site designated by the artist, but the work was founded upon a similar to Beuys' idea of social participation and, to some extent, anchored in a specific political milieu.

Yet it was that very milieu, combined with Wolski's limited financial opportunities during the late 1980s, that would make exhibiting these works in Poland virtually impossible, thus rendering their potential social impact largely impractical. Outside of a handful of friends and fellow artists, Wolski would not exhibit the *Dark Series* until 1990, a time “social change” had already begun to take shape in Central and Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. Between 1990 and 1993, the artist showed his *Dark Series* installations in numerous Western locations, including the 1990 Salon d'Automne and Parcours Privés in Paris, Nancy Hoffman Gallery in New York, Musée Saint Pierre in Lyon, and Fondation Vasarely in Aix-en-Provence. During that time, Wolski presented his work in only two Polish cities: Warsaw and Łódź. In each of these cities—Łódź in 1990 and Warsaw in 1991—his installations were featured alongside abstract three-dimensional works by other contemporary Polish artists. Wolski's work found itself placed in curatorial contexts that privileged formal interventions in Polish contemporary sculpture, ostensibly celebrating the artistic possibilities afforded by the newly reclaimed freedom of speech.

Similarly, his first one-man show organized in 1991 at Galerie Boulakia in Paris, which was dedicated to the *Dark Series* and included large installations of chains and crosses, distanced itself from Wolski's 1988 call for socially engaged sculpture. French critic Veronique Legrand, who authored the text accompanying Boulakia exhibition, described Wolski's sculptures as “landscapes” and noted that they “are first perceived as dramatic.” That drama, however, was primarily sensory, caused by the overwhelming scale of the work, its seemingly endlessly

proliferated elements, and its monochromatic nature. While noting that the artist was Polish, Legrand traced his engagement with sculpture to César and Carrara, stressing the relevance of Wolski's materials over any iconographical interpretations. In a text accompanying Wolski's 1991 exhibition at Galerie Caroline Serrero in Paris, sculptures of the *Dark Series* are compared to that of Daniel Buren, further underscoring the artist's ability to successfully alter the physical site within which the work is placed.

Critical reviews of *Dark Series* terracotta crosses and chains exhibited in the West at a time of tectonic political shift in Central and Eastern Europe arguably echo this predominantly formalist reading. Writing a year later, critic Michèle Cone praised Wolski's chain sculpture installed in the courtyard of a seventeenth-century Parisian mansion, *Beginning of the End* from 1991, for very similar reasons (Fig. 12). Wolski's work was part of the exhibition titled *Parcours Privés* and curated by Adelina von Fursternberg, in which contemporary sculptors were asked to intervene in private—and rarely visible from the outside—courtyard spaces of the so-called *hôtels particuliers* in the Marais district of Paris. Cone singled out Wolski's installation, which she described as a mountain of “chaotically folded chains” the courtyard's middle, as one of the few works in the entire exhibition that “added” to the stately and ornate surrounding space.

In another review, focusing on Wolski's exhibition at Nancy Hoffman Gallery in New York, critic George Melrod noted that the artist's sculptures “speak quietly,” while both “demanding and rewarding patient contemplation.” Describing Wolski as an artist who approaches sculpture with “the sensuality of a potter and the patience of a mathematician,” the critic stressed both experiential and formal registers of the work on view, further focusing on its physical properties and its geometrical pedigree. (Fig. 13) For the critic, it seemed, Wolski's work fulfilled expectations similar to those set for post-minimalist art in America. Perhaps, to some extent, the attractiveness of Wolski's installations for the New York spectator lay precisely in its ability to satisfy these categories by offering an engaging, if not unusual, take on the questions of materiality and abstraction.

To see *Dark Series* as merely abstract, however, is to overlook the political impulse that lay at the heart of the work's diverse visual vocabularies. Looking beyond chains and crosses, one finds other references intimately tied to the troubled history of twentieth-century Poland. The hexagon forms, as Wolski explained, were originally inspired by the Star of David, alluding at once to the importance of Jewish identity in shaping the Polish modern culture and to the unimaginable horrors the Jews endured during the Holocaust. (Fig. 14) Wolski's terracotta boards with carved footprints, much like the crosses, reiterate the role of religion in the country's fight for liberation during the communist era, while at the same time establishing a space of universal meditative experience. The same can be said about benches, a form evident in *Sanctuary in Deposit* from 1992, which fashion a site for gathering and reflection (Fig. 15).

