

Transgressions and Inhabitations: Wittgensteinian Spatial Practices between Architecture and Philosophy

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1. Maurizio Nannucci, *Does this image fill your concept of philosophy?* 1995, detail

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## **Nana Last**

### **Transgressions and Inhabitations: Wittgensteinian Spatial Practices between Architecture and Philosophy**

During a two-and-a-half year period beginning in the autumn of 1926, the Austrian born philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein designed and built a house in Vienna for his sister Margarethe Stonborough-Wittgenstein. The history of the house's production — designed as it is by a philosopher who is nearly as known for his dramatic entry, departure, and return to philosophy as for his philosophical work — challenges the viewer to decipher within its walls some affinity between Wittgenstein's architecture and his philosophy. In response to this situation, most of the discussions of the house attempt to define some such link. The association, however, remains strained, based in two largely separate approaches: the discussion of the architecture, on the one hand, and the discussion of the philosophy, on the other. What seemingly demands interdisciplinarity ends up reinforcing a sort of bidisciplinarity.

Delving into the philosophy-architecture association in Wittgenstein's work requires looking beyond ways in which the philosophy is legible within the architecture. It necessitates a reciprocal spatial maneuver that shifts the site of study from within the walls of the house to encompass the pages of the text. This shift accomplishes two things: it reveals the primordial role of spatial and visual thinking in Wittgenstein's philosophy and it allows the



practice of architecture to be considered an integral component rather than an isolated digression of his philosophical development. Wittgenstein's understanding of philosophy itself mediates between these two disciplines. In contrast to the belief that epistemology and metaphysics should be the center of the philosopher's concern, Wittgenstein viewed philosophy as lacking its own subject matter, a position that leaves epistemology and metaphysics both empty and bankrupt. Against this, he has stated, though not developed, the idea that aesthetics and ethics *have* content and therefore are productive areas of concern.

Wittgenstein's two main texts, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* published in 1922 and *Philosophical Investigations* published in 1953, two years after his death, suggest very different relations between philosophy and architecture. In both texts, Wittgenstein was concerned with the scope and limits of language, but what he believed language capable of sensibly communicating changed drastically from one to the other. The *Tractatus* had attempted to define the limits of "what cannot be thought by working outwards through what can be thought" (4.114). Beyond the bounds of the thinkable or sayable was that which could only be shown. Effectively, this thinking subdivided philosophy's traditional territory, casting aesthetics and ethics out into the realm of showing and practice. Logic in the *Tractatus* held the privileged position of connecting saying and showing and thereby allowing language to represent the world.

The *Investigations* removed the limits that the *Tractatus* had imposed on language and philosophy by rejecting the *Tractatus*'s view that language represents the world in accordance with the rules of logic. Instead, Wittgenstein saw that the proper task of philosophy was to reconnect the philosophical study of language with the everyday practice of language. As he stated in the *Investigations*, "What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their

everyday use" (¶116). As a result, the representative function of logic lost its centrality and the everyday practice of language replaced logic as the model for philosophical thinking. This reconceptualization of both language and philosophy exposed the *Tractatus*'s thinking as idealized and problematic. Ethics and aesthetics, although still undiscussed, were no longer defined as outside the realm of the sayable; rather, their realm of practice became the philosophical basis for studying language.

While the subtitle of this paper, "Wittgensteinian Spatial Practices between Architecture and Philosophy," speaks of a possible mediation between architecture and philosophy, it might also be understood as an oscillation between the two disciplines. As Wittgenstein's life and work were themselves structured by a series of breaks and shifts followed by subsequent returns and reengagements — with people, places, ideas, practices, and disciplines — location and relocation came to lie at the very heart of his attempts to position the subject in relation to philosophy and philosophy in relation to other disciplines and everyday life. These practices also define the order of the *Investigations*, which Wittgenstein described in the preface to the book as "*remarks*" or "short paragraphs, of which there is sometimes a fairly long chain about the same subject" and sometimes sudden changes from one topic to another. This, Wittgenstein explained, is "connected with the very nature of the investigation" that "compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction."

