

Haus Wittgenstein



Ergin Çavuşoğlu: *The View from Above*
Jon Bird: *Wittgenstein's Ladder*

Simon Harvey
departures, homecomings

Ergin Çavuşoğlu's *The View from Above* and Jon Bird's *Wittgenstein's Ladder* are separate, but complementary presentations whose point of departure is the *Haus Wittgenstein* in Vienna.

Let's start at the beginning. Walk through the small glass and steel-framed chamber that is the entrance to *Haus Wittgenstein*, up the grand-ish but minimal stairs, pause, noting the prominent, transparent elevator-shaft ahead, turn, glance back at the door, look left, look right, and then decompress from the busy city into a clean, silent Viennese modernism. This is perhaps how Ludwig Wittgenstein intended us to experience the house: quietly. It is known as *Haus Wittgenstein* both because it was intended for his sister Margarethe and because it was Ludwig's design (at least the interior) and, some say, a reflection of his philosophy. In taking these few steps inside, one sheds not only the bustle of the street, but also the adornment of old Vienna. It is clean, bright, reflective - perfected. How can one mess with this conception?



Jon Bird *HW: Wittgenstein's Ladder* 2023
Ink and collage on paper, 28.5x39.5cm

Here at Danielle Arnaud Venice, stand before Jon Bird's series of collages and drawings that double this short journey and one sees something very different. These images certainly emphasise Wittgenstein's clearly delineated architectural forms, shapes and volumes, but they also alter their textures. There are other alterations: images of blinding, pervasive light give way to dominant silhouettes and there are framings of variable, inexplicable exteriors. It is no longer Vienna out there, nor even a Viennese garden, (Margarethe, Gretl, cherished the vistas over her garden, now sadly much-reduced), instead wild skies and pressing jungles of hostas; even more strangely, an ocean where there was once a concrete floor. Wittgenstein's solid ground is deluged.

In other works by Ergin Çavuşoğlu at Danielle Arnaud Venice, one sees further strange, apparent defiance of Wittgenstein's grounded, although singular, architectural modernism.



Ergin Çavuşoğlu *Propellers and Propositions* 2024
Site-specific anamorphic drawing: Vinyl

There are twisted and morphed 'propositions' resembling propellers lying lightly on a bed frame that is not even there (it is a projected, anamorphic drawing). Where Wittgenstein privileged emptiness, this room is explored for its kinesthetic potential, levity and occupation of the whole space, right up to the ceiling, like a proud installation, a Kafkan metamorphosis of space. Some of these profess to be sculptures of Wittgenstein's precisely laid-out propositions, but they actually invoke entanglement in them, exhibiting curvatures that contradict his architectural logic and aesthetic of straight lines and edges.

Surely this is messing with Wittgenstein's neat architectural idea and close attention to detail? Actually, though, these two presentations in one are each, in many ways, a homage to the idea(s) of the house and the philosophy and life that we insist must be hardwired into it. This is not to say that they are not an invasion of the house and also a departure from the concept, but, for the most part, they remain faithful to it.

What exactly are they being faithful to?

At first sight, the interior of the house in Vienna is a *gesamtkunstwerk*, albeit a minimal and minimalist one (Wittgenstein was an acquaintance and, initially, admirer, of early modernist architect Adolf Loos; indeed, his collaborator on the house, Paul Engelmann, who designed the exterior, was a student of Loos).

Firstly, then, the artists engage with the singularity of Wittgenstein's interior details: its monumental glass and steel doors and windows with their engineered handles, its sculpture-like radiators, polished concrete floors, ceilings of a very precise height, the lift-shaft that visibly exchanges public and private space, and the huge metal counter-weighted shutters that rise up from the basement as if to exclude any external noise. When these works are installed in the house itself, in 2026, these details that make the house so striking will be an important factor in the encounter with the artworks.

Secondly, the house is an object in itself. It is Bird who engages most directly with the house as a motif in itself, hence paintings and a ceramic model of the building as a whole as seen from the outside and from above. On the inside, he achieves a somewhat surreal graphic sensing of the hall space.

Thirdly, whether or not we ourselves see Wittgenstein's philosophy reflected in some of the detail, these artists working with the *Haus Wittgenstein* must address, and show some fidelity, to his thinking. This is not, as one might expect, about artists doing philosophy, but rather about drawing-out the details of the house, and refracting some of the precise proposals of the philosophical work, into an artistic context. This latter is not actually such a stretch if one heeds the summation of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* by Gottlob Frege, (Wittgenstein's sometime mentor and then interlocutor) as: '... an artistic rather than a scientific achievement'. Rudolf Carnap, one of the Vienna Circle of philosophers inspired by Wittgenstein's work was similarly struck by his artistic sensibilities: 'His point of view and his attitude toward people and problems, even theoretical problems, were much more similar to those of a creative artist than a scientist ...'

Nevertheless, to engage with the house inevitably involves some addressal of Wittgenstein's philosophy, beginning with the *Tractatus* (published in 1921, in English in '22), continuing with his emergent philosophical preoccupations as he built the house between 1926-29, thinking that led to the *Philosophical Investigations* (published posthumously in 1953). And to engage with the philosopher is also to encounter the man: to pursue the architect, the musician, the (almost) artist, the aeronautical engineer and the mystic that made Wittgenstein more than a philosopher and so fascinating to us.