In the end, what connects the visually dissimilar elements of Xawery Wolski's *Dark Series* is a shared sense of purpose: proliferated and grouped together, they stage a silent yet powerful protest against human violence, suffering, and oppression.

ARTE DE CUERPOS Y MUNDOS

PAULO HERKENHOFF, 1996.

Wolski's artwork converges to define an art of temperatures. The memory of the firing of the clay is there, as is that of the volcanic lava, the beating of the metal, the sanguine heart of the monotypes. That circulation of temperature indicates a flow of energy in the work of Wolski.

HERKENHOFF, Paulo. Xawery Wolski - Luz Cuerpo Materia, Museo de la Nación, Lima, Perú, 1996.

MATTER OF DESIRE

SANTIAGO ESPINOSA DE LOS MONTEROS, 2012.

The work of Xawery Wolski (Warsaw, Poland, 1960) is the result of a long-term research process centered not only on a formal quest, but an investigation upon matter as well. Bronze, clay and—a few years back—paper, have been the main materials for his work; through his hands, they come about exploring different dimensions and portraying an unusual expressiveness. MATERIA DEL DESEO (MATTER OF DESIRE) is an ambitious gathering of the works created by Wolski over the past two decades. This is the first occasion in which some of the works exposed—though produced by the same artist—coexist under the same roof.

The visitor is greeted by one of his most ambitious works: MROK. A monumental sculpture made out of wire that comes together shaped as a cloud. The ethereal qualities of its subject collide with the material rigidity of the wire that conforms it. An inner drawing grows from within while embodying the thousand curves that intertwine in order to sustain themselves. Sharing the same hall, another huge drawing—this one created with ink on paper—(possibly one of the biggest drawings made by Wolski up to date) conveys one of the most recurring artistic languages active in his everyday processes, though rarely included in exhibitions of his work.

For many years, drawing has been one of the key foundations of his work. Without a doubt, drawing can be considered as the seminal artistic discipline from where the rest derive in different expressive explorations. In his works on paper we find the most delicate strokes, attentive to the smallest details, while saturated with repetitions and frequencies that compose its wholeness in an almost obsessive manner. As if they were automatic drawings, they create possible worlds out of impossible geographies.

For example, the circles made of granite, are worked with the polished edge of a diamond. The detail and precision accomplished in each of its forms attains laudable levels that, nevertheless, go far beyond the aim of exposing its own virtuosity and rejoicing with easy praise; their real aim drives upon an insatiable formal research about the different qualities materials can render. Circles created in various diameters receive carved lines on their surfaces that cover the blackness of their mirror-like appearance, embracing their traces as a newfound skin.

Wolski's inquiring gaze has learned to undress everyday objects from everything he considers superficial; by doing so, he beckons us to pay attention to the things that surround us. This is why he magnifies them and blows them out of proportion, such is the case of the chain that hangs from the ceiling as if grasping the significance of the space it now inhabits. Attentive to the human body and its endless connotations in art, Wolski works about it from diverse platforms. One of them, a peripheral approach, gathers long dresses made out with pumpkin seeds; necklaces made with colorines (red flowers of a Mexican tree called 'Colorín') and silk threads; painted clay beads, or a typical tzalan (shawl-like), composed by miniature fish bones. An important array of white dresses has been assembled in the same space. Ironically, its great force resides in their fragility and transparent qualities.

Wolski addresses directly the body as a theme by recreating each one of the parts that compose our vulnerable anatomy. Their expressive and formal synthesis enables these evocative organic machineries to coexist with their natural pairings—nature motifs that present themselves only after a scrupulous dissection that rescues nothing but its most basic origins. The importance of the work of Xawery Wolski resides in having accomplished a distinctive and singular aesthetic. All has been born from clay, drawing, carved stone, and the fictionalized body. Now, every one of his objects is a symbolic reference of that which first inspired them. They all share similar stories, though always told in a different manner.