The resulting multitude of associations takes two forms. The first, which I discuss elsewhere, are what I call "images of entanglement" and involve sites in Wittgenstein's work — both textural and architectural — where the enmeshment of these associations emerge through a specific image. Examples of this include Wittgenstein's definition of language as a labyrinth of paths, his discussion of the philosopher's

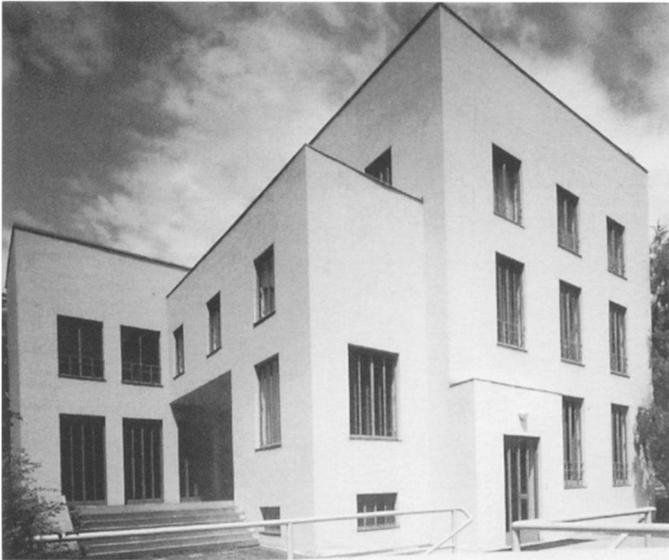
involvement with philosophical problems as the attempt to repair a torn spider's web with one's fingers, his description of meaning as akin to the intertwining of characteristics that produce a family resemblance, and the ordering of the *Investigations* itself, with its interwoven concepts and interrupting interlocutor. These moments of consolidation are punctuated by Wittgenstein's conceptual, textual, and historical movements. Chronicling these movements forms the second of his approaches, and it is these "transgressions and inhabitations" that are the focus here. These two approaches — the snapshot-like images of entanglement and the journal-like chronicling of the ins and outs of the transgressions and inhabitations that define the later work — emerged together from within the central space within the sole work of architecture Wittgenstein designed.

Wittgenstein's involvement with philosophy is a complex issue to trace. While still studying at Cambridge University with Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, Wittgenstein continually searched for a site to support his work. Ultimately, he decided on a remote village in Norway to provide him with the solitude that he craved. Several months later, following the outbreak of World War I, he voluntarily returned to Austria to enlist in the army as a soldier. Once there, he insisted on being sent to the front where he was eventually captured, spending ten months as a prisoner of war in Italy. The *Tractatus* was completed in 1918 while Wittgenstein was in the army and after he had had only a seven-year association with philosophy. With it Wittgenstein declared all philosophical problems solved and his involvement with philosophy over. Believing no work remained in the discipline, following the end of the war he abandoned both philosophy and his family wealth for what he thought of as a "completely unpretentious vocation." He then entered the Teacher's Training College in Vienna to pursue a career as a grammar school teacher. With the course completed, he took a position for the summer as an

assistant gardener in a seminary outside of Vienna before spending the period from 1920 until the spring of 1926 teaching in first one and then another Austrian village primary school. In almost an act of symmetry, Wittgenstein returned to Vienna and again worked as an assistant gardener until October 1926, when, at his sister's suggestion, he joined the architect Paul Engelmann on the design of her house, quickly taking over the project.

In January 1929, immediately following the completion of the house, Wittgenstein returned to Cambridge and to philosophy. In a letter that he wrote at the time to Moritz Schlick, the philosopher of the Vienna Circle, he expressed his desire to remain in Cambridge "for a few terms and work on visual space [*Gesichtsraum*] and other things." Although Wittgenstein did not explicitly work on these topics, they are implicit within his study of the philosophy of language. His involvement with problems of vision and space are inseparable from his investigation of language, as the philosophical problems Wittgenstein focused on were already spatial ones, involving, for example, the mediation between the subject's interiority and the publicness of language as well as his concern with the scope and limits of language itself.

Architecture provided both starting point and final impetus for Wittgenstein's so-called later work, the site of his interests in visual space. His architecture is not, however, coincident with the house he designed, but must be understood within his engagement with the practice of architecture. Through the work on the house, in the literalization, manifestation, and materialization of the architectural process, both spatiality and language became concretized and, in the later philosophy, reemerged transformed. Through architecture, Wittgenstein found a way to overcome the idealized solipsism of the *Tractatus* so as to reintegrate both the subject and the practice of philosophy with the wider culture.



