

4 A MONUMENT FOR EVERYONE AND NO ONE

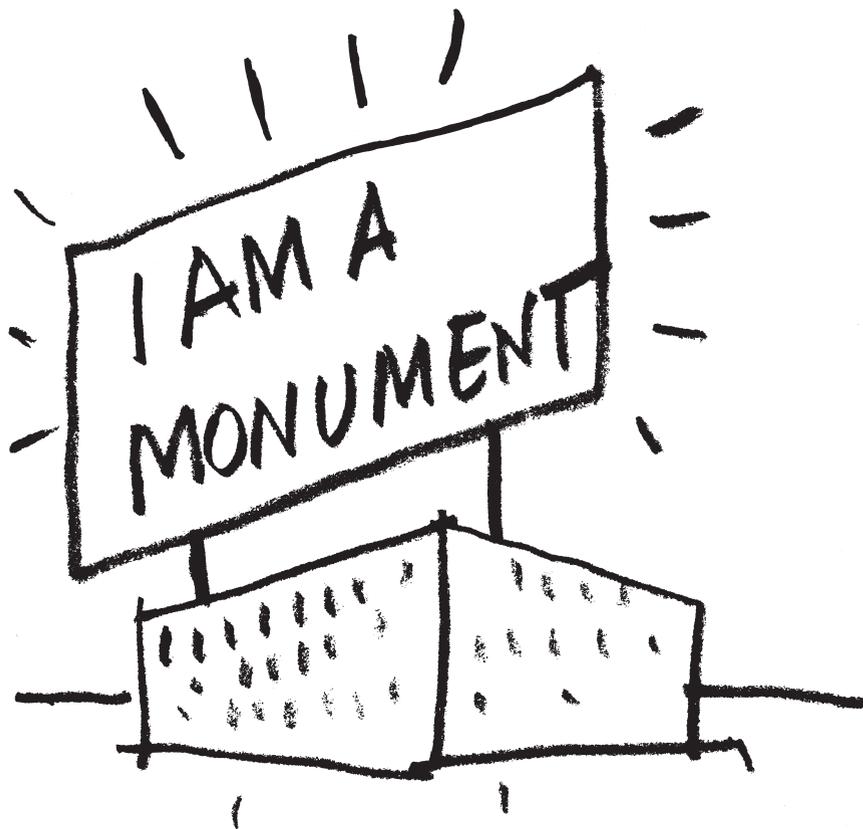
We don't see the human eye as a receiver. . . . When you see the eye, you see something go out from it. You see the blink of an eye.

—Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*

“I Am a Monument”

One can't avoid the blinking, flashing lights of Las Vegas. They are everywhere: in the streets, in the casinos, in the airports. As one author has described it: “they're all moving—flickering, twitching, blinking; turning on and off; running up and down and across; shooting across space and back again; starting at the bottom, speeding to the top, and exploding.”¹ It is within such an environment that Venturi and Scott Brown made their “recommendation for a monument”: a blinking sign that exclaims “I Am a Monument” (figure 4.1). This is one of the most striking images in the book, and it is the other major exemplification of the denotative, heraldic, and ordinary Decorated Shed as opposed to the overly expressive, physiognomic, and heroic Duck (figure 3.3). It is referred to twice in Part II of *Learning from Las Vegas*. First, the authors suggest that if Rudolph's Crawford Manor had to be a monument, it would have been preferable to have a “conventional apartment building, lost by the side of the expressway, with a big sign on top blinking, I AM A MONUMENT.”² They

4.1 “Recommendation for a monument,” in *Learning from Las Vegas*; © 1977 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, by permission of the MIT Press.



next recommend that Kallmann, McKinnell, and Knowles’s Boston City Hall (1963) might be more appropriate if it were a “conventional loft [that] would accommodate a bureaucracy better, perhaps, with a blinking sign on top saying ‘I AM A MONUMENT.’”³ There is little doubt that Tom Wolfe had the “recommendation for a monument” in mind when he called VSBI’s entire enterprise “Venturi’s Big Wink” in *From Bauhaus to Our House*.⁴

Wolfe’s characterization reiterates a long intellectual tradition that claims that our thinking is tethered to a moral and cosmotheological compass linking us to the firmament and the starry heavens at the outer reaches of our worldview. Such critiques have their modern *fons et origo* in Kant’s famous sentence from the *Critique of Pure Reason*: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.*”⁵ The transformation of the cosmos into a network of stupid and incessant blinking lights in the modern city is thus symptomatic, for many critics, of the untethering of this cosmotheological order. Venturi’s “Big Wink” would be an instantiation

and further exemplification of the “stars coming down to earth”—with all its apocalyptic connotations stretching back to the book of Revelation—and our blinking response to this condition seen as a further extension of a reign of stupefaction, facile irony, and the workings of the culture industry. We are most familiar with this critique from Adorno’s essay “The Schema of Mass Culture”: “The neon sentences which hang over our cities and outshine the natural light of the night with their own are comets presaging the natural disaster of society, its frozen death. Yet they do not come from the sky.” He continues, “The information communicated by mass culture constantly winks at us.”⁶ I am not sure whether the architectural critic Joseph Rykwert was aware of Adorno’s words, but his description of how such a “comet” might appear is striking: “*Learning from Las Vegas* was, you might say, the architectural tail of the comet which had Tom Wolfe as its flashing head.”⁷

