

Aron Vinegar

I AM A MONUMENT

ON LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS



LEARNING
FROM
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ON *LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS*

Aron Vinegar

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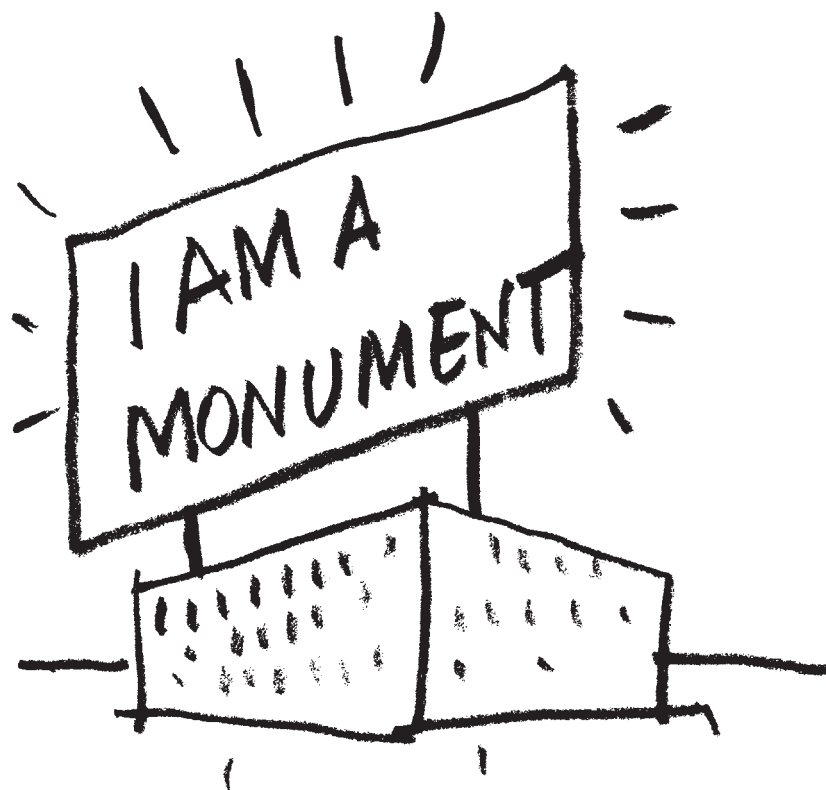
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2 OUR CITY OF WORDS

When I talk about language (words, sentences, etc.) I must speak the language of the everyday. Is this language somehow too coarse and material for what we want to say? *Then how is another one to be constructed*—And how strange that we should be able to do anything at all with the one we have!

—Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

Meaning Itself

Vincent Scully once suggested that the power of Robert Venturi's craft was his ability to transcend abstract formal manipulation and deal with meaning itself.¹ I am not sure what "meaning itself" is exactly, but certainly this statement illustrates the preoccupation during this period with "meaning in architecture," to take the title of a well-known book published in 1970.² Apart from the sophisticated work on the relationship between semiotics, structuralism, and architecture, the concern with meaning was more generally focused on the apparent lack of meaning in modern architecture, and the view that architecture was an (abstract) expression of its function, structure, or space. According to Venturi and Scott Brown, "meaning [in modern architecture] was to be communicated, not through allusion to previously known forms, but through the inherent physiognomic characteristics of form."³

Urban theorists at the time were deeply engaged in a generalized polemic about the chaotic nature of the exploding American metropolis in the late 1950s and early 1960s. At times, this led to binary arguments about chaos versus order—the “chaoticism” of the increasing spread of billboard advertising and urban sprawl—which tended to cleave apart the serious and the frivolous, splitting meaning off from the supposedly nonmeaningful as if scraping icing from a cake. The archetypal example of this polemic is Peter Blake’s book *God’s Own Junkyard* (1964), which exemplified the conditions of chaos and order in postwar America by juxtaposing an image of a “chaotic” commercial main street (Canal Street in New Orleans) with the pristine neoclassical order of Thomas Jefferson’s campus for the University of Virginia (figures 2.1, 2.2). Blake claimed, “The two American scenes . . . document the decline, fall, and subsequent disintegration of urban civilization in the United States.”⁷⁴ This apocalyptic tone marked many of the debates about urbanism at this time.

Venturi ends his first book, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, by roundly criticizing the validity of the comparison as such, not to mention Blake’s chiliastic conclusions. Instead, Venturi concentrates on deconstructing the binary structure on which the comparison is predicated, emphasizing the

2.1 Canal Street, photograph by Wallace Litwin, in Peter Blake, *God’s Own Junkyard*, 1961, reproduced in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*; © 1966 Museum of Modern Art, New York.





“acknowledged dualities” within each image and not just between them.⁵ What Blake overlooks in his book is that one can never separate the “serious” communicative task from what the philosopher John Austin calls the “etiolations of language.”⁶ *Learning from Las Vegas* demonstrates that the signscape of Las Vegas is merely the hyperbolization of the fact that *all* utterances are vulnerable to deception and insincerity. As Venturi and Scott Brown note: “Manipulation is not the monopoly of crass commercialism.”⁷ Any drive to firmly demarcate the “manipulative city of kitsch” (in Kenneth Frampton’s words) from what Socrates in the *Republic* calls “our city of words”—the ideal rather than the actual city—is a deception in its own right.⁸ Venturi and Scott Brown avoid the temptation to relegate these false alternatives to their separate domains, a move that Blake rushes into head on. Consider, for example, the closing lines of his book *The Master Builders*: “The alternatives are architecture or Disneyland, civilization or chaos.”⁹ Talk about either/or!

In contrast, Venturi and Scott Brown seem to be saying that the task of the critic of “culture” is not to carve out meaning from chaos but to undo meaning in an environment that is perhaps too “meaningful.” It would seem that Venturi and Scott Brown were in fear not of chaos but of naked meaning, “meaning itself.” Venturi quotes August Heckscher: “Chaos is very near; its nearness, but its avoidance, gives . . . force.”¹⁰ But how do they tarry with chaos

2.2 University of Virginia, photograph by George Cserna, in Peter Blake, *God’s Own Junkyard*, 1961, reproduced in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*; © 1966 Museum of Modern Art, New York.

yet somehow avoid it? One might say they demonstrate a “decreative impulse,” a term that literary critic Richard Poirier uses to characterize Eliot’s poetic enterprise in “T. S. Eliot and the Literature of Waste,” an essay that is directly referred to three times in *Learning from Las Vegas*.¹¹ Poirier relates this impulse to Eliot’s and Joyce’s “extraordinary vulnerability . . . to the idioms, rhythms, artifacts, associated with certain urban environments or situations.”¹² At times these idioms, rhythms, and artifacts overtake Eliot’s voice. Evidently the decreative impulse is meant to *risk* a loss of voice; to withhold it as a mode of possible recovery and a reassertion of voice. In *Learning from Las Vegas*, this impulse involves deploying excess as a technique of analysis. As Steven Izenour noted, “If we have any philosophy of exhibit design at all, it’s one of a kind of overload; we walk a thin line when it comes to boggling people’s minds by offering lots of choices through juxtaposition—and maybe sometimes we fall over” (figure 2.3).¹³ That seems to be a risk they are willing to take.

Venturi and Scott Brown end the first section of *Learning from Las Vegas* with this excerpt from the “East Coker” section of the *Four Quartets*:

That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:

A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,

Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle

With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter. . . .¹⁴

“The intolerable wrestle with words and meanings” in Eliot’s poem refers not to the traditional sense of the “meaning” and “reference” of words *apart* from our voice in them, but rather to what those words mean for us in saying them.¹⁵ The words may be worn out, but they are all we have, and their poetry—that institution, practice, or way of contextualizing them—will not ensure the “point” of saying those words, nor tether them to the circumstances in which they are said *now*. To return to the language of Venturi and Scott Brown, it is architecture’s task to search for a practice of “inclusion,” rather than to perpetuate a “pure” language of modern architecture set over and above the “impure” city that we happen to occupy. Their task is not to create a private, ideal language of architecture, but to locate our ability to mean within the ordinary language and practices we are already engaged in. Similarly, when Poirier characterizes Eliot’s “skepticism about his own poetic enterprise” in terms of his drive to “dislocate, if necessary, language into his own meaning,” he does not imply that Eliot is trying to secure his own private meaning over and against a public one.¹⁶ After all, as Wittgenstein observes: “When I talk about language (words, sentences, etc.) I must speak the language of the everyday. Is this language somehow too coarse and material for what we want to say? Then how is another



2.3 Institute of Contemporary Arts exhibition, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1992–1993; courtesy of VSBA, Inc.

one to be constructed—And how strange that we should be able to do anything at all with the one we have!”¹⁷ This everyday language might be “somehow too coarse and material,” but for Venturi and Scott Brown it is all we have to build with, and there is no other place to find what we want to say or do: “Meeting the architectural implications and the critical social issues of our era will require that we drop our involuted, architectural expressionism and our mistaken claim to building outside a formal language and find formal languages suited to our times.”¹⁸ The preoccupation with an architectural “poetry” of tastefulness and total design results in what they characterize as a condition of “deadness,” a word they use more than once in the text.¹⁹

Certainly, there is much in *Learning from Las Vegas* to suggest that the authors believe we can carve out a space for unhindered communication from the everyday din of Las Vegas without too much struggle: “How is it that in spite of ‘noise’ from competing signs we do in fact find what we want on the strip?”²⁰ But do we really find what we want? As Tom Wolfe entitled his famous essay on Las Vegas, “Las Vegas (What!) Las Vegas (Can’t Hear You! Too Noisy) Las Vegas!!!”²¹ Can noise or static be so easily suppressed? Can chatter be so easily converted into meaningful communication? According to Peter Fenves, “Chatter anticipates essential speaking. Not only does chatter refer back to the discovery of loss; it also anticipates recovery while at each interval displacing and reinscribing the terms in which ‘discovery’ and ‘recovery’ are cast.”²²

The difficulties in parsing out chatter from “meaningful” communication—indeed, the fact that there are no strict criteria for differentiating them—are encountered in *Learning from Las Vegas* before one even opens the book: the glassine dust jacket designed by Muriel Cooper for the first edition (figure 2.4) consists of slogan-like section headings from the book printed in large, black letters that continue over onto the back cover.²³ The title *Learning from Las Vegas* on the second line of the jacket is set in red lettering and is thus picked out from the “black noise” of the rest of the dust-jacket text. Through the semiopaque jacket, we can see a color reproduction of the famous “Tan Hawaiian with Tanya” billboard, the gold stamped title “LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS” (in all caps), and the names of the authors, all printed on the cloth cover (figure 2.5). The large gold lettering of *Learning from Las Vegas* on the cloth cover is overlaid by the black text on the glassine dust jacket, creating a palimpsest of sorts.²⁴ Although the title in red on the jacket is picked out from the surrounding typeface, it is in turn challenged by the gold embossed title of the cloth cover, seen through the layer of black lettering. If the title is supposed to point to a literal “scene of instruction,” a “Learning from . . .,” it seems to be undermined by its own doubling or “contra-diction.” The title is itself a repeated slogan no different from the surrounding section headings.

The cover of *Learning from Las Vegas* is a litany of monotonous one-liners divorced from any thick explanatory before and after; a parody of aphorism, it is all highlights and abbreviation in lieu of either brevity or completeness.²⁵ Skepticism’s presence, according to Cavell, is marked by repeated attempts to erase context. Insofar as skepticism removes “our access to context, to the before and after, the ins and outs, of an expression,” it is certainly that skeptical condition that Venturi and Scott Brown acknowledge.²⁶ And after all, advertising is precisely that mode of information, as Adorno has argued, that is “wrenched from all context.”²⁷ This erasure of context, however, is not restricted to the mere cover of a much richer interior text; it is basic to the very conditions of the business of practicing architecture.²⁸ As Venturi noted: “We architects can travel 3,000 miles for a three-quarter-hour interview where we have to be sloganeers and showmen rather than thinkers and doers.”²⁹

The fact that Venturi and Scott Brown disavowed “the latter day Bauhaus design” of the first edition, preferring the second edition’s stark title in black letters against a pale blue cover, without the “black noise” of the slogan-like section headings, does not make the dilemma go away (more on this issue in chapter 5) (figure 2.6).³⁰ One can’t simply remove the first edition’s dust jacket and neatly align those chapter headings on the contents page of the revised edition and be done with it. When we open *Learning from Las Vegas*, either the first or revised edition, we are still confronted with the task of reading, interpreting, meaning, and making in the face of such erasures of context.

A Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas. Commercial Values and Commercial Methods. Billboards Are Almost All

Here is a plea for a proper architectural humanity and humanity as well as a plea to recognize the desires and values of ordinary people, who are too often dragged along on architectural ego trips and uplift programs. It is also a realistic examination of the American vernacular environment as it is and a re-examination of the goal of



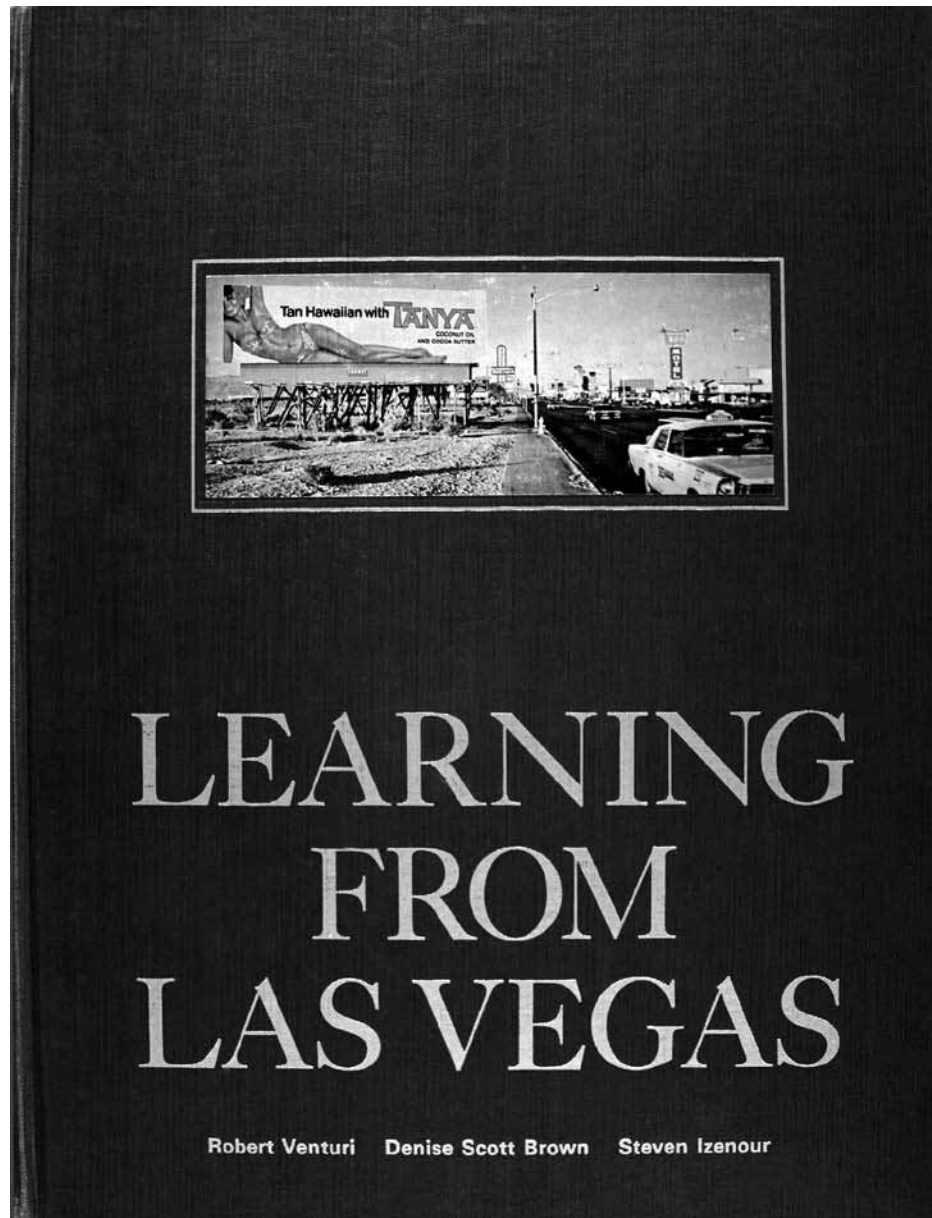
the architect. The challenge is clear and forthright. Articles based on material in this book have already caused a great deal of controversy and rethinking. But at the present uncertain point in the development of the Modern movement, it's a useful controversy that could result in a firmer sense of future direction and closer accommodation to social realities.

