

*Monogram in Front unique:*  
**Robert Rauschenberg and Jean-Jacques  
Lebel at the Limits of Surrealism**  
**Gavin Parkinson**

The critical response in France to the art of Robert Rauschenberg was heavily influenced by the campaign run by Ileana Sonnabend, a friend and admirer since 1951 (when she was still married to Leo Castelli who was then unconvinced by the artist's work), at whose Paris gallery Rauschenberg had no fewer than four solo exhibitions from its opening on 15 November 1962 (with a Jasper Johns exhibition) up to 1964 (Ikegami 19; *Collection Sonnabend* 77). In the year her gallery launched, Sonnabend invited an acquaintance to dinner, the young ex-surrealist artist and agitator Jean-Jacques Lebel, just returned from one of his yearly trips to New York (Lebel, "E-mail"). Out of that meeting came the translations by Lebel and Ileana's second husband Michael Sonnabend of the extracts from John Cage's now widely read 1961 text, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work," that would appear in the exhibition catalogue of the important Galerie Sonnabend double exhibition devoted to the US artist in 1963 (Lebel, Phone conversation; Cage). Lebel had been interested in Cage's work for many years and was introduced to the composer by Marcel Duchamp and his wife Teeny (Lebel, E-mail). His immersion in Rauschenberg's art had begun in October 1959, when he had stood mesmerized before *Talisman* (1958) with his friend the art critic and poet Alain Jouffroy, also by then an ex-surrealist, at the Paris Biennale (Jouffroy 193). From that point, Lebel played an important and distinctive role in the near-unanimously positive welcome the wider circle of surrealists and ex-surrealists gave Rauschenberg's work in Europe.

In this essay, I consider one zone of this reception, which lies at the perimeter of surrealism, delineated by the reproduction of Rauschenberg's *Monogram* (1955–59) in Lebel's journal *Front unique*, itself ultimately a borderline surrealist journal. My intention is to activate it as a case study to illustrate how in the late 1950s and through the 1960s, under certain publishing or curatorial circumstances conditioned by surrealism, the art of Rauschenberg could convincingly be drawn across the boundary apparently delimiting surrealist styles, themes, and ideas, in the years before art history conclusively figured the US artist's work as neo-Dada, descended from Dada, Duchamp, and Kurt Schwitters. The dialectic operative in the art of René Magritte becomes the chief means by which I make this case.

## Jean-Jacques Lebel and Surrealism

Lebel was auspiciously prepared for the task of promoting Rauschenberg in Europe because he was extraordinary well placed socially and intellectually, as well as being perfectly bilingual. He was born in Paris, but when he was three years old his family travelled to New York due to a commission received by his father Robert Lebel to organize an exhibition of nineteenth century French painting to be held in Ottawa, Canada, which was ultimately cancelled, leading to the Lebel family's residence in the United States for the duration of the Second World War and to Jean-Jacques seeing it out as a kind of infant comrade of Duchamp, André Breton, Max Ernst and other surrealist immigrants (Restany 121-22; Mahon, "Outrage" 93). In September 1952 at the age of sixteen, Lebel began a correspondence with Breton (possibly after reading the radio interviews with André Parinaud, just published as *Entretiens 1913–1952*), then joined the surrealists in 1955 (Clébert 335; Mahon, "Outrage", 97; Mahon, *The Marquis de Sade*, 201; Lebel, E-mail).<sup>1</sup> In the years that followed, he "continued to travel back and forth between Paris and New York" (Fleck 147). Lebel had much of his earliest exposure as an artist in Italy, which he visited repeatedly by train, initially exiting Paris for Florence in the mid-1950s to avoid the draft into the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), illegally and sometimes perilously supporting fellow draft resisters still in France while studying techniques for the restoration of antique painting at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence for three years (Lebel, E-mail; Fleck 139, 141; Stiles 8; Kvaran 52).<sup>2</sup>

Lebel signed three surrealist declarations between November 1956 and June 1959; his painting *L'arbre fruitier* (1956), more like a mythic bird than a fruit tree, was reproduced full-page in the third issue of *Le surréalisme, même* in 1957 (the same issue in which his father Robert published important material from his forthcoming, decisive monograph *Marcel Duchamp* of 1959), and an automatic drawing by him appeared on the opening page of the first issue of the monthly *Bief: Jonction surréaliste* in November 1958 (Lebel, "Marcel Duchamp").<sup>3</sup> At the close of the decade, Lebel showed a readably figurative oil painting at the *Exposition internationale du Surréalisme (EROS)* titled *Barbelô* (1958), meant to designate the divine female principle of Gnosticism, but he was listed in the catalogue not as a surrealist but among "Nos invités" 'our guests' with non-surrealists such as Rauschenberg (*Bed* of 1955 was famously displayed there), Johns, Enrico Baj, Max Walter Svanberg, and Clovis Trouille, demonstrating that

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<sup>1</sup> Some inaccurately place Lebel's entrance into the surrealist group at 1954 or 1956.

<sup>2</sup> Lebel's first solo show was held in 1955 at the Galleria Numero in Florence. It included his oil on panel of that year, titled *Iceberg de poche: Portrait of Diana*, dedicated to Breton and given to him the following year.

<sup>3</sup> A measure of his activity in surrealism can be gained from the short notices in *Bief* (Lebel, "Présentation"; Lebel, "FEU"; Lebel, "Continent retrouvé").

his position within surrealism had become at least tenuous by the end of 1959 (Breton, *L'exposition*, 118). In April of the following year, word would be spread of Lebel's ejection from the surrealist group in *Bief*, apparently for a gregariousness that the surrealists read as "arrivisme" and a "totale confusion des valeurs" "total confusion of values" ("Mise en garde").<sup>4</sup>

This was the very same surrealist Parisian monthly that had reported in June 1959 on the series of events constituting the *Giorni surrealisti di Milano* of the last four days of April that year ("Journées surréalistes"). Comprising exhibitions, conferences, interviews, poetry readings, film screenings, and publications, it was meant to publicize the beginning of surrealist activity in Milan, led by Lebel, and the launch of a new, mainly French-language surrealist journal titled *Front unique*, which advertised both *Bief* and *Le surréalisme, même* on the back of its first issue (fig. 1). Also based in Milan, *Front unique* was edited by Lebel and his then-dealer Arturo Schwarz, a surrealist sympathizer who wrote for the review under the name "Tristan Sauvage" but who is best known today for his closeness to and promotion of Duchamp from the 1950s and as author of *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (1969, revised 1997) (Heil, 22–23 n. 15). Published initially with less fanfare as an *affiche-revue* or wall poster in six issues over 1955–58, *Front unique* had premiered at Lebel's first solo show in Florence in 1955 and was intended and expected by the surrealists to serve both their cause and the revolutionary one in Algeria, under a punning title ("*front*" 'forehead') apparently referring at once to individual thought and collective action ("Journées surréalistes"; Fleck 149).<sup>5</sup> To those ends, the first issue in full journal format in spring/summer 1959 included