Needless to say, the major example that links blinking eyes, stars, and the demise of moral order into stupefaction is Nietzsche’s Last Man, who makes his dramatic appearance in the prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “Alas! The time is coming when man will give birth to no more stars. Alas! The time of the most contemptible man is coming, the man who can no longer despise himself. Behold! I shall show you the *last man*. What is Love? What is Creation? What is Longing? What is a Star? thus asks the last man and blinks. . . . ‘We have discovered happiness,’ say the Last Men and blink.”⁸ These passages might lead us to ask: Is Venturi and Scott Brown’s ugly, ordinary, and “dumb” (they call it “think little”) conventional building with a blinking sign on top reading “I Am a Monument” the architectural equivalent of Nietzsche’s Last Man? My claim is that the “recommendation for a monument” provokes such interpretations, but is not to be equated with them. On the contrary, it makes a claim for us to embrace the ethical possibilities of those stars come down to earth, with new constellations of meaning and sense, spacing and displacements to be explored, not yet named and not yet disengaged from the force and intensity of those singular stars.⁹ It is an exploration that would require a literal reconsideration of the contemporary city and its luminous, pulsating points of light as the material figure for its multiplicity, in which our condition is, as Venturi and Scott Brown note, “being together and yet separate.”¹⁰ George Santayana has captured this thought beautifully: “things which have enough *multiplicity*, as the lights of a city seen across water, have an effect similar to that of the stars.”¹¹ The “I Am a Monument” proposal is an exploration of that thought as simultaneously an aesthetic, social, and political question.

In other words, *Learning from Las Vegas*’s “recommendation for a monument” puts into relief many of the characterizations and critiques of the book, and what it supposedly initiated in historical and theoretical terms. To summarize briefly, the “I Am a Monument” proposal is often seen as the exemplification of *Learning*

from *Las Vegas*'s postmodern irony; its fundamental concern with architecture as representation bordering on spectacle; its initiation of a linguistic turn in architecture, toward theory and the textualization of architecture at the expense of materiality and embodied meaning; and the reduction of architectural meaning to issues of communication and its message-bearing function. In this chapter, I want to engage in a reading that shifts us away from such interpretations, and suggest that it is not so easily categorized, that in fact it puts such interpretations under pressure. The "I Am a Monument" proposal suggests how we might shift our attention and sensibility through its unthought dimensions, which are never simply a lack, but are present in the book *as* unthought.

Architecture Presents Itself

One of Venturi and Scott Brown's major critiques of the Duck was its emphasis on expression over representation, ultimately leading to a distorted "expressionism" in architecture. This seems to suggest that Venturi and Scott Brown embrace representation in architecture (ultimately I will disagree with this suggestion). For example, in talking about the windows of Guild House, they demonstrate that one starts not with a window's "abstract function" of modulating light rays and breezes to serve interior space but with the *image* of a window, "adapted from existing vocabularies that evoke associations from past experience."¹² According to VSBI, this emphasis on convention and acknowledged symbolism promotes an architecture less dramatic, but broader and richer in meaning, than an architecture of dramatic expression. This approach to connotation is contrasted with the Duck, which achieves dramatic expression from the connotative meanings of its original structural elements, derived from their abstract function, which is, in turn, expressed through the physiognomic character of those elements (also see chapter 3). The authors argue that the Duck's "total image" is primarily derived from an implicit symbolism associated with the undecorated physiognomy of the building.

In contrast, the Decorated Shed's image derives from elements that they claim are used in explicitly symbolic ways. So for example, in Venturi and Rauch's Fire Station No. 4 (1965–1967), the "total image"—its specific use and its implied civic character—mobilizes ordinary, banal, and conventional elements such as a standard aluminum sash, roll-up doors, a flagpole in front, and a denotative sign spelling out "Fire Station No. 4," that act as explicit symbols as well as architectural abstractions. Fire Station No. 4 is not "merely ordinary," as they put it, but rather "represent[s] ordinariness symbolically and stylistically."¹³ VSBI acknowledge that the modern movement also embraced representation and symbolic content—for example, its love for the "industrial vernacular" of grain elevators, factories, steamships, and locomotives, all of which had an

“iconic power” for architects of the modern movement—but modernists tended to disavow these associations in favor of pure, simple forms. VSBI characterize this as “symbolism unadmitted.”¹⁴

In thinking about these issues, Venturi and Scott Brown acknowledge their debt to Colquhoun’s essay “Typology and Design Method” (see chapter 3). By extension, they are indebted to the theories Colquhoun draws on in his essay: Gombrich’s critique of modern expressionist theory and the physiognomic fallacy, and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s writings on primitive kinship systems, which, as he famously noted, have their basis in “arbitrary systems of representation, not the spontaneous development of a *situation of fact*.”¹⁵ Based on Lévi-Strauss’s work, Colquhoun’s essay claims the “need to represent the phenomenal world in such a way that it becomes a coherent and logical system.”¹⁶ He then couples this with Gombrich’s argument for the “perceptual-psychological necessity for representation in art” due to the fact that there is no expressive content that communicates to us directly without recourse to a particular cultural milieu.¹⁷

But Venturi and Scott Brown also refer to Colquhoun’s insistence that “systems of representation are not altogether independent of the facts of the objective world.”¹⁸ This citation suggests that issues of “fact” and “evidence,” if taken in the right sense, are deeply relevant to the “I Am a Monument” proposal, and actually trouble the oft-claimed critique that *Learning from Las Vegas* is solely concerned with issues of image and representation. In fact, I am inclined to say that the “I Am a Monument” proposal shifts emphasis from issues of *representation* (or better, image as representation) and *symbol* to the evidence of image as force, or otherwise put, to the presentation of representation.¹⁹

