2 OUR CITY OF WORDS

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

—Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

Meaning Itself

Vincent Scully once suggested that the power of Robert Venturi's craft was his ability to transcend abstract formal manipulation and deal with meaning itself.[1] I am not sure what "meaning itself" is exactly, but certainly this statement illustrates the preoccupation during this period with "meaning in architecture," to take the title of a well-known book published in 1970.[2] Apart from the sophisticated work on the relationship between semiotics, structuralism, and architecture, the concern with meaning was more generally focused on the apparent lack of meaning in modern architecture, and the view that architecture was an (abstract) expression of its function, structure, or space. According to Venturi and Scott Brown, "meaning [in modern architecture] was to be communicated, not through allusion to previously known forms, but through the inherent physiognomic characteristics of form."[3]

Urban theorists at the time were deeply engaged in a generalized polemic about the chaotic nature of the exploding American metropolis in the late 1950s and early 1960s. At times, this led to binary arguments about chaos versus order—the "chaoticism" of the increasing spread of billboard advertising and urban sprawl—which tended to cleave apart the serious and the frivolous, splitting meaning off from the supposedly nonmeaningful as if scraping icing from a cake. The archetypal example of this polemic is Peter Blake's book *God's Own Junkyard* (1964), which exemplified the conditions of chaos and order in postwar America by juxtaposing an image of a "chaotic" commercial main street (Canal Street in New Orleans) with the pristine neoclassical order of Thomas Jefferson's campus for the University of Virginia (figures 2.1, 2.2). Blake claimed, "The two American scenes . . . document the decline, fall, and subsequent disintegration of urban civilization in the United States."[4] This apocalyptic tone marked many of the debates about urbanism at this time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:
>
> A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
>
> Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
>
> With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter. . . . [14]

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

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

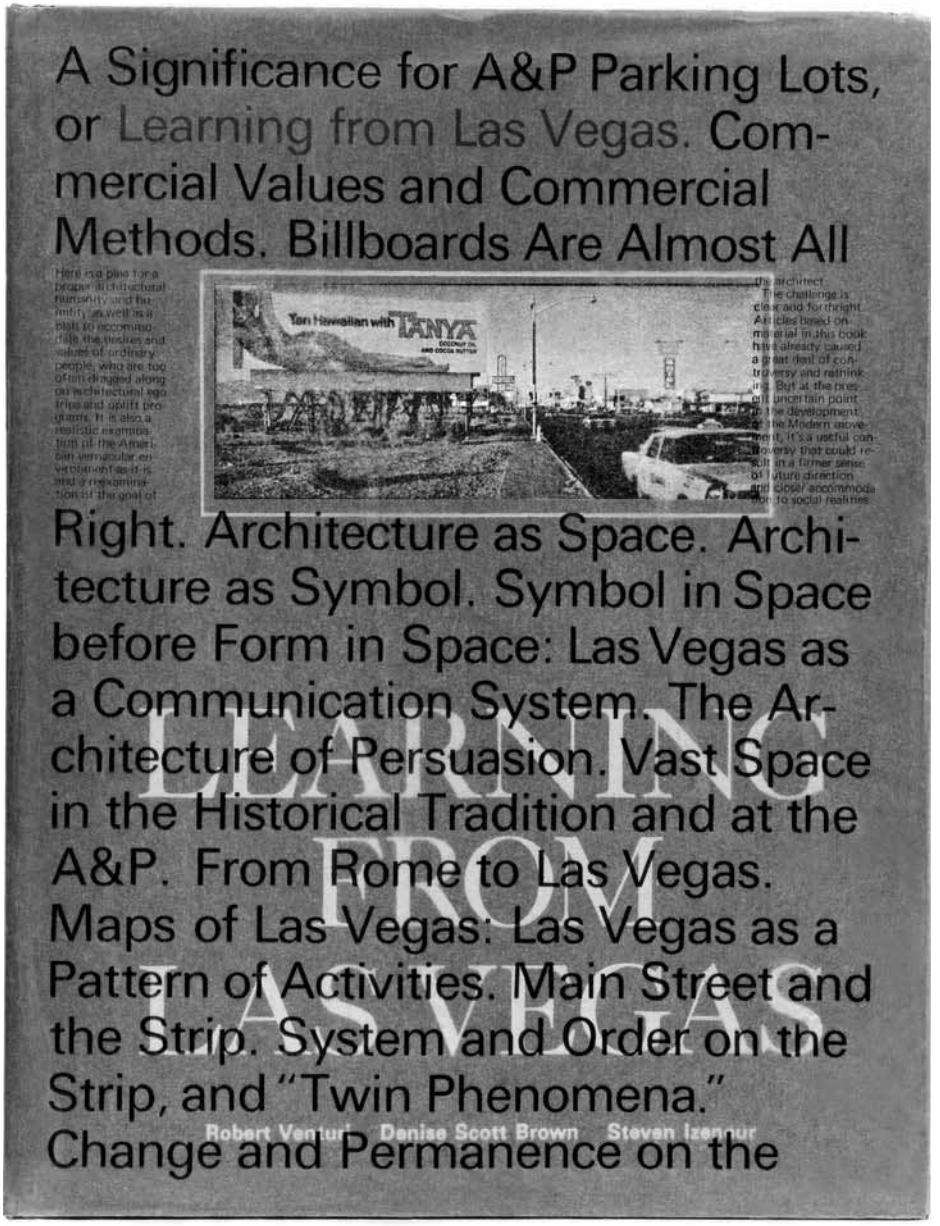
one to be constructed—And how strange that we should be able to do anything at all with the one we have!"[17] This everyday language might be "somehow too coarse and material," but for Venturi and Scott Brown it is all we have to build with, and there is no other place to find what we want to say or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