Right. Architecture as Space. Architecture as Symbol. Symbol in Space before Form in Space: Las Vegas as a Communication System. The Architecture of Persuasion. Vast Space in the Historical Tradition and at the A&P. From Rome to Las Vegas. Maps of Las Vegas: Las Vegas as a Pattern of Activities. Main Street and the Strip. System and Order on the Strip, and "Twin Phenomena."

Robert Venturi Denise Scott Brown Steven Izenour
Change and Permanence on the

2.4 Glassine dust jacket for the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1972 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.

2.5 Cloth cover for the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1972 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.





LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS

Revised Edition

Robert Venturi Denise Scott Brown Steven Izenour

2.6 Paperback cover for the revised edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1977 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.

How should we read the sequence of astonishing images in the section entitled “Symbol in Space before Form in Space: Las Vegas as a Communication System” in the first edition of the book? Images 3 to 6 are a sequence of small cropped photographs of Las Vegas signs at night, that read together produce the sentence, “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas, Free Aspirin—Ask Us Anything, Vacancy, Gas” (figure 2.7).³¹ The neon signs are literally translated into that proper sentence on the adjacent page (figure 2.8). Venturi and Scott Brown are suggesting that these neon sentences are not only “pop art” but also “pop literature.” In fact, the sentence is reminiscent of Tom Wolfe’s pop literature, contemporary practices of “found” poetry, and T. S. Eliot’s writing, with its mix of “Sweeney and Latin.”

Consider the words of Eliot’s character Eggerson from his play *The Confidential Clerk*: “He has a heart of gold. But, not to beat around the bush, He’s rather a rough diamond.”³² Or those of Gerty MacDowell in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which Marshall McLuhan has described as “a mosaic of banalities that reveals the effect of these forms in shaping and extending our lives.”³³ Venturi and Scott Brown were well aware of these early modern strategies of reusing ordinary language: “We say our buildings are ‘ordinary’—other people have said they are ugly and ordinary. But, of course, our buildings in another sense are extraordinary, extra-ordinary. . . . Literary critics have known about this all along, that is, about the use of clichés, the use of common, everyday language which makes the literature of Eliot and Joyce, for instance, *extra*-ordinary.”³⁴ In sympathy with critics such as McLuhan, Poirier, and Frye, Venturi and Scott Brown underline the stakes and possibilities involved in our “subjection” to mass media culture and the reign of the cliché.³⁵

One is always in the position of a painter like Robert Rauschenberg whose very first brush stroke takes place on a canvas already primed with newspaper, a “gray map of words.”³⁶ Thoreau puts the dilemma this way: “It is difficult to begin without borrowing.”³⁷ Whether an axe to hew logs for a house or a pen to cleave words on a page, we are all borrowers and lenders. It is significant, then, that Part I of *Learning from Las Vegas* begins with an epigraph from an essay by Poirier on Eliot; with an aphorism by a critic on a poet writing about words as always already spoken for: “Substance for a writer consists merely not of those realities he thinks he discovers; it consists even more of those realities which have been made available to him by the literature and idioms of his own day and by the images that still have vitality in the literature of the past. Stylistically, a writer can express his feelings about this substance either by imitation, if it sits well with him, or by parody, if it doesn’t.”³⁸ I am not concerned with the references to mimesis and parody in this passage—in the sentence immediately



2.7 Neon sentence, “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas, Free Aspirin—Ask Us Anything, Vacancy, Gas,” Learning from Las Vegas studio, Yale University, in *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1972 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.

2.8 “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas, Free Aspirin—Ask Us Anything, Vacancy, Gas,” Learning from Las Vegas studio, in *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1972 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.

following, Poirier veers away from such concerns—but rather with the fact that it highlights the importance of what Venturi and Scott Brown call “receptivity.” If architects are “Johnnies-come-lately on the scene,” as Scott Brown writes, then their *responsibility* is not to speak first, but to listen and learn.³⁹

Of course an emphasis on affective passivity can always call forth a response that architects are then abdicating the Kantian creative/critical role of schematizing the manifold of perception, for its passive, and predigested, easy consumption. In Horkheimer and Adorno’s words: “The active contribution which Kantian schema still expected of subjects . . . is denied to the subject by industry. It purveys schematism as its first service to the customer.”⁴⁰ This was precisely Tomás Maldonado’s early critique of *Learning from Las Vegas*, encapsulated in his claim that “Las Vegas is a not a creation *by* the people, but *for* the people.”⁴¹ These words are unusually harsh for such a quintessentially American book. Are they *just* words?

But doesn't Venturi and Scott Brown's "receptivity" undermine the "inability to leave anything beyond itself untouched," which Adorno identified as the "monopolistic compulsion" characteristic of mass culture?⁴² If so, they are creating room for thinking about how we touch and are touched by ordinary language rather than how we grasp or are grasped by meaning. I sense this in Scott Brown's provocative question: "what makes the city 'mine'?"⁴³ Assuming that Venturi and Scott Brown's stake in the neon sentences is the fact that all our words and sentences were never solely "ours," I wish to acknowledge this as the absolute starting point for locating our share in those words. What words bind us together, willingly or unwillingly?⁴⁴ They are perhaps driving us to investigate, in the spirit of Thoreau, "by what degree of consanguinity *They* are related to *me*, and what authority they may have in an affair which affects me so nearly."⁴⁵

Might not Venturi and Scott Brown be "taking a reading" of these words? One of their favorite artists, Ed Ruscha, described words in terms of temperature: "Words have temperatures to me. When they reach a certain point and become hot words, then they appeal to me."⁴⁶ Although Venturi and Scott Brown also "take the temperature" or check the intensity of electrified words and signs in the city, they are equally interested in "cold words"; instead of boiling them, they drain the lifeblood out of them, in order to verify at what "degree" they enter into that cold, lifeless region that Horkheimer and Adorno have identified with the "mood" of advertising:⁴⁷ "The layer of experience which makes words human like those who spoke them has been stripped away, and in its prompt appropriation language takes on the coldness which hitherto was peculiar to billboards and the advertising sections of newspapers. Countless people use words and expressions which they either have ceased to understand at all or use only according to their behavioral functions, just as trademarks adhere all the more compulsively to their objects of choice the less their linguistic meaning is apprehended."⁴⁸ But as J. M. Bernstein has pointed out, this coldness is not merely a condition that is imposed; rather, it is a task that is "affirmed against its imposition as the unavoidable means of undoing that imposition."⁴⁹ This thought is also raised by Cavell in his use of the term "subliming," inspired by passages in Wittgenstein that relate it to a craving to speak in purity or in ideal terms outside of our "language games" and the "everyday."⁵⁰

Subliming—in contrast to the term "sublimation," the scientific definition of heating a substance in order to convert it from its solid state into a vapor or gas without an intermediate liquid stage—drives us to those polar regions where we find it difficult to move because we are frozen in the ideal realm where words are lodged apart from our share in them. We might think that the language of advertising is a way of having words circulate in our world of exchange and exhibition value, but instead it leads to their paralysis. Paradoxical

cally, we need to put words into *further* circulation so that we can begin to have the exchanges we want with them. Wittgenstein pointed to this paradox: “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!”⁵¹

Although advertising signage might appear to be a manifestation of “ordinary” language, it is more precisely indicative of that drive toward skepticism, in which words are pushed to a region where they are beyond the reach of our participation in them. The task of driving them there, however, is a necessary one, as the life of words occurs to us only *after* we have seen language as a collection of signs separate from us.⁵² Wittgenstein’s sentence, “Every sign *by itself* seems dead,” is immediately followed by the question, “*What* gives it life?”⁵³ Notice that it is the “What” that is italicized, as if to remind us that it is not “the life” that is at stake but rather the “what.” What have we done to take away that life? What can be done to give it back? Need we be reminded here that these are also Venturi and Scott Brown’s concerns, best exemplified in the title of their 1976 Bicentennial exhibition at the Renwick Gallery, “Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City”?

(No) Vacancy

If indeed, as Venturi and Scott Brown suggest, there is a perversity in the learning process in which we go down to go up, and back to go forward, then we could equally read the “Vacancy” sign in bright orange neon, and the barely discernible, unlit “No” directly above it ready to be activated at a moment’s notice, as emblematic of the plenitude or voidness of meaning in *Learning from Las Vegas* (figure 2.7).⁵⁴ The often abrupt, even precipitous movement between the plenitude and paucity of meaning in *Learning from Las Vegas* is exemplified in this image. We could think of this movement in terms of two dominant voices discernible in the text (though there are others): one taking an extreme skeptical stance in its erasure of context and the denial of shared meaning; and the other, equally insistent, arguing for the recovery of context and meaning.⁵⁵ For example, in constructing the grammatical *written* sentence out of the “primitive language” of the neon signs, the authors radically insert “context” into the discontinuous and paratactic words/images: a comma here, a dash there, the omission of “Nevada” in the first image, a period to put an end to it all. It is as if their interest in the Las Vegas “Strip” lies not only in that burlesque show, but also in “stripping” criteria for meaning and context in order to explore the very conditions of possibility for communication as such.⁵⁶ In *Learning from Las Vegas*, the layer of experience that Adorno claims makes words human, and that is absent from the cold language of billboards, has been *stripped* away. One might

say that Venturi and Scott Brown are “strippers” in a melodrama of meaning what we say. As Venturi put it: “I am an exhibitionist: I go around exposing my doubts.”⁵⁷

It has always struck me that the neon sentence looks like one of those clichéd ransom letters seen in old movies where the letters and words are ripped and pieced together from different typefaces and print media. Are we common criminals who need to steal our language back? Or have we always already had it stolen from us—willingly? Are we victims of meaning? Are Venturi and Scott Brown suggesting—in the spirit of T. S. Eliot’s dictum, “Immature poets imitate, mature poets steal”⁵⁸—that architecture is a mug’s game, a rogue’s gallery? We might read this sequence of images like Adorno’s characterization of the telegram: its “mutilated language [is] condensed to carry the maximum information combined with the urgency of delivery imparts the shock of immediate domination in the form of immediate horror.”⁵⁹ Certainly Adorno’s description of the telegram calls to mind Venturi’s aphorism about Las Vegas: “The city of signs spewing the vital if vulgar iconography of now—terribilità verging on orribilità.”⁶⁰ The potential ambivalence, violence, and urgent delivery of such signs are all exemplified in the “Tan Hawaiian with Tanya” billboard image.

“Tan Hawaiian with Tanya”

Critics have been particularly dismissive of the “Tan Hawaiian with Tanya” that is prominently displayed on the cover of both editions, posing *provocatively* for the book as a whole (figures 2.5, 2.6, 2.9). As Neil Leach bluntly put it: “A tanned bikini-clad figure is used to promote a suntan lotion, in a poster that blatantly exploits female sexuality.”⁶¹ But are Venturi and Scott Brown really claiming, to quote Thoreau, that “we are a race of tit-men, and soar but little higher in our intellectual [and sexual] flights” than ogling half-clothed figures on advertising billboards?⁶² Can we in all credulity assume that Venturi and Scott Brown were oblivious to the fact that instruction sometimes requires provocation? In a book that traffics in commodified words and images, they are all too aware of the price, not to mention the value, of those words and images.⁶³ One certainly can’t accuse them of being agoraphobic: they aren’t afraid to mingle in the spaces of exchange, where words, goods, money, and sexual temptation circulate.⁶⁴ After all, in our agora there are no strict criteria for differentiating between works of art that are “ascetic and shameless” and the products of the culture industry that are “pornographic and prudish.”⁶⁵

The Tanya image begins to look more critical if we consider it in terms of the constant skeptical project of “stripping” away criteria in *Learning from Las Vegas*. VSBI ask us, the readers, to acknowledge the difficulty of identifying any

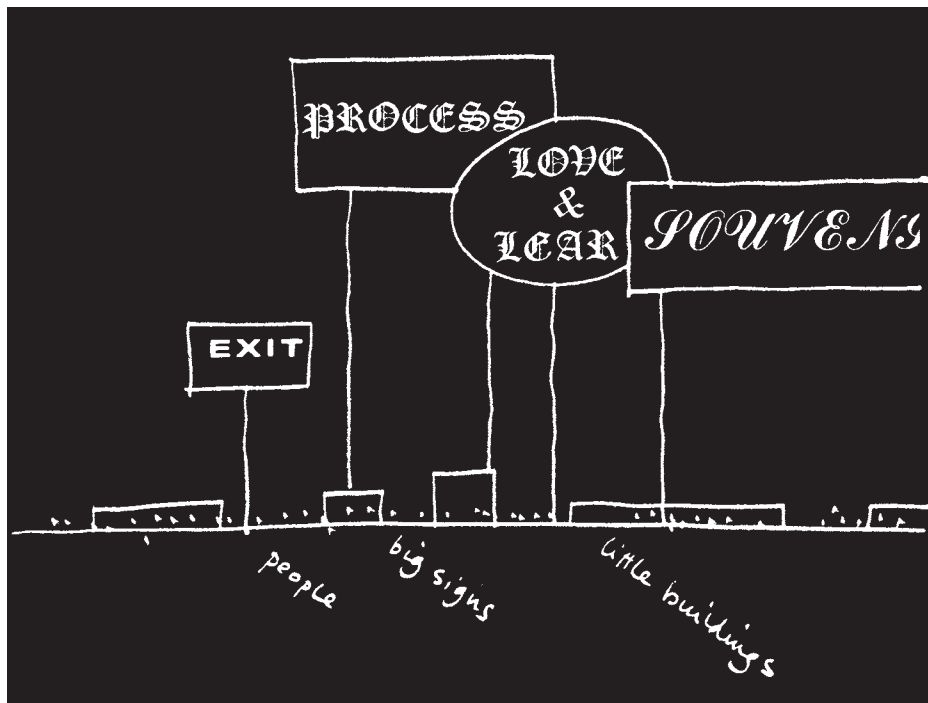


2.9 “Tan Hawaiian with Tanya” billboard, Learning from Las Vegas studio, in *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1972 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.

scene of instruction at all, or any scene of instruction we would want to identify with. For example, the billboard is planted in the desert sharply perpendicular to the Strip, in an abrupt transition between “nature” and “culture.” However, gender plays a role in accomplishing that transition. The outline of the reclining Tanya figure echoes the contours of the mountains in the background, as if calling attention to the very ideology that subtends such advertising images. (Venturi and Scott Brown also refer to this liminal space between desert and Strip as a “zone of rusting beer cans.”)⁶⁶

There is another striking image in Scott Brown and Venturi’s 1969 essay “The Bicentennial Commemoration 1976” that brings the Tanya image into the constellation of issues I am talking about (figure 2.10).⁶⁷ It consists of schematic rectangular buildings with large signs tethered to them or near them, like cartoon speech balloons (more on tethering and speech balloons in chapter 3). The signs read, “EXIT,” “PROCESS,” “LOVE & LEARN,” “SOUVENIR.” Although the “LOVE & LEARN” sign is referred to as such in the text of the article, what we *see* and *hear* in this image is “LOVE & LEAR,” as the adjoining sign occludes the *N*.⁶⁸ The authors subtly, and ambivalently, couple love and learn with love and leer (lear), and thus prompt the question: Should we “learn from” or “leer at” the billboard architecture of the “strip”? Venturi and Scott Brown comment, “If the commercial persuasions that flash on the strip are materialistic consumption and vapid subcommunication . . . it does not follow

2.10 “Bold Signs in the City,” in Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, “The Bicentennial Commemoration 1976,” *Architectural Forum* (October 1969); courtesy of VSBA, Inc.



that we architects who learn from their techniques must reproduce the content or the superficiality of their messages.”⁶⁹ As Cavell has noted, it is precisely the movements between “distrusting and entrusting words, investments and withdrawals” on which skepticism lives.⁷⁰

If the bikini-clad image adorning the front cover of the book provides a striking contrast to Venturi and Scott Brown’s loving and learning from Las Vegas, it also confirms that both profane and profound messages are found in the city. Like “love” and “glove,” the ultimate weapon of the Blue Meanies in the Beatles film *Yellow Submarine*, sometimes they are separated by a mere hair’s breadth.⁷¹ But the skeptical dilemma in *Learning from Las Vegas* is really brought to the fore through the “indiscreet” comparison between the Duck and Decorated Shed.