Although this interpretation may seem contrary to the explicit “intentions” of *Learning from Las Vegas*, there are plenty of indications for such a position in their work. Indeed, Scott Brown’s account of Ruscha’s deadpan photographs seems to move in this direction. Her claim that Ruscha offers a new vision of the imminent world around us through the collection of facts suggests a fantasy of a *presymbolic* condition. That is to say, Ruscha’s work acknowledges the conditions of possibility of breaking and making links within the world of fact, thus rethinking what world we might want here and now, rather than prematurely fulfilling a drive for a “mystique” or “system” that would foreclose an exploration of how those facts make a world.²⁰ Ruscha’s photographs “delay judgment” in order to accumulate facts and thus show how we might find new “worlds” emerging from them. Likewise, Ruscha’s dismemberment of the referential meaning of words in his paintings and prints, by boiling, melting, cutting, clamping, setting on fire, and smashing the words, is an exploration of the materiality of the letter as a physical fact. As Roland Barthes put it in his essay “That Old Thing, Art . . .”: “What pop art wants is to desymbolize the object, to give it the obtuse and matte stubbornness of a fact. . . . It is no longer

the fact which is transformed into an image (which is, strictly speaking, the movement of metaphor, out of which humanity has made poetry for centuries), it is the image which becomes a fact. Pop art thus features a philosophical quality of things, which we may call *facticity*.²¹ But we don't have to conclude, as Barthes goes on to do, that this facticity is, in the end, "the Signifier," which pop art reproduces and replicates.

It is perhaps most helpful to consider facticity as Heidegger does. In *Being and Time* and *Ontology—The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, facticity is the "how" of *Dasein*'s being-there; the how opens up the "thereness" of the there in *Dasein*, its condition of self-encounter and self-situating.²² Facticity differs from factuality in that it is a way of being-in-the-world and not simply an entity in the world (of course factuality is the condition of possibility for any facticity). In this light, the "I Am a Monument" proposal is not simply a "fact" or "evidence" in our everyday understanding of that word; it is not something pregiven, or subsumed into meaning. A fact is not merely an event in the world, but rather the assertion of an event. It is a way of bringing to the fore what has been gathered and making that *evident*.²³ I have always thought that Roland Barthes's characterization of the flat, platitudinous photograph as "at once evidential and exclamative" captures what is at play in the "I Am a Monument" proposal.²⁴ Thus we might say that, in the right light, the proposal is indeed a "situation of fact"—or perhaps a fact of situating—as it posits, positions, and presents itself, not to situate itself in a *given* environment, nor to represent any predetermined context, but rather to create new architectural situations. "Evidence," Jean-Luc Nancy writes, "refers to what is obvious, what makes sense, and what is striking and, by the same token, opens and gives a chance and an opportunity to meaning. Its truth is something that grips and does not have to correspond to any given criteria."²⁵ In other words, the "I Am a Monument" proposal is an "evidencing," but there are no *kriteria*—no clear "signs," no distinguishing marks or traits—that would secure its identity for us.²⁶ As Cavell has written, "The other can present me with no mark or feature on the basis of which I can *settle* my attitude."²⁷ The "I am a Monument" proposal is arresting precisely because it is never settled; it is always concerned with new evidence, new values, and potentially new responses.

The "recommendation for a monument" explores the work of the image, and thus, how representation works. In many ways, that is dependent on *evidencing* the becoming of an image: how it pulls and cuts itself out from the ground of architecture and then frames itself as image.²⁹ The rectangular sign saying "I Am a Monument" does not just send out explicit messages; rather, it indicates how it emerges from its own ground, and the fragile lines in the building below gather together to "image" itself. It is as if one side of the shed—with its rough, overlapping corners, and the multiple black marks on its surface planes—had literally "expressed" itself into the more regularized sign above, with its lines

meeting at tighter, cleaner corners and the black graphic marks now emerging into a legible graphology. But this is not to argue that the shed below is *not* an image, and purely ground, but rather that the “recommendation for a monument” shows the “doubling operation” in which an image is cut out from the ground of architecture and in framing itself as an image makes the ground disappear as ground.²⁹

But how does this claim square with Venturi and Scott Brown’s insistence that their Decorated Sheds are “recessive” almost to the point of disappearing into total background? I believe we need to think of the “recommendation for a monument” as a kind of “positive image” of that claim “developing” before our eyes; a situation in which the background becomes foreground. But these kinds of reversals are also in micro-operation throughout the image, and call attention to the *oscillating* relationship between ground and image. For example, notice how the ground or horizon line rendered on either side of the shed extends into it on one side, and on the other is free-floating on the white page. This seems to suggest on the one hand that the building is situated on a firm ground, and simultaneously that there is no fixed delimitation of ground and image, but that that condition is precisely what is being negotiated. This condition is further enhanced by the fact that the free-floating horizon line to the left can be seen as another “force” line that reverberates out from the shed, like the black lines flashing out from the “image-sign” above.