2. Ludwig Wittgenstein,  
Stonborough House, 1926–28

3. Stonborough House, central  
hall



The Stonborough house is often associated with its austere exterior image of asymmetrically grouped cubic white blocks with regular vertical windows. This image of the house has been taken to parallel the seemingly similar austerity and precision of the writing of the *Tractatus*. Both of these are what I define as the view from without. I want to contrast this image with one from the interior, with the view from within, the scene of inhabitation. The central hall of the house is a scene of quiet conflict in which the idealized pictorial view of language presented in the *Tractatus* is forced to confront the spatial practice of architecture. The hall remains poised between the simplicity and austerity of the exterior and an almost mazelike series of reflections formed by the paired glass-and-steel doors erupting from all sides and defining the movement through the hall as that between the practices of vision and of space.

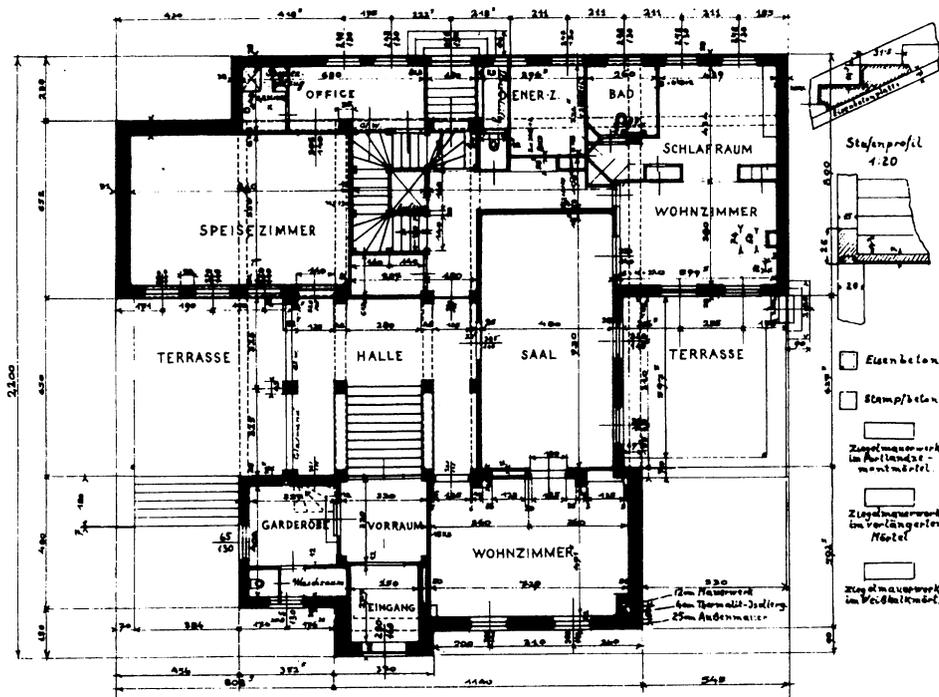
The central hall contains a series of six paired glass-and-steel doors that lead into the house from the main entry, out to the southwest terrace, the dining room, the living room, and to the staircase and upper floors beyond. Because of the climate, double exterior windows were a necessary and common practice in Austria. But Wittgenstein extended this idea to the interior. With the exception of the doors to the breakfast room, and those connecting vestibule and hall, all of the glass-and-steel doors in the interior are bipaneled, double doors that always open out into the rooms in both directions. The doors have metal frames with one vertical division in each glass panel and no horizontal divisions, except for the doors connecting vestibule and hall, which are not subdivided. The hall also contains a pair of plain metal bipaneled doors leading to the salon.

