

Appreciating Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram* (1959) from the Perspective of Contradictory Opposition and the Multiple Interpretations of Symbols

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Abstract: Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram* (1959) exemplifies a pivotal moment in modern assemblage art, merging diverse artistic media and symbolic expressions to challenge traditional modernist ideologies. This study examines *Monogram* through the lenses of contradictory oppositions and the multifaceted interpretations of symbolism, employing semiotic theory, modern art theory, social critique, and postmodernist discourse. The analysis explores *Monogram* as both a formal innovation and a socio-cultural critique, focusing on its integration of mixed media, figuration, abstraction, and symbolism to interrogate questions of identity, consumer culture, and symbolic alienation within modernity.

Key Words: Robert Rauschenberg; *Monogram*; mixed media; ready-mades; contradiction

1. Background and Introduction

Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram* (1959) stands as a paradigmatic example of modern assemblage art, emblematic of unprecedented experimental crossings between artistic media and symbolic modes of expression. As an iconic collage work, *Monogram* integrates multiple artistic mediums, including painting, sculpture, collage, and found objects, demonstrating a profound engagement with hybrid formal aesthetics while simultaneously challenging the purist ideologies traditionally underpinning modernist art. One of the most distinctive characteristics of *Monogram* lies in its employment of *mixed media*—the synthesis of tangible, real-world objects with artistic expression. This innovative formal practice dismantles conventional modernist theories regarding the demarcation of media boundaries and questions the monolithic, singularly symbolic nature of artistic language. At the heart of the composition is a goat affixed within the collage's structural framework, interwoven with abstract painterly elements. This juxtaposition creates a dynamic tension between figuration and abstraction, realism and symbolism, constructing a visually compelling and conceptually layered work. This visual complexity embodies not only the innovative spirit of formal experimentation but also Rauschenberg's critical reflection on societal phenomena, cultural conflicts, and the symbolic crises of modern existence (Belting, 2001; Godfrey, 2003).



Figure 1. *Monogram* (1959) by Robert Rauschenberg

Website Source: <http://www.hiart.cn/feature/detail/d6chxwt.html>

Born in 1925 in the United States, Rauschenberg played a pivotal role in the trajectory of mid-20th-century modern art. His artistic practice was deeply influenced by the Dada movement, which underscored the rebellious ethos of artistic expression and the recontextualization of quotidian objects within the artistic domain (Bishop, 2012). In Rauschenberg's oeuvre, the interplay of real-world objects, collage techniques, and Abstract Expressionist painterly elements underscores a challenge to the conventional boundaries of artistic media while exploring the complex symbolic meanings inherent in cultural and social phenomena. *Monogram* exemplifies this artistic ethos, exemplifying both a critique of traditional modernist formalist paradigms and an engagement with themes such as the alienation of cultural symbols within capitalist societies, the crisis of consumerism, and the ambiguity of identity in the modern era (Flam, 1999).

Monogram serves as a powerful critique of the singular formalism of modernist painting, presenting viewers with a multifaceted challenge through its embrace of media hybridity and symbolic deconstruction. This artistic endeavor profoundly influenced subsequent movements in modern and postmodern art, as well as fields such as semiotics, social critique theory, and modern cultural studies (Krauss, 1999; Foster, 2011).

Through *Monogram*, we observe how modern art transitioned from a predominantly formalist preoccupation toward an experimental intersection of content and form. This transition not only signifies a transformation in artistic media but also reflects Rauschenberg's thoughtful critique of and engagement with societal and cultural conditions. The work embodies both an aesthetic and intellectual reorientation, marking a key moment in the development of contemporary art practices and critical methodologies (Golding, 2001; Dossin, 2015).

2. Research Questions:

Monogram, as a complex work that intertwines figuration with abstraction, reality with symbolism, and employs multiple media, has garnered considerable academic attention for its multifaceted artistic form, symbolic significance, and socio-critical dimensions. This study endeavors to examine the work's conceptual and theoretical contributions through a multidisciplinary lens, drawing on semiotics, modern art theory, and social critique theory to provide a comprehensive analysis of its underlying meanings and broader implications. Specific research questions include:

How does *Monogram* articulate the formal experimentation of modern art through the exploration of contradictory oppositions?

How does the goat, as the central symbol, embody the tension and conflict between multiple cultural significations and symbolic connotations?

How can the interpretation of *Monogram* facilitate an understanding of the transformation of modern artistic media, the anxieties of modern society, and the crisis of symbolic representation?