We might say, then, that the “I Am a Monument” proposal explores how a “face” is extruded from “surface”; how a face literally surfaces to the top, and is brought to the fore.³⁰ The rectangular sign is not only extruded from its tenuous ground; it also cuts itself out and faces us with its (relatively) clear edges and corners framed by the white page. The sign is placed so that it confronts us more directly, rather than raked at the same left angle as the shed. But this is not to say that the face ever disengages totally from the surface, or figure from ground. The traces of ground and surface appear as the energy and force expended in that act of facing or imaging. These traces are registered in the upward thrust of the sign from left to right, the visible undulations of the lines of the sign that never really become a “true” rectangle, and the singularity of the black marks that radiate out from the “sign” and the shed below (notice the two isolated marks below the shed) onto the white page, each with their own particular graphic intensity.

The inspiration for the “recommendation for a monument” might have come from the generalized idea of “roadside commercial architecture,” but perhaps it arose more specifically from a small, banal image in an advertising brochure preserved in the VSBA archives at the University of Pennsylvania that reads, “I AM AN ELECTRIC SIGN.”³¹ This seems to be a way of articulating that what counts is the point where denotation and connotation seem to conflate, or better yet,

conflagrate, so that their opposite pulls—one outward and the other inward, one particular and the other general—become the pulsating, blinking sign that is the *force* of the image. The Decorated Shed presents a condition where materiality, language, and image touch upon each other without one grounding the other. This interweaving of the conditions of image making, including its nonmimetic aspects, is crucial to the authors' exploration of the Decorated Shed.

The "I Am a Monument" proposal is, to use Meyer Schapiro's terminology, intimately caught up with the "non-mimetic elements of the image-sign and their role in constituting the sign," and with what Roland Barthes calls the "grain of the voice."³² These nonmimetic elements are never merely support or background for the "image-sign," nor is the grain simply the tenor of the voice; instead, they permeate the "image-sign" and "voice" through and through. Although the multiple black marks on the surface of the two planes of the shed are supposed to "represent" schematic windows, they are also the indexical marks of mark-making itself. They inflect the building with the same pulsating force as the marks radiating out from the sign. The Sharpie marks *cum* windows also recall a rudimentary notational system that suggests a kind of rhythm of readability that extrudes itself into "legibility" in the words on the sign above. One might say the whole "I Am a Monument" image is "inflected" from the ground up, or all the way down, and not merely in terms of the advertising sign being "directed" toward the street, as the authors argue in *Learning from Las Vegas*. The image ranges from the connotations of inflection that emphasize expressive patterns of stress, intonation, and modulation, to its sense of marking a word to reveal particular grammatical information.

What is important is that the "recommendation for a monument" is continuously ranging across all aspects of this inflection without ever completely occupying one pole or the other. For example, the words "I Am a Monument" are never entirely cleaved apart from their status as graphic marks: one might see the reverberating black marks around the sign as an indication of those words returning to their status as illegible markings, as if the force and sense of matter are always in excess of signification. Billboard signs are, in many ways, exemplary of this condition, and we might say they are an amalgam of the facticity of pop art coupled with op art's emphasis on sensorial intensity and impact (as we well know, advertising is meant to maximize appeal and minimize information).³³ The two small, seemingly useless and irrelevant black marks below each side of the shed in the "I Am a Monument" image are the most striking "indications" of this excess. They recall Benjamin's comment that advertisements' power lies not in what the neon sign says, but in the "fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt."³⁴ The "recommendation for a monument" is not just a schematic reduction or representation of some fuller, more sensory example out "there," but rather a fully sensuous entity in its own right.

VSBI also derived other important lessons from billboard advertising. The Tanya billboard image is a powerful critique of widespread claims about the “seamlessness of the media” in our contemporary society, that is, the criticism that we are saturated with media and advertising, from which there is no outside perspective. *Learning from Las Vegas* leads us back to our ordinary lives, in which such a condition hardly ever holds. The authors often call attention to the scaffolding, seams, and framing conditions that are within the image yet call out the necessity for us to seam them together differently. For example, in the Tanya billboard we can see the crisscrossed scaffolding that extends up from tufts of vegetation and sand in the desert to “support” the billboard sign above (figure 2.9). This scaffolding, however, does not extend directly up to support the billboard sign, but connects to an intermediary zone of an entablature-like support, consisting of thin horizontal boards, also seamed vertically, with the name of the billboard company, Donley, prominently located in the center.

The scaffolding does not primarily emphasize that architecture is now the mere support for the dominant sign above. The billboard sign calls attention to the fact that the work of the image is always under construction, and that its framing conditions are within the scene of representation. The vertical seams of the billboard sign are visible in all photographs in the book, and their orientation and rhythm work both with and against the horizontal flow of the reclining Tanya and the exaggerated horizontality of the text. Further, the left-hand side of the sign literally cuts off part of the forearms and part of the face of the Tanya figure, so that only *one eye* looks out at us, thus calling attention to the act of framing and cutting out as such.³⁵ If the Tanya image demonstrates that seaming is always at play in so-called seamless images, then the question becomes, What is the rhythm and nature of that seaming? In the “I Am a Monument” image, that seaming is intimately related to the particular rhythm of its “blinking” eye.

Visibility, Legibility, Exscription, and the Eye of Architecture

It is worth repeating that the sign saying, “I Am a Monument” resembles both a flashing neon sign *and* a blinking eye. The radiating black marks around the “high reader” suggest both flashing neon lights and the cartoon-like indication of the force lines/lashes of a blinking eye. The “recommendation for a monument” thus further explores the issues of skepticism about other minds raised in the Duck and the Decorated Shed, which similarly addressed the topic of architecture facing itself through an emphasis on the “eyes.”