3 OF DUCKS, DECORATED SHEDS, AND OTHER MINDS

... purely impenetrable thickness and the idea purely penetrated by itself are two abstractions—two extremities of separating abstraction, and something like the face-to-face of stupidity and madness, and the utter loss of sense.

—Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*

The Modernist Drive for Expressive Transparency

One of the primary critiques of modernism that *Learning from Las Vegas* was engaged in was the dialectic between inside and outside and the assumption that the exterior expressed the interior.¹ As Rem Koolhaas explains in his book *Delirious New York*: “In Western architecture there has been the humanistic assumption that it is desirable to establish a moral relationship between the two, whereby the exterior makes certain revelations about the interior that the interior corroborates.”² Let’s call this the modernist drive for “expressive transparency.” In contrast, VSBI stress the contradiction between the inside and outside, drawing upon examples from premodern eras, as well as American roadside architecture with its “false fronts,” combination of styles (with “Moorish in front and Tudor behind”), and the diremption of the big sign from the boxlike generic building behind it. *Learning from Las Vegas* attempts to make sense of and go on from a situation in which a certain postwar modernist legacy of architecture was breaking down.

The drive for expressive transparency in modern architecture, and *Learning from Las Vegas*'s response to it, are intimately related to the skeptical dilemma about knowing “other minds”—a problem that is deeply involved with the relationship between the inner and outer, transparency and opacity, expression and inexpression. As Cavell has put it: “At some stage the skeptic is going to be impressed by the fact that my knowledge of others depends upon their *expressing themselves*, in word and conduct.”³ If skepticism about other minds, our ability to know the other, depends on an interaction between the inner and outer—upon the expressive capacities of a body and our willingness to acknowledge or avoid those capacities—then architecture’s deeply rooted investment in the metaphors of the body, and its preoccupation with the relationship between the interior and exterior, would suggest that it is one of the privileged domains in which skepticism about other minds is dramatized. A shorthand way of thinking about the dilemma of other minds—the mode of skepticism at stake in this chapter—is roughly marked out by Walter Benjamin on the one hand, and by Venturi and Scott Brown on the other. In a well-known passage from his essay “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” Benjamin advocates the transparency of the modernist building and its ability to express: “To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence. It is also an intoxication, a moral exhibitionism we badly need.”⁴ Venturi and Scott Brown argue that internal to this logic of “moral exhibitionism” is the potential—already latent in Benjamin’s passage—for architecture to twist itself into a full-blown *theatricality* in which the “expressive aim has distorted the whole.”⁵ Thus, postwar modernism’s theatricality was thwarting its own attempts to express.

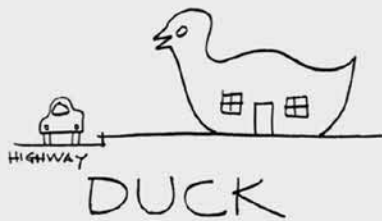
Fantasies of Absolute Expression and Inexpression in the Duck and Decorated Shed

This dialectic between expression and inexpression is taken up with a vengeance in the by now infamous contrast—what Venturi and Scott Brown call an “indiscreet comparison”—between the Duck and Decorated Shed in *Learning from Las Vegas* (figure 3.1). And it is this comparison that enacts the skeptical dilemma about knowing other minds. Venturi and Scott Brown’s definitions are worth quoting in full:

1. Where the architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form. This kind of building-becoming-sculpture we call the *duck* in honor of the duck-shaped drive-in, “The Long Island Duckling,” illustrated in *God’s Own Junkyard* by Peter Blake.
2. Where systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is applied independently of them. This we call the *decorated shed*.



73. "Long Island Duckling" from *God's Own Junkyard*



75. Duck



74. Road scene from *God's Own Junkyard*



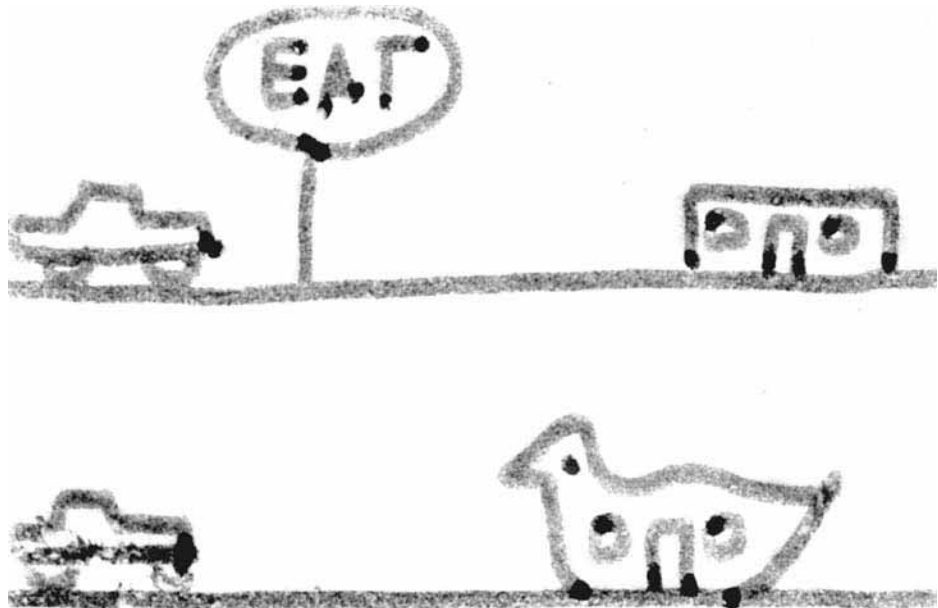
76. Decorated shed

3.1 Top: "Long Island Duckling" and road scene (photograph by Standard Oil Co.), reproduced from Peter Blake, *God's Own Junkyard*, by permission of Henry Holt; bottom: diagrams of the Duck and the Decorated Shed. In *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1977 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.

As they note, “The duck is the special building that *is* a symbol; the decorated shed is the conventional shelter that *applies* symbols. . . . We think that the duck is seldom relevant today, although it pervades Modern architecture.”⁶

The two photographs reproduced from Peter Blake’s *God’s Own Junkyard*, and the diagrams below them that illustrate the comparison, demonstrate that there is no hard and fast separation between the Duck and the Decorated Shed. The “Long Island Duckling” is also “conventional,” insofar as the photograph includes the adjacent signs indicating that the Duckling sells game hens and turkeys as well as broiled and roasted ducks.⁷ Moreover, we can see what look like two sheds behind the duck, and so we could interpret the Duck as a conventional “sign” in its own right that is applied to the sheds in back.⁸ Although the free-standing Duck is described as a “building-becoming-sculpture,” at various points in *Learning from Las Vegas* the authors also emphasize the sculptural qualities of the big neon signs in Las Vegas. Early images of the Duck and Decorated Shed diagrams, appearing in their articles before *Learning from Las Vegas*, are drawn at the same scale and with the same thickness of line (with the exception of the windows), as if to suggest that the curving, expressionistic lines of the Duck are the result of a twisted morphing of the shed, or vice versa (figure 3.2). Further blurring the distinction, both the Duck and the Decorated Shed are concerned with the function of eating (a point to which I will return). Most

3.2 Duck and Decorated Shed, in Robert Venturi, “A Significance for A&P Parking Lots, or Learning from Las Vegas,” *Architectural Forum* (March 1968); courtesy of VSBA, Inc.



importantly, both the Duck and the Decorated Shed are deeply concerned with issues of voice. In the diagrams the Duck and the Decorated Shed have two window-eyes and a door-nose, but no mouth. The issues of voice and expression—giving expression to voice and voice to expression—are dominant concerns in this chapter and in chapter 4. I simply note here that in the Decorated Shed the mouth or voice seems to be displaced onto the adjacent sign, and in the Duck to the slightly open animal beak in the diagram, in contrast to the closed beak in the photograph. Simply put, *Learning from Las Vegas* makes it abundantly clear that many buildings throughout history should be seen as both Duck and Decorated Shed (though of course the authors' sympathies are with the Decorated Shed for its relevance *now*).⁹

What is even more telling of the skeptical dilemma is that the Duck and Decorated Shed diagrams render both types of building with a “face”: the two windows and central door strike one as schematic eyes and nose (figures 3.1, 3.2).¹⁰ There could be no better testament that skepticism about other minds is central to these images than the inclusion of eyes, the supposed windows to the soul and the canonical location and bearer of expressiveness in figural art and natural human interactions. This is reminiscent of a striking passage in *The World Viewed* where Cavell describes “a mood of nothing but eyes, dissociated from feeling.”¹¹ Notice, however, that the dark, thicker line used to render the windows/eyes on the Duck makes them look more expressive than the ones on the Decorated Shed. And the overall “facedness” of both the Duck and the Decorated Shed is remarkably close to Cavell’s claim that in material-object skepticism, “the body . . . becomes a thing with senses, mostly eyes, disconnected from the motive power of the body.”¹² It would seem that, despite their apparent opposition, both the Duck and the Decorated Shed share an overarching proposition: if there is a “disconnection” between eyes, body, feeling, and voice, then perhaps we need to rethink that condition in order to see how we might reconfigure our *sense* of what architecture is and can be.

By beginning with the similarities between the Duck and the Decorated Shed instead of their differences—with their indiscreteness, one might say—I am suggesting that we are better served by understanding the comparison as voicing a certain *fantasy* of expression and/or inexpression. In calling it a fantasy, I mean that it is an interpretation of reality, and not simply a state separate from reality. As Cavell puts it, “Fantasy is precisely what reality can be confused with. It is through fantasy that our conviction of the worth of reality is established; to forgo our fantasies would be to forgo our touch with the world.”¹³ This fantasy suggests a particular atmosphere, mood, or attitude in which the world is colored *as* Duck- or Decorated Shed-like. Rather than taking the authors’ comparison as simply a concrete discussion about discrete and stabilized ontologies “out there,” we should see the Duck and Decorated Shed as categories—

one might say historical a priori categories—under which different stretches of response are evaluated.¹⁴ If we approach the comparison from this angle, how we respond to architecture—how we permit it to count for us in specific ways—is inseparable from what architecture *is* at any given time.

In other words, the Duck and the Decorated Shed are not “tired tropes”; they do not simply repeat the ontology of architecture involved in other well-known comparisons, such as Nikolaus Pevsner’s famous opening line in *An Outline of European Architecture*: “A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture.”¹⁵ But neither do Venturi and Scott Brown abandon an interest in the “ontology” of architecture. Rather, they modify it with an attentiveness to the historical and affective dimensions that are perpetually redefining what it is and what it can do.¹⁶ It is our mode of acknowledgment or avoidance of that acknowledgment—a certain category of *response*, perhaps a “confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness”—that inflicts the status of “duckdom” on *any* building whatsoever.¹⁷ It would appear that the Duck and the Decorated Shed operate as highly mobile, supple, and chiasmatically entwined terms—and at crucial points, each incorporates the other in order to survive.

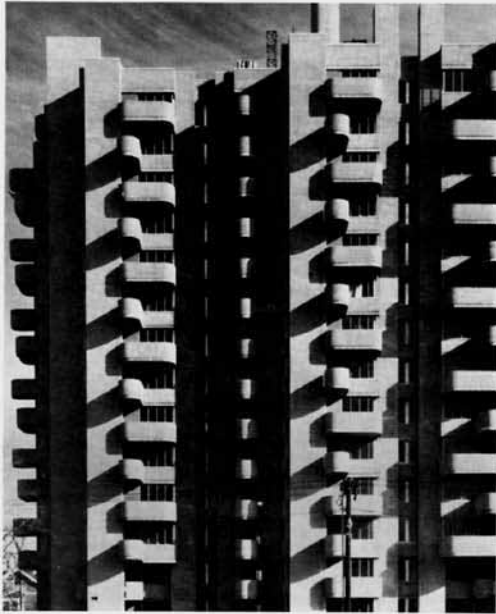
Crawford Manor and Guild House: Plasticity and Flatness

In arguing against the “modernist” Duck’s attempt to exude meaning independently of convention, Venturi and Scott Brown are drawing on art historian Ernst Gombrich’s argument about the “physiognomic fallacy”—primarily read through Alan Colquhoun’s article “Typology and Design Method,” published in 1967.¹⁸ At the heart of this argument is the critique of any kind of direct expression that could bypass the conventional use of signs. In his essay “Expression and Communication,” Gombrich tabulates a set of binary concepts to make this clear: on one side, expression, emotion, symptom, naturalness; and on the other, communication, information, code, convention.¹⁹ Venturi and Scott Brown take up Gombrich’s criticism of the argument that “shapes have physiognomic or expressive content which communicates itself to us directly,” in order to question the supposed ideology of certain strands of modern architectural functionalism.²⁰ Adhering pretty closely to Colquhoun’s interpretation of Gombrich, they critique high modernism’s belief that form is the logical expression of operational needs and techniques, which, in turn, is wedded to a mystical belief in the intuitive process. The result was, according to Colquhoun, Venturi, and Scott Brown, a biological determinism inextricably linked with a permissive expressionism. The words and phrases used to describe the Duck are indeed revealing: overarticulated, dramatic, stridently distorted, overstated, twisted, violently heroic and original, and extraordinary.²¹

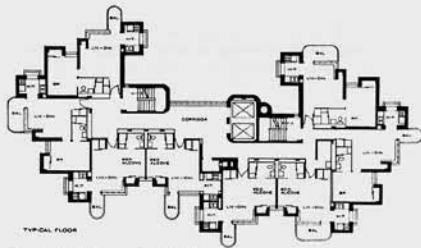
Venturi and Scott Brown's characterization of the Duck as a "building-becoming-sculpture" highlights the fact that issues of sculptural plasticity and modulation carry the weight of this hyperbolic expressionism. As Scully noted in the unpublished introduction to the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*, VSBI are involved in flattening out the "sculptural forces" of late and postwar modernist facades.²² Venturi and Scott Brown no doubt had the late work of Le Corbusier and its legacy in mind; they must also have recalled Le Corbusier's early fascination with issues of plasticity, and his well-known claim in *Towards a New Architecture* that the prime achievement of the Parthenon was due to the sculptor Phidias rather than the architects Iktinos and Kallikrates. A major thrust in the comparison between the Duck and the Decorated Shed is to critique and reconfigure what plasticity might mean in architecture—and in terms of the political—when it is no longer possible to define architecture as the "skillful, accurate, and magnificent play of masses seen in light."²³ Paul Rudolph's Crawford Manor, located in New Haven, and Venturi and Rauch's Guild House in Philadelphia—both built as housing for the elderly—are deployed as the contemporary examples of the sculptural Duck and the heraldic Decorated Shed (figure 3.3).²⁴

Although the structure of Crawford Manor is really a "conventional" frame supporting masonry walls—consisting of poured-in-place concrete with concrete block faced with a striated pattern—it doesn't look it. It appears as if the supports are "made of a continuous plastic material reminiscent of *béton brut* with the striated marks of violently heroic construction process embossed in their form." Further, "interior light is 'modulated' by the voids between the structure and the 'floating' cantilevered balconies." In contrast, the system of construction and program in Guild House are ordinary and conventional and look it. It is constructed of poured-in-place concrete plate, with curtain walls "pierced" by windows. The facing material is common brick, darker than usual to match the aged brick buildings in the surrounding neighborhood.