On the exterior, where these double glass-and-steel doors occur, the two sides contain the same transparent glass, but in the interior, this is not always the case. While the mediation between interior and exterior is equalized and conven-

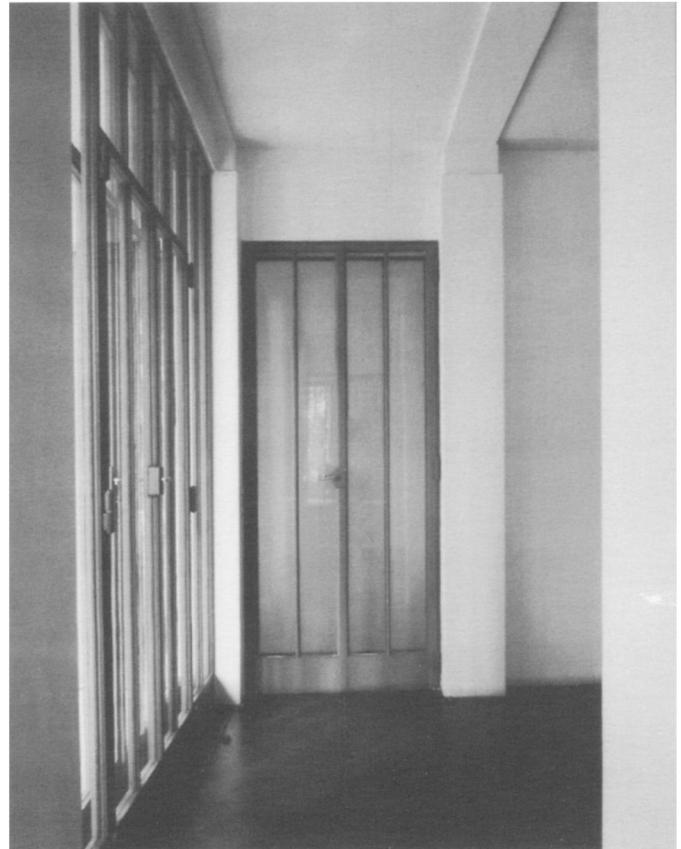
tionalized, the complexity of relations on the interior destroys this singularity of approach. While the doors connecting the living room and hall repeat the exterior condition, those between dining room and hall and staircase and hall differentiate between the two sides. Each of these doors are clear glass on the hall side and translucent glass on the other, thus allowing for varying degrees of separation and privacy provided by both the visual coding and the restriction of vision depending on which panels are open and which closed. A similar situation occurs with the double doors leading from the salon to Margarethe Stonborough's private living room. The twist here is that all of the interior doors leading to the salon are plain metal, so that these doors combine not two types of glass to create the transparent/translucent pairing, but glass and metal to form a transparent/opaque combination.

In each of these cases, the less transparent material is on the more private side and the more transparent on the public side of the doors. This produces two curious reversals of association. In the dining room the doors to the hall are on the same wall as three similar sets of paired glass-and-steel doors that lead directly outside to the southwest terrace. This situation creates a dilemma as to whether the dining room to hall doors should exactly match the other three sets along the same wall, as they do in size and detail, or whether they should also mark what is on their other side. To which room and which wall do the doors belong? What boundaries do they define?

The connection between salon and private living room illustrates further the kind of boundary clashes Wittgenstein was faced with in the design of the house. As with the dining room-hall connection, the doors in question occur along a plane that also contains exterior doors. While the sets of paired doors leading out to the terrace are of clear glass, the interior doors connecting hall and salon and salon and family living room are of plain metal. The connection between



4. Stonborough House, ground-floor plan



5. Stonborough House, doors leading to the dining room

salon and private living room thus had to navigate a series of three conflicting rules: the continuation of the glass doors along the wall, the placing of the more opaque material on the more private side, and the fashioning of all interior doors to the salon, and only to the salon, from plain metal. All of these cannot be satisfied at once. Instead, Wittgenstein opted to place metal on the salon side and clear glass on the private living room side. This allows the metal doors to remain solely associated with the salon but it disrupts the series of glass doors along the same wall and leaves the private living space with the more transparent material.

My point in this discussion of rules and their accompanying and almost endless list of exceptions is that what starts with an apparent singular and repeated image gives way to a multitude of possibilities arising from the specifics of site and the demands of use. What begins as an attempt for absolute clarity and differentiation ultimately yields a series of functioning ambiguities.

This series of doors functions in several other ways to break down the absolute correlation of place, element, and meaning. The conflicting reflections by each in the other creates a visual-spatial collapse. When looked at directly, the two layers composing a pair of the double doors coincide so that the front metal frame completely obscures the frame beyond. Moving off to one side disrupts the singular image to reveal a double image emerging as a spatial dislocation. The importance of this — and of related circumstances that rely on the visual alignment of architectural elements in space — lies in their ability to reveal their dependence on a fixed observer. Movement through space destroys the singular, fixed image and reveals it as an idealized condition that gives way to the vicissitudes of movement and space.