However, in the “I Am a Monument” proposal the stakes have been ratcheted up a notch, so that it seems even more appropriate to say of it that it is a “mood of nothing but eyes” or that it is a “thing with senses, mostly eyes.”³⁶

This is simply to reiterate that architecture is one of the privileged sites that reveal the two overlapping yet asymmetrical aspects of the threat of skepticism: external-world skepticism (material) and skepticism about other minds (mental). Accordingly, the “recommendation for a monument” both presents itself as a monument that puts forth a particular world in a compressed way *and* introduces itself—one might say makes a gesture toward us—with the expectation of some kind of response. It seems to push the exemplarity of this overlapping to the breaking point, where it would be a case not just of a “thing with senses, mostly eyes,” but rather one solipsistic, disembodied eye removed from materiality, life, or grounding in the world of sense, as if the “eye” of Tanya had been isolated, enlarged, and schematized. But the “recommendation for a monument” does not have to *look* that way.

The first thing we should notice is that the words “I Am a Monument” are not exactly written “in” the eye of the billboard but right *at* its outermost surface. The letter “T” in the word “Monument” extends toward, touches, and overlaps the vertical line of the rectangle as if it were level with it, or even slightly in front of it. The words do not come up from the depth of that “eye,” nor does the eye give them any further depth than they might have at its surface. Legibility is not grounded in visibility, nor is visibility grounded in legibility. Rather, they traverse and mutually define each other on that surface. One might say that they meet “at” their very (de)limitation. The “I Am a Monument” proposal evidences the fact that vision and legibility are woven into each other, and into architecture, in a way that does not close off meaning or stabilize it, but rather opens up the possibility *for* meaning. The concept of “graphicness” so much at issue in *Learning from Las Vegas* is meant to suggest that point where writing is not merely looked at but “pulsated,” as if vision were in it; it also suggests the point where visibility is punctuated, not primarily in grammatical terms, but as a scintillation of points. In the words of Venturi and Scott Brown, the Las Vegas Strip signs are not forms reflected “in” light; rather the signs themselves are often the source, and they glitter rather than glow.³⁷ In many ways, the “reciprocal supplementation” of legibility and visibility in the “recommendation for a monument” is the fragile counterpart to the “symbolic” CBS logo of an eye plastered over the Duck that figures so prominently in Part I of *Learning from Las Vegas*, in which text and image, visibility and legibility, are isomorphic rather than supplemental.³⁸

But to say there is a point of contact between visibility and legibility is not to suggest the fixing of architectural meaning. Although the “I Am a Monument” sign boldly announces its status, and thus appears self-assured to its depths like a traditional monument, it is in fact quite vulnerable. The words are literally exposed on or at the surface of the “blinking” eye rather than being *inscribed* in it, as if set in stone. According to VSBI, the statements of today

will come from media that are, as they say, “less static.”³⁹ But we should read this in the skeptical sense as well: it is not just a change in physical “medium” that is required, a shift from heroic statements in pure architecture to the mixed media of the Strip, but also a change in the pitch of our response, so that we might rethink how our approach to architecture is involved in immobilizing its possibilities, and thus encouraging the production of “dead ducks,” or alternatively how our attitude might unleash new possibilities. Here the emphasis on plasticity demands a suppleness of response. In other words, the “I Am a Monument” proposal fosters the conditions of a possible *encounter*, rather than just a bold declaration of self-identity. It is not fundamentally a “sign” that we are supposed to look at, nor a “screen” on which we might project our fantasies, but rather a rhythm of opening and closing—that is to say, a “blinking”—that we are meant to engage with and respond to.

Thus expression is not avoided in the deadpan “recommendation for a monument,” it is simply reconfigured. Plasticity is now concerned with how issues of image, language, and architecture reform themselves in relation to each other and the world, rather than directing us toward physiognomic depth, interiority, and signification.⁴⁰ The explicit and denotative sign spelling out “I Am a Monument” is, of course, “self-referential”—a traditionally modernist notion of the “sign”—but its essential thrust is a mode of self-referral that calls attention to how its mode of expression is concerned with the way the eye is in contact with the outside. The eye does not simply see, it looks; and we respond to that looking. As Wittgenstein has expressed this thought, “We don’t see the eye as a receiver. . . . When you see the eye, you see something go out from it. You see the blink of an eye.”⁴¹ In this regard, and practically all others, the “I Am a Monument” proposal is exactly the opposite of Wolfe’s characterization of it as a “Big Wink,” which suggests a closing of the eye and, in its superficial understanding of irony, a stress on its indirect, all-knowing, and fundamentally privative status. When the eye blinks it encounters and opens up onto the world in a rhythmic patterning of connecting and disconnecting, opening and closing, surfacing and receding.⁴²

The interweaving of visibility and legibility “draws” the eye outside itself, and this “drawing out” is literally accomplished through the rich, black lines that render the “I Am a Monument” as if it were an epiphany emerging from the white page. The “recommendation for a monument” is hand-drawn with Venturi’s favorite instrument, the Sharpie. We get a literal sense of his touch, how the black lines are darker and fuller in some spots and more grainy, porous, and sketchy in others, depending on the rhythm of tactile pressure. There is nary a straight line to be seen throughout the image, nor do the lines of the shed ever meet at clean corners. It is a deliberately *sketchy* proposal that is meant to exist cheek by jowl with its bold claims for itself, as if to testify that

the kinds of connections we want to make in architecture are held together only by our willingness to give “voice” to our expressions. And we should emphasize that the materiality of the “sign”—the high reader that says “I Am a Monument”—is formed from the same matter and medium as the supposedly meaning-bearing function of the “conventional shed” that “supports” the blinking sign on top.

