... 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. As Rem Koolhaas explains in his book
Delirious New York: “In Western architecture there has been the humanistic as-
sumption 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.” 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 Ameri-
can 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 \textit{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 \textit{expressing themselves}, in word and conduct.”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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 \textit{theatricality} in which the “expressive aim has distorted the whole.”\textsuperscript{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 \textit{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 \textit{duck} in honor of the duck-shaped drive-in, “The Long Island Duckling,” illustrated in \textit{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 \textit{decorated shed}.
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.”

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. 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. 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
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. 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.”

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).

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
some way housing for the elderly.”

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). 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.

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...
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. 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.” And as Karsten Harries has rightly pointed out, “Ledoux’s architecture parlante is an architecture of ducks.” 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.” 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. 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. 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. 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.”\textsuperscript{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.)”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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

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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.
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 over-exposure 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. Postwar modernism’s drive for a certain kind of explicitness had, according to Venturi and Scott Brown, resulted in the production of Ducks. 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.” 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. 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.” 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. 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.” 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. 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.” 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.” 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. It denies Venturi and Scott Brown’s shared life and work in and as “an exposure of finite singularities.” The Duck emblematizes 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. 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.”

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*.)

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”? 

![Figure 3.9](image-url)
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.” Sometimes such divisions are necessary in the straits of what Venturi, drawing on Aldo van Eyck’s terminology, calls the “sickness” of spatial continuity. 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. 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. 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, or, as Deleuze and Guattari define it, “a content that has hidden its form in favor of a simple container.”

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,” 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. 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 (figures 3.2, 3.11). 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. 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. 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). 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.
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. 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. 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.” 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. 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.” 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).
The “Eat” Sign, Primitive Language, and the Search for Criteria

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*? Or is it our appetite for “signs,” “texts,” or “theory,” as many would argue of *Learning from Las Vegas*? 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.” 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.” 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.” 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?” 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.” 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. 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.” In such situations we must, out of necessity, pay close attention to the illocutionary force of the word. 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.’” 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 pablum” 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? 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.” 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.
Deadpan and the Absorption of Skepticism

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.” 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.

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. 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). 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.” 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.” In another reference to Ruscha, she notes, “His Twentysix Gasoline Stations are photographed straight: no art except the art that
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.’” 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.” 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. 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.

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.”

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. 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
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.” 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. One might call it a “comic acknowledgment” of the world.

Cavell’s account of Keaton centers on his particular countenance and the “Olympian resourcefulness of his body.” 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. 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.” 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. 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.” 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.” 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,
3.15 Buster Keaton as “Old Stone Face,” publicity still.

with no way of voicing that condition. That is to say, we have no way of acknowledg-
ing 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.”\textsuperscript{114} In another passage in \textit{Being and Time}, Heidegger calls it “undisturbed equanimity.”\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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 equa-
nimity is intimately related to Heidegger’s understanding of what he calls the “\textit{equiprimordial disclosedness} of world.”\textsuperscript{117} And for Heidegger, disclosure and attunement are closely linked: “\textit{In attunement lies existentially a disclosive submission to world out of which things that matter to us can be encountered.”}\textsuperscript{118} What is striking in this sentence is that Heidegger italicizes every word, as if each one might matter to us; all might 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: “\textit{Learning from Las Vegas—and learning from Everything.”}\textsuperscript{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-moutherd 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.”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{121}
Heidegger has a wonderful phrase that seems to capture the idea of wonder as deadpan expression: “resolute raptness.” 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.” 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?” 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. 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.” 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.”

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,” 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 example 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.” 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, exemplified 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.”

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). 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. 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.”

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. 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 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.” 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 Tschumi—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. 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.” It is not as if the false facades 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. 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.
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. 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.]” 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.” 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.
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.”

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.”

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.”

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.”

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 crashed-land, after a heady ascent, across pages 20 and 21 of the first edition. 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.”

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
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. 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. The “vehicle and field” are the nonsemiotic and material conditions that enable us to make any sense whatsoever—esthetic, 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.