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<sup>4</sup> Lebel had made what the surrealists regarded as unrepresentative remarks for a surrealist, partly by identifying himself as a surrealist at all, in spite of all the Cocteau-bashing he indulged in (Lebel, "Voici comment rêve" 2). The surrealists protested that day in a letter to the editor of the newspaper, André Parinaud, where they already characterized Lebel as a non-surrealist, accused of a "confusion mentale" 'mental confusion' and "L'arrivisme cosmopolite pris pour la suppression des frontières" 'cosmopolitan arrivism taken for the suppression of borders,' and in a tract dated 14 April the imminent statement "Mise en garde" was included along with that letter and another to Parinaud signed by Édouard Jaguer, the editor of the equally misrepresented art and culture review *Phases*, similarly protesting what it called the "stupéfiantes élucubrations" 'stupefying elucidations' that had appeared in *Arts* courtesy of Lebel ("Mise en garde" and Édouard Jaguer 195–96). This was the first document co-signed by the surrealists and the main figures behind *Phases*. Lebel has given his own account of the multiple crises he shouldered at the time (Lebel and Labelle-Rojoux 56–57). His own reports of the rupture tend to play it down and he soon came to have a good relationship with Breton and certain other surrealists anyway, but he regarded himself as "post-surrealist" from this moment, which might mean he considered surrealism a historical category, overtaken by neo-Dada, happenings, pop art and so on (Mahon, "Outrage" 99, 104 n. 49).

<sup>5</sup> For some rare information on the first series of *Front unique*, see Jean Jacques Lebel 36–37, 44 n. 17.

poems, brief essays, and works of art by surrealist sympathizers and members of the group such as Robert Benayoun and José Pierre, as well as Breton, Victor Brauner, Duchamp, Wifredo Lam, Gérard Legrand, Joyce Mansour, Matta, Benjamin Péret, Jean-Claude Silbermann, Svanberg and so on, alongside discussions of the situation in Algeria.<sup>6</sup>

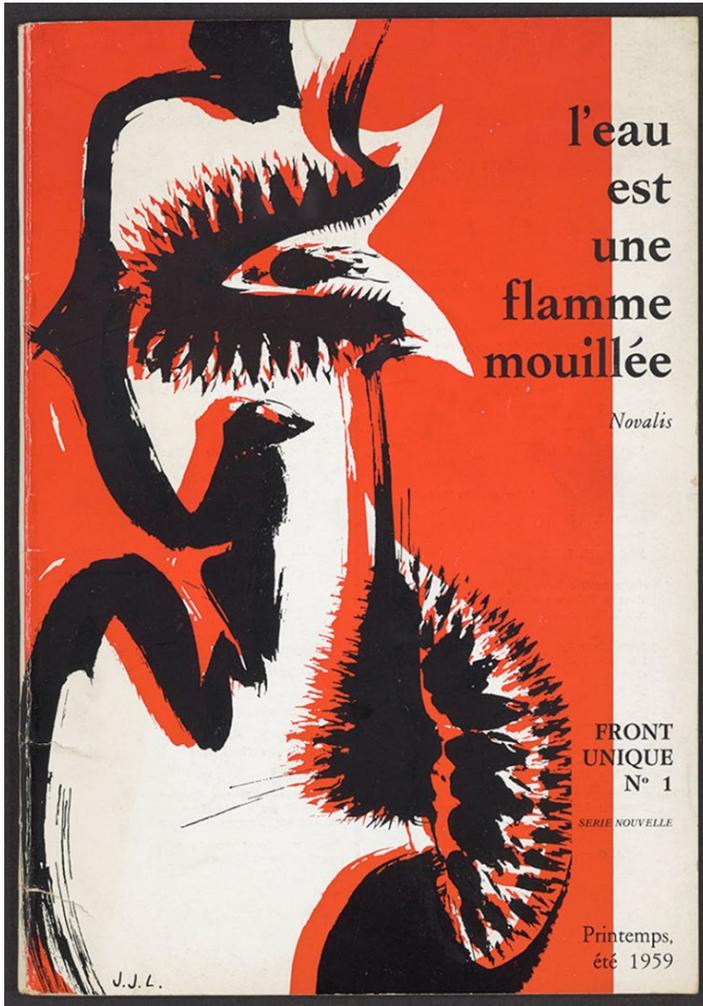


Figure 1: Cover of *Front unique*, no. 1, spring/summer 1959. Photo: Philadelphia Museum of Art, Library and Archives.

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<sup>6</sup> See the essay by the Algerian poet Henri Kréa (16–19); in the same issue appeared the historic anti-colonialist tract by Jean-Paul Marat (15).

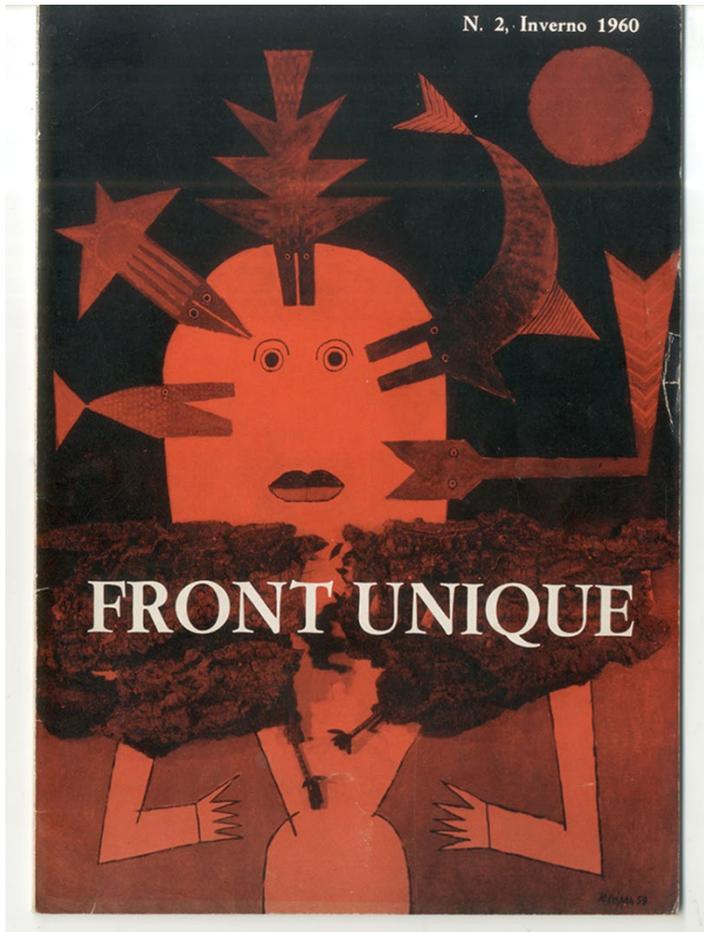


Figure 2: Cover of *Front unique*, no. 2, winter 1960 (author's collection).

### ***Front unique*, John Bernard Myers, and Monogram**

Far greater provocation followed in the second issue of *Front unique* dated winter 1960 (fig. 2). Lebel and Jouffroy had given their signatures to the 1960 *Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie* or *Manifeste des 121* (Declaration on the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War or Declaration of the 121) (fig. 3), condemning military authoritarianism and racism and asserting the legitimacy of resistance to colonialism in Algeria and aid given to Algerian combatants from France in the face of censure from the main political parties and press, while defending and encouraging conscientious objection and desertion from the French army. The frankly treasonous statement was conceived, drafted, and edited mainly by militant writer Dionys Mascolo, Maurice Blanchot, the surrealists, and their friends, then signed by them and many others. It was issued as a loose leaflet

because no journal or representative of the “free press” in France was willing or legally able to publish it in whole or in part.