The flatness of the cheap appliqué decoration on the Guild House facade contrasts with the plasticity of Rudolph's Crawford Manor. Its balcony railings recall patterns in stamped metal, and the double-hung conventional windows puncture the surface rather than articulate it; they are explicitly symbolic rather than serving to modulate exterior light. The comparison is crowned by the description of the "unconnected, symmetrical television antenna in gold anodized aluminum"—an imitation of an "abstract Lippold sculpture," or "almost sculpture" (their words)—that perches on the roof of Guild House and "ironically" refers to the sculptural qualities of Crawford Manor. As against the explicit, specific, and heraldic denotative sign that spells out "[I am] Guild House," Crawford Manor identifies itself through the "connotation implicit in the physiognomy of its pure architectural form, which is intended to express in



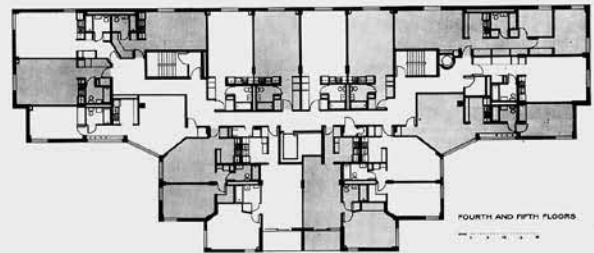
77. Crawford Manor, New Haven, 1962-1966; Paul Rudolph



79. Crawford Manor, typical plan



78. Guild House, Friends' Housing for the Elderly, Philadelphia, 1960-1963; Venturi and Rauch, Cope and Lippincott, Associates



80. Guild House, typical plan

3.3 Left: Paul Rudolph, Crawford Manor, New Haven, 1962-1966, by permission of the photographer, Robert Perron; right: Venturi and Rauch, Cope and Lippincott, Associates, Guild House, Friends' Housing for the Elderly, Philadelphia, 1960-1963, photograph by William Watkins, courtesy of VSBA, Inc. In *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1977 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.

some way housing for the elderly.”²⁵ This contrast between the expressionism of Crawford Manor and the deliberate damming of expression in Guild House is “dramatized” by the strikingly different photographic perspectives of the two exteriors: a frog’s-eye view of the undulating, striated, and chiaroscuro-lit balconies of the “soaring tower” is juxtaposed with a “deadpan” view of the tightly cropped, shadowless facade of Guild House (figure 3.4).²⁶ Like Ruscha’s deadpan photographs in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, the photographs of Guild House appear to be taken as if at high noon, the time of the shortest shadow.²⁷

This engaging and carefully staged comparison—we might call it a fantasy scene—enacts the differences between the Duck and Decorated Shed in the strongest possible terms. But at times the comparison seems to take on a life of its own, and suggests the symmetries as much as the asymmetries between the two positions. For example, what begins as a critique of Crawford Manor

3.4 Left: frog’s-eye view of Crawford Manor, by permission of the photographer, Robert Peron; right: deadpan view of Guild House, photograph by William Watkins, courtesy of VSBA, Inc. In *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1977 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.



81. Crawford Manor (detail)



82. Guild House, windows

as a “sculptural duck” quickly transfigures into a statement about its “abstract expressionist” qualities, suggesting an analogy perhaps to the abstract expressionist painting of Jackson Pollock.²⁸ But Pollock’s gesture of dispersing painterly expression over the surface of the canvas—so that the expression achieves a certain degree of explicitness (let us call it the painting’s flatness, or better yet, its “candor”)—might be a lot closer to the deadpan Decorated Shed, and to the issues raised by pop art in general, than Venturi and Scott Brown seem to acknowledge.

It seems fairly obvious that in their critique of the Duck, Venturi and Scott Brown are arguing for the irrelevance of any contemporary version of architecture based on the premises of an *architecture parlante*. As Detlef Mertens succinctly described this approach: “Eighteenth-century critiques of rhetoric, theatricality, and allegory sparked formal experiments in architecture that sought to eliminate the use of conventions or applied signs in favor of the direct expression of the inner nature of a building.”²⁹ And as Karsten Harries has rightly pointed out, “Ledoux’s *architecture parlante* is an architecture of ducks.”³⁰ It doesn’t take much extrapolation to conclude that Venturi and Scott Brown are engaging in a critique of what one might call the “logocentrism” of postwar modern architecture; that is, in de Man’s definition, “the unmediated presence of the self to its own voice as opposed to the reflective distance that separates this self from the written word.”³¹ Although Venturi and Scott Brown’s comparison of the Decorated Shed with the Duck is, in a sense, such a critique, it does not deny the fact that we are nevertheless still tethered to our words and, more specifically, to our *voice* in those words.³² Thus, the issue of expression and inexpression and their relative “articulations” are at the heart of the comparison between the Duck and the Decorated Shed.

The Duck as Melodrama of Expression

If melodrama is characterized as the site of “excessive expression”—the point where, in the words of Venturi and Scott Brown, “expression has become expressionism”—then one might say that the Duck is the melodramatic figure in which a fantasy about absolute expressiveness is aired.³³ However, melodrama, as Cavell is quick to point out, is also the locus of the “emptiness of expression,” a situation that resonates with *Learning from Las Vegas*’s critique of the “empty gestures” of postwar modernist architecture.³⁴ One might say that the excessive expression embodied in the Duck is meant to suggest a symptom of our inability to mean what we say or do, as if we were required to force an idea of architecture to fit a circumstance that is no longer viable—what Venturi and Scott Brown call, at various points, architecture’s “strident,” “overstated,” and “irrelevant articulations.”

The Duck stakes out the region of a modernist drive for transparency pushed to its breaking point—the condition in which the modernist quest for purity, totality, and its version of absolute expression would seem to suffocate us rather than express our needs, wants, and ideals. Wittgenstein explains the straits of this condition: “The ideal, as we think of it, is unshakeable. You can never get outside it; you must always turn back. There is no outside; outside you cannot breathe.”³⁵ If this quest for purity and totality has created an absolute interior cut off from the world “out there,” the “solution” is not simply to reach out to that world (where would you be reaching *to*?), but rather to reconsider how we came to occupy this condition in the first place. As Wittgenstein put it: “The *preconceived idea* of crystalline purity can only be removed by turning our whole examination round. (One might say: the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need.)”³⁶ Wittgenstein’s sentiment is echoed by Venturi and Scott Brown in one of their key statements: “meeting the architectural implications and the critical social issues of our era will require that we drop our involuted, architectural expressionism and our mistaken claim to building outside a formal language and find formal languages suited to our times.”³⁷ I take it that the quest to “find formal languages suited to our times” is somewhat analogous to Wittgenstein’s “real need”; that is, both voice a desire to locate the criteria for our real needs in the ordinary, rather than in the ideal and its quest for purity and transparency (in Venturi and Scott Brown’s sentence, the word “formal” does not mean, as it might suggest, an ideal or abstract language; it is closer to the simple word “form”). If we bring these thoughts to bear on the Duck, then its version of absolute expression would also seem to disclose a fear of absolute inexpression.

What was once the modernist optimism that we might be able to connect the material with the mental, behavior with its expression, architecture with that behavior, and those conjunctions with political and social change, now manifests itself as the suppression or suffocation of behavior, in which the modernist ideal has been twisted to such a degree that *what* was to be expressed is no longer even clear. Venturi and Scott Brown’s critique of the Duck is not based on its “dishonesty,” but rather on its irrelevance.³⁸ In other words, the Duck is not meaningless but pointless. The Duck marks the region in which the drive for expressive transparency begins to confront its unacknowledged aporia: a certain kind of opacity that is the condition of any communicability whatsoever. It is as if to say that that suppressed need had resulted in the twisting of architecture’s “public face” into a thickened grimace or mask, in which “a certain theatricality [becomes] the sign of an inability to mean, to get our meaning across.”³⁹

The stakes of VSBI’s critique are thus pitched at a very high level here, although that level might seem hard to register from our vantage point forty

years later, in an age of media saturation, entailing endless diatribes against the “society of the spectacle” (I return to these issues in more depth in the following chapter). They are asking some crucial questions about architecture *as such* that I want to thematize at this juncture: Will architecture have *any* voice at all at this point in history and in our changing urban environment? What would it mean for architecture not to matter at all in our staking a claim to the world we live in now? How much is too much architecture and design? How little is too little? How can we prevent the *meaning* of architecture from suffocating at the hands of its own ideals (from being locked in)? Or, conversely, how can we prevent its disappearance in the face of and in competition with our media-saturated environment (being locked out)?

If VSBI struggle with the fact that architecture might disappear—as they obviously do in the images of night and day on the Las Vegas Strip, the false-facade architecture and billboards of the generic commercial strip, and their fascination with the “recessive” qualities of their own buildings (their reconstruction of the “ghostly” Ben Franklin House, or their “invisible” Fire House No. 4 come to mind)—it is in order to deal with the fact that architecture might no longer *count* in the conditions of our “overexposed” and “saturated” cities of information and image overload (figures 3.5, 3.6). At that juncture, architecture might be left with nothing relevant to say or do, reduced to making strident and empty gestures. If the disappearance of architecture in America is simply embraced as already accomplished in the writings of Jean Baudrillard, in *Learning from Las Vegas* that possibility is one that must be responded to with all the rigor, imagination, sensitivity, and humor one can muster.

In true modernist fashion, the authors explore how architecture might lose itself as it becomes decoration—what they call “articulation as ornament”: the distortion of the whole building into “one big ornament,” as in the case of the sculptural Duck. Or simply, how it might become irrelevant in the face of entertainment. (Let us call the latter desire completely separated from need, and no longer “propped” on it.)⁴⁰ This modernist affiliation is strikingly brought forth in the image of the “gilded rocaille” stucco decoration in the Amalienburg Pavilion, which is immediately followed by a photograph of the Las Vegas Strip at night (figures 3.7, 3.8). Both images demonstrate how an all-over bas-relief decoration, reflected by mirrors and crystals, like the neon lighting of Las Vegas, “disintegrates space into an amorphous glitter.”⁴¹ VSBI are trying to see how far the medium of architecture might absorb those conditions and, in the process, reconfigure the criteria for what architecture is *now*. What is architecture when space is no longer dominant, and no longer enclosed and directed on an urban scale? When issues of program must be more flexible than ever to accommodate the contingencies of the fast-paced information age (thus requiring a reworking of the relationship between form



3.5 Night image of the Las Vegas Strip, Learning from Las Vegas studio, Yale University, in *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1977 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.



3.6 Day image of the Las Vegas Strip, Learning from Las Vegas studio, in *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1977 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.

3.7 Rocaille decoration, Amalienburg Pavilion, photograph by Charles Brickbauer, courtesy of VSBA, Inc., in *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1977 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.



and function, interior and exterior)? When issues of graphicness, electronics, and signage dominate our urban landscapes and require us to rethink the traditional qualities of form and space in architecture—and *still remain recognizable as architecture*?

If modern architecture had “sunk” the fragility and contingency of its conventions into the depths of a biological or technological determinism, *Learning from Las Vegas* seems determined to *expose* and reconfigure those contingencies. One might say that *Learning from Las Vegas* explores how we permit certain objects to count for us as architecture; it recounts the criteria used to regulate the application of the concept of “architecture.”⁴² The Duck would seem to mark the point where the drive for expressive “depth” and transparency has pushed so far that it begins to brush up against its own unacknowledged need for resistance and opacity. Precisely because it hasn’t been acknowledged, that need has seemingly converted architecture’s “public face” into a thickened grimace or mask in response to a constant overexposure and publicity. Gianni Vattimo notes that the utopian dream at the heart of modernism’s quest for absolute self-transparency and open communication was “wrecked” by success; that is, it was undermined by the very expansion and proliferation of information and communication.⁴³ *Learning from Las Vegas* registers disappointment with this very success.⁴⁴



3.8 Fremont Street at night, Learning from Las Vegas studio, in *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1977 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.

The Duck is a fantasy of the self-qua-architecture caught between an overexposure that is the distorted counterpart to Benjamin's glass house with its "moral exhibitionism" and a concomitant suffocating privacy. The Duck reaches a pitch of expression that is somehow at an inappropriate level for its environment. Like "a minuet in a discotheque," or a mosh pit in a ballroom, it is either too subtle or too bombastic.⁴⁵ Postwar modernism's drive for a certain *kind* of explicitness had, according to Venturi and Scott Brown, resulted in the production of Ducks.⁴⁶ But their optimism lies in the possibility that this pitch could be recalibrated. What this condition calls for is not less exposure, in response to that overexposure, but rather more, and of a different kind. The dilemma might be to find the "perfect exteriority that communicates only itself," against an advertising that "is a system of signals that signals itself."⁴⁷ This would be a quest for a certain kind of expressiveness that no longer expresses an inner depth or core, but rather that exposes its conditions of mediation in the act of manifesting itself (I pursue this train of thought in depth in the following chapter); that is, an architecture reconfiguring its mode of mediation and encounter as a presentation of what community might mean for us now.

Dead Ducks and the Imagination of Stone

A certain strand of postwar modern architecture had been designing what *Learning from Las Vegas* specifically calls "dead ducks"—a phrase that is repeated in many variations throughout the book.⁴⁸ The word "dead" suggests a coldness that recalls a certain kind of response—or, more accurately, a lack of responsiveness—that brings architecture to such a "frozen" region. If we keep to the spirit of the skeptical account I am pursuing here, the designing of dead ducks suggests that "there is a life and death of the world, dependent on what we make of it."⁴⁹ In Cavell's analysis of Shakespeare's plays *The Winter's Tale* and *Othello*, he recounts a "tragedy" of skepticism (or better, skepticism *as* tragedy) involved in the avoidance of the other; an inability to acknowledge the other; that is allegorized by the male protagonists in those plays, Leontes and Othello, when they "turn" their female partners, Hermione and Desdemona, into stone (the latter figuratively before literally killing her).

It is the men's coldness that turns the women to stone, and Hermione is figured specifically as a stone *sculpture*.⁵⁰ This draining of life is a mark of Leontes's and Othello's inability—or is it rather their unwillingness?—to acknowledge the limitations of knowledge, their respective partners' separateness from them, and thus the seam of their connection to them. What was closer than they could "know" is placed beyond the warmth of human life, love, and liberty. One might call it Leontes's and Othello's interpretation of "metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack."⁵¹ They avoided the fact that the situation called for acknowledgment on their part.

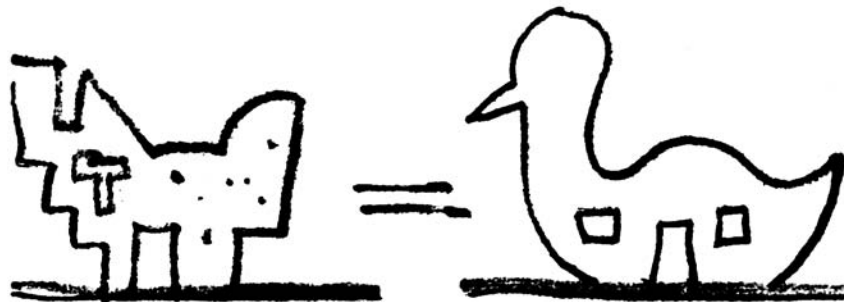
The coldness that figures the woman as a stone sculpture in these accounts sounds remarkably like the “building-becoming-sculpture” that characterizes the Duck for Venturi and Scott Brown. To repeat, it is our mode of acknowledgment or avoidance of that acknowledgment—a certain category of response—that inflicts the status of duckdom on *any* building whatsoever. The explicitly gendered nature of Cavell’s account of the tragedy of skepticism is even more poignant considering Scott Brown’s early struggle with the architectural community’s disavowal of her, and her contribution in the shared enterprise with Robert Venturi, her partner and husband.⁵² It was in fact Denise Scott Brown’s modification of her earlier work on the “physiognomic” and “heraldic dimensions” of architecture that resulted in the idea of the Duck and the Decorated Shed, and that came to exemplify their approach to architecture in *Learning from Las Vegas*. I would claim that the Duck and the Decorated Shed figure her critique of the discipline’s inability to acknowledge issues of separateness and limitation that are at the heart of any shared enterprise, be it public or private.

It is striking to note that Scott Brown makes an analysis similar to Cavell’s in her influential essay “Room at the Top? Sexism and the Star System in Architecture.” At one point she uses the metaphor of a “lady . . . carved on the helm of the ship to help sailors cross the ocean” as a figure for the desire for guidance when faced with “unmeasurables.”⁵³ This is clearly meant as an analogy to the “guru” system in architecture, as if to say that taking the “lead” and following the “star(s)” involved turning a woman to sculpture instead of acknowledging the unmeasurability of the difficulties and pleasures of shared life, labor, and “star power.” This line in Scott Brown’s essay also resonates with a sentence in *The Claim of Reason*: “What I have wished to bring out (in the discussion of Othello and Desdemona) is . . . the way human sexuality is the field in which the fantasy of finitude, of its acceptance and its repetitious overcoming, is worked out.”⁵⁴ Perhaps we could see the discipline of architecture that Scott Brown was critiquing as avoiding that “finitude.” If architecture is involved in issues of acknowledgment of the other, then an *ignoring* of Scott Brown, a response which is not simply an *ignorance* but, more precisely, an avoidance, thrusts aside both her public and private life, one through the other.⁵⁵ It denies Venturi and Scott Brown’s shared life and work in and as “an exposure of finite singularities.”⁵⁶ The Duck emblemizes the frozen denial of the state of the other, but together the Duck and the Decorated Shed are entwined as a figure of attempting to overcome other minds skepticism.

