

A View From Within: Mark Tansey, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, and the Iconography of Deconstruction

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A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. Semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth.¹

This quote by Umberto Eco exemplifies Mark Tansey's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1987). What upon first glance appears to be a figurative scene of male bathers entering a lake in the shadows of a large, distant mountain becomes upon reflection, a lie. The reflections in the lake are not male but female bathers; the mountain is a cave, and the clouds, rock. These reflections also seem to lie (Figure 1). Yet as signs together, they do speak a measure of truth. A close examination of these signs and their interrelation is the task of this essay. This "close looking" will take the form of an intertextual and iconographic study of the signs within *Mont Sainte-Victoire*. Through these two pictorial strategies, Tansey reverses the way we traditionally look at images.

The title of the work initiates the discourse between the viewer and the work of art. It offers a way to enter the painting, acting to draw upon the viewer's historical as well as art historical knowledge of *Mont Sainte-Victoire*. *Mont*, or mount is an easily recognizable truncation of the French word, *montagne*, or mountain. *Sainte-Victoire* is French for holy victory. Historically, this Mountain of Holy Victory received its name from the Roman general Marius after he defeated the Teutons and the Cimbri at what is today Aix-en-Provence in 102 BCE. The Romans, a patrilineal society held off the invading barbarians, whose system of power was based on equality between the sexes.² Art historically, *Mont Sainte-Victoire* becomes a marker (Figure 2). The mountain and its environs were captured on canvas by what modern art critics called the "father of 20th Century art," Paul Cézanne.³ Cézanne painted this mountain throughout much of his life while at his home in Provence. By

placing a small Roman aqueduct in several of his *Mont Sainte-Victoire* paintings, Cézanne incorporates the rich history of the mountain within the frame of the work of art itself.

The mountain in Mark Tansey's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* is a typical intertext. Intertextuality has gained currency in literary criticism in the last twenty-five years since its inception by Julia Kristeva in 1969.⁴ An intertext can be considered any sign which is borrowed from a past author/artist. Intertexts in art history have been differentiated from iconography in three distinct ways by Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson. First, the artist who appropriates the sign from the older artist plays an active role in taking the image. Mark Tansey appropriates the image of Cézanne's mountain not in order to pay homage to Cézanne, but in order to reply to Cézanne. Second, a borrowed sign necessarily comes with meaning. The artist borrowing the sign must deal with this meaning whether endorsing or subverting the former meaning. As Tansey states, he uses the mountain:

in response to (Cézanne). In contrast to, having perfect respect for what he accomplished and the influence he had, but realizing that is no longer the path that can be traveled again. But we can go back and use part of what was perhaps discarded by Cézanne, the thematics, and say well, you can't throw any of these levels of content out. Those thematics were important symbolically. Symbolically as a transitional point.⁵

For Tansey, pure form and color, two issues important to Cézanne in *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, are not primary to his work. Intertextually, Tansey subverts Cézanne's concepts while responding to them in his own portrayal of the mountain. The third way intertextuality differs from iconography is that the borrowed motif takes with it the text of the former painting while constructing a new text. Art historical text has been so firmly attached to Cézanne's work that it can never be ignored,

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¹ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: UP of Indiana, 1976) 7.

² William L. Langer, *An Encyclopedia of World History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1948) 93. Additionally, this insight was provided by Susan and Hartley Schearer.

³ Michael Hoog, *Cézanne: Father of 20th Century Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994) 1.

⁴ For information on intertextuality see, Julia Kristeva's *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia UP, 1980). See also Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein's *Influence and Intertextuality* (UP of Wisconsin, 1991). For an art historical approach see Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson's "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin* 73. 2 (1991).

⁵ Mark Tansey, personal interview, November 11, 1995.

whether original or intertextual. Starting with Clive Bell, who makes reference to Cézanne when describing significant form, and continuing to *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, where as Richard Martin points out, "Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* [is read] as a turning point and a fully developmental painting for the escheloned history of modern art," art history has viewed Cézanne as the patriarch of modernism.⁶

Clement Greenberg looked at Cézanne's work in the context of mid-twentieth-century modernism:

Cézanne sacrificed verisimilitude, or correctness, in order to fit drawing and design more explicitly to the rectangular shape of the canvas. . . . It was the stressing, however, of the ineluctable flatness of the support that remained most fundamental in the processes by which pictorial art criticized and defined itself under Modernism.⁷

Tansey has always been in conflict with Greenberg's view of painting since his days as a studio assistant to Helen Frankenthaler where Greenberg was a frequent visitor. As Tansey states, "Greenberg was a great teacher, but for me he was a teacher in the negative. The problem, as I saw it, was how to do exactly what he prohibited. If he said, 'Easel painting and illustration are out,' well that was the prescription for me."⁸ Tansey chooses to work with Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* intentionally to subvert Greenberg's ideas about painting while initiating a new discourse. By reversing the way the viewer sees *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, Tansey opens a rift of tension in the center of the painting. This tension is enhanced by the introduction of the philosophers Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida within the painting.