Facing down the scandal, prohibition, and censorship that surrounded the *Declaration of the 121* in France, the incensed Lebel had copies of the statement inserted into *Front unique* as a loose, green flyer, setting an empty page in the review to avoid legal pursuit:

I had to leave a blank page twenty-eight so the publication could be shipped to Paris and pass the customs. If my memory is correct, 1500 copies of the magazine were printed but I had 10,000 copies of the leaflet printed. Of those, 1500 were inserted by hand [in France], the remaining 8500 being distributed by my anarchist buddies at political rallies, street demonstrations, etc. in Paris. . . . I was not among the very first 121 to sign the manifesto since I was in Milan . . . and by the time I received the text from [Maurice] Nadeau and could send him my signature by express mail, the first batch of signatures had already been made public. My signature was part of the second batch, a couple of weeks later. This was important to me since I was then twenty-four years of age and in danger of being called into the army to fight my Algerian comrades, which, of course, was out of the question (Lebel, E-mail).

The act echoed the now much better-known double blank page “protest” that had just confronted the reader of Jean-Paul Sartre’s periodical *Les temps modernes* in September 1960 (194–95), created there by the printer’s reluctance under threat of police action to typeset the *Declaration of the 121*; that was exceeded by the defiant Lebel who distributed the offending document in *Front unique* anyway. This is the context in which Rauschenberg’s *Monogram* (1955–1959) was reproduced in the review, inevitably if not explicitly charged with both surrealist and political connotation.

Overleaf from the blank page and inflammatory insert in this second issue of *Front unique* appeared an article by John Bernard Myers on the activities and artistic acquaintance of the European surrealists while in the US during and just after the war, titled “Note sur le surréalisme aux États-Unis” (30-32). Commissioned by Lebel when he had met Myers in Venice earlier that year, the text was an abbreviated version of the one Myers had published in the US in the spring in the *Evergreen Review*, “The Impact of Surrealism on the New York School” (75-85; Lebel, E-mail). Like the longer article, the one in *Front unique* includes some detailed background on the activities of Breton and the surrealists in the forties, dwelling more than the earlier one had on familiar ground such as the importance of surrealism for Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, the coolness shown towards the ideas of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud by US artists, Breton’s eventual failure to consolidate group activity in New York, and the triumph of the “existentialist” rhetoric of “spontaneity” over surrealist “objective chance” in the art historical account of abstract expressionism.

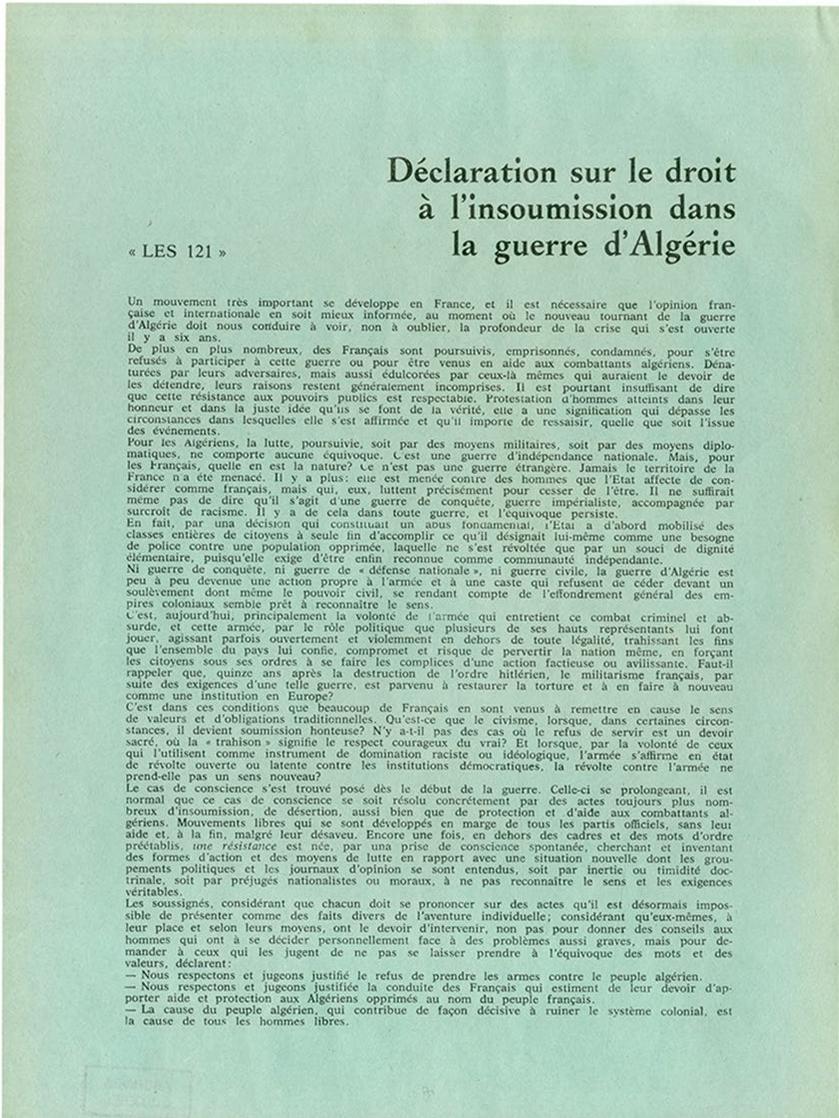


Figure 3 Printed leaflet reproducing the *Declaration on the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War* or *Declaration of the 121* (1960), inserted into *Front unique*, no. 2, winter 1960 (author's collection).

But Myers's article also carried speculations that were unusual for the time on the durable legacy of surrealism for the next generation, meaning contemporary poets and artists such as the Beats, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Larry Rivers, which Myers claimed was acknowledged by them:

La génération suivante subit avec moins réticence l'influence du Surréalisme. On peut vraiment dire que l'action painting est une extension du hasard surréaliste. Les critiques Harold Rosenberg et Hanna [sic] Arendt ont chacun mis les points sur les i en ce qui concerne l'Expressionnisme Abstrait, inventé par des journalistes friands de formules. Un coup cynique porté aux idolâtres de l'Action et de la Spontanéité [sic] fut l'exposition de Robert Raushenberg [sic] où l'on put voir deux "action paintings" côté à côté et parfaitement identiques. Raushenberg [sic], ainsi que Jasper Johns et Larry Rivers ne sont certes pas indifférents à l'humour noir et à d'autres activités surréalistes auparavant laissées pour compte.