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

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

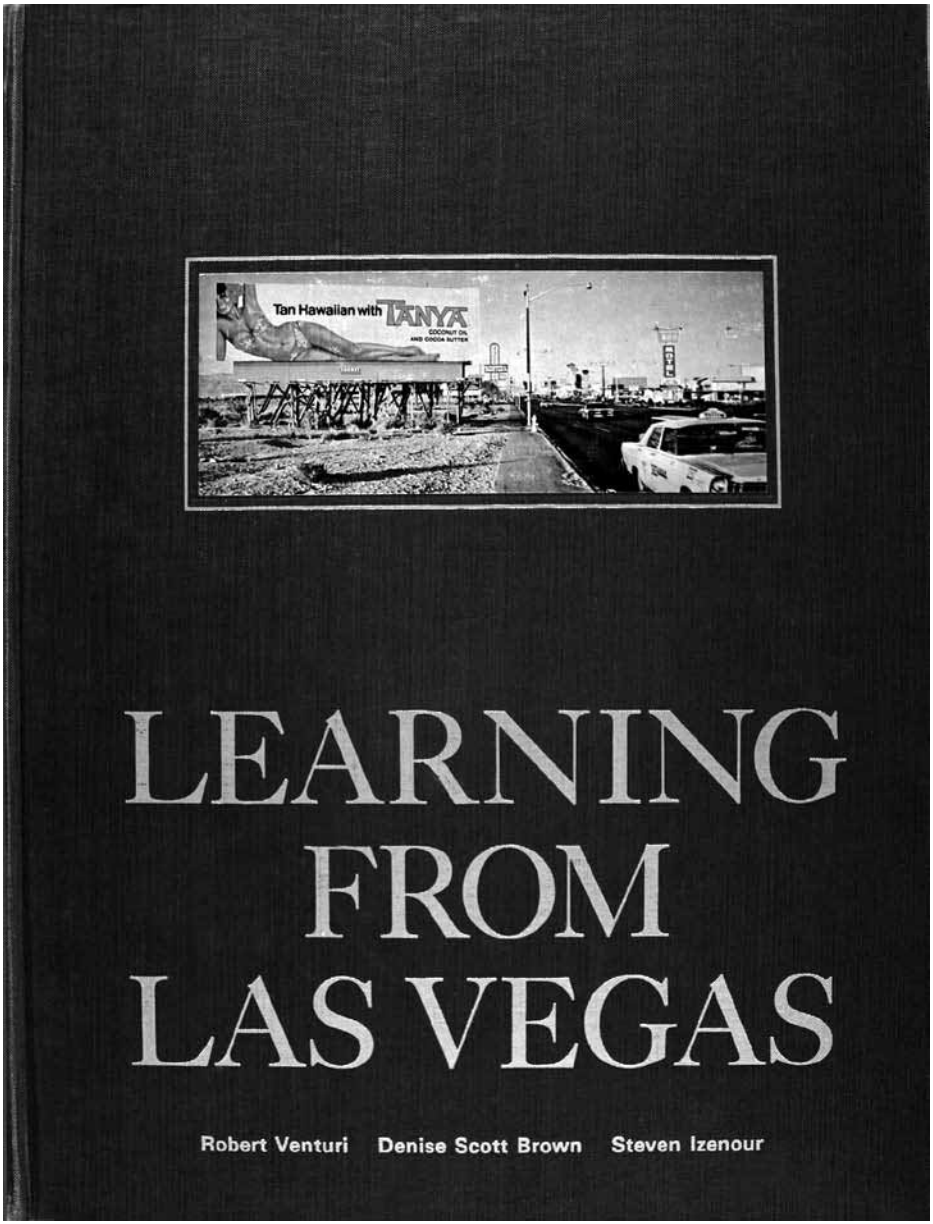
The cover of *Learning from Las Vegas* is a litany of monotonous one-liners divorced from any thick explanatory before and after; a parody of aphorism, it is all highlights and abbreviation in lieu of either brevity or completeness.[25] Skepticism's presence, according to Cavell, is marked by repeated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