Jon Bird *Haus Wittgenstein version 1*, glazed ceramic 2024. H20.5x31x28cm

Fragments of Wittgenstein's philosophy inspire and permeate each of the artists' work. For instance, there is the ladder in one of Bird's collages from *Tractatus* (which, in the philosophic work is offered to anybody who wants to find their way around the edifice of his thinking, but which must be thrown away after use, leaving the logic of language proposition unnavigable

and maze-like). Similarly, an image of the stair alludes to the sometimes-labyrinthine characteristic of meaning production that is found more in his later work and which undoes much of the *Tractatus*. That the earlier work, and the house itself, now seem overly encompassing, cage-like, is suggested in one of the serial images mentioned above, although it isn't any longer the rampant foliage, but Adolf Loos's Villa Moller that confronts the interior of Haus Wittgenstein. The repetitions (each the same-but-different) of the three-way views around the hall are an engagement with what, in the terminology of the *Tractatus*, can and cannot be told, what should be told and what, instead, might better be simply shown. Difficult to represent what belies language, but of course not telling, resisting explanation, and just showing, are the lingua franca of a lot of contemporary art.



Ergin Çavuşoğlu *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand in C-Sharp Major* 2024. Site-specific anamorphic drawing: Vinyl

The philosophical viewpoint of the *Tractatus* can also be thought of as a 'view from above' (in one sense, a work of logic that is limited, freed from a metaphysical past, viewable in its entirety as if from above) and Çavuşoğlu both draws on this for his title and plays with the idea for several of his artworks that refer to flight or aerial reconnaissance – kites and propellor sculptures. Biographical aspects of Wittgenstein and his family's life (the anamorphic piano drawing refers to his brother Paul, a concert pianist) that inform several of Çavuşoğlu's works are much more about context and immersion in a culture of creativity that the philosopher develops in the *Investigations*. Indeed, there are several key concepts from this later work that inspire, or might be seen to echo, both of the artists' work here.

Production of meaning, for the later Wittgenstein, had to be produced in context and is termed 'aspect seeing'. Accordingly, Çavuşoğlu's work gives us this fuller picture with multiple viewpoints.

The component parts of his installation might be considered to have 'family resemblances' and 'internal relations' (which are a development from the fixed perspectives of Wittgenstein's famous picture constructions of the earlier work). The 'expressive playing' of pianists can only be felt if one has been immersed in a culture of music, as Wittgenstein was from birth. The artworks here, precise and light touch, seeped in the culture of Wittgenstein, are analogous to this culture of expressive performance.



Ergin Çavuşoğlu *Flying Lesson - Wittgenstein Studies* 2024. Alumide / PA-AF (Aluminium Filled), D540xW504.1xH156.3mm

Many of these cues for the artists suggest spatial relations and although there are fixtures at both *Haus Wittgenstein* and Danielle Arnaud Venice that might dictate spatial arrangements in the installation of work, each venue also offers, to a limited extent, a blank canvas. This is fortunate because the weighty legacy of both Wittgenstein the personality and Wittgenstein the work might not have allowed for too much expressive playing from the artists.



Jon Bird *HW: Inside-Outside-Upside-Down* 2023. Charcoal and graphite on paper, 41x31cm

Haus Wittgenstein

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Jon Bird: *Wittgenstein's Ladder*

6 May to 23 November 2025

By appointment

Philosophy more generally helps us here. There is a way of looking at Wittgenstein's work, including his house, not as all about precision and detail (although that too), certainly not about perfection, but as to do with a point of departure. Giorgio Agamben, referring to Wittgenstein's work, but also to linguistics in general, sees it as such: it '... gives itself the most minimal object conceivable ... it is from a still more minimal place, namely from the pure existence of language, that philosophy must depart'.

The partially empty space of *Haus Wittgenstein*, so wonderfully captured again and, variably, again by Bird is also inviting for artistic commotion and inhabitation, and Çavuşoğlu steps in here. Not quite a white cube (as also the space in Venice is not), it is nevertheless, in some ways, sufficiently different to accommodate a referential and reverential, and also poetical take on Wittgenstein's only artistic (if one excludes the *Tractatus*) work.

The View from Above and *Wittgenstein's Ladder* go to *Haus Wittgenstein* in Vienna in 2026, a homecoming, another departure.

Simon Harvey is a visual cultures theorist and writer. He is the author of *Smuggling: Seven Centuries of Contraband* (Reaktion Books, 2016).

Jon Bird is an artist, writer and curator. Curated exhibitions include Alfredo Jaar at Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna (2019); Leon Golub at the Met Breuer (2019), National Portrait Gallery (2016), Reina Sofia, Madrid (2011/12); Nancy Spero and Kiki Smith, Baltic, Gateshead (2003/04). He has written extensively on Golub and Spero, Hans Haacke, Alfredo Jaar and other artists, and on visual culture. He contributes to *Le Monde Diplomatique* and exhibits regularly in the RA Summer Exhibition. He is Emeritus Professor of Art and Critical Theory at Middlesex University. He lives and works in London.

Ergin Çavuşoğlu's practice centres around enquiries into notions of place and liminality. His works are featured in collections such as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Collection, Arts Council England, Frac Alsace, Pinakothek der Moderne, München, EMST, Athens, Istanbul Modern, and The Ludwig Collection. He co-represented Turkey at the 50th Venice Biennale. He was shortlisted for the Beck's Futures Prize and Artes Mundi 4. Çavuşoğlu lives in London. He is a Professor of Contemporary Art at Middlesex University.

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