3. Research Methods and Approaches

This study employs a qualitative research methodology and adopts a multidimensional theoretical approach, integrating semiotic theory, modern art theory, and social critique theory to analyze *Monogram* across the dimensions of form, symbolism, and socio-critical analysis. The specific theories involved in the study are as follows:

3.1 Semiotic Theory

Semiotic theory serves as the theoretical foundation for analyzing the polysemy and cultural conflicts embodied in *Monogram*. The primary semiotic theories referenced in this study include the core concepts of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes. Saussure's *dyadic theory of the sign*—comprising the distinction between the *signifier* and the *signified*—provides the fundamental analytical lens for semiotic inquiry (Saussure, 1916/1959). Barthes' theory of *sign openness* and *polysemy* in *Image-Music-Text*

further supports the analytical framework for exploring the phenomena of symbolic alienation and the shifts in meaning (Barthes, 1977). Additionally, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic semiotics offers supplementary theoretical insights into the unconscious conflicts embedded within symbolic structures (Lacan, 1966).

3.2 Modern Art Theory

The analysis of modern art theory in this study primarily draws on the perspectives of Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, and Alexandra Munroe. Krauss' *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* provides a historical reflection on the concepts and forms of modernist art, contributing to an understanding of how Rauschenberg challenges the purist ideologies of modernist thought through his use of mixed media (Krauss, 1985). Foster's *The Return of the Real* emphasizes themes of *symbolism*, *rebellion*, and *identity crisis* within postmodern art, concepts that resonate deeply with the thematic preoccupations embodied in *Monogram* (Foster, 1996). Moreover, Alexandra Munroe's analysis of the sociopolitical dimensions of modern art offers a critical framework that aids in contextualizing *Monogram* within broader social critiques (Munroe, 2005).

3.3 Social Critique Theory

From a socio-critical perspective, this study employs David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* and Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Harvey's examination of modern capitalism and the postmodern crisis provides a sociological backdrop for understanding symbolic alienation and identity anxieties within contemporary society (Harvey, 1989). Meanwhile, Benjamin's theoretical analysis offers critical insights into the intersections of modern technology and artistic production, particularly focusing on the social dimensions of symbolic and material alienation (Benjamin, 1936).

3.4 Consumerism and Modernity

The theory of consumerist culture is pivotal to analyzing the symbolism of the goat and the symbolic crisis in *Monogram*. Theoretical inquiries into consumer culture and modernity can be traced back to T.J. Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life* and other sociological studies. These investigations delve into the ways in which modern consumerist culture impacts individual identity, class conflicts, and the phenomenon of symbolic alienation, providing essential context for interpreting *Monogram*'s symbolic and socio-cultural dimensions (Clark, 1985).

3.5 Contemporary Art and Postmodern Theory

This study further incorporates Jacques Sollers and Griselda Pollock's explorations of postmodernist art theory, with particular emphasis on their analyses of *symbolic reconstruction*, *rebellion*, *identity fluidity*, and *cultural crises*. These theoretical frameworks are instrumental in elucidating the postmodern characteristics expressed in *Monogram* and situating its aesthetic experimentation within broader postmodernist discourse (Sollers, 1994; Pollock, 1999).

By synthesizing the aforementioned theoretical approaches, this study seeks to offer a comprehensive and multi-dimensional interpretation of *Monogram*, thereby expanding the interpretative field and contributing to a deeper understanding of its artistic, symbolic, and socio-critical dimensions.

4. Contradictions and Oppositions in the Formal Expression of Monogram

The artistic innovation of *Monogram* is significantly rooted in Robert Rauschenberg's audacious use of mixed media. Through the integration of collage, painting, sculpture, and found objects, Rauschenberg transcended the conventional boundaries of medium-specificity that characterized modernist traditions. This experimentation with mixed media represents not only a formal innovation but also serves as a reflection of modern artists' engagement with the complex themes of societal anxieties, the symbolic crisis, and the fluidity of identity within the context of modernity.

4.1 The Theoretical Foundation of Mixed Media

The experimental use of media in modern art did not emerge in a vacuum but was grounded in a well-established theoretical framework. As early as the Dada movement, artists began incorporating everyday objects and reality-based materials into their artistic practices, exemplified by Marcel Duchamp's concept of "ready-mades" (Harrison & Wood, 2003). With the progression of postmodern art theory, this multiplicity of media gradually evolved into more visually impactful and critical creative practices.

Rauschenberg's approach to mixed media is closely intertwined with postmodernist art theory. This method directly challenges the modernist emphasis on formal purity and the singularity of artistic media. Mixed media manifests as the collage of diverse forms and materials, a practice that underscores phenomena such as multiculturalism, social mobility, and symbolic alienation within the context of modernity. (Lyotard, 1984)

4.2 The Complex Visual Experience Induced by Mixed Media and Formal Expression in Monogram

4.2.1 The Fusion and Conflict of Visual Space Between Two-Dimensional Painting and Three-Dimensional Objects

Monogram disrupts the conventional sense of unified spatiality through the juxtaposition of two-dimensional painted elements and three-dimensional objects, thereby creating a complex and dynamic visual experience. The viewer's gaze oscillates between the flat pictorial plane and the three-dimensional forms, allowing for repeated exploration and contemplation of the work's varying visual strata.