The next generation bears the influence of surrealism with less reluctance. We can genuinely say that Action Painting is an extension of surrealist chance. The critics Harold Rosenberg and Hanna [sic] Arendt have each had their say with regard to abstract expressionism, which was invented by journalists fond of formulas. A cynical blow to the idolaters of Action Painting and Spontaneity was the exhibition by Robert Raushenberg [sic] where two 'Action Paintings' side-by-side and perfectly identical could be seen. Raushenberg [sic], Jasper Johns and Larry Rivers are certainly not indifferent to black humor and other activities of the surrealists that have been previously ignored. (Myers, "Note sur le surréalisme" 31-32)<sup>7</sup>

On the thinnest of evidence, Myers once again linked a few others to surrealism as he had in the *Evergreen Review*, such as Richard Stankiewicz and Grace Hartigan, while the case for continuity between the new generation and the surrealists was furthered partly by way of a photograph of Lebel and the poet and critic Alain Jouffroy with their friend the gallery owner Raymond Cordier and the Beat poet Gregory Corso misbehaving on Jean Gautherin's 1886 bronze statue of Denis Diderot on Boulevard Saint-Germain.

More worthy of note is that whereas Myers had referred merely in passing in his article in the *Evergreen Review* to Rauschenberg's "stuffed goat" as a surrealist "Re-found Object" ("Note sur le surréalisme" 83), here in *Front unique* it is reproduced in its full glory as a mascot for his text (fig. 4): the just completed, still-

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<sup>7</sup> Translations are provided by the author unless otherwise noted. By the time of his later, full-length account of thirty-five years or so of life with artists, poets, and dealers in New York, beginning with the surrealists and Duchamp, Myers had long decided that "both Rauschenberg and Johns are at best minor painters" (*Tracking the Marvelous* 216).

unsold, slightly misdated *Monogram* in what must have been its first outing in a French language publication.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 4: Photograph of *Monogram* in *Front unique*, no. 2, winter 1960, p. 30. © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2022.

Now regarded on a par with *Bed* as one of Rauschenberg's vital contributions to twentieth-century art and of an equal fame to the *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), *Monogram* (fig. 5) had its inaugural display early in 1959 at the Leo Castelli Gallery in a three-artist event featuring Norman Bluhm, Jean Dubuffet, and Rauschenberg, followed by only one other showing before its appearance in *Front unique*, also in New York at the Stable Gallery in 1959-60. The work would have been seen by Myers at both and probably at the artist's studio, already garnering

<sup>8</sup> The first showing in a European publication of Rauschenberg's *Monogram* seems to have been in the Italian review *Azimuth* edited by artists Enrico Castellani and Piero Manzoni in Milan (and therefore would have been known to Lebel and Schwarz, no doubt) where it was reproduced untitled a few pages into the inaugural issue of September 1959, in what appears to be the same photograph that was carried by *Front unique* (so presumably provided by the Leo Castelli Gallery). I am very grateful to Grazina Subelyte for her advice and direction following my enquiries about *Azimuth*.

its reputation as a groundbreaking if not revolutionary work (Stenström 40). Later, in 1962, it would make its first journey to the Moderna Museet in Stockholm to appear at the *4 Americans* exhibition, alongside *Bed, Charlene* (1954), *Odalisk* (1955/1958), and *Pilgrim* (1960), before it was purchased in 1964 by the museum's director Pontus Hultén as part of a determined program of buying and showing US art there (Widenheim 49). However, by the end of the 1960s and at least up to 1973, during which period it did not go out on loan, *Monogram* was perceived by some in Stockholm as “a symbol of the American cultural imperialism that had invaded Sweden after the end of World War II,” and the previously (and subsequently) much-loved goat was further scorned as a reminder of US military expansionism: “*Monogram* became a scapegoat,” writes Hiroko Ikegami (146), “as a symbol of American invasion in the era of the war in Vietnam” (10).



Figure 5: Robert Rauschenberg, *Monogram* (1955-59). Oil, paper, fabric, printed reproductions, metal, wood, rubber shoe-heel, and tennis ball on two conjoined canvases with oil on taxidermied Angora goat with brass plaque and rubber tire on wood platform, 106.5 x 160.6 x 163.5 cm. Moderna Museet, Stockholm Purchase 1965 with contribution from Moderna Museets Vänner/The Friends of Moderna Museet. © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/VAGA at ARS, NY.

By contrast with the stigma *Monogram* came to carry in its early Stockholm era due to its US heritage, its equally symbolic placement in *Front unique* in 1960 was meant to liberate the revolutionary energy of the work initially through juxtaposition with the support displayed in the review for Algerian resistance, especially as stated in the *Déclaration des 121*, and more elusively through direct relation with its surrealist elements that I will be exploring here, precisely in alliance with the origin of the work in the US. Situated in the contexts of *Front unique* and surrealism, a few months after Lebel saw the already scandalous *Bed* displayed to great effect at *EROS* (largely due to the personal and curatorial intervention of Duchamp who remained close to the surrealists), and at exactly the time that notorious *Combine* resurfaced at the exhibition *Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanters' Domain* in New York (1960-61), the pre-Stockholm *Monogram* was an emblem not only of resistance to conformity in the visual arts, but of an intransigence specifically inflected by the history and ongoing influence of the movement in the US during the war, as that was understood by the sympathizers of surrealism.<sup>9</sup> The social and even “political” content the surrealists read metaphorically out of works by Rauschenberg such as *Bed* and *Canyon* (1959) (Benayoun and Pierre) was already being given fuller ideological voice by Lebel’s contextualization.

The art critic Françoise Choay had discerned in 1961 only superficial resemblance between the Combines and the surrealist object, but Rauschenberg had already done enough before *Monogram* to merit stronger comparison with surrealism (Choay 83-84). This has elicited a steady stream of comment up to the present day. Branden W. Joseph has characterized the collages, hangings, and boxed works or *Scatole Personali* and *Feticci Personali* (the second group presumed lost) fabricated by Rauschenberg in Rome in 1952-1953 as “brief, digressive investigations into surrealism” (132). However, it was likely the work of Joseph Cornell that Rauschenberg had most immediately in mind through the more or less yearly Cornell exhibitions in New York since 1946, notably at the Egan Gallery where the parents of Rauschenberg’s then partner Susan Weil had bought three works in 1949, and from a minor acquaintance with the older artist that included visiting Cornell’s home on Utopia Parkway to move works to the gallery (Hopps 29 n. 11; Cullinan 468; Solomon 202, 235-37, 374).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For Duchamp’s role in securing the loan of *Bed* for *EROS*, see Harris 573–75. Duchamp’s close relationship with surrealism extended from the early 1930s up to this period; his name appears with glowing approval in every issue of the postwar periodical *Médium: Communication surréaliste* (four issues, 1953–55) and the letter from him to Breton published in the final number states clearly enough his continued interest in debates in the review (Duchamp 33).

<sup>10</sup> The rare collages of c. 1952 were called “versed in Surrealism” (Stuckey 34) and “Surrealist-inspired” respectively (Davidson 44).

As for *Monogram* itself, as early as 1966, Max Kozloff could write of “a work so recognizably Surrealist as a goat stuffed through a tire” (Kozloff 9). In a later, much-quoted interpretation, Robert Hughes read it as a gay counterpart to Meret Oppenheim’s fur-covered *Object (Breakfast in Fur, 1936)*, which therefore fulfilled André Breton’s description of the surrealist ideal: “La beauté . . . sera érotique-voilée, explosante-fixe, magique-circonstancielle ou ne sera pas” (*Amour fou* 687) ‘Beauty will be erotic-veiled, explosive-fixed, magical-circumstantial, or it will not be at all’ (qtd. in Hughes 335).<sup>11</sup> More recently, *Monogram* has been viewed as “a surrealist encounter of two discrete elements that together turn the familiar . . . into the unfamiliar or uncanny” (Wainwright 961); and elsewhere as the incursion of the “surrealist object-assemblage aesthetic” into the Duchampian readymade (Aloi 222).<sup>12</sup> However, such evaluations alongside the surrealist object are little more than formalist comparisons or leaps of faith without a deeper conceptual examination of surrealist poetics in the visual arts.