In contrast to the fixity of the *Tractatus's* collapse of language and logic, in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein associated movement through space with everyday language. He wrote:

The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty. — We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground! (§107)

Similar spatial issues occur with the location and alignment of the floor joints (the floor was composed of a poured artificial stone that allowed for subdivisions in nearly unlimited ways), the location of window and door openings on inside and out, the localized symmetry within the asymmetric plan, as well as with conditions involving lighting, materials, the various mechanical systems, and so on. In contrast to what Wittgenstein had to say about philosophical problems in the *Tractatus*, these problems do not dissolve through analysis but arise from it.

Additionally, these issues must navigate the move from a two-dimensional set of drawings to the three-dimensional house. This translation did not always go smoothly for Wittgenstein, as various anecdotes reveal. After the initial construction, he remained dissatisfied with several aspects of the design, which he then proceeded to alter. These changes most infamously include his raising of the ceiling of the salon by about three inches. At the end, when he was forced to complete the work, he still remained dissatisfied with three windows on the rear façade along the staircase. This situation created the one time Wittgenstein bemoaned having relinquished his share in the family wealth that would have allowed him to pay for the cost of further reconstruction. As he later confessed, he bought a lottery ticket in the hope of winning the money to cover the costs.

It is not that these are such profound or unusual activities or issues arising from the design and construction processes, but exactly that they are typical of the experience of design

that Wittgenstein encountered. It is this set of problems introduced to Wittgenstein in the practice of architecture that, in spatializing his understanding of limits and practice, literally defined a place from which he could reconsider the limits and functioning of language and philosophy. The movement through space and the disposition of use that fostered the reconsideration of limits and boundaries revealed how spatial concepts could not be discarded to leave the philosophical problems intact. This understanding lent itself toward the creation of a practice-based aesthetics by showing that spatial problems shared territory with traditional philosophical problems in logic and epistemology.

Locating the house within Wittgenstein's thought involves reading the gaps within the philosophy, both between the texts and within them. The ten-year gap marking Wittgenstein's absence from philosophy has combined with a coincident shift in his philosophical thinking to produce the early/late distinction often used to classify his work. Understanding the philosophy involves more, however, than looking across this ten-year ravine and trying to connect the splintered edges — either by filling in the gap or by compressing the space to force the two sides to meet. Rather than trying to further close the space between the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*, it is the texts themselves that need to be opened up by *the space or break* that separates one from the other.

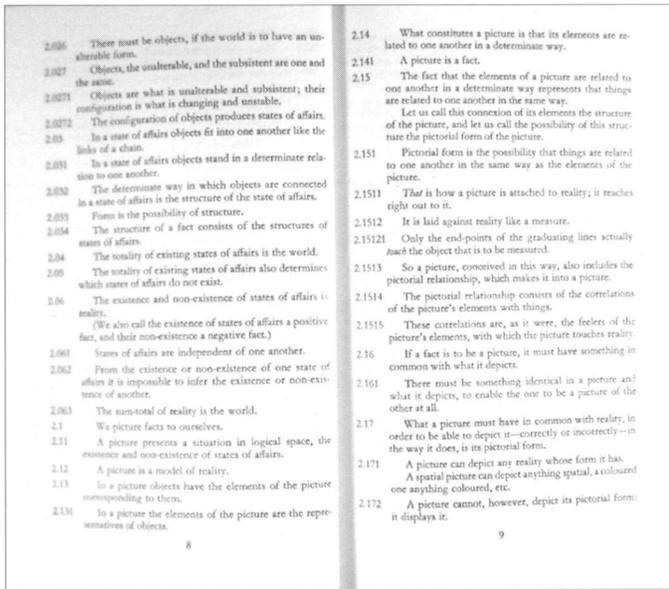
The question of how the two texts can be seen together without obliterating or covering over the space between them — a space that includes Wittgenstein's practice of architecture — then becomes another way of asking how his practices of architecture and philosophy are related.