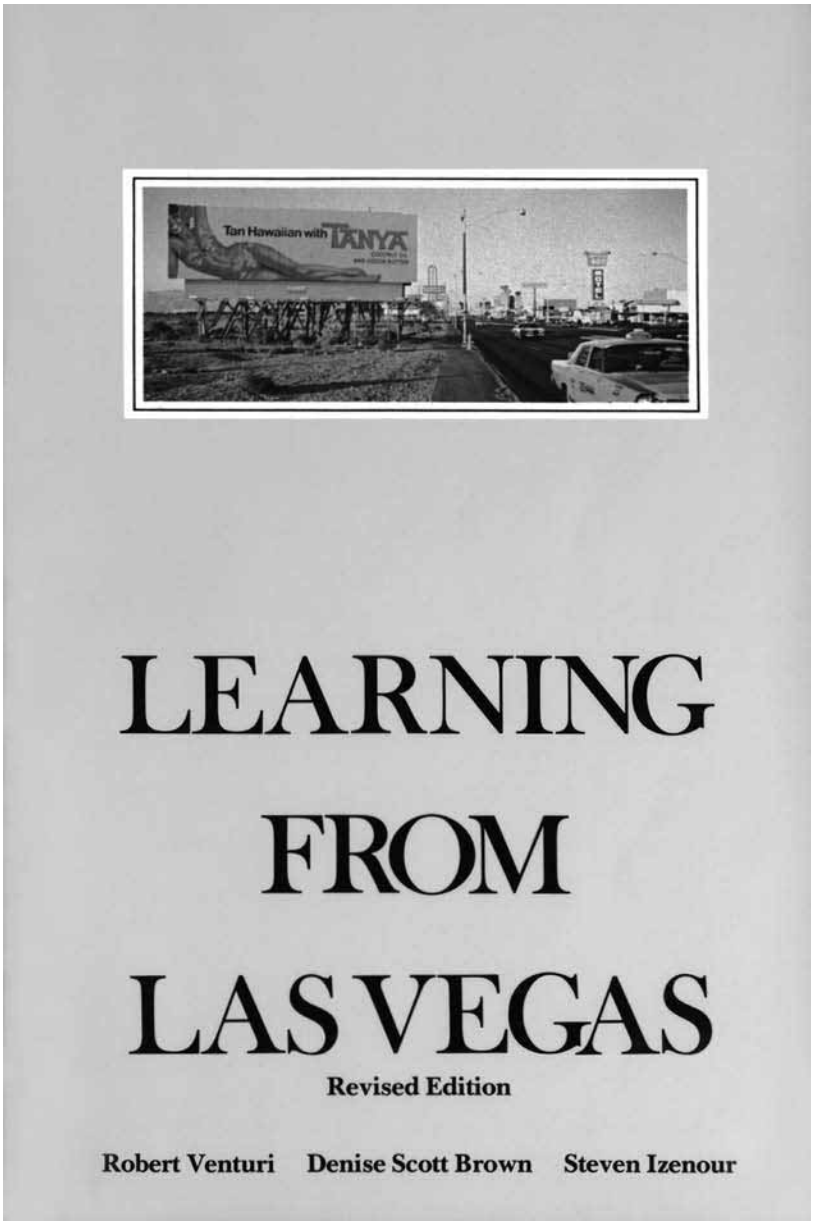
The fact that Venturi and Scott Brown disavowed "the latter day Bauhaus design" of the first edition, preferring the second edition's stark title in black letters against a pale blue cover, without the "black noise" of the slogan-like section headings, does not make the dilemma go away (more on this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