Further potential iconographic interpretations of *Monogram* suggest themselves along surrealist lines, corresponding more or less neatly with ethical, artistic, mythic, and occultist discourse within surrealism. But it is not so much the nature-trapped-by-culture reading of *Monogram* that is germane here, nor exactly the related one of the lone, indolent Angora goat as the dupe or Aunt Sally in a bizarre circus act or fairground game,<sup>13</sup> nor the mythic reading, available also in *Canyon*, nor the sacrificial, ritualistic one that is enhanced by the priapic symbolism of the garlanded, pilloried, neck-, ear- and face-painted goat with damaged head, nor even the talismanic one, closer to postwar surrealism, advanced further in the

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<sup>11</sup> It was the properties of specifically “convulsive” beauty that Breton was seeking to determine (*Mad Love* 19).

<sup>12</sup> Aloi relates *Monogram* and Oppenheim’s much-loved surrealist object as “the very first works of art to employ the taxidermy medium,” yet seems to have overlooked Hughes’s comparison between them, even though he refers to the larger reading of *Monogram* from *The Shock of the New*: (Aloi 34, 161–90). Marjorie Welish locates Rauschenberg’s three-dimensional work closer to surrealism than Dada, stating of the later *Sant’Agnese* (1973) that “the chair, seemingly in spatial translation, seems readying itself for the surrealist domain of the marvellous,” and, with reference to *Coca-Cola Plan* (1958), writes: “surrealist in their heterogeneity and Neo-Dadaist because potentially anything goes, the artefacts Rauschenberg spins out under the rubric of assemblage are nonetheless at odds with those of Dadaist predecessors,” while insisting in a discussion of *Pail for Ganymede* (1959) that Rauschenberg holds “an aversion toward keeping the object pure, he is much at home in the raggedy production that delighted the surrealists” (91, 100, 106).

<sup>13</sup> The forlorn air of the stuffed animal is better beheld when its head is viewed front right at a low angle “keeping his eye on our folly,” as Walter Hopps once ironized it (qtd. in Ross, Hopps, Garrels, and Samis). Its gaze was exploited by Sonnabend, who placed *Monogram* at the beginning of part one of Rauschenberg’s 1963 Paris exhibition at her gallery, where one newspaper review commented on “l’air terriblement sérieux” ‘the terribly serious look’ of the goat (Michel 9; Bigel 62).

title and equally implied by the Combine named *Magician* in the same year and *Talisman* in the previous one, of *Monogram* as lucky charm, fetish, or shrine and the artist as modern sorcerer (Kaprow 163-64). These interpretations seem merely thematic or reductively symbolic at best, opportunistic at worst, and insubstantial or fortuitous somewhere in the middle. A contextual exploration of *Monogram* takes us further into Rauschenberg's compositional process and the creative choices that concluded in this work and also towards the logic of Lebel's inclusion of it in *Front unique* as a surrealist, revolutionary artefact.

Rauschenberg divulged, typically unpretentiously, the calculated tasking of the imagination that went into the creation of *Monogram*, revealing that he added the tire with white paint (to heighten the tread) to the goat because he "wanted to have fantasy enter in" on what would otherwise have been an overly realistic element in or on the tableau, which immediately nudges Rauschenberg's assemblage closer to surrealism than, say, Pablo Picasso's unornamented, iconic *Goat* (1950) on its equally improvised yet more restricted "pasture" (qtd. in Stenström 49). The ensuing juxtaposition of the two unlike objects on a horizontal surface that has little to do with either (in what is, admittedly, a more complex work than that) consequently recalls the example of the relentlessly aired quotation of the comte de Lautréamont, thought by the surrealists to convey an exemplary image as beautiful "as the chance juxtaposition of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table" (216-17). It is as an image with a poetic drift that *Monogram* carried a surrealist appeal to Lebel and his friends by contrast with the later, avowedly postmodern, literalist view of it as "art's first convincing presentation of the postmodern animal," "obstinately occupying the centre of the gallery floor in all its glorious dumb thingness," and prompting a "confrontation" through its incursion into the space of the viewer (Baker 51, 53).<sup>14</sup> This interpretation is at least weakened by the raised, distancing platform that the goat stands on, and it is thwarted decisively by the transparent container that has protected the whole Combine since at least the early 1970s but is hardly ever present when *Monogram* is reproduced.<sup>15</sup> In rejecting Hughes's interpretation, Rauschenberg himself purportedly avowed in literalist mode, "a stuffed goat is special in the way that a stuffed goat is special" (qtd. in Kotz 90), but a reading of *Monogram* by way of the surrealist image gets us closer to the movement of its

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<sup>14</sup> A similar position to Baker's was taken ten years earlier by Roni Feinstein, but on the work of the early 1960s, which equally overlooked floor-based counterexamples such as Alberto Giacometti's *Disagreeable Object* (1931): "Rauschenberg's sculptures existed in real space and time rather than in the surrealist otherworld" (Feinstein 114), and "Rauschenberg's sculptures did not occupy a space adjacent to reality in the manner of surrealist objects; instead, in their physicality and palpability, they participated in real space and time" (308).

<sup>15</sup> I am very grateful to My Bundgaard at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm for information relating to the display and conservation of *Monogram*.

“poetry” that Rauschenberg and his admirers have so frequently claimed for his work.<sup>16</sup>

## The Dialectical Image in Rauschenberg and René Magritte

Suzi Gablik described as follows the operation of the poetic image in Lautréamont in her discussion of its primary lesson for René Magritte:

If its connections with the rest of the world have been broken in some brutal or insidious way, an object will become separated from the field in which it normally functions. And once removed from its habitual field, it will collaborate with unforeseen elements. When objects are isolated in this way, both from their usual surroundings and from their recognized function or role, a certain ambiguity is produced, and an irrational element is introduced on the plane of concrete reality. The resulting image thus escapes from the principles of reality, but without having lost its reality on the physical plane. (*Magritte* 45)

Gablik’s metaphorical language assists accidentally in the initial transposition of the reading to *Monogram*. The inert goat is given prominence by detachment from the flock, stranded on a movable stage of painted canvas and wood with a few other objects and transfer drawings, seemingly designed to mimic both the broken-up syntax and sepia-tinted tones of Schwitters’s ageing collages, which Rauschenberg would have seen at the two solo exhibits of 1957 and 1959 held at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York over the period of rumination on *Monogram*. Gablik bridges this parodic stand or pedestal with surrealism more convincingly, comparing Magritte’s inquiry into words, images, and things with the collage and three dimensional work of Rauschenberg and Johns, such as *Bed* and *Flag* (1954-55), producing a new art after modernism and heralding “the replacement of illusionism with actual objects” causing “a whole new set of dialectical solutions to emerge,” meaning here the elimination of “the previous distinction, or separation, between the real object and that which represents it” (77-78).