Seated among three standing military men at the far left of the painting is Jean Baudrillard. Iconographically, the placement of Baudrillard in this position by Tansey is not arbitrary but reflects the philosopher's ultra-leftist views about material culture. Baudrillard looks out over this imaginary scene which is a simulacrum, a copy for which no original exists. In traditional iconography Baudrillard would act as a signifier of the simulacrum. Tansey reverses this thinking about signs. The inscripting of signs does not begin with the image of the philosopher, and work its way out of the painting, as traditional iconography would have it. It is only through the act of deciding that the painting itself is a simulacrum that the art historian can finally decide that Baudrillard acts as a sign for that code (simulacrum) and reinscription occurs. Therefore, the painting itself can be seen as a simulacrum reinscribed in the image of Baudrillard, and not the other way around. If Baudrillard were not in the painting, the idea that the painting is a simulacrum

and not part of an objective reality would still exist. Tansey reverses the thinking of traditional iconography which would need the image of Baudrillard to convey meaning. To this extent, the images of the philosophers within *Mont Sainte-Victoire* are secondary and act as "pointers," indexing the larger signs inscribed within the painting.

One of the uniformed officers points to the right, in the direction of Roland Barthes. As the viewer's eyes look from left to right, she sees the men dressed in military attire, disrobing. These critics taking off military garb can be seen as signs of the demilitarization of the writing of avant-garde proponents. Words and phrases such as, "avant-garde," "dogmatic opponents," "enemies," "art in general as in decline," all come from the art criticism of Clement Greenberg.⁹ By demilitarizing this avant-garde style, Tansey hopes to show the futility of a militaristic approach to art, where one mode or style tends to dominate over every other mode or style. Tansey welcomes a more pluralistic approach to art which will open many different and new discourses.

Almost hidden behind a cloak-like veil, Roland Barthes reclines, lights a cigarette. Two visual codes Tansey inscribes within the image of Barthes are the neutrality of the author/artist and intertextuality. In *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes wishes to "create a colorless writing. . . . Th[is] new neutral writing. . . achieves a style of absence which is almost an ideal absence of style."¹⁰ Because both painting and writing are made up of a system of signs, Barthes' ideas may be transferred from written to painted signs. It is within this context the figure of Roland Barthes acts to reinforce *Mont Sainte-Victoire*. The scene is painted in a sepia monochrome. As Tansey states:

In the beginning I was attracted to monochrome because everything I liked was in it, from Michelangelo to scientific illustration to *Life* magazine photos. Because this simple but versatile syntax was shared by art, fiction, and photographic reality, it made another level of pictorial fiction where aspects of each could commune.¹¹

"Scientific illustration" and "*Life* magazine photos" are not usually signed, seemingly have no author, and are "neutral" to the extent that they lack a definitive style. Tansey appropriates Barthes' "absence of style" within his own work which, in turn, becomes the style associated with Mark Tansey.

Although the term "intertextuality" was coined by Julia Kristeva, Barthes was using the concept to validate his claim for the death of the author. "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which

⁶ Richard Martin, "Cézanne's Doubt and Mark Tansey's Certainty on Considering Mont Sainte-Victoire." *Arts Magazine* Nov. 1987: 80.

⁷ Howard Risatti, *Postmodern Perspectives* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990) 15-18.

⁸ Nancy Stapen, "Mark Tansey: Seriously Funny." *Artnews* Summer 1994: 102.

⁹ See especially Clement Greenberg's *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 77.

¹¹ Arthur C. Danto, *Mark Tansey: Visions and Revisions* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992) 138.

a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.”¹² Both the mountain in the background and the bathers act as intertexts, none of which is original to Tansey, constantly blending and clashing with the original paintings as well as within Tansey’s work itself. Here again, Tansey’s larger visual agenda is reinscribed in the visage of Barthes. Initially, the image of Barthes was not included in *Mont Sainte-Victoire*. In fact, Barthes it not necessary to support the meanings of the canvas. Tansey’s inclusion of Barthes acts to index the philosophic discourses that ebb and flow within the frame.

The man pointing at the far left continues to focus the viewer’s attention away from the left of the painting toward Jacques Derrida who stands to the right of Barthes ready to disrobe. Derrida’s writing was a significant influence on Tansey during his painting of *Mont Sainte-Victoire*. Tansey was reading Derrida’s book, *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*. In this book Derrida wishes to break down polar oppositions in his writing by questioning commonly held beliefs such as truth and falsehood, male and female. Derrida writes:

There is no such thing as the essence of woman because woman averts, she is averted of herself. Out of the depths, endless and unfathomable, she engulfs and distorts all vestige of essentiality, of identity, of property. And the philosophical discourse, blinded, founders on these shoals and is hurled down these depthless depths to its ruin. There is no such thing as the truth of woman, but it is because that untruth is ‘truth.’ Woman is but one name for that truth of untruth.¹³

This deconstruction of truth to untruth, of woman to not woman is taken by Tansey *via* the figure of Derrida and used to construct an entire pictorial scene about the equivalence of opposites. Derrida’s image is an index for revealing an opening to this discourse, the breaking down of metanarratives, like Truth, Woman, Modernity, through the painting.

