

PEDESTRIAN MONUMENTS

by D.K. Sole

When I saw Wendy's idea for a show about "new monuments" made by groups of artists I thought about the "recommendation for a monument" sketch on page 152 of the 1977 revised edition of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas*. The sketch, which takes up most of the page, introduces us to a box-shaped building with a rectangular billboard on top reading, "I am a Monument". Elevated on struts, the billboard resembles the other high-rise signs the reader of *Learning* has probably already noticed in the authors' photographs of the 1970s Las Vegas Strip. The signs in the photos don't say, "I am a Monument", of course; they say, "Riviera", or "Golden Nugget." Aron Vinegar, in his 2008 study of *Learning*, refers to the sketched billboard-sign as a "voice" moving outwards in search of a response.

"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."

Vinegar supports his reading by pointing out the radiating short lines that suggest this illuminated billboard is flashing its lights on and off. He compares the diagram to Wittgenstein's description of a blinking eye: "When you see the eye, you see something go out from it. You see the blink of an eye." The form of something going out postmodernises this idea of a monument, rendering it unmonumental, impermanent, threatened by its dependence on the febrile force of electricity, a commodity that could be revoked at any moment by unseen technicians or just nature electrocuting itself on a wire.

The box in the diagram is standing on its own, at odds with the box-buildings in the photographs of the actual '70s Strip, a street where similar signs overlap in a stretched-back mass. If I think of the building in the diagram as one of the casinos in those pictures then I don't imagine a lone box saying "I am a Monument". No: I imagine a crowd of individual identities all announcing their significance without any of them being wrong. Would I argue that the building saying, "I am a monument named Caesars" is lying because the building down the road has responded, "I am a monument named Bellagio"? (Which should remind me, too, of that old line about Jay Sarno de-apostrophising his casino into "Caesars Palace" instead of "Caesar's Palace" because everyone who came there was supposed to think of themselves as, equally, a Caesar. The interesting thing about the story is not that it exists (in defiance of the cynical voice

muttering, “This is just some executive covering up the fact he can’t spell”) but that no one ever, as far as I’ve heard, tries to batter it down with the repressive pro-hierarchy chorus from Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Gondoliers*, “When everyone is somebody | Then no one’s anybody.” The apostrophe-less Caesars sign doesn’t know why everybody *shouldn’t* be somebody).

The Strip is in mass agreement: “I’m a monument and so are you.” The lights rebound to and fro across the canyon. The impression they produce feels something like the socially-responsible murals Théophile Gautier thought artists should aspire to create in the wake of the French Revolution of 1848, describing “great camps and armies of painters working at speed but immaculately, producing the vast works which will decorate the buildings of the Republic – the buildings we dream of, designed for the gigantic life of the future. ... No doubt individualism would suffer, and a few would lose their little originality, their mastery of details; but the great works of art are almost all collective. No one knows the names of those who built and chiselled the cathedrals.” His text envisages revolutionary artworks emerging from a communal mass of artists who work to feed the aesthetic needs of the entire community: the shopkeepers, the street urchins, and everyone else who took part in the uprising. Gautier was not alone in his expectation that the social revolution would trigger a revolution in the arts, but mismanagement and lack of focus on the part of the politicians who tried to organize the response thwarted any hope of the ambition being realised. A movement can die through no fault of the artists. Their community is not only them.

Does this model of community subsume the artists in the way that prehistoric monuments now do when archaeologists look at them and describe them as palimpsests? Is this what our current exhibition wants? The decorations along the tunnel inside Ireland’s Neolithic Newgrange passage tomb were gradually, over many stretches of long-ago years, augmented by new illustrations outside the structure, leaving us to guess that the audience for the monument expanded over time until the growing crowd overflowed the tunnel and the monument had to change (through communal art making?) to accommodate them outside. When I look at contemporary conversations about monuments in the United States I see them discussing something different, a post-prehistoric monument-model that has more in common with the Ancient Roman notion of a victory column (like Venice’s Column of San Marco, or its winged replica outside the Venetian Las Vegas) -- a singular object set up on a pedestal where nothing can modify it. The pedestal doesn’t have to be physically present; the untouchability of the object is understood. You don’t change these monuments by expanding them. You either move them wholesale out of their prominent spot and into the shadows, or else you treat them like the Confederate statues we saw this year on the news being graffitied and then torn down.

Las Vegas is allergic to both the prehistoric model and the pedestal. There isn't a city square where the citizens could gather to orient themselves around a statue and there would be trouble if people got together to claim territory on the Strip by laboring over a communal update of Michael Heizer's *City* in front of The Luxor. I toy with the idea of Barbara Gary's *Monument to a Pedestrian* from the Gowanus Memorial Artyard's huge 1982 exhibition, *The Monument Redefined*. "Monument to a pedestrian is a monument to anyone who cares to explore it," she wrote, next to a sketch of a landscape that looks like an empty fenced lot seamed with messy pathways. But Las Vegas isn't friendly to pedestrians. Should I have even pretended to take the "I am a Monument" sketch seriously if I'm thinking about Las Vegas? I think Venturi pointed out that the book was not "about" Las Vegas. Las Vegas was a lens for looking at a trend. Vinegar points to the "from" in the title. We are learning *from* Las Vegas, not *in* or *of* Las Vegas. What is there indisputably *in* Las Vegas? I wonder if I could argue that Justin Favela's *Estandas*, 2010, is a useful illustration of the sign-as-voice monument compressed into a single artwork, this cardboard mimickry of the Stardust sign spelling out the casino's name with the artist's grandmother's accent. The cardboard is recycled -- you can see that it had a previous life as commercial packaging -- and the rectangular hand-holds cut into the sides remind you that the deinstall crew will come by eventually to take it off the wall and carry it away into storage. If the original Stardust sign asked you to understand its message in the present tense -- "This is the monument named Stardust" -- then Favela's cardboard replica asks you to split your imagination between the past and the future, to look not only at it but also around it, behind and ahead of it in time. Its voice is aimed in several directions.

I think of the stretched-out horizontality of the city and picture a monument that is also a "big, low" space (as *Learning* puts it), like the Bonanza Gift Shop by the Strat. There are things inside this monument but you can't buy them. Instead the community meets there and shifts them around. Everybody picks one and moves it. "Don't be afraid to ask for something; chances are the World's largest Gift Shop has it," says their website. This imaginary space with its contemporary equivalent of prehistoric activity is a monument to everything.

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