4.2.2 The Interweaving and Collision Between Figurative Symbols and Abstract Forms

The goat, tire, wood and so on within the artwork represent the figurative element, which is interwoven with the abstract visual language—comprising lines and color—to establish a dialogue between the figurative and the abstract. This visual tension reflects modern art's exploration as it shifts from formal purity toward symbolic experimentation and the expression of polyvalent meanings (Bishop, 2012).

4.2.3 The Contrast and Harmony Between Everyday Objects and the Artistic Context

In *Monogram*, objects such as the goat, tire and wood are redefined and repurposed as artistic media, imbuing the work with unusual, surprising, and estranging visual effects. Clearly, the significance of the canvas itself has undergone a transformation. It appears to have become a patch of mythical soil in a fairy tale, from which astonishing, improbable and incredible entities have emerged.

5. The Mysterious Goat: The Multifaceted Symbolism and Metaphorical Significance of the Goat Symbol

In *Monogram*, the goat functions as a central symbolic element, occupying a pivotal role within the work's system of symbolic expression. Its rich and contradictory cultural connotations permeate the entire composition, imbuing it with layered significance. The goat is not merely a concrete object or figure but serves as a complex, polyvalent symbol, embodying multiple cultural metaphors, historical contexts, social critique, and the anxieties surrounding identity (Campbell, 2009).

The image of the goat has acquired a complex multiplicity of meanings, as it has been imbued with varying symbolic significances across different historical periods and cultural contexts within diverse socio-symbolic systems.

In Western ancient mythology and religious traditions, the goat frequently emerges as a symbol imbued with mystery, divinity, or supernatural power. In Greek mythology, the goat is associated with numerous deities and divine figures. For example: The Greek god of nature, Pan, is often depicted as half-human and half-goat or associated with goat-like imagery, representing nature, vitality, music, and primal instinct. The goat, therefore, symbolizes freedom, nature, and untamed natural forces (Burkert, 1985).

Within the Christian tradition, the goat carries a dual symbolic meaning: One relates to sin and punishment, the concept of the scapegoat in the *Old Testament* represents the transfer of sin onto a goat, symbolizing atonement and the expiation of wrongdoing (Campbell, 2009); The other one relates to Judgment Day Separation, In the *Gospel of Matthew*, a parable describes the division of the righteous and

the wicked, likening the righteous to sheep and the wicked to goats. This imagery underscores the demarcation between punishment and salvation.

During the Middle Ages, the goat was regarded as a creature associated with malevolent rituals, symbolizing witchcraft and the powers of paganism. Satan was occasionally depicted in the guise of a goat or possessing certain goat-like attributes. The goat was also frequently linked to mysticism and black magic (*Eliade, 1987*); according to historical accounts, it was sometimes utilized in alchemical rituals. Nevertheless, the goat ultimately remained an innocent creature—one among the living beings inhabiting the natural order of the earthly and celestial realms.

The goat, as a wild animal, is a symbol of nature, wildness, freedom, and the primal state. The goat is often perceived as an emblem of independence and autonomy, embodying qualities of freedom and a defiance of traditional constraints and societal norms. Goats inhabit mountainous regions, grasslands, and other natural environments, symbolizing the profound connection between the human spirit and the natural world, as well as humanity's innate longing to return to a state of untamed natural purity.

In agricultural societies, the goat has historically served as an essential domesticated animal, symbolizing fertility and vitality due to its prolific reproductive capabilities. It came to represent abundance, prosperity, and the flourishing of life.

So, what does the goat actually signify in Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram*? Art critic Catherine Craft draws a connection between it and Rauschenberg's *Feticci Personali* series, created during his time in Italy. She said: "Not surprisingly, *Monogram* shocked contemporary viewers. Still, there is also a strangely poignant beauty to its acquiescent, eternally patient goat. Some observers have associated it with an animal awaiting sacrifice. Nevertheless, with its horns and long, shimmering coat it also recalls the *Feticci Personali* Rauschenberg made in Italy." (*Craft, 2012*) Here, Catherine Craft appears to interpret the goat in *Monogram* as a vessel embodying mystical forces and the spirit of sacrifice.

Robert Hughes' perspective appears somewhat unconventional, as he steadfastly asserts that the underlying subtext of this artwork alludes to themes of homosexuality. He said: "One looks at it remembering that the goat is an archetypal symbol of lust, so *Monogram* is the most powerful image of anal intercourse ever to emerge from the rank psychological depths of modern art." (*Hughes, 1990*) This interpretation reflects a more psychoanalytic and provocative reading of *Monogram*, highlighting its symbolic potency as a representation of complex, unconscious meanings.

