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MODERN ART

*as a Market Derivative
or Credit/Default Swap*



by Miles Mathis

I just had another in a long line of similar conversations this week. One of my readers asked why I didn't publish my art criticism in one of the major journals. He said I was the only art critic he had ever read who had any real ideas or opinions; the others were just writing polite and tepid fodder for the bored upperclasses. He said he found it strange that the best art critic in the world should be unpublished, except on the web.

I have heard this hundreds of times, going back to when I began writing for the Art Renewal Center in 2003. Readers on both sides of the fence (I mean the liberal/conservative fence) have told me I should be publishing in one of the major journals. My answer now is (nearly) the same as it was then. I responded, "Which journal do you suggest?" I had already tried them all, with no success, but I was open to suggestion. Maybe this reader knew someone I didn't. But no, on further thought, the reader always saw my deeper point: what journal had any interest in publishing real criticism? In what journal on either side of the fence would my writing seem appropriate? What journal's editorial drift could contain my writing? Even more to the point, what journal could print my articles without offending their masters?

Notice I don't say "their readers." I think plenty of journals could publish my writing without offending a majority of their readers. Any time you have a firm opinion, you are going to offend some

people, but my writing would interest more people than it offended. No, it is not their readers these journals are trying to protect from my opinion, it is their publishers, and the controllers of their publishers. These controllers wish to shield their readers from opinions like mine, because my opinions undercut their propaganda.

You have to understand that ALL the mainstream journals, and most of the marginal ones, have been swallowed by the corporate/government squid, and this includes the ones that some of you think of as progressive. It includes, for instance, *Harper's* and the *Nation* and *Mother Jones* and the *Atlantic*, places where people like me used to be published occasionally. It also includes most of the new online journals like *Huffington*, *Salon*, and the rest. And of course it includes all of the art journals, which, even if they weren't already in the tentacles of the squid, would have no interest in publishing real criticism. Real criticism does not prop up phony markets, and so it is useless and dangerous to either realism or the avant garde.

In short, the truth is not a publishable commodity these days. The readers may still have some desire to hear it, but it does not suit the advertisers, the corporate sponsors, or the other administrators of the contemporary world.

But the reason I do not publish has, in the past few years, become twofold. The second reason I do not publish in the mainstream is because I no longer wish to. I would not publish there if they asked me to, with a large paycheck. The reason is because I do not wish to help them sell their magazines and newspapers. I don't want to be a part of it. I don't wish to be the bait that draws otherwise sensible people into a journal that can then propagandize them on other pages, selling them a bunch of subtle and not-so-subtle lies.

Lest you think I have become some kind of crank, subsisting on fairy tales and fear, I will give you several examples, ones you can research for yourself. Some readers have thought I could publish in the *New York Times*. Fred Ross—the director of the Art Renewal Center—upon finding out that I was “liberal” on some issues, suggested that I should submit to the “liberal” *New York Times*. I had to laugh. If liberalism is thought of as having something to do with a free press (and it should—just consider the link between the words “liberal” and “free”), then the *NYT* is certainly one of the least liberal rags in the country. If you don't agree, you need to research a little thing called Operation Mockingbird. You can even do your research [at Wikipedia](#), since although Wikipedia was created to whitewash things like this, there is enough to get you started there. The important thing to notice is that knowledge of this Operation wasn't cooked up by some author—not even [Carl Bernstein](#)—it came out of the Church Committee investigations in Congress in 1975. So if you want to argue that Operation Mockingbird is a conspiracy theory, you will have to argue against the Congressional Record. Operation Mockingbird was basically a secret agency operation to control the media, reaching back at least to the early 1950's. Arthur Sulzberger, the publisher of the *NYT* from 1935 to the present (in the form of father, son, and grandson), was implicated in these proceedings, and the CIA admitted that *TIME*, CBS, and the *NYT* were three of their most important assets. William B. Bader, former CIA intelligence officer, in briefing members of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said,

There is quite an incredible spread of relationships. You don't need to manipulate *TIME* magazine, for example, because there are [Central Intelligence] Agency people at the management level.*

And William Colby, the head of the CIA from 1973-76, said, **“The Central Intelligence Agency owns everyone of any significance in the major media.”**

Wikipedia tells you that George Bush, Sr., the head of the CIA after Colby, discontinued this practice after the Church Committee hearings, but if you believe that you need serious help from Mars. The CIA simply found ways to hide its actions better, mainly by owning the Senate as well.