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

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





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

cally, we need to put words into *further* circulation so that we can begin to have the exchanges we want with them. Wittgenstein pointed to this paradox: "We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!"[51]

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

(No) Vacancy

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

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

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

"Tan Hawaiian with Tanya"

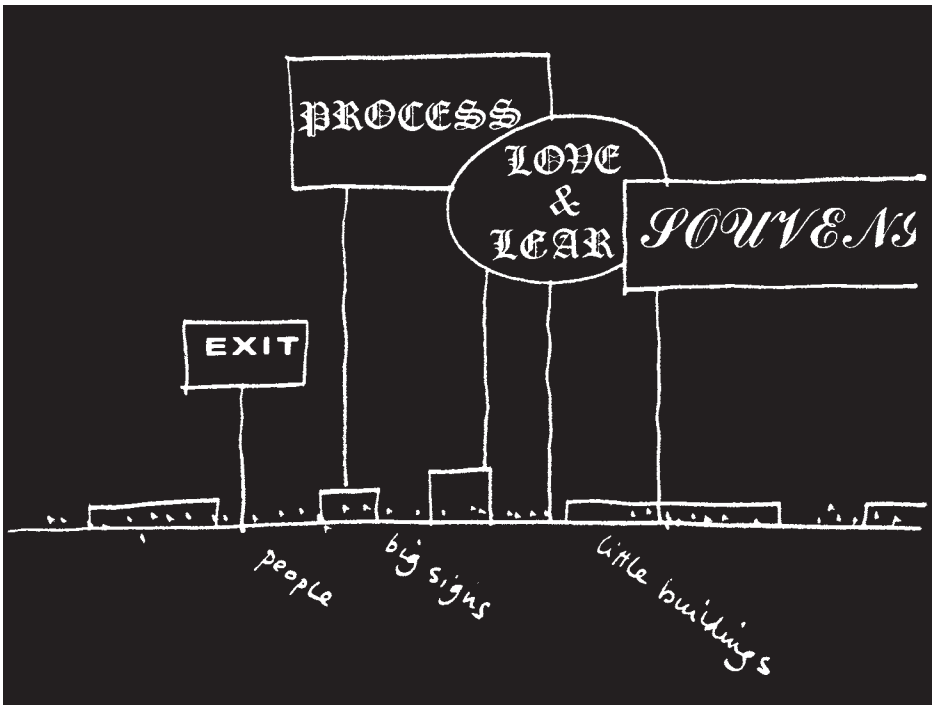
Critics have been particularly dismissive of the "Tan Hawaiian with Tanya" that is prominently displayed on the cover of both editions, posing *provocatively* for the book as a whole (figures 2.5, 2.6, 2.9). As Neil Leach bluntly put it: "A tanned bikini-clad figure is used to promote a suntan lotion,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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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