Writ large, the Duck enacts a “melodrama of modernism”—at one point in *Learning from Las Vegas*, it is called “an architectural soap opera”—in which the entire building becomes a (sculptural) “ornament” to its own communicative impasse.⁵⁷ Venturi and Scott Brown’s understanding of the disavowal of ornament and its return as “one big ornament” perhaps finds more of an echo

in Gianni Vattimo's understanding of ornament and kitsch than in Clement Greenberg's. To Vattimo, "*Kitsch*, if it exists at all, is not what falls short of rigorous formal criteria and whose inauthentic presentation lacks a strong style. Rather, *Kitsch* is simply that which, in the age of plural ornamentation, still wishes to stand like a monument more lasting than bronze and still lays claim to the stability, definitive character and perfection of 'classic' art."⁵⁸ The condition of transparency and its ideals caught up in its own communicative impasse is captured in an image from *Learning from Las Vegas* that equates the Duck with a "minimegastructure," rendered in much the same shape as the duck but drawn with jagged, expressionistic lines (figure 3.9). The equation is meant to imply that the totalizing, self-enclosed, overdesigned 1970s megastructure is the Duck's tautegorical double. The issue of the megastructure and "total design" allegorizes the inability to acknowledge "limitations" and issues of "separateness"—the fact that, in a particular light, (total) design might look like the point where reason has turned its attention to each social detail and personal relation, what Venturi and Scott Brown see as verging on "total control." (See chapter 5 for a further discussion of "total control" in relation to the design of the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*.)⁵⁹ Is the Decorated Shed, with its "explicit" symbolism and "deadpan" facade, indeed the therapy for "our involuted, architectural expressionism and our mistaken claim to be building outside a formal language"?⁶⁰

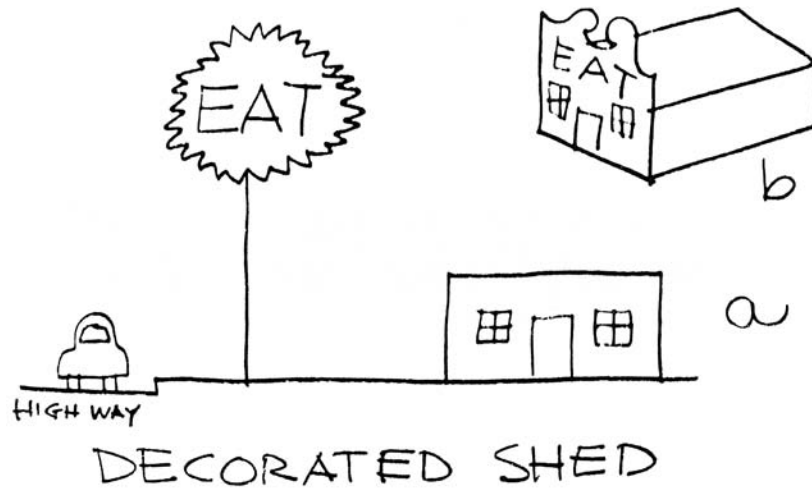
3.9 "Equation of the minimegastructure with the Duck," in *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1977 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.



The Decorated Shed and the Melodrama of Inexpression

In contrast to the Duck, the Decorated Shed would seem to enact a certain hyperbolic inexpressiveness—what Cavell terms a “screened unknowingness.” He characterizes this “melodrama of unknowingness” as “one of splitting the other, as between outside and inside.”⁶¹ Sometimes such divisions are necessary in the straits of what Venturi, drawing on Aldo van Eyck’s terminology, calls the “sickness” of spatial continuity.⁶² And sometimes the therapy for such ills is drastic. In a different scenario, but drawing on the same logic, Rem Koolhaas suggests the architectural equivalent of a lobotomy, in the form of a radical separation between exterior and interior in the Manhattan skyscraper.⁶³ This solution indicates not just an attempt to abolish “the dialectic of inside and outside,” to use Jameson’s phrase, but the acknowledgment and acceptance of distinctions, limits, and separateness that the Duck would disavow. It is as if we needed a good dose of *seduction*—to be separated from ourselves, led outside ourselves—in order to encounter new dimensions of what a “self” as a relation to others might mean.⁶⁴ In order to do so, it would seem that distinctions and limitations have to be acknowledged over and over again on a daily basis (which does not necessarily mean endlessly). One might say that the Decorated Shed articulates an architecture of the “secret,” a word whose etymology and sense point toward a separation—a condition of “apartness,” a necessary opacity—as a way of articulating our “shared” concerns,⁶⁵ or, as Deleuze and Guattari define it, “a content that has hidden its form in favor of a simple container.”⁶⁶ *Learning from Las Vegas*’s “solution” is a simple “shed” for a secret. But it is a shed with no secret literally hidden within it. After all, if the Decorated Shed is exemplary of a *screened* unknowingness, its mode of illuminating that condition is surely through surface and exposure, not depth and interiority.

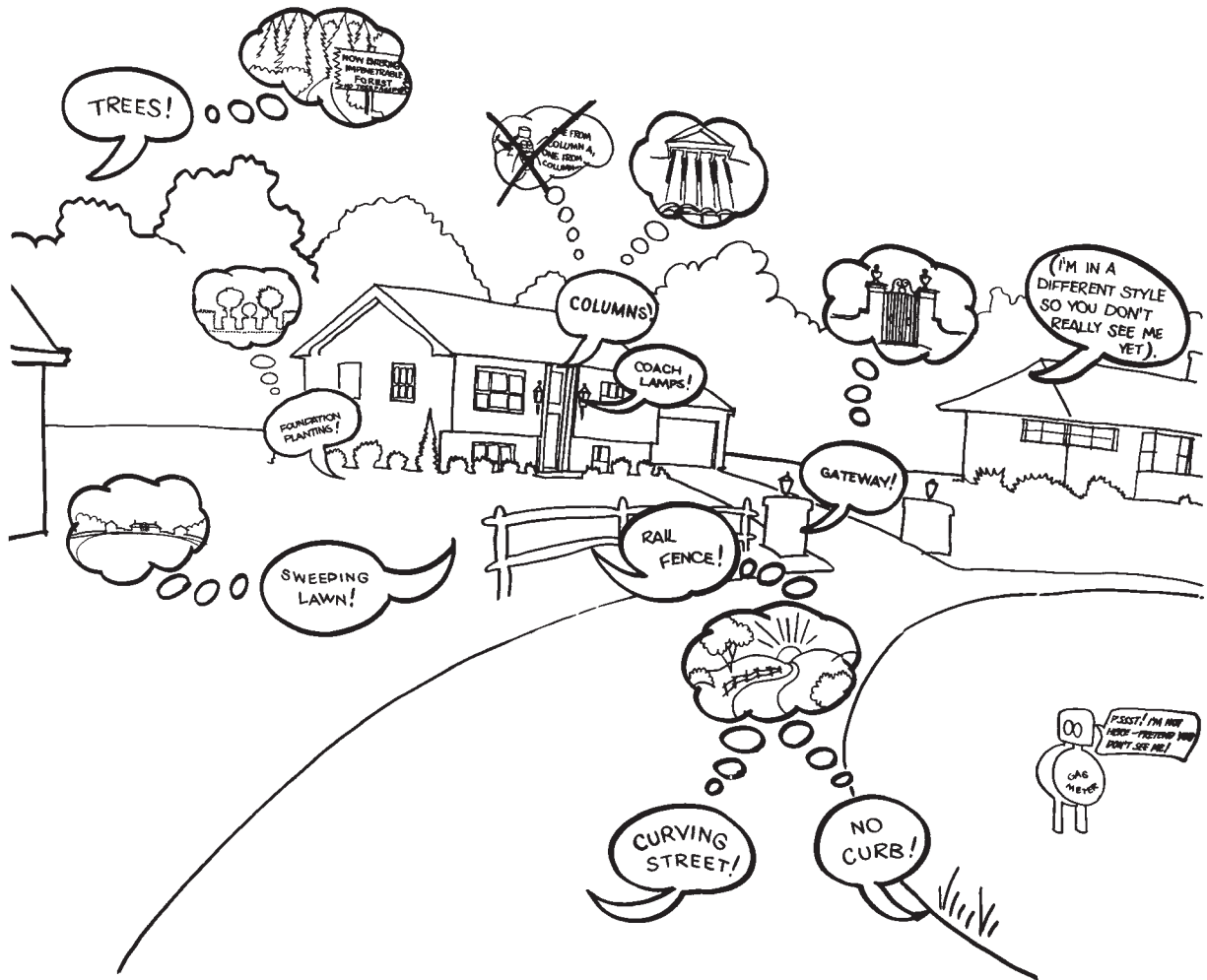
If we take visibility in Lyotard’s sense to mean “an exteriority that discourse can’t *interiorize* in signification,”⁶⁷ then the food for thought that the “Eat” sign in the Decorated Shed diagrams raise is indigestible. I take it that the speech balloon/large sign in the Decorated Shed diagrams—the sign reading “Eat” that separates the car from the building—is crucial to working out the stakes involved in the issues of separateness, limitation, and distinction that are at the heart of skepticism about other minds (figure 3.10). Although one has to wait until the end of the second part of *Learning from Las Vegas* to encounter speech balloons in their strict cartoon form—in an image from the Learning from Levittown studio (figure 3.11)—they are strikingly evident as literal balloons in the image of the Decorated Shed.⁶⁸ In fact, in most versions of the Decorated Shed, the quivering line of the pole carrying the “Eat” sign looks more like a string attached to a balloon than a solid columnar structure supporting an elevated sign (figure 3.2). In a recent book on cartoons, David Carrier has suggested that



comic book speech balloons attempt to overcome the skepticism of other minds by revealing another (fictional) person's thoughts displayed transparently to the reader "as if" we could literally read (look into) their minds.⁶⁹ But one could just as easily argue that sophisticated uses of speech balloons are another manifestation of the skeptical dilemma of other minds, rather than a mere convention for its overcoming.

It is significant that in all the Decorated Shed diagrams, either the speech balloons are literally *untethered* from their "source," the architecture itself, or the sign is conspicuously "applied" to the false facade of the shed; they are placed either slightly in front of or farther away from the shedlike structures. Carrier notes that it is paramount that the "things" or characters in the fictional cartoon scenes never acknowledge the speech balloons *as* speech balloons because that would call attention to the opacity that supposedly makes it difficult to register other minds.⁷⁰ But if I am not mistaken, the little pools of ink in the eyelike building windows of an earlier rendition of the Duck and the Decorated Shed look remarkably like tiny pupils looking up at the separation of language from its physical body (figure 3.2).⁷¹ In fact, owing to the dual register of the image above, it actually appears as if the Duck is looking up at the "Eat" sign that the Decorated Shed is also "looking" at.

3.11 "Precedents of suburban symbols,"
 Learning from Levittown studio, Yale University, 1970, by Robert Miller, courtesy of VSBA, Inc., in *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1977 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.



How far is architecture separated from the words used to articulate itself or, more precisely, from its own voice in those words? Manfredo Tafuri's well-known response to this dilemma in regard to the increasing closure of capital and the capitalist city was to demonstrate a condition of architectural "muteness" on the part of some architects that potentially gave them a critical distance from those capitalist structures, but ultimately resulted in a condition of absolute alienation from the city as such. Fredric Jameson notes that Venturi and Scott Brown's Duck is perhaps a late capitalist version of Tafuri's account of the building's separation and isolation from its environment, now "celebrating its own disconnection as a message in its own right." In the language I am using, it is a monument unable to give voice to its expressions.⁷² Venturi and Scott Brown forge another response to this dilemma. In an act of architectural ventriloquism, the "voice" of architecture is separated from its body in the Decorated Shed.⁷³ But the analogy to ventriloquism is not quite accurate; it is, in fact, a disanalogy. The Decorated Shed is a ventriloquism gone awry, and thus the situation is more akin to a badly synchronized film, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes it in *Phenomenology of Perception*: "When a breakdown of sound all at once cuts off the voice from a character who nevertheless goes on gesticulating on the screen, not only does the meaning of his speech suddenly escape me: the spectacle itself is changed. The face which was so recently alive thickens and freezes, and looks nonplussed, while the interruption of the sound invades the screen as a quasi-stupor."⁷⁴ In the speech balloons of the Decorated Shed, we get a real sense of how our words, and our voice in them, are achieved through fragile acts of barely achieved *composure*. The Decorated Shed calls attention to this fragility.

In doing so, they imply that the ways we converse and exchange words and ideas about architecture—about anything—might not express or reveal the attitudes and connections that we are willing to give voice to. This is all to say that the speech balloon in the Decorated Shed allegorizes the temptation of language to drive a wedge between us and other minds. But this is not a perspicuous way of putting things. After all, if our words drive a wedge between us, are we, in effect, saying that architecture has been "driven" to that same point, as if we were somehow in the thrall of a natural force that has pushed us outside our common "language games," and thus outside the social? It would be more accurate to say that if our words (on architecture) force a wedge between us, we are responsible for that condition, either because we have done the driving or because we don't have the will to undo it.⁷⁵ As Foucault put it, "Man" may be a "vehicle for words which exist before him," but those words "are called back to life by the insistence of his words."⁷⁶ Calling architecture back to life might involve seeing how it can remotivate itself within a range of communicative possibilities that are never strictly idiomatic (private and opaque) nor entirely conventional (public, shared, and transparent).⁷⁷

What then does the “Eat” sign signify about our appetite for architecture? Is that appetite mostly for “images,” as Fredric Jameson argues in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*?⁷⁸ Or is it our appetite for “signs,” “texts,” or “theory,” as many would argue of *Learning from Las Vegas*?⁷⁹ Considering the close connection between our appetite for books and for architecture, we can’t help but wonder what kind of reader *Learning from Las Vegas* is trying to attract. Do VSBI want a reader of primitive judgment, either swallowing (good) or spitting out (bad), as Freud would have it? Or would they prefer a bovine reader, a “ruminator,” as Nietzsche would say? I take it that they want the latter, considering their critiques of the relationship between interior and exterior, and their consistent demands for “delays in judgment.” One thing is certain: the word “eat” is not *merely* a “sign.” As Gertrude Stein once remarked: “Americans can and do express everything . . . in words of one syllable made up of two letters or three and at most four.”⁸⁰ It is hardly surprising, then, that one of the inspirations for *Learning from Las Vegas* was the Los Angeles-based artist Ed Ruscha. His use of monosyllabic words such as “no,” “ok,” “smash,” and “oof” suggests that Americans are somewhat comic, and definitely *primitive*.

I take the coupling of the schematic shed with the “Eat” sign less as an indication of *Learning from Las Vegas* initiating a linguistic turn in architectural theory than as an attempt to explore our primal needs and satisfactions: a taking stock of what we need from architecture, from life, in terms of what we are getting or not getting from it. To make a loose analogy, we might think of the Decorated Shed with its “Eat” sign as an updated version of Thoreau’s declaration in *Walden* that “None of the brute creation requires more than Food and Shelter.”⁸¹ The first chapter of that book, “Economy,” is taken up with a minute rendering of the monetary costs of materials and foodstuffs to provide for the author’s nourishment and shelter for eight months. Thoreau’s obsession with economics is his way of coming to terms with how “dear” things are to him, his attempt to account for how those sundry things might *count*.

Are we so needy that we can only utter our needs, or register “signs of life,” in monosyllabic words? One doesn’t have to imagine what Adorno’s reply would be: “the bread on which the culture industry feeds humanity, remains the stone of stereotype.”⁸² But we often mistake stones for bread, and we are liable to break both too soon.

Clearly the word “eat” in the Decorated Shed image is not merely a word. Here we might fruitfully recall the opening passage of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, in which he asks us to conceive of four spoken words—“block,” “pillar,” “slab,” and “beam”—as a complete primitive language. He then queries: “is the call ‘Slab!’ . . . a sentence or a word?”⁸³ And if it is a sentence, is it

complete, or merely degenerate, elliptical, or truncated? As John Austin points out in *How to Do Things with Words*: “in primitive languages it would not yet be clear, it would not yet be possible to distinguish, which of various things that . . . we might be doing we were in fact doing. For example ‘Bull’ or ‘Thunder’ in a primitive language of one-word utterances could be a warning, information, a prediction, etc.”⁸⁴ Primitive language games are constitutively indeterminate, as Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell have shown us.