If you want some immediate proof that this is still going on, click on my Carl Bernstein link above. You will see that Bernstein's *Rolling Stone* article "The CIA and the Media" from 1977 has zero availability at Amazon. You can also search at ebay, where you will find nothing. Or go to Abebooks and Biblio: also nothing. Ask yourself how likely it is that a major reporter and author like Bernstein (played by Dustin Hoffmann, above) would have an article completely unavailable on such a topic. Also ask yourself why he would not turn such an important and explosive article into a book. The only explanation is that the CIA got to his publisher, and *all* publishers, and all secondary markets. They also destroyed him, since he went into a career slide after 1977, got stopped for driving drunk, probably had the IRS sicked on him for invented tax problems, and so on. If you read his bio, it appears they stopped just short of suiciding him.

If you want more proof, go to [my own article](#) on the CIA and the *NYT* from 2006, where, in an oped piece at the *NYT*, the authors admit that the CIA is proofing every article that goes to press.

Why should this matter to me, you will ask. What does the CIA care about art? Nothing, clearly. But that is not the point. The point is that I do not wish to work for the CIA, helping them to sell their newspapers and magazines.

That said, the corporate/government squid does have some interest in the art market, as I have shown in recent papers. Art is a big unregulated business, worth billions a year, and so you would not expect it to be free of the corporate/government mobsters. Like everything else, the art market is controlled from the top down, and it is controlled to benefit a few rich people. It is not set up to benefit art history, much less the artist or the art lover. It is set up to benefit the speculators and the swindlers. That is why you see the obscenely inflated trade in objects of no intrinsic value or worth: it is the art analogue to the derivatives market. Modern art is not really art, it is an art derivative, a manufactured "art market instrument."

Which leads us to an interesting diversion, and my title here. If Modern art is a derivative, what is the underlying asset? In other words, a derivative in the financial markets is defined as a contract (or bet) based on the performance of an underlying asset with real value, such as gold. But what real asset is a Modern art derivative based on? Since a work of Modern art is a big nothing, there must be something of value that is underlying the trade. What is it? It is the prestige attached to the name "art," and the prestige attached to spending a large sum of money on something you can point to as "art." So the real commodity in art is no longer the artifact, it is the perceived prestige attached to the sale. In a way, this is what Robert Hughes meant when he said art had become "monetized." But I am taking the idea a lot further than Hughes did, since I am showing you that art is not just monetized, it is now based on a psychological state. Prestige is not a "tangible" asset, in the sense that you cannot touch it. Prestige is simply a *feeling* that a buyer has. The underlying asset in the art derivatives market is a *feeling*. Art has not just been monetized, it has been *psychologized*.

But of course this makes art like a fiat currency, since it is based on nothing but consumer confidence. Art, like a fiat currency, depends entirely upon the emotional states of those involved. Modern art is again like a fiat currency, in that it is backed by nothing but an empty guarantee. The paper dollar is backed by the guarantee of the Federal Reserve, but since the Federal Reserve is bankrupt, that

guarantee is worth nothing. Likewise, the guarantee of the art market is worth nothing, since it is also bankrupt (and has been since about 1910). The art market has been existing on nothing but credit/default swaps—the art being the default—since before the First World War, and only crushing ignorance about everything to do with both art and economics has kept confidence high.

So you can see why I no longer want to be a part of it all. The markets are corrupt in a hundred different ways, only a couple of which I have touched on in this paper. And the journals are part and parcel with this corruption. I still desire to write and be read, and I do and am. And I still desire to paint and to sell, and I do. But the majority of people—artists and administrators of art—are under the impression that to sell you must bow to everyone you meet. It simply isn't true. An artist just needs a few clients, and to get them he has to bow to no one, not even them. Good clients don't require you to bow to them, they only require you sell them good paintings at fair prices. Remember that.