But *Learning from Las Vegas*’s acknowledgment of the “graphic” nature of architecture in the mediated city is not just a way of talking about the relationship of text to image. It also brings other “senses” into the configuration of what architecture is and can be. For example, the first-person, declarative speech act that states “I Am a Monument” not only denotes a sense of “voice” through its words, it also connotes it through its expressive line. It suggests that we “image” those words not only by writing, but also by speaking them. Thus, the sign evokes a mouth opening and closing as it voices the words in a particular intonation and pitch. The Duck and the Decorated Shed had eyes and noses but no mouth, whereas in the “recommendation for a monument” there is a mouth that enunciates its vision, and an eye that gives vision to that voicing. The sign’s blinking is precisely the oscillation between mouth and eye that surfaces a face for us to encounter.⁴³ And because we get a better sense of the “force” of this utterance as compared to the “Eat” sign in the Decorated Shed, it prompts us to respond to its call in a more direct way, but one that still involves *hearing* what it is voicing. This voice calls into play the sense of hearing in general and makes us aware—as part of its echo and reverberation—that we need to be more attentive to hearing our own voices in order to give voice to what we want to claim for architecture (more on this below). The Learning from Las Vegas studio was deeply interested in issues of sound and hearing, and tried to express their qualities through the media of writing, typography, graphic design, color, film, and scale.

My calling attention to issues of the five senses—seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling (the latter two in the previous chapter)—and their articulations through different media is meant to suggest that the “I Am a Monument” proposal literally draws out a new sense of what *making sense* entails in architecture. It demonstrates that each new definition of an art or practice necessitates coming to terms with how it touches on all the other arts and, in that touching, enacts a new redistribution and partition of sense *for* that particular practice.⁴⁴ That is, architecture always reconfigures what a medium is *within* architecture; how a new medium is discovered or invented *out* of itself.⁴⁵ If a new medium is to be found for architecture, this can happen only in a concomitant redefinition of what architecture is and what it has been, which is simply to say that issues of medium are both ontological and historical in nature. Questioning that history and ontology is what the “recommendation

for a monument” does. And this depends, as I have attempted to show, on how aspects of language, matter, and medium negotiate new configurations and relations among themselves.

Jean-Luc Nancy’s word “exscription” seems to strike the right tone for this reconfiguration.⁴⁶ The act of exscribing suggests the point of contact and disruption between impenetrable matter and bodily sense, and between bodily sense and linguistic signification.⁴⁷ That is, it demonstrates how matter and medium touch on one another and mark new contours of sense. The “I Am a Monument” proposal is a way of thinking about how exscription makes sense: where the tip of a Sharpie touches a flat piece of paper and, in the process, simultaneously separates and links body, instrument, vision, and writing; or the point of contact and disruption between eye and eyelids in “blinking”; or the electrical currents in neon signs that require a mode of connection and disconnection that enables it to “blink” on and off; or two lips coming together and separating as they say “I Am a Monument”; or even the moment when inscription exscribes itself in the very writing of “I Am a Monument,” thus dislocating writing from itself (not to mention its “body”) and from any “fixed” idea of the “monument.” But the tendency has always been to take that evidencing of exscription in *Learning from Las Vegas* as an accomplishment, or a deliberate cleaving apart of body, matter, and language, rather than as an exploration of how one might make sense in architecture. This making sense—which is always a placing into relation—leads us to the question of what kind of community *Learning from Las Vegas* is proposing in the “recommendation for a monument.”

The Arrogation of Voice, or Looking through Each Other’s I/Eyes

The “recommendation for a monument” is deeply involved with changing attitudes toward the monument and monumentality that were in full force among theorists in the 1960s and 1970s. I am not interested in the generalities of this critique, which can be culled from other sources, but rather the particularities of how *Learning from Las Vegas* engages the relationship between the individual and society that the traditional monument is supposed to symbolically represent. What I want to flesh out in this section, carrying on from the work in the previous two, is the phatic rather than semantic dimensions of the “I Am a Monument” proposal: how it is primarily engaged in bringing about conditions of relationality, communicability, and community rather than communicating meaning through signs.

Simply put, the “recommendation for a monument” makes what Cavell has termed a “claim for community.”⁴⁸ Claims are based on criteria of judgment that we either agree on or not, and on the basis of this mode they determine

our ordinary ability to say what anything is or could be. A claim is inherently fragile and is no stronger than our agreement to go on with the ordinary criteria we are willing to speak for in making those claims. In Cavell's words, "the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the basis upon which it can or has been established. I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I make sense."⁴⁹ Community is as fragile or strong as the claims made for it, and therefore it does not presuppose any given basis for connection; rather, we enact the conditions of possibility for its formation and continuation. Skepticism is the denial of those ordinary criteria, the always-present temptation to *strip* us of our "attunement in criteria," rendering us unable to make sense to ourselves or each other (also see chapter 5).

