

Hu Fang
**Wittgenstein
House**

01/04

After being in Vienna for over two months, I paid a visit to the Wittgenstein House.

At the side of the street, I saw the familiar shape of the building I had seen numerous times in photographs. Its narrow windows were particularly eye-catching, and its outlines seemed alarmingly clean as it stood in the twilight.

I approached the building and noticed a huge and noisy crowd already at the entrance. They were huddled around the front lobby, their hands clutching champagne glasses as they greeted and chattered incessantly with one another. Against the vertical iron grills of the door and windows, the whole scene looked a little like it was set in the common area of a prison. I opened the door and my ears were assaulted by the buzzing conversations; I deliberately let my touch linger on the legendary solid and unyielding stainless steel doorknobs, and felt its cold calmness.

Thanks to an invitation to a film screening, I found out that the Bulgarian Cultural Institute was now located in the Wittgenstein House. I noticed that the small room on the left of the entrance had been turned into a security kiosk – the old fellow in the kiosk kept alert while observing the surroundings. The screening room was on the right side of the front hall. The original rooms – initially kept separate – were revamped into a space for exhibitions and public events. The guests began to filter into the seats as I stood in the corner and continued to watch the lively crowd.

The form and layout of the Wittgenstein House demonstrate a simple spatial concept in which the rationale behind the relationship between the building's modules and their placements – as well as how Wittgenstein had transformed philosophical language into an architectural one replete with paranoia and wit – could be clearly seen. Yet, what I see now is a clamorous social setting, one not unlike a dinner banquet in an elegant Chinese garden, in which inebriated people throw up in the flowering shrubbery while the sounds of drinking games intertwine with lilting giggles of courtesans, all drifting back and forth across a clear lake in the center. Had Wittgenstein accurately predicted that a similar scene would someday take place within this space?

The film screening began, and its tedious beginning was already boring to me. The crowd politely kept silent as details from everyday life ran endlessly on the screen. The old man in the security post had also left his workstation, joined the audience, and was especially attentive as he immersed himself in the film. I slipped out and crept up the staircase. The ceiling lamp cast an even, serene, yet totally dull light in the space.

e-flux journal #24 — april Hu Fang
Wittgenstein House

Quietly, I opened the glass doors on the second level. The corridors were not lit, though the door to the room at the end was unlatched, revealing a lucent streak akin to sunlight.

I walked on, pushed the door open, and was surprised to see two young men dressed in suits standing in a narrow empty room (reminiscent of a bright and clean prison cell), while gesturing in a mysterious way. They appeared to be Eurasians – the taller one had a little pointy beard, and the short one was clean-shaven. They soon stopped and motioned for me to approach them.

“You are...?” I asked.

“We are philosophers,” they declared.

I was bewildered by how their English did not betray any accent.

“This is a menu of our performance, and you can purchase our performance for the audience to watch,” they said as they handed me a photocopied sheet of A4-sized paper, which had a list of items like a menu, with corresponding prices. Like professional salesmen, they pointed out the different options on it, and added, “If you are lucky, you might even receive a memento of the performance.”

I looked at the menu. The variety of items listed on it elicited various thoughts in my head, but also made me feel somewhat exhausted. There was a series of imitations of actions by “famous people” from Marilyn Monroe to Buddha; there was another series that related to things from daily life, ranging from “socks which are all meant for the right foot” to “a screaming plastic cup.” A series of items focused on emotions from “envy” to “hate,” and another focused on categories in sociology, anthropology, or biology, such as “male/female” and “human/animal.”

I selected “boy and girl,” and the taller chap looked at the menu intently, before expressing regret as he said, “Sorry, this is already sold out.”

“Oh really?” I replied as I scrutinized the menu, as if by doing so I could spot some sort of trick to the whole experience.

“What about ‘white writing’ then?”

“Please pay 5 euros.”

They brought out a coin box, the kind often used in small shops, as I searched for my wallet.

They retreated to a corner on the left side of the room, took some things from a cupboard and stuffed them into their pockets. They then strode to the center of the house.

They looked up towards the ceiling. In an instant, the taller fellow drew a white colored thing from his pocket, knelt down and placed it on the floor as he said, “Yes.” The shorter one then turned around and responded, “Yes,” as he also took out a white thing from his pocket and placed it on the ground.

They parted ways and the taller one walked

up to me, placed the thing at my feet, and said, “Yes.”

It was a little white plastic object in the shape of an X.

“Yes, yes,” he continued, as he placed two other X’s consecutively at my feet.

As this was happening, the short one seemed to have found the correct position for himself. “Yes, yes,” he uttered as he placed two of the objects down, thought for a moment, and proceeded to put two additional X’s on the floor.