Magritte’s invention in 1933 of his own juxtapositional method when he had been close to surrealists in Paris – whereby familiar objects are not chosen for their lack of relation to each other but their relatedness: not sewing machine and umbrella but foot and shoe, for instance, or egg and birdcage – retained what

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<sup>16</sup> Such a cool dismissal must be interpreted as a pose given Rauschenberg’s affection for the goat and *Monogram* itself, to the extent that one writer has reasonably suggested that “[i]t is likely that the artist found an analogy for himself in the goat” (Mattison 73-75).

Gablik called a “dialectical process, based on paradox” (109).<sup>17</sup> She elaborated as follows:

His method was essentially that of trying out assumptions in a series of speculative drawings until an answer was found to each familiar object. The underlying principle for nearly all the work that followed was based on a kind of Hegelian dialectic of contradictions, in which a union of opposites operated as the mainspring of reality. He pursued these investigations until just before his death . . . an image for Magritte would often be the result of complex investigations – an authentic revelation after a long period of calculated reflection. (101-02)

The value of this process for a reading of *Monogram* in *Front unique* is already hinted at in a structural similarity between Rauschenberg’s felicitous, economical, and surprisingly snugly fitting union of tire with goat and certain simple and humorous doodles by Magritte in letters, or even final works that manifest the same rumination, such as the gouache *The Cut Glass Bath* (1946) and the later colored drawing *The Vocation* (1964, fig. 6). While the coalition of Magritte’s objects had the same role as in *Monogram* – “its sheer improbability excites the mind” in one estimation – their titles perform a similar task to the writing appended to Duchamp’s readymades, to goad the imagination onto unforeseeable byways of speculation, baiting the mind’s weakness for analogy (Mattison 72). It was a strategy also engaged in by Rauschenberg, the supposed literalist, whose titles range, appropriately, from the atypical ultra-literalism of *Bed* to the wordplay of *Odalisk* with *Monogram* somewhere in the middle, titled quite specifically to allude to the interlinked elements of a monogram but surely meant like Magritte’s to intrigue its audience, which is to say to set off a reverie or chain of associations; or, as one of Rauschenberg’s admirers put it, perhaps too candidly for the artist: “he prefers titles with multiple connotations” (Mattison 16-17).

In Gablik’s main case study, Magritte’s juxtapositional method was played out across the many exploratory though quite spare drawings that sought an answer to the question, in the artist’s own words to Gablik, “how to show a glass of water in a painting in such a way that it would not be indifferent? Or whimsical, or arbitrary, or weak. . . ?” (letter of 1958 from Magritte qtd. in Gablik 111). The trial and error was concluded after the hundredth or hundred and fiftieth drawing, according to Magritte, in the dialectical object comprising glass of water (meant to contain liquid) on top of open umbrella (meant to repel liquid), which became the painting *Hegel’s Holiday* (1958, fig. 7), because of the pleasurable release the German philosopher might have gained from pondering “this object which has two opposing functions” (Magritte qtd. in Gablik 111).

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<sup>17</sup> Magritte always identified as a surrealist, but for detail of his temporary estrangement from Breton and Parisian surrealism from the late 1940s and reconciliation in the late 1950s, see Parkinson 249–69.

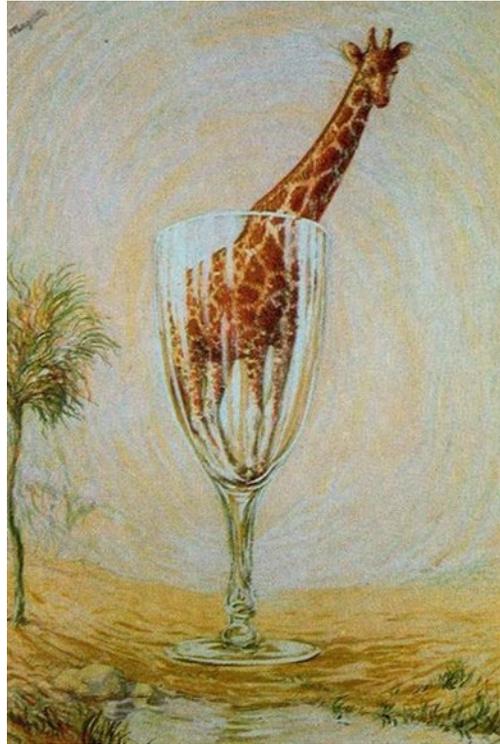


Figure 6: René Magritte, *The Vocation* (1964). Colored pencil on paper, 22.6 x 29.5 cm. Current location unknown. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2022. © Photothèque R. Magritte/Adagp Images, Paris, 2022.

Magritte reached this solution in Brussels in the same year Rauschenberg began in New York his own “drawings,” the lengthy campaign of the *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante’s Inferno* (1958-60). More to the point, he arrived at it in the period of Rauschenberg’s sporadic work on *Monogram* over the far more protracted span of five years across 1955-59, which was equally spurred though differently tested by a single object as a “problem,” that of the quite “exotic” \$15 or \$35 goat (accounts differ) rather than the entirely ordinary glass of water (an object that is, in fact, like the tire, more “Rauschenbergian” than the goat) (Rauschenberg qtd. in Hunter 139).<sup>18</sup> The investigation is recorded in two drawings (see fig. 8), two photographs, and a more elaborate plan and elevation sketch including watercolor: trials seeking the right setting and accoutrements for the uncooperative goat, which tended to dominate any other objects it was positioned alongside (Ikegami 121-27).

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<sup>18</sup> For the plausible but unsourced claim that “the stuffed goat once functioned as a mascot for an Angora mill,” see Potts 11.



Figure 7: René Magritte, *Hegel's Holiday* (1958). Oil on canvas, 61 x 50 cm. Private collection. Genève, Galerie Couleurs du Temps. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2022. © Photothèque R. Magritte/Adagp Images, Paris, 2022.

James Leggio inched towards a dialectical reading of Rauschenberg's Combines from *Bed* to *Monogram* in a language close to surrealism's by way of the "category mistake," characterized as an "effective strategy used in literary metaphor," initially perceiving in the Combines a "free, unresolved dissonance of contradictory associations" and "a sense that the conflicting elements somehow attract each other even as they are repelled" where "[o]pposed pairs freely transpose with each other, but instead of creating mere random confusion, their collision sets off sparks of sudden recognition" (Leggio 104-06). From there, Leggio went on to assert a "free dialectic of difference" in the Combines and a "dialectical sense of identity, a poetry of difference" specifically for *Bed*, quoting the artist's own words to the art critic Barbara Rose on the importance of "the internal dialectic of contradicting yourself, which is cathartic – the only thing that leads to something new" (Leggio 107; Rauschenberg qtd. in Rose 59).