Learning from Las Vegas makes a very strong case against the ethical and practical relevance of any kind of "unary" monument—one without disturbance, without singularity, without any trace of the supplemental—that would close it off and render it self-sufficient.⁵⁰ The book is interested in exploring a community that does not substantialize itself into a false cohesiveness or organic unity. As the authors state, "our money and skill do not go into the traditional monumentality that expressed cohesion of the community through big-scale, unified, symbolic, architectural elements."⁵¹ The primary example of the unary monument in *Learning from Las Vegas* is the minimegastructure. The latter's emphasis on the "easy whole," the expressionism of its formal properties, and its emphasis on total design are contrasted with the difficult whole of the Decorated Shed and urban sprawl—the incremental spread of the city that "grows through the decisions of many"—in their concern for image and conventional symbolism.⁵² Not surprisingly, the minimegastructure is equated with the Duck in *Learning from Las Vegas* (figure 3.9). VSBI's comparison of Moshe Safdie's Habitat, built for Expo '67 in Montréal, with a residential strip recalls their comparison between Crawford Manor and Guild House. As in those comparisons, the "total design" of the minimegastructure is equated with "total control," a condition in which issues of limitation, separateness, and singularity are avoided or disavowed.

In a revealing statement, *Learning from Las Vegas* suggests that now the "occasional communal space . . . is a space for crowds of anonymous individuals without explicit connections with each other," and these spaces—such as a Las Vegas casino or a big-city subway system—combine "being together and yet separate."⁵³ VSBI note that, because of lighting effects, the atmosphere of such places is akin to being in "the twinkling lights of the city at night" rather than in a "bounded piazza."⁵⁴ I want to claim here that this "being together and yet separate," like the "twinkling lights of the city," is a profound reconsideration of the multiplicity of the contemporary city, with an attention to how *everyone*

is “in-common” without subsuming the one into any given community. In his book *La ville au loin* (1999), Nancy talks about the exteriority of relations of singular individuals in the city who brush by each other in the Métro or on an escalator or pass each other in cars, and where the “in-common of the city has no identity other than the space in which the citizens cross each other’s paths, and . . . has no unity other than the exteriority of their relations.”⁵⁵ Like the starry skies come down to earth, the city is extended *partes extra partes* in a condition of pulsating, interconnected, and dispersed singularities.⁵⁶

The “recommendation for a monument” is an attempt to proclaim such a community’s conditions of possibility. Simply put, it articulates the need to “voice” our claim to community, and that proposal is its literal “proclamation.” As I argued earlier, this claim has to be voiced by each and every *one* of us—by each and every one *as* an “us”—because the criteria for community are “ours”; they come from “us,” and thus, as Cavell points out, the only source of confirmation is ourselves, and we are all individually answerable “not merely to it, but for it.”⁵⁷ This claim to community requires what Cavell terms an “arrogation of voice.”⁵⁸ It suggests that each of us as a singularity is “representative” of what being in common is, and a condition of that singularity is to speak for being in-common with no more boldness or fragility than the depths of our exposure to each other. The arrogation of voice recognizes the fact that “we live lives simultaneously of absolute separateness and endless commonness.”⁵⁹ I would suggest that Cavell’s understanding of the “arrogation of voice” might be brought into relation with what Nancy calls the “seizure of speech,” which for him marks “the emergence or passage of some *one* and every *one* into the enchainment of sense effects.”⁶⁰ This connection would help us to further link the aesthetic and bodily dimensions of sense in the “I Am a Monument” proposal, which I outlined in the previous section, to the political and social dimensions of sense that are attested in Nancy’s work and in Cavell’s statement that a claim to community has nothing more to go on than “my sense that I make sense.”⁶¹

This arrogation of the voice is precisely what the words “I Am a Monument” enact. Saying “I Am a Monument” is the arrogation of speaking for community as such, evoking the conditions of possibility for such a community. These words, which we might call a speech act, do not refer to something; instead, they bring something about. The “recommendation for a monument” is referring not to any monument “out there,” but rather to its own invocation of that community that it literally “pro-claims.” For the “I” in the “I Am a Monument” is not a fixed or stable “I,” but rather a personal pronoun operating as a “shifter,” which can be understood only by reference to the context in which it is uttered. It is the capacity of the pronoun “I” to substitute for everyone, so that what each “I” shares is his or her own unsubstitutable singularity.⁶² That is, we are meant to participate in the arrogation of voice by saying “I Am a

Monument,” thus voicing our claim to speak for being in-common. And likewise for the next *someone* who will say “I . . .”. Thus, the “recommendation for a monument” suggests a condition in which each and every *one*, all “I’s,” might have access to what Nancy has called a “concatenation of acts of speech” that is “infinitely interrupted and retied.”⁶³ It is a chain of singularities that is only as strong as the willingness to participate in the seizure of speech that it proclaims. The “recommendation for a monument” calls for a response: “I am a monument too,” or alternatively, “I am not a monument, and neither are you.” We can enter into its claim, or disclaim it if we disagree, but in both cases we are still giving our voice in the matter. The “I Am a Monument” proposal evidences a “placing-into-relation,” and doesn’t simply provide a “space” or “representation” of that condition. It articulates the kind of plasticity that *Learning from Las Vegas* at its most ambitious moments argues for: a mode of response that exposes the fragility of our claims to what architecture is and can be without suggesting that those claims are “superficial” or “arbitrary”—instead, they are deeply binding, and yet always open to reconfiguration. *Learning from Las Vegas*’s emphasis on receptivity and response in conjunction with the boldness of its proclamations—its arrogation of voice and its willingness to withhold that voice at times—is the best indication of its engagement with the condition of skepticism, and the authors’ desire to give voice to their claims for architecture.