When confronted with such extreme erasures of context, we must consider some different (primal) scenes for these calls.⁸⁵ We might surmise that the people speaking this language are incapable of speaking in sentences, “as though their words, hence their lives, were forever somehow truncated, stunted, confined, contracted”; or we might imagine that these words are spoken calmly in a “deserted landscape,” or perhaps in the context of a “noisy environment”—let’s say a construction site, or in the “cacophonous context” of Las Vegas, or any media-saturated environment—in which they are uttered not “sluggishly and vacantly, but vigorously, in shouts.”⁸⁶ In such situations we must, out of necessity, pay close attention to the illocutionary force of the word.⁸⁷ As John Austin put it: “Language as such and in its primitive stages is not precise, and it is also not, in our sense, explicit . . . explicitness, in our sense, makes clearer the *force* of the utterances or ‘how . . . it is to be taken.’”⁸⁸ The deliberate lack of *context* (or explicitness, to use Austin’s wording) in which the word “eat” is exposed in the Decorated Shed is a provocation for the reader to acknowledge that it is up to us to locate the shared criteria, our attunement in ordinary words, and thus how the “Eat” sign is to be taken.

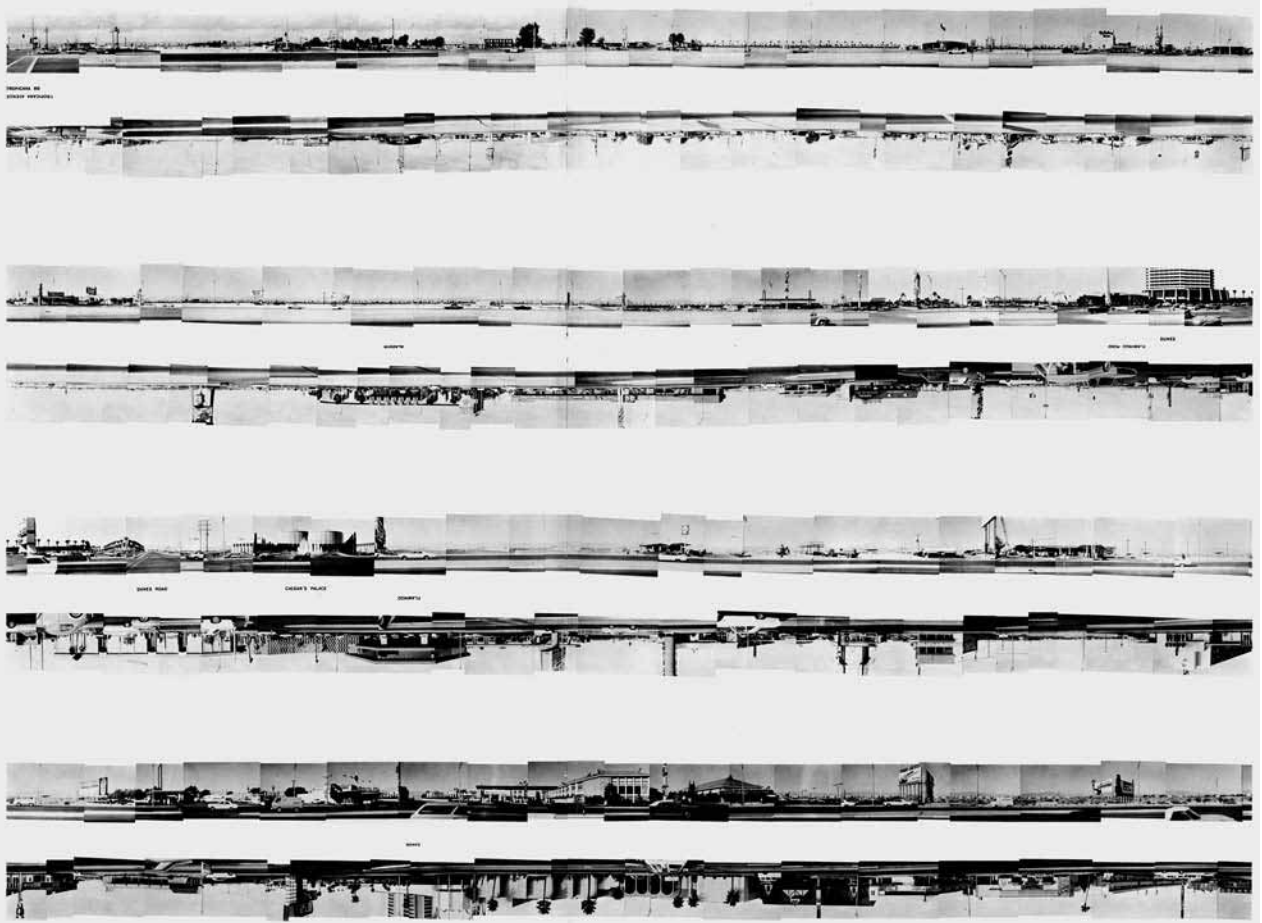
Is the word “eat” an imperative: “Eat, damn it!”? Imagine the harsh paternal voice of the culture industry ramming something down our throats. Do we take it willingly? Or is that voice the soft and loving one of a parent figure serving up what Adorno calls “pre-digested pabulum” for our childish consumption (two sides of the same coin)? Or is it the muttering of a starving man, woman, or child, who can muster only a single word to express an urgent life-and-death need? Is it the pulsating, loud, shrill, and repetitive voice, “eat, eat, eat” that must scream to be heard in the din of Las Vegas (think of the title of Tom Wolfe’s famous essay on Las Vegas, or imagine the chanting accompanying an eating competition)? Or is it the staging of a scene of reorigination in which we are again “in-fans,” literally on the verge of language without yet being “in” it?⁸⁹ How are we to tell? It is as if we are afflicted with a case of tonal agnosia, in which “the expressive qualities of voices disappear—their tone, their timbre, their feeling, their entire character—while words . . . are perfectly understood.”⁹⁰ This might be the appropriate time to return to the role of the deadpan in relation to the fantasy of expression and inexpression that takes place through the Duck and the Decorated Shed.

In a brief aside toward the end of the previous chapter, I touched upon Venturi and Scott Brown's interest in the "deadpan" as a technique and disposition to cultivate a responsiveness toward the imminent world that we live in now. I raised this issue in terms of Scott Brown's interest in Freudian models of nonjudgmental attitudes toward the world and other minds in it, such as the analytic technique of "evenly distributed attention."⁹¹ I want to further pursue the concept of the deadpan as it elaborates the fantasy of expression and inexpression aired in the Duck and the Decorated Shed.⁹²

Freud's even-handed, nonjudgmental attitude to psychic phenomena, which so inspired Scott Brown, can also be seen in Ed Ruscha's approach to the ordinary environment we live in. In fact, it was this approach that most attracted Scott Brown to Ruscha's work. Ruscha's art books began to appear in 1962, and no doubt inspired Scott Brown's own photographic record of vernacular architecture in Los Angeles while she was a professor at UCLA in the mid-1960s.⁹³ It is hardly surprising, then, that Ruscha was subsequently invited to VSBI's Learning from Las Vegas studio at Yale (he never came); that the Yale studio group visited Ruscha's studio during their four days in Los Angeles before proceeding to Las Vegas; that two of the photographs of the Las Vegas Strip in *Learning from Las Vegas* are directly inspired by Ruscha's book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) (figures 3.12, 3.13); that they hired a helicopter in Las Vegas as Ruscha did to have photographs taken for *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*; that they produced a film called *Deadpan Las Vegas* (or *Three Projector Deadpan*); or that Scott Brown's article "Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning" is illustrated with three of Ruscha's photographs: one from *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* (1967), one from *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1962), and another from *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965) (figure 3.14).⁹⁴ For Scott Brown, Ed Ruscha's art books were the primary exemplification of a "deadpan," nonjudgmental approach to the environment.

She remarks: "His *Sunset Strip*, a long accordion fold-out, shows every building on each side of the strip, each carefully numbered but without comment. Deadpan, a scholarly monograph with a silver cover and slip-on box jacket, it could be on the piazzas of Florence, but it suggests a new vision of the very imminent world around us."⁹⁵ And in her notes for the Levittown studio at Yale (winter 1970), Scott Brown queries: "What new techniques are required to document new forms? We should aim to dead-pan the material so that it speaks for itself. Ruscha has pioneered this treatment in his monographs (*The Sunset Strip*, *Some Los Angeles Apartments*). It is a way to avoid being upstaged by our own subject matter."⁹⁶ In another reference to Ruscha, she notes, "His *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* are photographed straight: no art except the art that

66. An "Edward Ruscha" elevation of the Strip. Tourist maps are made of the Grand Canal and the House showing the route lined by its palaces. Ruscha made one of the Sunset Strip. We invited him to the Las Vegas Strip.



3.12 "An 'Edward Ruscha' elevation of the Strip," by Douglas Southworth, in *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1972 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.



3.13 Ed Ruscha, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966, offset lithograph on paper. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1997.



3.14 "Good Year Tires, 6610 Laurel Canyon, North Hollywood," in Ed Ruscha, *Thirtyfour Parking Lots*, 1967, offset lithograph on paper, photograph by Art Alanis. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center Library Collection.

hides art.”⁹⁷ This passage, from her essay “On Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning,” echoes Ruscha’s own claim that what he was after “was no-style or a non-statement with a no-style” that would result in a “collection of ‘facts.’”⁹⁸ The point is further echoed when Scott Brown contrasts Ruscha’s approach with the premature systematizing of some aspects of humanism and high modernism: “Where the facts and intangibles are many, a mystique or system—a philosophy of Man and the Universe or a CIAM grid—may substitute for the collection of facts or hard thought.”⁹⁹ Later in the essay, she calls architects and urban designers “Johnnies-come-lately” on the scene who “can learn from others,” such as Ed Ruscha.¹⁰⁰ Although this passage refers to a specific instance of “learning from” Ruscha, its lesson is better seen as a transcendental one: the first task of the architect and urban planner, she suggests, is a responsiveness that delays judgment in order to heighten sensitivity.¹⁰¹ As Scott Brown puts it: “we are still outraged if an architect comes out for billboards or if a planner removes the *emotion* from his voice when talking of urban sprawl.”¹⁰²

Removing emotion from the voice should recall the issue of tonal agnosia in relation to the “Eat” sign, and alert us to the importance of the deadpan technique for Scott Brown and, ultimately, for the visual and rhetorical strategies in *Learning from Las Vegas*. There is no doubt that Venturi and Scott Brown’s “aim to dead-pan the material so that it speaks for itself” contributed to their dissatisfaction with the “interesting Modern styling” of the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*—their feeling that the design and designer had upstaged their own subject matter—and their embrace of the newly “stripped” and “clothed” revised edition. (For a detailed account of the design of both the first and second editions, see chapter 5.)

Not surprisingly, it is the issue of “superficiality” that has exposed *Learning from Las Vegas* to the most criticism. Venturi and Scott Brown’s interest in issues of image, surface, and flatness has been read reductively, with accusations of an “aesthetics of disappearance” à la Paul Virilio, Baudrillardian accounts of the simulacral condition of the American city, and critiques of postmodern “stage-set architecture” and its collusion with the culture industry.¹⁰³ I hope, instead, to try to come to grips with their acknowledgment of what the technique of deadpan flatness might mean in terms of their work.

Deadpan is “literally” defined as a flat or emotionless face, the word “pan” being slang for “face” in nineteenth-century America. It is a mode of rhetorical delivery, used in speeches, public lecturing, and comedy, that is primarily associated with Anglo-American society. As a sociohistorical phenomenon, deadpan has been linked to nineteenth-century American literature, oratory, and popular forms of theater; and it has played a role in facilitating the movement between high and low culture, and in negotiating issues of revelation and concealment within the shifting boundaries of the public and private in frontier

America.¹⁰⁴ If deadpan originated in the work of writers, humorists, and storytellers, such as Mark Twain, it flourished in popular theater and subsequently in silent film. Its presence continues to resonate in the dry comedy of Bob Newhart, Bill Murray, and Rick Mercer, and in the farce of deadpan: the droning voices and placid faces ubiquitous in television and radio advertising.

The great silent-film actor and comedian Buster Keaton—popularly known as “Old Stone Face”—is probably the most famous and striking example of deadpan humor in action (figure 3.15). All of Keaton’s movies feature his trademark deadpan visage that never flinches, no matter what mishap befalls him (figure 3.16). In three different stretches of writing, Cavell directly refers to the logic of Buster Keaton’s comedy as one that “absorbs skepticism.” As Cavell has posited, “[Keaton’s] refinement is to know everything skepticism can think of.”¹⁰⁵ He suggests that Keaton’s deadpan humor is an ideal attitude in the face of skepticism: a stance toward the world and others in it that is an exemplary tarrying with skepticism that neither succumbs to it nor definitively overcomes it.¹⁰⁶ One might call it a “comic acknowledgment” of the world.¹⁰⁷

Cavell’s account of Keaton centers on his particular countenance and the “Olympian resourcefulness of his body.”¹⁰⁸ The lack of emotion in his face and his eternal agility are signs of Keaton’s peculiar receptiveness to the world. His gaze allows an evenness or readiness, in which any object might be as good or bad as any other.¹⁰⁹ Keaton, in other words, is ready for the best and worst that the world has to offer. Perhaps we might characterize his receptiveness as Keaton’s acknowledgment “that it is not a matter of knowing but accepting the world.”¹¹⁰ This should recall Scott Brown’s suggestion, using Ruscha as the primary example, that we might cultivate a sensitivity to the world—heighten our responsiveness to it—by delaying judgment. She reminds us that it is a matter of our attunement or mood toward objects in the world—in her words, “an open-minded and nonjudgmental investigation” of it—that would enable us to do so.¹¹¹ We should hardly be surprised, then, to find that Cavell also talks about Keaton in terms of the “philosophical mood of his countenance” and his “human capacity for sight, or for sensuous awareness generally.”¹¹² In other words, mood brings a world—a totality of sense, a totality of facts—into existence.

This brings us back to Heidegger and the issue of mood that I began to discuss in chapter 1. The “mood” of deadpan that Cavell describes suggests that it is precisely the opposite—perhaps separated by a hair’s breadth—of what Heidegger calls “The pallid lack of mood of indifference to everything.”¹¹³ In *Being and Time*, the mood of indifference is, at various points, described as a “muffling fog,” “smooth,” and the “gray everyday.” These images conjure up an atmosphere in which everything is reduced to the same color, texture, and tone, and in which we are “in” the world, but in it in a literally oppressive way, with no way of voicing that condition. That is to say, we have no way of acknowledging



3.15 Buster Keaton as “Old Stone Face,” publicity still.



3.16 Buster Keaton, *The Cameraman*, 1928, publicity still.

how or why we are “engulfed” by the world, yet we seem to withdraw from it, or it from us, such that it looses its hold. One might call it, for lack of a better word, a condition of apathy.

Heidegger specifies, “Indifference, which can go along with busying oneself head over heels, is to be sharply distinguished from equanimity.”¹¹⁴ In another passage in *Being and Time*, Heidegger calls it “undisturbed equanimity.”¹¹⁵ Equanimity is thus characterized by a calm and even-tempered “resoluteness” that has a vision of “the possible situations of the potentiality-of-being-as-a-whole.”¹¹⁶ Much like Cavell’s understanding of the deadpan, equanimity is not the opposite of indifference, but rather its modification. Thus indifference is not merely “fallen” or “inauthentic”; it is also the (pre)condition that allows for the possible opening up of being-as-a-whole.

The sense of “resoluteness” and “sober readiness” at the heart of equanimity is intimately related to Heidegger’s understanding of what he calls the “*equiprimordial disclosedness* of world.”¹¹⁷ And for Heidegger, disclosure and attunement are closely linked: “*In attunement lies existentially a disclosive submission to world out of which things that matter to us can be encountered.*”¹¹⁸ What is striking in this sentence is that Heidegger italicizes *every* word, as if each one might matter to us; all bear equal weight of priority and expressiveness. This is, perhaps, the crucial difference between indifference and equanimity: indifference is a matter of not caring enough about anything, and equanimity is the openness to caring about possibly everything in the right mood. Venturi and Scott Brown put it this way: “*Learning from Las Vegas*—and learning from Everything.”¹¹⁹

In the first chapter I claimed that wonder, unlike the mood of the “gray everyday,” is characterized not by “indifference” but rather by the fact that the object does matter, without one’s knowing precisely the mode of this mattering. I want to make the claim that the mood of awareness, readiness, and openness to the world exemplified in the deadpan attitude might be the “expression” of that wonder. This claim might strike us as counterintuitive, as we are so used to thinking about wonder in terms of the extremes of expression—perhaps as open-mouthed and wide-eyed awe or shock—that we are less alert to the fact that an expression of wonder might at times register as inexpression. Or to be more accurate, register as an evenly distributed expression—or, in Heideggerian terms, as “equanimity.”