Wittgenstein had tried to have the texts published together so as to literally place the two works side by side. As he wrote in the preface of the *Investigations*: “Four years ago I had occasion to re-read my first book (the *Tractatus Logico-*

*Philosophicus*) and to explain its ideas to someone. It suddenly seemed to me that I should publish those old thoughts and the new ones together: that the latter could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my old way of thinking.” While he failed in the attempt to publish the works together (the publisher of the *Tractatus* would not allow it), Wittgenstein did succeed in bringing together the ideas contained in each in another way, within the pages of the *Investigations*, often around spatial and architectural constructs. There they exist not side by side, but interwoven and overlapping, continuing a process that was begun within the house. Through this process, the gap between the works is not covered over but forms the site from which the late work emerges.

The fight for space on the page within the text can also be understood as a fight waged *by* space, as it is through the spatial thinking employed by the *Investigations* that the limitations of the *Tractatus*'s thinking are revealed. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein explicitly associated the restricted vision of the *Tractatus* with its understanding of language. In referring to the *Tractatus*'s belief that the general form of a proposition is, “This is how things are,” he wrote: “That is the kind of proposition that one repeats to oneself countless times. One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing the frame through which we look at it” (§114). He continued: “A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” (§115).

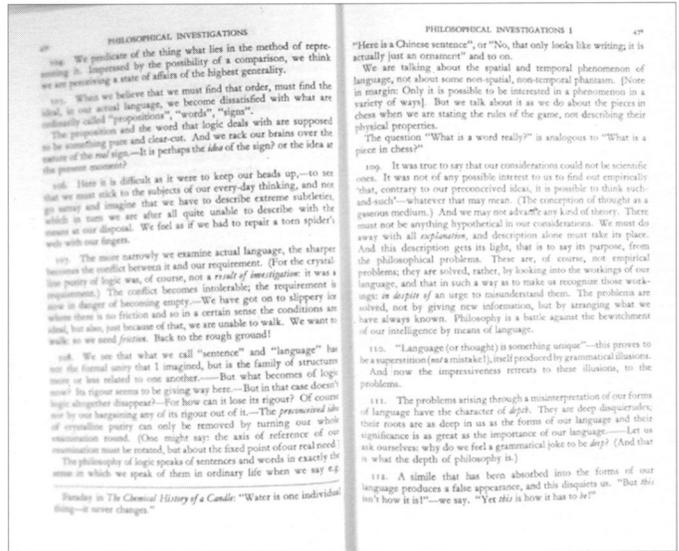
In many ways, architecture is exactly what was missing from Wittgenstein's early work. At first glance, the *Tractatus* seems more architectural with its strictly ordered and structured sections. But it represents a purely two-dimensional, visual order based in a one-to-one-to-one correlation of language, meaning, and place. The practice of architecture, however, challenged those strict associations. Through the introduction of



6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922

a new spatiality and the idea of practice, the singular view within the *Tractatus* was destroyed; in its place, the reader was left with the realization that the absolute correlation of meaning and place were not a given reality but a particular way of seeing, one dependent on a fixed viewer. Three-dimensional space dislodged place from the trio of correlations. Reliance on absolute correspondence was further dismantled in the later philosophy by replacing the strictly structured ordering of the *Tractatus* and instituting an otherwise undifferentiated and open-ended seriality.

The *Tractatus's* understanding of language and philosophy had depended on the positioning of the viewer as if above and outside of language, looking downward so as to clearly discern a particular relation among language, logic, and philosophy. From this viewpoint, all three seemed to share a coincident series of boundaries. The *Tractatus* defined these as a series of spatial limits: “*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*” (5.6); “*Logic pervades the world: the limits of the world are also its limits*” (5.61). Although the subject shares (nominally) these limits, the philosophy of the *Tractatus* made no room for the subject, finding instead that “the subject does not belong to the world: rather, it is a limit of the world” (5.632). The subject “must,” according to the text, “transcend these propositions, and then he will see the