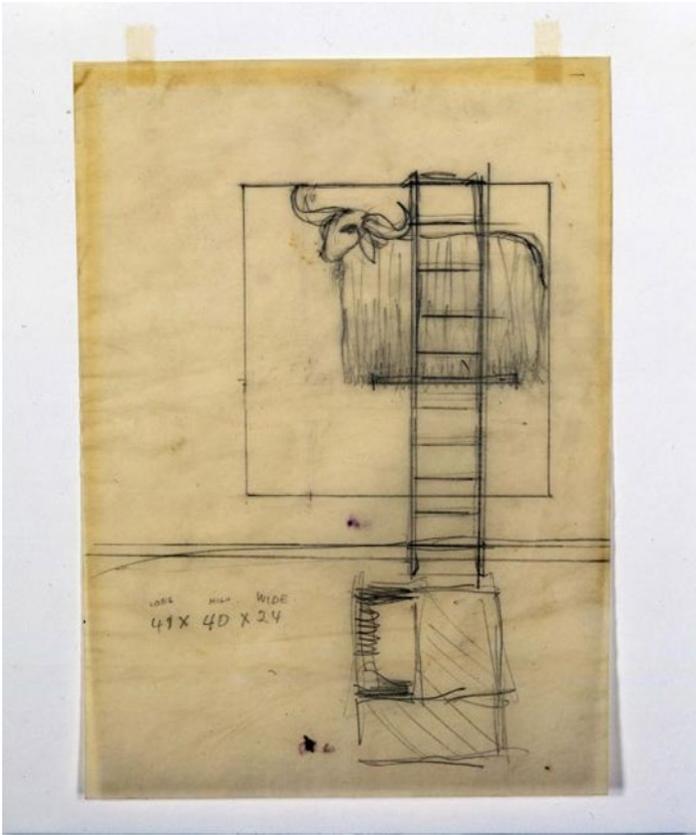


Figure 8: Robert Rauschenberg, *Monogram: Preliminary Study 1* (c. 1955). Pencil on paper, 30.2 x 22.2 cm. Jasper Johns Collection, New York. © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2022. Image courtesy Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

None of this made Leggio think of surrealism or its favorite philosopher Hegel. The same goes for Ikegami who, in dialogue with Thomas Crow, posits a “dialectical tension” in *Monogram*, developed in the studies, between “an urge to move beyond and a force to resist such movement,” which reduces to gravity and the challenge to it, at which point Ikegami seems to acknowledge the laxity (“multivalent quality”) of such an unfalsifiable reading, especially once extended

iconographically since everything is caught up in resisting gravity or succumbing to it, including umbrellas, glasses, and rainwater (Ikegami 117).<sup>19</sup>

A more rigorous dialectical reading of the main components of *Monogram* and safer guarantee, therefore, of its footing in the history of art and the logic of Lebel's reproduction of it in *Front unique*, is made available if we narrow Ikegami's interpretation by reimagining Rauschenberg's Combine in the poetic field established within surrealism between Lautréamont and Magritte. Under this restriction, attention is drawn more closely to the artist's treatment of the specific capacity of the functioning of objects: First, the goat, "acquiescent, eternally patient" (Craft 70) both grazing and inert with, significantly, its legs and hooves concealed by its fleece (which is longer than it is usually allowed to grow on Angoras) but compensated by the four small prints of a right human foot, transfer drawn on a single sheet of paper attached flush to the front edge of the dolly. The missing heel from each impression is itself compensated by the single rubber shoe heel placed back at the center left of the base, which also rhymes with the material of the tire. Second, the wheelless tire not set in motion like its "negative" suggested indexically in the *Automobile Tire Print* (1953) and not even available for motion as was the tireless wheel of Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) but assigned to restrain. And third, the deceptively still, hinged-together, two-part, asymmetrical "pasture" or "raft" upon which the goat both does and does not roam, once (but no more in Stockholm) rendered mobile by wheels or castors, as in the contemporary *Odalisk*, originally fitted by the artist some way in from the edges to be hidden from the viewing public (Craft 70).

An interpretation of *Monogram* that takes account of the basic uses of its individual elements and how these are undermined, as in surrealist objects such as Oppenheim's *Breakfast in Fur* and Wolfgang Paalen's very Magrittean *Articulated Cloud* (1938, similarly boxed in perspex in the Moderna Museet), confirms that Rauschenberg was not concerned with them merely as bodies resisting or not resisting gravity, which goes for all things. Rather, he selected, amended, and intermingled objects, which are objects that exist in our space, yes, but which are then defined under these juxtapositional conditions by movement, arrived at through Rauschenberg's meticulous interference in their means of motility. Deftly contriving a synthesis of mobility and immobility, he "entrusts his news to the speechless dialectic of the Combine" (Steinberg 70).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See the iconographic, allegorical, general theory of the Combine developed along mythic lines by Crow, "Rise and Fall"; its origins lie in Crow, "Becoming Robert Rauschenberg;" and it was revisited in Crow, *The Long March of Pop* 58–73.

<sup>20</sup> Steinberg did not use the word "dialectic" in his interpretation of *Bed*, but he came close, speaking of an "unresolvable paradox" between oil paint and sheets, of a "contradiction in terms" between its customary use and upright position, its "[c]ontradictory . . . conflation of private and public" between bedroom and museum, and of Rauschenberg "unmaking

Leo Steinberg's phrase was meant for the later, more traditionally sculptural assemblage *The Ancient Incident* (Kabal American Zephyr series, 1981). But Steinberg's phrase works well for what I have argued about Rauschenberg's goat, as uncharacteristically pondered at length and satisfactorily resolved intuitively, yet unforthcoming and compliant in equal parts. (I am not claiming that Rauschenberg, like Magritte, consciously utilized a rigorous dialectical method with a near-pedagogical goal in mind.) In this reading of *Monogram*, the Ducassian image and its legacy, Hegelian or otherwise, in poetry, painting, and the object in surrealism, provide a juxtapositional basis for the comparison between Rauschenberg's intuitive "method" and Magritte's along with the poetic frisson they beget.

This proposition that the image in surrealism, "revolutionary because it is the restless enemy of all the bourgeois values which keep the world in its present appalling condition" (Magritte 63), served as the poetico-aesthetic justification for the reproduction of *Monogram* in *Front unique* in 1960 is strengthened by consideration of the bond that existed between Magritte and Rauschenberg. In March 1954, before embarking on *Monogram*, Rauschenberg had viewed the exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery titled *Magritte: Word Vs. Image*, also attended by Johns. Both artists subsequently came to own work by Magritte through purchase or gift, including Rauschenberg's acquisition of *The Proper Image IV* (*Le sens propre IV*, 1929, sometimes referred to as *The Literal Image IV* or *The Proper Meaning IV*), which had been included in that show.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, a distant acquaintance with Magritte was forged through none other than Suzi Gablik, who had known Rauschenberg since attending Black Mountain College in summer 1951<sup>22</sup>, and Johns probably from 1953, whom she met at Marlboro Books on West 57<sup>th</sup> Street in New York where he worked (Gablik, *Living the Magical Life* 167; Tomkins 1980; Gablik, "Oral History Interview").

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distinctions" through the work (51). For elements of "contrast," "contradiction," "compromise" and "inversion" between individual elements in *Monogram*, see Cranshaw and Lewis 47. In an interview late in life, Rauschenberg stated as follows: "Je suis un artiste instinctif. Le choix des images se déroule de la même manière que pour les objets. S'il y a une contradiction intéressante, induite par leur rapprochement, alors je préfère cela à l'harmonie" 'I am an instinctive artist. The choice of images is the same as for the objects. If there is an interesting contradiction, induced by bringing them together, then I prefer that to harmony' (qtd. in Lequeux 25).