Wonder would then be continuous with what Heidegger characterizes as allowing things to be “encountered in a circumspect heedful way,” which, he continues, “has . . . the character of being affected or moved.”¹²⁰ Wonder might very well look like a deadpan expression, just as a state of calm and cheerfulness might pervade “authentic anxiety,” as indeed it does for Heidegger.¹²¹ Heidegger has a wonderful phrase that seems to capture the idea of wonder as deadpan expression: “resolute raptness.”¹²² Ruscha makes a similar claim in

an interview when he notes that his first book, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, had “an inexplicable thing I was looking for, and that was a kind of a ‘Huh?’” A few lines later, he notes: “One of them [his books] will kind of almost knock you on your ass.”¹²³ That response seems to be what Scott Brown was looking for in the design of *Learning from Las Vegas*. Jean-Luc Nancy has posed the question: “Can we think of a triviality of sense—a quotidianness, a banality, *not* as the dull opposite of a scintillation, but as the grandeur of the simplicity in which sense exceeds itself?”¹²⁴ Perhaps we can.

It is as if the deadpan attitude exemplified by Keaton, Ruscha, and the Decorated Shed refuses to give us the “out” of being too quickly normative in our categorization of good, bad, best, or worst objects or people in the world. This is dramatized by Cavell’s point that Keaton appears in his films to be *of a piece* with objects in the world. (Heidegger might say “together with.” To be of a piece with objects in the world does not necessarily mean to be at peace with them.) Keaton’s “pursuit of happiness” registers as an “ontological equality” between objects and human subjects.¹²⁵ In “Pop Art, Permissiveness, and Planning,” Scott Brown also notes, in relation to her ideas about delaying judgment in order to heighten sensitivity, that “[a]rchitects and urban designers have been too quickly normative.” Here a sentence from Freud’s essay “Negation” comes to mind: “Judging is the intellectual action which decides the choice of motor action, which puts an end to the postponement due to thought and which leads over from thinking to acting.”¹²⁶ In fact, Scott Brown has entitled one section of her and Venturi’s most recent book, *Architecture as Signs and Systems in a Mannerist World*, “Think before You Judge.”¹²⁷

Although I won’t pursue it here, Scott Brown’s discussion about delaying judgment, or as she so wonderfully puts it, “judgment with a sigh,”¹²⁸ exemplifies what is arguably the most important approach to architectural theory and practice in the last forty years: taking architectural production as a form of research. Take as examples Rem Koolhaas’s *Delirious New York*, which he characterizes as a “manifesto with research,” or his research-intensive design studios at Harvard, or the Dutch architectural firm MVRDV’s projects, such as “Data City,” that explore the relationship between the accumulation of information and issues of form. As Stan Allen has described the latter: “MVRDV work to keep the schema open as long as possible, so that it can absorb as much information as possible.”¹²⁹ If this delay in judgment might heighten our sensitivity to the world, then, as Cavell, Heidegger, Ruscha, and Scott Brown emphasize, that would seem to involve a sense of openness, readiness, equanimity, and, at times, inexpression. How might we relate this to the (re)presentational strategies in *Learning from Las Vegas*?

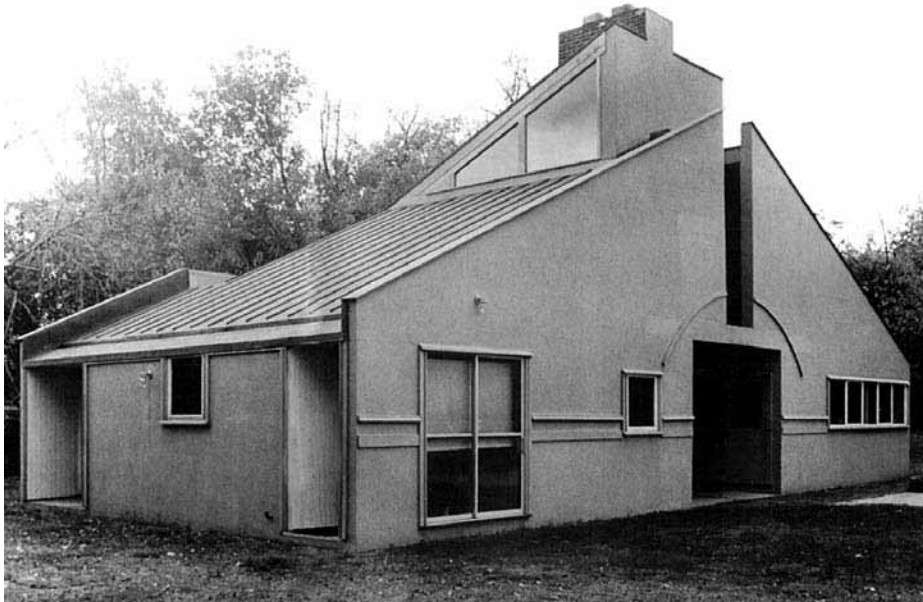
Of course the issue of flatness is operative throughout the text, with its emphasis on the false-front, billboard-like architecture of Las Vegas, exempli-

fied by the Decorated Shed with the big sign dominating the generic building behind. The signs that read or speak, “I Am a Monument,” “Fire Station No. 4,” or “Guild House” are the primary instantiation of a deadpan approach—a flat denotation—that would allow the architecture to “speak” in order to avoid upstaging itself. Although I will return to Venturi and Scott Brown’s proposal entitled “I Am a Monument” in detail in the next chapter, I would like to make the claim here that the desire not to be upstaged that the deadpan epitomizes is a way of acknowledging that our expressions, our needs, our satisfactions should not be overwhelmed or denied by vehicles of expression that do not satisfy us. It voices a desire to avoid a mode of *theatricality* that might prevent us from getting our meaning across, or to be receptive enough to enable “a submission to the world out of which things that matter to us can be encountered.”¹³⁰ Deadpan takes the issue of voice, expression, and encounter down a notch, in order to reimagine how and where they might *seam* together differently.

In terms of flatness, we also need to examine Venturi and Scott Brown’s built work. One obvious example would be one of Venturi’s early buildings, the Vanna Venturi house, built for his mother in 1962 (figure 3.17). The clapboard front and back denoting “home” is merely a flat appliqué that provides a “sandwich” for the middle ground of the interior “lived” space. Or consider the facade of Guild House, which extends beyond the bulk of the shed at the front (figure 3.3).¹³¹ In *Learning from Las Vegas*, not only is Guild House photographed in an extreme close-up that serves to stupefy it beyond all expression, but the flatness is accentuated by the fact that the windows in the second recessed plane are slightly larger than the ones on the front facade, thus counteracting any sense of recession in perspectival depth.¹³² What is never noted is that we somehow needed Venturi and Scott Brown to point out these urban phenomena. After all, this kind of decorated shed has been ubiquitous in American culture for decades, in fantasy and reality, not to mention *Learning from Las Vegas*’s tracking of that genealogy back to Egyptian architecture. And the Duck, for that matter, is a phenomenon that was conceptualized, if not theorized, years earlier by Norman Bel Geddes as “Coney Island Architecture.”¹³³

Venturi and Scott Brown’s insistence on the disruption of the smooth workings of the dialectic between interior and exterior in architecture calls attention to the world *as* obtrusive, opaque, and disrupted.¹³⁴ If media seems to saturate our environment in a “seamless” way, as we hear endlessly repeated, then Venturi and Scott Brown’s operations find the seams, not exactly by seaming it actively, but as if they were allowing the world to reveal its seams to them. They seem to suggest that, with enough patience and resolve on our part, the seams might be rendered visible to us, and thus the world and our desires for the seams that we want might coincide. I see this attitude as informing an intriguing passage in *Walden*: “Look at a meeting-house, or a court-house, or a jail, or a shop, or

3.17 Robert Venturi, Vanna Venturi house, 1962; by permission of VSBA, Inc.



a dwelling-house, and say what that thing really is before a true gaze, and they would all go to pieces in your account of them.”¹³⁵ This passage could easily be read as perpetuating the division between appearance and reality—the desperate “wish to read the reality behind the architectural mask,” in the words of Bernard Tschumi¹³⁶—but I would rather see it as something akin to Cavell’s claim, in relation to Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, that “No possibility, of fakery, simulation, or hallucination, goes beyond the actualities of their existence,” or Ruscha’s observation that Los Angeles makes one aware that everything is ephemeral from the right angle.¹³⁷ After all, who hasn’t had their world unseam itself along the lines out of which they have constructed it?

Although Venturi and Scott Brown do state at times that if we removed those facades there might be nothing left behind them, there *is* something behind them—it may be the wasteland of a beer-can-strewn desert at the limits of



3.18 "The Strip from the desert," Learning from Las Vegas studio, in *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1977 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.

the city, or the comfy interior of Vanna Venturi's house (figure 3.18). As Ruscha writes, sounding a lot like Venturi and Scott Brown, "there's *almost* . . . nothing behind the façades."¹³⁸ It is not as if the false façades are "hiding" anything or acting as a screen to prevent us from seeing that there is nothing behind them. We *know* that the inside is different from the outside; it announces that fact in a very straightforward manner. And what would it be like to know all those possibilities and more? It would be, to repeat Cavell's characterization of Buster Keaton, "to know everything that skepticism can think of." Is that refinement somehow beyond the actualities of our existence? Is that possibility only available to us in film? If it is only available in film, why does it always seem that architecture bears the burden of exemplifying living in the face of such a world? I am thinking of the well-known sequence in *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, in which the facade of a house collapses around Buster Keaton, yet he emerges unscathed owing to a well-placed open window (figure 3.19). Or is that a well-placed Keaton? Timing is everything.¹³⁹ Only someone with the right attitude, with a knack for the openness, receptivity, and awareness of a Keaton, can prepare you for whatever fate befalls you. If Keaton is dashing, perhaps more importantly he is also undashable.¹⁴⁰



3.19 Buster Keaton's impeccable timing and undashable attitude, *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, 1924.

The British artist Steve McQueen's short black-and-white video *Deadpan* (1997) draws many of these issues forward (figure 3.20). It is a restaging of that famous scene in *Steamboat Bill Jr.* in which McQueen himself plays the role of Keaton.¹⁴¹ In the video, in contrast to the film, the facade does not fall once but perpetually, captured from different angles by the camera, as if to say that an acceptance of distinctions and limits is, if not exactly endless, at least an event that we must perpetually risk. To quote Ruscha: "It [the Hollywood sign] might as well fall down. That's more Hollywood—to have it fall down or be removed. But in the end, it's more Hollywood to put it back up, see? [Laughter]." ¹⁴² Or perhaps, it is more (Learning from) Las Vegas?

At this point the "dialectic" between inside and outside is *beside* the point. Mood, after all, comes neither from the "outside" nor from the "inside" but rather from the fact that "knowing is grounded beforehand in a Being already-alongside-the world."¹⁴³ What "befalls" us in such a mood is that architecture would no longer seem to be "grounded" in the traditional metaphors of building as such, but rather would seem more concerned with our imaginative confrontation with the fragility and depths of surfaces, and the way they are posed, exposed, and deposed.¹⁴⁴

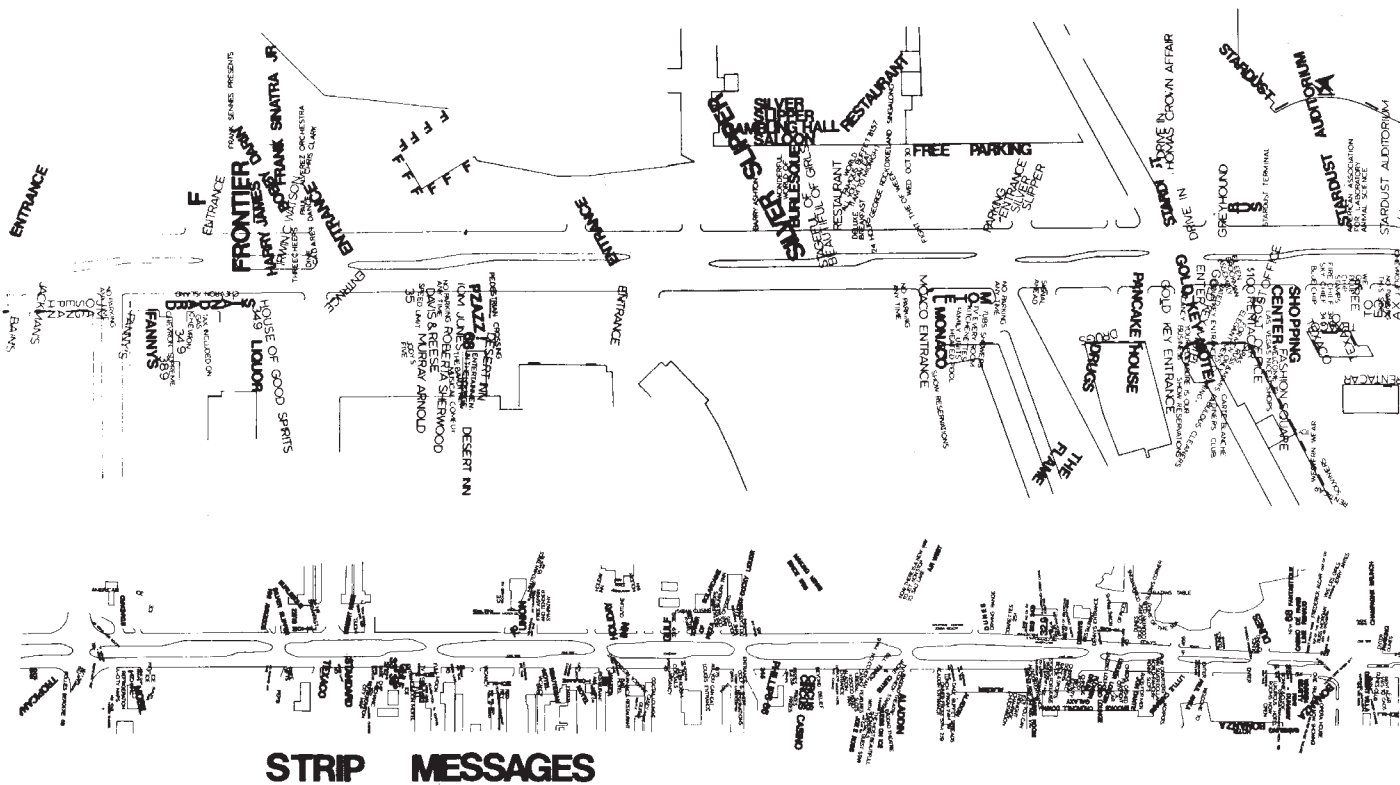
3.20 Steve McQueen, *Deadpan*, 16mm black-and-white film, video transfer, silent, 4 min. 30 sec., 1997; © Steve McQueen, by permission of the Marian Goodman Gallery.