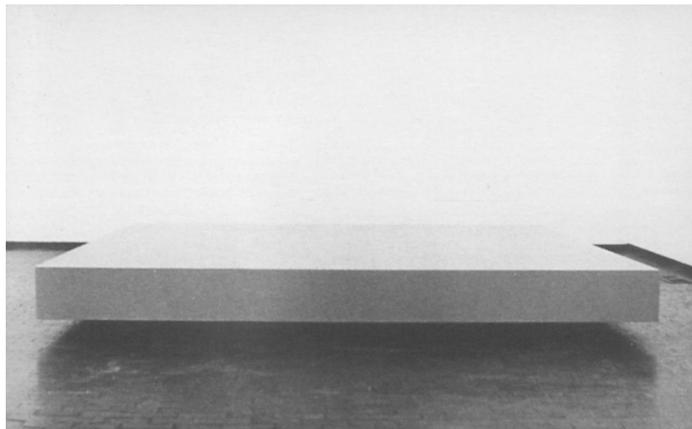


7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 1953

world aright. . . . (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.” (6.54). That is, the subject has to move beyond what the philosophy of the *Tractatus* has defined as thinkable. I take this transgression as an initial and incomplete act, one that literally leaves the reader suspended in midair. Having climbed up the ladder the subject is stranded, incapable of movement, left solely with vision as the way of perceiving or interacting with the world.

The *Investigations* responded to this act of transgression by reconceptualizing philosophy as inhabitation. No longer was Wittgenstein trying to define the realm of ethics and aesthetics, practice and the subject, as outside of the limits of language; instead, the *Investigations* offered an understanding of language arising from everyday practices that are then used to reinvigorate the discipline of philosophy. It is this shift that makes the transgression of philosophy a necessary stage in Wittgenstein's development. This is to say that Wittgenstein's movement outside of philosophy served to form the basis for both his reengagement with and reconceptualization of the discipline.

The text of the *Investigations* begins with the scene of the builders. Their simple language is based on a series of four words: *block*, *pillar*, *slab*, and *beam*, with an associated series



## 8. Robert Morris, Untitled (Slab), 1962

of actions. The builders' language is the first model for the use of language the *Investigations* offers. It forms the basis for the rejection of a *Tractatus*-like conception of language. By defining the realm of practice as within philosophy, the builders allow for the simultaneous construction and inhabitation of the space of language. As Wittgenstein declared emphatically, "We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm" (§108).

The creation of habitable space led to the construction of the view from within. This view differs dramatically from the view from without in how it positions the subject in relation to language and to the study of language. The view from within is incapable, however, of offering the clarity of that from above, with its implication that everything is available to vision. This change alters the role of vision itself. As a result, vision is no longer privileged, but becomes one of the many possible ways of interacting with the world. Another way of understanding this distinction is to see the aerial view of the *Tractatus* as having been replaced by the view from the streets, a view that would later form the everyday of Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau.

The concepts of boundary, limit, transgression, so fundamental to Wittgenstein's work, cannot be conceived of without committing to certain conceptions of space. The *Tractatus*, in attempting to define the limits of the thinkable, is itself unthinkable outside of the severely restricted understanding of space that I have characterized as the view from above. The practice of architecture challenged this understanding of space by disrupting the fixed point of view and forcing Wittgenstein to confront a series of complex spatial constructs irreducible to a single view or representation. The resulting reconceptualized space required the development of a new understanding of philosophy and language.

One of Wittgenstein's later criticisms of philosophy was that it was closed off from the outside or larger culture from which it presumably arose. While the early philosophy began with those same limitations and moved inward so as to rework and redefine the basis of philosophical problems in epistemology and metaphysics as problems of language and logic, dissolving the original problems in the process; the later philosophy of the *Investigations* moved outward from those self-imposed disciplinary limits to include the realm of everyday practices. As Wittgenstein wrote in the *Investigations*:

One might say that the concept 'game' is a concept with blurred edges. — 'But is a blurred concept a concept at all?' — Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need?

[Gottlob] Frege compares a concept to an area and says that an area with vague boundaries cannot be called an area at all. This presumably means that we cannot do anything with it. — But is it senseless to say: 'Stand roughly there'? Suppose that I were standing with someone in a city square and said that. As I say it I do not draw any kind of boundary, but perhaps point with my hand — as if I were indicating a particular *spot*. And this is just how someone might explain to someone what a game is. (§71)

### Figure Credits

1. Maurizio Nannucci, *Another Notion of Possibility*, exhibition catalogue (Vienna: Wiener Secession, 1995).
- 2–5. Paul Wijdeveld, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Architect* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1994).
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961).
7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1958).
8. *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994).