The taller chap seemed to have found a new ideal placement. He estimated the distance between the window and door, and appeared to visualize a connecting line between them, before placing an X along the line. “Yes,” he said with an air of satisfaction, and seemed secure as he positioned the X.

Meanwhile, the shorter one began to shout excitedly, “Yes, yes, yes!” He then placed another three X’s side by side at the corner of the wall.

The tall one turned around and looked at me as if seeking approval, before he carefully placed an X on the floor between us. “Yes,” he said as he continued to look at me with a faint smile; the short one crossed the room promptly to where I was and said loudly, “Yes.” He then raised his arm in an exaggerated fashion and dropped an X down on the ground. As if trying to prove that he was right in his choice, he dropped a few more.

Very quickly, the ground at my feet was filled with X’s. I remained a spectator throughout this process, at times having to hold back an uncontrollable urge to laugh. They continued their string of “Yes, yes,” – sometimes in a high-pitched voice, sometimes in a low one; at times gentle and other times loud; or sometimes in an obedient tone and sometimes like an order; sometimes with confidence, other times sounding unsure. The floor was littered with more and more X’s, and the space for their movements became increasingly limited.

The numerous X’s in the taller one’s pocket suddenly scattered on the floor by accident. He hastened to say, “Yes yes yes,” as if to catch up with the speed at which the X’s were falling. Finally, he turned his pockets inside out and watched haplessly as the X’s all dropped to the floor. The short fellow stood at the side and stared at him in shock, while peppering the air with “yes yes yes” to compensate for the irresponsibility of the tall chap. The two of them then stood and watched the X’s on the ground in prolonged silence.

Suddenly, they bowed together, and retreated to the cupboard at the corner again.

I started applauding, and found that I had unconsciously sat myself on the floor.

They walked up to me again. “Thank you, please help yourself to an X.”

03/04

e-flux journal #24 — april Hu Fang
Wittgenstein House

I looked around me, and finally selected the one closest to where I was.

“Great,” the taller one said dramatically, “we will send that to you as soon as we can. Now, please fill in this form.”

As I began to write, I suddenly felt as if I were signing some sort of invisible contract.

“Alright, is there anything else you want?” he asked as he passed me the menu.

If they were willing, perhaps they could perform every exhaustive “detail of life.” Similarly, if I had enough time, I may have been able to see every aspect of life reenacted here, and through this viewing, I could have whittled away my entire life.

Suddenly, there was a deafening silence that permeated the house. I sensed that I needed to leave as soon as possible, before this became an unending performance.

I spotted “Philosophy” at the corner of my eye. “Let me pick this one,” I said.

They took one look at it and said, “Ah, good choice. We can finally rest today. Thank you. 10 euros please.”

Thereafter, they separated and walked around the circumference of the house, before meeting, then turning around and repeating their circling. Their steps followed a sort of strict line towards the door, and they proceeded to walk out.

The X’s that filled the whole place remained.

They had vanished, and the sliver of opening at the door remained as it was. I opened the door cautiously, and saw a gentle light filtering through the glass door at the end of the corridor. I thought of how, at some point, Wittgenstein must have anxiously and excitedly measured every detail of this house, right up to how light could best be present itself in the space. Yet, could it be that for Wittgenstein, it is precisely when the space is unused that its most ideal presentation is assured?

I walked quietly to the front hall. The screening was still going on. The old man from the security kiosk had returned to his working post, and looked at me from there with a sense of suspicion. I acted as if nothing had happened, pushed open the heavy front door, and walked down the steps.

I was surprised to receive a gift from the two “philosophers”: a little white plastic X.

It happened to be on May Day, a day of rest for the whole world’s proletariat. I was filled with an inexplicable sense of excitement about the new life that will unfold before me once I return to China.

×

Hu Fang is the artistic director and co-founder of Vitamin Creative Space, a project and gallery space dedicated to contemporary art exchange and to analyzing and combining different forms of contemporary cultures. As a novelist and writer, Hu has published a series of novels including *Shopping Utopia*, *Sense Training: Theory and Practise*, and *A Spectator*. His recent publication is a collection of fictional essays called *New Arcades (Survival Club, Sensation Fair, and Shansui)*. His writing has appeared in Chinese and international art/culture magazines since 1996. His curatorial projects include “Through Popular Expression” (2006); “Xu Tan: Loose” (1996); “Zheng Guogu: My Home is Your Museum” (2005); and “Object System: Doing Nothing” (2004). He has been a coordinating editor of *documenta 12 magazines* since 2006. Hu graduated from the Chinese Literature Department of Wuhan University in 1992. He lives and works in Beijing and Guangzhou.

04/04

e-flux journal #24 — april Hu Fang
Wittgenstein House