When the painting is inverted 180 degrees, the reflections betray the images. The male bathers become female, the phallic *mont*, the sign of modernism is now a womb-like cave, and the equivalence of opposites takes place. Just as the male bathers were disrobing in an act of demilitarization, their female equivalents seem to do the opposite, and remilitarize.

The left grouping of bathers is an intertext of Cézanne’s *Large Bathers* 1906 (Figure 3). This intertext is not another attempt by Tansey to subvert the trope of modernism, however. Some bathers in Cézanne’s work, have been characterized by many critics as Hermaphrodites. A.J.L. Busst has shown that

the Hermaphrodite is depicted, “in every aspect of French culture of that period, social and political as well as artistic. In the first half of the century this attraction was optimistic, but by the second half the figure had become a symbol of decadence.”¹⁴ In the *Large Bathers* in particular Mary Louise Krumrine notes, “Cézanne [is] appearing in two androgynous guises, as the Hermaphrodite and as a woman with masculine characteristics.”¹⁵ Krumrine uses this analysis to investigate Cézanne’s psychological makeup. Whatever value the androgyne has in the Bathers motif for Cézanne, for Tansey it reinscribes the equivalence of opposites found throughout the work. The androgyne is neither male nor female, but equal. Tansey has also taken up the idea of the Hermaphrodite in his *Utopic* (1987), where a Hermaphrodite reclines, “allowing the irreconcilable to become one.”¹⁶

The most fecund element within the painting is the umbrella. It lies in the middle of the *Great Bathers*’ intertext, unopened at the place where the shore meets the lake, a sort of *Coastline Measure*—indefinite, indistinct, indeterminate. Derrida brings up the issue of the umbrella in *Spurs*. An unpublished fragment of Nietzsche’s writing states, “I have forgotten my umbrella.” Derrida takes the fragment to task. He describes that the fragment actually may not be a fragment at all, but rather intact and whole without any other context. The fact that the fragment is inaccessible to the reader could mean that it holds a secret, or no secret at all. Perhaps Nietzsche meant to say nothing. Perhaps it means exactly what it says, “I have forgotten my umbrella.”

Derrida also scrutinizes the text in terms of psychoanalysis with the umbrella representing a phallus, and the fact that it has been “forgotten.” Psychoanalysts, “Assured that it must mean something, look for it to come from the most intimate reaches of this author’s thought. But in order to be so assured, one must have forgotten that it is a text that is in question, the remains of a text, indeed a forgotten text. An umbrella perhaps.”¹⁷

Derrida finally concludes that, “it is always possible that it [the fragment] means nothing at all or that it has no decidable meaning. There is no end to its ‘parodying play with meaning,’ grafted here and there beyond any contextual body or finite code.”¹⁸ With this “umbrella” Derrida explains that meaning is indeterminate, always deferred. The umbrella exists on the left side of the painting, lying at the border, the edge, the indefinite line which determines the water and the shore, the mountain and the cave, the male and the female, or actually shows their equivalence, determining nothing. No meaning is True, in fact all meaning is deferred. There exists no transcendental signifier, only slippage around the gap of mean-

¹² Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968) 146.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 51.

¹⁴ Mary Louise Krumrine, *Paul Cézanne: The Bathers* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987) 218.

¹⁵ Krumrine 218.

¹⁶ Martin 81.

¹⁷ Derrida 131.

¹⁸ Derrida 133.

ing. Derrida stands near the center of the painting, playing a seemingly essential role in the work. This however is a lie. Tansey uses the medium of paint to show the equivalence of opposites: male and female, mountain and cave, clouds and rock. In effect, the image of Derrida is (de)centered, acting only to point out that these philosophic choices exist. These choices would exist within the painting, without Derrida.

Mark Tansey uses signs in unconventional ways to disseminate possible meanings. By using intertexts Tansey reverses the role of the artist from passive receiver to active transmitter

breaking down any effort to secure one stable meaning within the work of art itself. By using primary figures within the painting (Baudrillard, Barthes, and Derrida) as indexes "pointing" to meanings, instead of as signifiers of meaning, Tansey reverses the way the viewer looks at images, creating a necessary level of ambiguity between narrative and visual strategies for viewing painting. Endless relations among signs blend and clash, continuously bifurcating, where no single sign or meaning gains total primacy over any other.

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Figure 1. Mark Tansey, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, 1987, oil on canvas, 100 x 155". Private Collection; courtesy Curt Marcus Gallery, New York, © Mark Tansey 1987.



Figure 2. Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, 1886, oil on canvas. London, Courtauld Institute. Photo: Art Resource.



Figure 3. Paul Cézanne, *The Large Bathers*, 1906, oil on canvas, 82 1/8 x 98 3/4". Philadelphia Museum of Art; purchased with the W.P. Wiltach Fund.