One might even see the “recommendation for a monument” as claiming that an ideal society might entail the fantasy, as Thoreau proposed, of being able “to look through each other’s eyes for an instant.”⁶⁴ This fantasy entails looking out, not in, and requires our willingness to think further about the rhythm of blinking eyes, what they are signs for, and how we should respond to them.

Blinking Signs and the Last Man

If the eruption of blinking, flashing lights in Las Vegas is, for many, the counterpart of the Last Man’s blinking eye, then how does *Learning from Las Vegas* acknowledge the world out there, and respond to the vacant bliss captured in the eyes of those men who have discovered happiness and who “love the world”? Descartes found a way to avoid all sensory deception: “I will now shut my eyes, stop my ears, withdraw all my senses.”⁶⁵ This strategy did not work for the psychotic Daniel Schreber, who had quite a different understanding of what he, like Descartes, called “seeing with the mind’s eye”: “I see such events even with my eyes closed and where sound is concerned would hear them as in the case of the ‘voices,’ even if it were possible to seal my ears hermetically against all other sounds.”⁶⁶ And remember that Descartes could still stumble over ordinary words by just thinking about them. We can always close our eyes and try to make our dissatisfaction and doubt go away, but in the process we

are avoiding the world we actually live in. In the words of Denise Scott Brown: “if activities which appear to be ‘dysfunctional’ continue to exist, they must obviously be functional for someone, ergo closing one’s eyes and ordering them to go away won’t remove them.”⁶⁷ And there is a further risk in doing so: in shutting our eyes, we close ourselves off from the dilemma of skepticism that marks our enchantment and disenchantment with the world.

Eyes shut. Eyes open. Both extremes are untenable. Think of the game children play of staring into each other’s eyes until one “gives in” and blinks.⁶⁸ In this contest the blinking—the brief closing of the eye—is an acknowledgment of defeat. But do we really know who is the winner and who the loser in this game? After all, isn’t the ability to keep one’s eyes open at all times monstrous? Think of the opening of Stanley Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*, in which Alex de Large stares out at us with his unblinking eye, a fact accentuated by his false eyelash (figure 4.2). What can one make of the fact that the blinking sign “I Am a Monument” shares a striking family resemblance with Alex’s exaggerated open eye?

Blinking is not an *open* or *shut* case. It is the tone or rhythm of the “blinking” that counts. I take this rhythm to be encapsulated in the many alternations of night and day images that are ubiquitous in *Learning from Las Vegas* (figures 3.5, 3.16). It is the sequence of night and day, the extraordinary possibilities latent in our “daily” lives, that marks out the contours of our commitment to engage with these possibilities. One might say that this diurnality, the everyday world we live in, is something to be achieved over and over again. Its literary correlate would sound something like T. S. Eliot’s words from “Fragment of an Agon”: “And the morning / And the evening / And noontide / And night / Morning / Evening / Noontime / Night.”⁶⁹ That is all.

Venturi and Scott Brown seem to be arguing that we need to be responsive to our environment, which requires repeated acts of looking and acknowledging. Thus we should read the “I Am a Monument” proposal as blinking and not as an ironic winking. And at times we need to see this blinking, as Cavell wrote, “as a wince, and connect the wince with something in the world that there is to be winced at.”⁷⁰ Or at times we might follow the lead of Ralph Waldo Emerson: “When I converse with a profound mind . . . or . . . have good thoughts, I do not at once arrive at satisfactions, as when, being thirsty, I drink water . . . ; no! but I am at first apprised of my vicinity to a new and excellent region of life. By persisting to read or to think, this region gives further sign of itself, as it were in flashes of light.”⁷¹ These flashes of light are not simply “signs” that convey information, but rather indications of possible ways, paths, invitations, even seductions. Venturi and Scott Brown do not sit on the fence: they take the pulse of the rhythm of the skeptical dilemma that does not call for easy solutions, despair, unadulterated ecstasy, or nihilistic pessimism. The rhythm is interesting

4.2 Malcolm McDowell as Alex de Large, *A Clockwork Orange*, dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1971.



enough. What I find *ethically* seductive in *Learning from Las Vegas* is the emphasis on how we acknowledge or refuse to acknowledge our responsiveness, and hence our responsibility, to the actual environment we live in now and to the eventual one that will emerge from it.

To paraphrase Vincent Scully's introduction to *Complexity and Contradiction*, which could be an even more appropriate introduction to *Learning from Las Vegas*: "This is not an easy book, and is not for those who, lest they offend them, pluck out their eyes."⁷² This intriguing sentence suggests not only a reader plucking out his or her own eyes—an avoidance of the book's particular vision—but also how visibility—and for that matter a *theory*—can be "plucked" out of a text. This suggests, however, that whatever "vision" is expressed in *Learning from Las Vegas* is woven into the materiality of that book. Here we can't avoid the realization that the rhythm of blinking that the authors are after is inseparable from how the book *looks*, and thus the way it *blinks*. And that is inseparable from how a page of *Learning from Las Vegas* might look to us, and how our palpitation of its vision is enacted by the rhythm of our turning the pages as they lift, separate, and fold back down to contact one another . . . again.