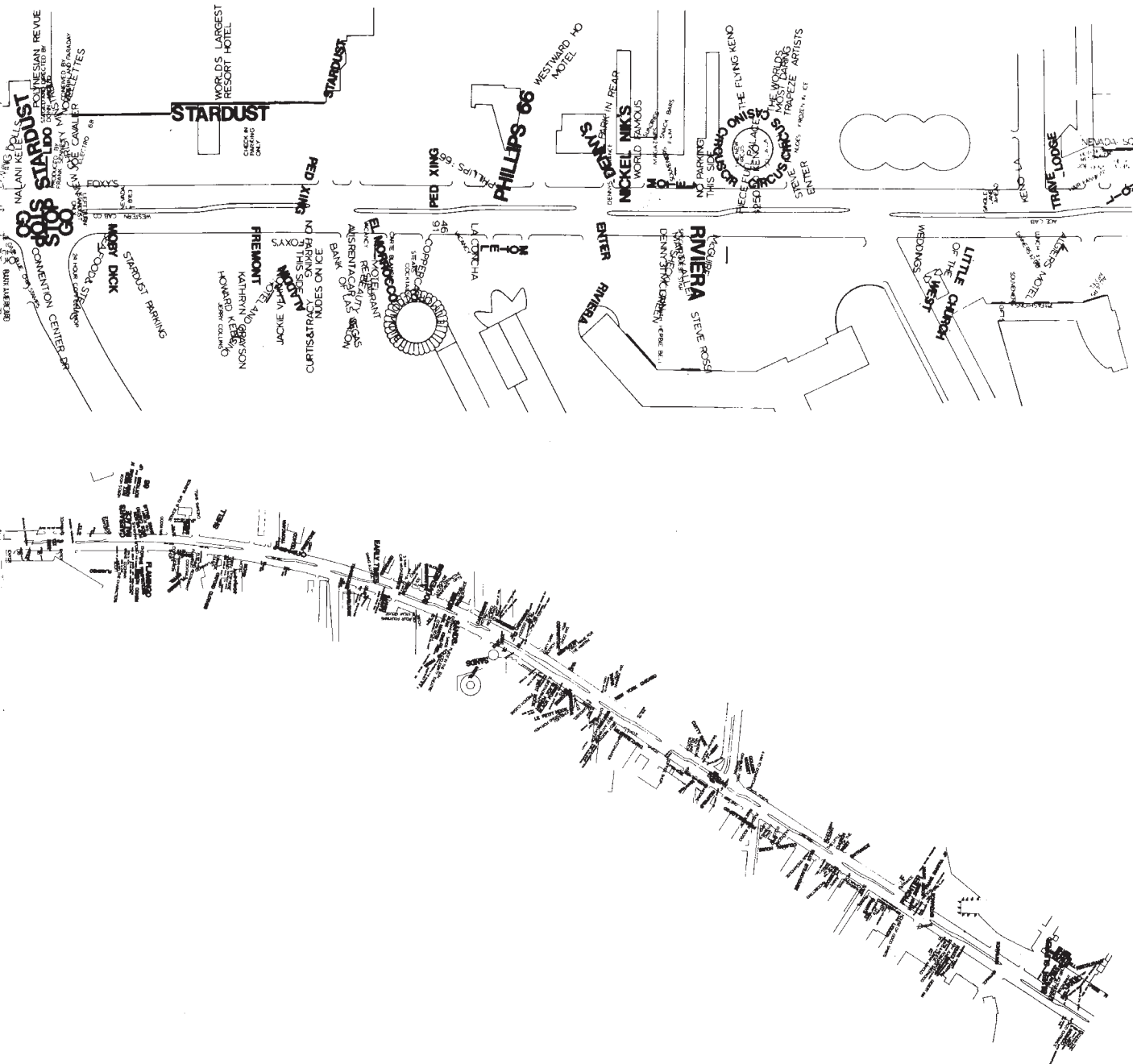
In 1972, the year of the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*, art historian Leo Steinberg published his book of essays *Other Criteria*. In his section on “The Flatbed Picture Plane,” Steinberg argued for a “reorientation” of the picture plane from the vertical to the horizontal, thus marking an epochal shift from a primary reference to “visual experience”—oriented to an upright posture—to that of an “operational process.”¹⁴⁵ As Steinberg’s title suggests, the postwar picture plane—with Robert Rauschenberg’s paintings and combines as the primary examples—now refers to any “[hard] receptor surface on which information may be received, printed, impressed—whether coherently or in confusion.”¹⁴⁶ The analogy might be made to any “flat documentary surface that tabulates information”: tabletops, architectural plans, studio floors, charts, maps, aerial views, newspapers, or bulletin boards. This might remind us of the charts, maps, plans, schedules, aerial views, postcards, and brochures that were operative in Venturi and Scott Brown’s Yale studio, and that appear in *Learning from Las Vegas* as an attempt to capture the sense and sensibility of Las Vegas through a plethora of graphic techniques. Steinberg’s claim for Rauschenberg could easily apply to the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas* with only a slight shift in wording: “Rauschenberg’s picture-plane is for the consciousness immersed in the brains of the city.”¹⁴⁷ The crucial point of “The Flatbed Picture Plane” is that it is not the actual physical placement of the image that counts, but rather its “psychic address” and its mode of “imaginative confrontation.”¹⁴⁸

These ideas are strikingly pertinent to the astonishing map in *Learning from Las Vegas* labeled “Map of Las Vegas Strip showing every written word seen from the road” (figure 3.21). In this map, all the “tethered” balloon signs from the Strip have become untethered (or have we let them go?) and eventually crash-land, after a heady ascent, across pages 20 and 21 of the first edition.¹⁴⁹ These signs are no longer in their vertical position, facing us “from” the road, as if standing for something; instead, all the words on the Strip seem to have fallen to the ground, too weak to stand on their own or to compete with each other for our attention; or as if the words were straining under their burden to bear meaning, as if they had escaped their upright constraints. Thrown out onto the “public” street.

The question is: Are we looking at a further scrambling of those words or at an attempt to make *sense* of them? How are we supposed to read them? Perhaps the map is a literal enactment of those words returning to the horizontal “refuge” of “our city of words”—the book we are reading—from their vertical exile in what John Dos Passos called the “city of scrambled alphabets.”¹⁵⁰ We might stumble or trip over these scattered words. Who knows, maybe Venturi and Scott Brown might want the words there—consciously or unconsciously—



3.21 "Map of Las Vegas Strip showing every written word seen from the road," by Ron Filson and Martha Wagner, in *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1972 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.





precisely because we might trip over them. I like to think of Venturi and Scott Brown's "ambivalence" toward them in terms of a particularly revealing "symbolic and compulsive act" from Freud's analysis of the Rat Man: "One day, when his lady was due to go to the country, he [the Rat Man] took a walk, in the course of which his foot knocked against a stone. He kicked the stone out of the way, because, he reflected, his lady might shortly pass along this road, she might come to grief. Twenty minutes or so later, the Rat Man thought what he had done absurd, and he walked over to the stone, picked it up, and replaced it in the middle of the road."¹⁵¹ Freud speaks here to the condition of these words that are both "fixated" and yet mobile—"on the road."

A more literal example of this stumbling might be Venturi and Scott Brown's Franklin Court restoration on the excavated site of Benjamin Franklin's home in Philadelphia. Excerpts from Franklin's letters and household records describing the house were inscribed in the rough paving stones underneath the bare structural frame of the house, which Venturi and Scott Brown referred to as a "ghost architecture." A fragment from Baudelaire seems to strike the right tone: "Stumbling over words as over cobblestones, colliding now and then with long-dreamed-of verses."¹⁵² It is as if wording the world is also our stumbling block, our collision with "long-dreamed-of verses."¹⁵³ Descartes's dream of a philosophical "bedrock" is also uneven when it comes to words—even when just thinking about them: "But it is surprising how prone my mind is to errors. Although I am considering these points within myself silently and without speaking, yet I stumble over words and am almost deceived by ordinary language."¹⁵⁴ After all, as Cavell points out, "the capacities for walking and talking are the same as the capacities for stumbling and stammering."¹⁵⁵

The language and imagery of stumbling suggest the act of walking rather than the more obvious situation that *Learning from Las Vegas* is predicated on: the city experienced through the mediation of the automobile. I don't deny this for a minute. Within the car we do not have the same point of view on the city, nor do we have the same city as seen on foot. The oscillation between the horizontal and vertical planes enacted through the movement of the car enables the imaginative confrontation between the driver/viewer and the city to occur. For example, think of the strange effects of the car hood, rearview mirror, side mirrors, and the "play" between them, in many of the photographs and films made by the Yale studio participants in Las Vegas (figure 3.22). The condition in the car marks what Deleuze has identified as an overtaking of the "monad" by a "nomadology"; a *shift* from a world closed within a room with imperceptible openings to a "sealed car" on the highway.¹⁵⁶ Significantly, the shift from monad to nomadology is specifically raised in relationship to Tony Smith's famous account of driving on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike at night. Needless to say, the conditions in Las Vegas are different, and I realize that the visual markers for orientation on

3.22 "Movie sequence traveling north on the Strip from Tropicana Avenue to Sahara Avenue," Learning from Las Vegas studio, in *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1972 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.

the Strip are more prominent than in the situation described by Smith. But contrary to their explicit statements, within the car the underlying harmonic “order” Venturi and Scott Brown want to recover from Las Vegas—all the “grids,” “rows,” and “points of identity” in what they call the “expansive texture” of the Strip—begins to free itself from such containment. Seated in the car, figure and ground are in movement within this desert city.¹⁵⁷ The tumbling of the words onto the horizontal plane of the map is an acknowledgment that point of view and encounter are unhinged from their strict x,y coordinates. Again, how do we read these signs now?

What is really at stake in these examples is how such “signs” relate to the ground in a groundless world and how that reconfigures our mode of encounter with them. That is to say, it is the ground of the image that is at stake; the point where the sign manifests, and acknowledges, its own exteriority and conditions of sense. Art historian Meyer Schapiro characterizes this situation in terms of the “vehicle and field” in the constitution of image-signs.¹⁵⁸ The “vehicle and field” are the nonsemiotic and material conditions that enable us to make any sense whatsoever—aesthetic, ethical, or political—and that enable an encounter with them to take place. Perhaps this suggests a way to think about signs whose meanings are never given, and certainly never given to a preexisting “us.” The “I Am a Monument” proposal in *Learning from Las Vegas* explores these issues with incredible imagination and logic, and we need to consider now what that “blinking sign” might indicate.

- 113 In the revised edition, only a snippet of this “deadpan” sequence is reproduced.
- 114 “Las Vegas Deadpan,” 16mm film, transferred to VHS, approx. 21:45 minutes; VSBA Archive. There are two other films produced during the Las Vegas trip: “Las Vegas Strip (Day/Night)” by Dan Scully, 16mm film, transferred to VHS, approx. 14 minutes; “Las Vegas Electric,” 16mm film, transferred to VHS, approx. 8:45 minutes. In the last video, the images have been reversed during transfer.
- 115 Robert Venturi to Alan Lapidus, Tom Wolfe, and Vince Scully, January 16, 1969, AAUP, 225.II.A.27.16.
- 116 “Feasibility Report for the Renwick Gallery,” from Robert Venturi to Dr. Joshua C. Taylor, August 31, 1974, AAUP, 225.II.A.79.27.
- 117 Venturi and Scott Brown refer to the jester in relationship to the architect in *LLV*, p. 161.
- 118 Donald Lydon to Mr. and Mrs. Robert Venturi, January 23, 1969, AAUP, 225.II.A.26.14.
- 119 Muriel Cooper in conversation with Ellen Lupton, May 7, 1994. This variety was enabled by the IBM Composer, designed by Eliot Noyes, which had a type ball that allowed for changes in typeface. Scott Brown and Venturi used an IBM Elite typewriter in the “Signs of Life” exhibition, in which they employed Franklin Gothic for bold heads, owing to its ordinary styling; Times Roman and Caslon for institutional symbolism; and Futura for lobby signs, owing to its boldness and roundness. See “Print Casebooks Questionnaire: The Best in Exhibition/Display,” AAUP, 225.II.A.80.06. This kind of typographic variety and accompanying sensory overload is also evident in their first exhibition, “From Rome to Las Vegas: An Exhibit of the Work of Venturi and Rauch at the Philadelphia Art Alliance, 1968.” See the wonderful description of this exhibition in the first edition of *LLV*, p. 125. The use of an underlying typographic grid is conducive to either a deadpan or jester aesthetic; it is equally able to engage in minimal design—the “white-page aesthetic” that so disturbed Scott Brown—or to produce a “mise-en-page” of a noisy broadsheet, or newspaper-like, layout. In fact, isn’t their “Bill-Ding-Board” project a giant columnar grid(iron)?
- 120 Muriel Cooper in conversation with Ellen Lupton, May 7, 1994.
- 121 In Muriel Cooper’s two layouts for Part I, these elevations begin as a six-page spread and are then edited down to a four-page spread.
- 122 Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, conversation with the author, Manayunk, Pennsylvania, June 16, 2007. Denise Scott Brown took the “Las Vegas Strip” photograph, which appeared as figure 39 and figure 111 in the first edition and was figure 1 in the revised edition.
- 123 Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968).
- 124 Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Soun-Gui Experience,” in *Multiple Arts: The Muses II*, ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 207–211, and p. 260 n. 1.
- 125 Jean-Luc Nancy, “Forbidden Representation,” in *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 35–36. Nancy provides a succinct “definition” of his way of thinking about this issue: “Representation is a presence that is presented, exposed, or exhibited” (p. 36).
- 126 See J. J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), p. 26.
- 127 Barbara Ankeny to Robert Venturi, November 20, 1975, AAFAL: “The book will be re-designed as well, along the lines of your earlier desires. It will look like a book of ideas for students and professionals.” See Nancy, “The Soun-Gui Experience,” p. 209.

- 128 Here I am paraphrasing an idea in Nancy's essay "Catalogue," in *Multiple Arts: The Muses II*, p. 154, that I found quite relevant. Also see chapter 4.
- 129 The large presentation boards that explore the Las Vegas Strip's intensity utilize psychedelic Day-Glo colors to great effect; however, they are not nearly as striking when they appear in the first edition, owing either to their smaller scale or to the limitations of four-color reproduction.
- 130 In many ways the first edition recapitulates the studio, summarizing the *process* of its research and presentation of material, even as it further extends it into new configurations.
- 131 Although at one point the Press was considering including it as a numbered image, this idea seems to have dropped out sometime during the design and production of the revised edition.
- 132 Scott Brown, preface to the revised edition, p. xvi.
- 133 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, "The 'Learning from Las Vegas' Studio, or Formal Analysis as Applied Design Research, Fall 1968," p. 3, AAUP, box 6905.
- 134 Ibid.: "Although at the end-of-term presentation neither instructors nor students could clearly answer the question 'What did you learn from Las Vegas?' (Can one answer the question 'What did you learn from the Parthenon?') students and faculty judged their efforts as worthwhile and relatively successful by two criteria: relevance and involvement."
- 135 Marshall McLuhan, "Decline of the Visual" (1966), in *Looking Closer 3*, ed. Bierut et al., p. 175. Significantly it was Marshall McLuhan who first declared the epochal importance of "suspended judgment": "the technique of suspended judgment is the discovery of the twentieth century as the technique of invention was the discovery of the nineteenth." See Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), p. 69.
- 136 Michel Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher," in Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, vol. 3 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault* (Harmondsworth: Penguin and Allen Lane, 1997), p. 323.
- 137 Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 282.
- 138 See Kant, *Critique of Judgment*. The differences between reflective and determinate judgments are laid out in the introduction and in "Division I: Analytic of the Aesthetic Judgment." For an interesting way of thinking about Kant in relation to issues of judgment and pleasure in Freud, see Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 147–149. Cavell's understanding of Kant's "reflective judgment" and its "universal voice" is central to all of his writings on aesthetics, criticism, politics, ethics, skepticism, and the ordinary.
- 139 In 1972, Derrida had the following to say about the status of the book: "the form of the 'book' is now going through a period of general upheaval, and . . . that form now appears less natural, and its history less transparent, than ever." Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 3.
- 140 Barthes, "From Work to Text," pp. 155–164. Derrida's writings about the relationship between oeuvre and text in the opening pages of *Of Grammatology* are also relevant here, but I have derived the most benefit from his discussion of that relationship in *The Postcard*, pp. 414–419, particularly as he relates them to issues of undressing, text, and

- truth. An excellent overview of this moment in theory can be found in John Mowitt's *Text: The Genealogy of an Antidisciplinary Object* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992).
- 141 Jean-Luc Nancy, "Distinct Oscillation," in *The Ground of the Image*, p. 66. This is an astute essay on the relationship between text and image.
- 142 See "Fallen Words Flat Out" in chapter 3, where I further elaborate on Leo Steinberg's notion of the flatbed picture plane in relation to the representational strategies in *LLV*.
- 143 Schapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art," p. 26.
- 144 *LLV*, p. 20. Not to mention that Cooper's design is also an excellent typographic presentation of Ruscha's claim that "Streets are like ribbons. They're like ribbons and they're dotted with facts. Fact ribbons, I guess." "L.A. Suggested by the Art of Edward Ruscha," in Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. Alexandra Schwarz (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), p. 224.
- 145 Denise Scott Brown to Barbara Ankeny, September 14, 1976, p. 4, AAFAL.
- 146 Denise Scott Brown to Barbara H. Ankeny, June 9, 1976, AAFAL.
- 147 The latter two phrases are used by Barbara Ankeny to describe the revised edition.
- 148 Another definition of a treatise is that it is shorter than a book, but longer than an essay.
- 149 *LLV*, p. 87.
- 150 Scott Brown to Barbara Ankeny, June 9, 1976, AAFAL.
- 151 From my perspective, there is no contradiction here with my claim in chapter 3 that the Duck and the Decorated Shed overlap with a vengeance.
- 152 Derrida, *The Postcard*, p. 343.

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