<sup>21</sup> Rauschenberg acquired another painting and four works on paper by Magritte from 1961 onwards (Bernstein 123 n. 8). Among other paintings, *The Proper Image IV* can be seen in photographs of the artist's studio in the 1960s (*Selections* 18, 58–65). Johns came to own one painting and six works on paper in various media by Magritte, the first received as a gift around 1960 (Bernstein 123 n. 8 and n. 23).

<sup>22</sup> After his first stint in 1948–49, Rauschenberg had returned there for a summer stay in 1951, remaining through the autumn, and after a brief break returned for the spring and summer terms of 1952.

Gablik corresponded with Magritte before she journeyed to Brussels in October 1960 when she moved in with the artist and his wife for what became a seven month stay while she worked on her monograph.<sup>23</sup> Her letter exchange with Magritte concerning the dialectical image might go back as far as the initial conception of *Monogram* in the mid-1950s when Gablik first devised the idea for a book on the artist. The culmination of the project of *Monogram* in 1959 at the same moment of the letters is, no doubt, a coincidence; the likeness of the Rauschenbergian image in a three-dimensional work to the Magrittean one in two dimensions is not. To address this as an influence of Magritte on the younger artist would be overly assertive. However, to identify and rationalize contextually a comparable means by which a poetics of the image was reached that is historically so deeply rooted in surrealism, where art history has insisted almost exclusively on the relevance of Dada and Duchamp to Rauschenberg, is to give explanatory force to the innocent presence of *Monogram* in Lebel's still-just-about-surrealist *Front unique* in 1960 when that art historical orthodoxy was still in the process of being established and a surrealist lineage could still be entertained for the US artist.

### *Front unique, Revolution, and Monogram*

Photographed in *Front unique* slightly cropped from directly in front of the goat at a viewpoint looking down from about three-quarter human height, making it look as though the creature is emerging from the painted tire or has been cut in two by it, *Monogram* was situated within Myers's text on surrealism and US art in association with the seditious and insurgent bearing of the review, set by the heightening crisis in Algeria, and borne in both its content and language. This was reinforced by the insertion of the quotation by Leon Trotsky placed immediately above the reproduction of *Monogram*: "La Révolution doit conquérir pour tous les homes le droit, non seulement au pain, mais à la poésie" 'The Revolution must win for all men not only the right to bread, but also to poetry' (Myers, "Note sur le surréalisme aux États-Unis" 30). The resolute message was dear to Lebel and had nothing to do with the Trotskyist past of Myers, who was also well on his way to distancing himself from surrealism by 1960 and who later declared the movement had ended by 1949 (Myers, *Surrealism and New York Painting* 57). It carried an obvious subversive appeal to the surrealists, ex-surrealists, and friends such as Schwarz, who had been in touch with Breton since 1942 and been expelled from his native Egypt due to his Trotskyist sympathies (Fleck 148 n. 10; Kamien-

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<sup>23</sup> Although Gablik reported eight months of co-habitation, the letters between Magritte and his friend and lawyer (and Gablik's lover) Harry Torczyner reveal it lasted from the first week of October 1960 until about the last week of April 1961 (Gablik, *Magritte*, 7, 136; Magritte and Torczyner 58, 64; Gablik, "Oral History Interview").

Kazhdan 58), and it had been cited at least once before as an epigraph for a surrealist tract.<sup>24</sup>

Lebel confirmed the commitment of *Front unique* to the revolution in Algeria and its association of *Monogram* with revolution through his inclusion of the *Declaration of the 121* in this issue of the periodical and also his introductory remarks, which began with a statement endorsing internationalism signed by the surrealists dated June 1959, illustrated with a previously unpublished drawing said to be by Lenin that showed an insular network existing between US corporations that was entirely contradictory to such internationalism (Lebel "Avis"). The text by Lebel self-identified unambiguously as surrealist and was followed in the review by articles by the surrealist Jean-Louis Bedouin and others such as Édouard Jaguer and Ragnar von Holten who were close to surrealism, as well as by reproductions of works by Jean Benoît, Wilhelm Freddie, Agustín Cárdenas, and so on (Bedouin; Jaguer; von Holten). At the same time, Lebel well and truly justified the recent complaints of the surrealists about his extra-surrealist activities by including work in *Front unique* by an eclectic throng of artists who had no connection with the movement, such as Guido Biasi, Éro, Öyvind Fahlström, Karl Otto Götz, Alberto Martini, and Amedeo Modigliani, as well as a brief text by Jouffroy and, edging further out, a poem by Gregory Corso, one of the Beat poets with whom Lebel had become friendly.

But the crowning motif of the ill-assortedness of this issue of *Front unique* is to be found towards the end, where a dossier devoted to the ongoing poetry, art, performance, and curatorial project of Lebel and Jouffroy named *Anti-Procès* was collected, including not only statements meant to clarify its aims and defend it from its accusers in the press, but a citation of perhaps the most detailed and damaging indictment of it: the surrealists' very own 1960 "tract de luxe *Tir de barrage*" (Lebel and Jouffroy 37). In this way, the direction of travel taken by Lebel and Jouffroy towards the margins of surrealism is gradually marked out across *Front unique*, from its first pages to these last ones of the second issue of the short-lived review, devoted to *Anti-Procès*, the main cause of the departure of Lebel and Jouffroy from the surrealist group.

It is unlikely that Rauschenberg knew that *Monogram* would be serving Lebel's cause of revolution in *Front unique*, for which he had as little taste as he did for

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<sup>24</sup> Trotsky's statement had been quoted by the teacher and co-founder of the Egyptian surrealist group Ramsis Younane as an epigraph for his expository article "Harakat al-Suriyalizm" ("The Surrealist Movement"), which appeared in the Cairo journal *al-Risala* on 4 September 1939 (where Schwarz would have read it at some point in the years before his expulsion from Egypt in 1949, since he knew Yunan and other members of the group Art et Liberté) (LaCoss 102; Kamien-Kazhdan 51). The passage, which was translated in an abbreviated version in both *Front unique* and *al-Risala*, has been rendered into English directly from Trotsky's 1926 tribute to the poet Sergei Essenin as follows: "The revolution, above all, will in lofty struggle win for every individual the right not only to bread but to poetry" (Trotsky 184).

surrealism.<sup>25</sup> But then, only an avant-garde expeditionary such as Lebel, so uniquely placed in/out of the movement and between European and US culture, could have positioned that journal so precisely, dialectically at the Magrittean center and Rauschenbergian limits of surrealism.

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<sup>25</sup> At the height of his powers in the mid-1960s, Rauschenberg flatly told Brian O'Doherty, "I hate surrealism," a remark passed on by the art critic without elaboration (O'Doherty 116). Not unreasonably, Rauschenberg viewed Breton and surrealism as the main cause of Dada's obscurity from the 1920s to the 1950s, avowing in the 1980s interview with Rose: "I don't like surrealism. I think Dada was totally misrepresented by people like Breton. The surrealists tried to tuck people under their wing and use them because they needed visually interesting motifs" (qtd. in Rose 64).

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