Evidently, the symbolism of the goat within this artwork has become an unresolved enigma in the history of art. Critics such as Kenneth Bendiner, who have delved into Rauschenberg's biographical anecdotes, have pointed out that as a child, Rauschenberg once kept a goat as a pet. However, upon returning home from school one day, he discovered that his father had slaughtered the animal. Thus, carrying the shadow of this childhood trauma, Rauschenberg's work is likely an act of mourning for his former pet. Consequently, the goat featured in his artwork can be interpreted as a symbolic scapegoat, embodying this unresolved personal grief. (*Bendiner, 2014*)

Maybe this is precisely what Rauschenberg had in mind; he desired his work to retain an air of mystique. He once said: "If I see any superficial subconscious relationships that I'm familiar with--cliches of associations--I change the picture." (*Rauschenberg, 2001*) It is evident, then, that he did not wish his work to be so easily deciphered; he eschewed superficial and overt interpretations. Perhaps art should, much like Rauschenberg's *Monogram*, cultivate an open and fluid space for interpretation.

6. When Everyday Objects are Introduced into Art:

The Dialectical Relationship Between Liberating Forces and Commercial Tendencies

By incorporating everyday objects into their work, modern art has challenged the traditional demarcation between artistic creation and daily life. Through the recontextualization of ordinary materials, artists have enabled viewers to engage with art in a more immediate and intuitive manner, fostering a direct encounter with the intricate relationship between art and life. Artistic creation is no longer confined to a select group of professional artists but has entered into a dynamic interplay with mass culture and popular life. This interaction has broadened the scope of artistic production and enhanced its accessibility, representing a fundamental aspect of the democratization of art.

The goat in *Monogram* may well invite viewers -- particularly children -- to reach out and touch it. Its posture as it emerges through the tire evokes the acrobatic performances of the circus, adding a dynamic and playful connotation. Considering the abstract nature of the color blocks on the canvas, the placement of the goat on this surface lends it an unexpectedly approachable and endearing quality.

However, at the same time, artworks have been subjected to the forces of commercialization, prompting many artists to cater to market tastes. The use of everyday objects as artistic subjects has, in some cases, become a pursuit driven solely by the quest for commercial value. Within the process of artistic commercialization, numerous works have conformed to popular aesthetic tastes by simplifying and commodifying mass cultural symbols, thereby compromising their critical and creative dimensions and veering toward the realm of the kitsch. For instance, artworks inspired by popular brands and consumer culture symbols may resonate with mass audiences; however, such works also risk diminishing the subversive spirit traditionally associated with art.

Taking the goat in *Monogram* as an example, the goat is originally a wild animal in nature, living a life of unrestrained freedom. However, through the advent of pastoralism, humans confined these animals, transforming them into tools within the process of agricultural labor. When Rauschenberg introduced the image of the goat into his artistic creation, it was reimagined as a plush toy—reminiscent of a teddy bear—thus becoming an object of leisure and play for human enjoyment. Liberation and degradation—these two interwoven forces—form a vast magnetic field that envelops this work.

The aestheticization of everyday life may, in itself, embody inherently contradictory forces. While Rauschenberg celebrated the popularization and democratization of art, he also appeared to engage in a critical reflection on modern society's consumer culture, modes of production, and quotidian ways of living.

Monogram exudes a profound postmodern essence, and like all postmodern discourses, it is marked by its inherent complexity and lack of unequivocal directionality. "A Postmodern Goat" might well serve as a playful and ironic subtitle for this work.

7. Conclusion and Academic Contributions:

This research provides a multidimensional examination of *Monogram*. Central to the analysis is the symbolic presence of the goat—a polyvalent figure imbued with mythological, socio-political, and personal connotations. Drawing on historical references, including the goat's association with ancient mythologies, religious iconography, and agrarian societies, this study contemplates the goat's transformation within *Monogram* into a totemic symbol of liberation, sacrifice, trauma, and leisure. Additionally, the exploration addresses the aestheticization of everyday life and the dialectical tension between artistic democratization and commercialization. This tension is articulated through modern art's recontextualization of quotidian objects, as seen in Rauschenberg's reimagining of the goat as a playful, approachable figure.

In addition, the study situates Rauschenberg's work as emblematic of both the liberation of artistic expression and the anxieties of modern symbolic crises, offering insights into the aesthetic and intellectual transformations of 20th-century art. Through *Monogram*, this analysis engages with the intersections of media hybridity, abstraction, symbolism, and socio-cultural critique, emphasizing the work's enduring complexity and interpretive fluidity.

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