Making the Invisible Visible:
The Neo-Conceptual Tentacles of Mark Lombardi

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> If heaven and hell exist, Lombardi's drawings are like PowerPoint representations that St. Peter might create to determine accountability.
> — Richard Klein, Exhibitions Director at
> the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

A judicious entry point for Mark Lombardi's graphite and watercolour paper panoramas of financial malfeasance is the octopus. (That is, the octopus as metaphor, not zoological curiosity.) Recall the "Serio-Comic War Map For the Year 1877" by political cartoonist Frederick W. Rose, in which Russia is portrayed as an octopus, with a wounded tentacle retreating from the Crimea, while others embrace Poland, Finland and Persia. Rose's map demonstrates how much smaller the world once was. To view even a relatively modest drawing by Lombardi, such as *World Finance Corp. — Guillermo Hernandez Cartaya (Miami FL)* (1st Version), 1994, is to witness the Byzantine linkages inscribed within his "rhizomic schematizations of power."[1]

Lombardi spent much of his short life gathering information and creating art, but it was only in the six years before his death that he managed to find a satisfying method of merging his twin passions. Born in 1951, Lombardi earned a BA in art history from Syracuse University in 1974 and spent a number of years in Houston working as a curator, a fine arts librarian and a series of other related jobs. His interest in art, politics and research led him to complete two unpublished manuscripts on panorama paintings and the drug wars. He also dabbled in abstract painting.

Starting in 1994, Lombardi began creating "narrative structures" — paper and pencil diagrams that linked disparate institutions and individuals — webs that mixed art and intrigue in equal measure. Inspired by a difficult to disentangle collection of influences, including business charts, panorama painting, and Conceptualism, Lombardi found a visual outlet for his journalistic obsession with information.

Through a series of solid, dotted, spiky, and squiggly black lines representing connections of influence or movement of assets, plus the occasional stain of

red pencil indicating legal proceedings, Lombardi's diagrams make abstract movements of capital concrete and comprehensible. These are literal spheres of influence, although their formal geometries lack the endearing quality of Rose's European map, where Greece is painted as a pesky crab pinching the Turkish Empire.

Moving from Houston to New York in 1997, momentum built quickly for Lombardi; he was soon earning a living from his art. His increasing influence can be seen by an invitation from the prestigious P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center to submit a piece for a group show entitled Greater New York held in February of 2000. Yet less than a month after the P.S. 1 opening, Lombardi committed suicide.

The recent "Global Networks" retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario provided an opportunity to explore Lombardi's methods, approaches and significance. The content of Lombardi's work became more relevant post-9/11, but regardless of the socio-political context in which his art is viewed, the visual harmony remains pleasing to the eye. In *Global International Airways and Indian Springs State Bank*, Kansas City, ca. 1977-1983, (4th Version), 1999, 18 different arrows converge tightly upon the circle representing the airline in question, like sperm trying to fertilize an egg. In dramatizing and clarifying abstruse economic swindles like the savings and loan scandal, "Lombardi reminds us that data is pattern."[2]

Lombardi initially favoured rectilinear diagrams for his informational illustrations. In 1999, he swapped his ruler for a ship's curve, creating the simple yet seductive contours of latitude and longitude that characterize his later works — self-described Vicious Circles. A geodesic dome details Oliver North and the Iran-Contra scandal. A fat oval kissing a seashell forms the circumference of a drawing that details Bill Clinton's connections with the Lippo Group and COSCO, a state-owned Chinese shipping company based in Beijing.

Despite the simple technique and subject matter, these are not ugly, dry, or mechanical artworks. Echoing Walter Pater's sentiment that "All art aspires to the condition of music," Hobbs writes in the exhibition catalogue:

> It appears in retrospect that [Lombardi] wanted not only to record information but to dramatize it in terms of varying energies, almost like a piece of music, so that different actions would seem to move at varying speeds and rhythms: long arching lines would glide; short ones would dictate a more staccato rhythm; nodes with several radiating arcs would vibrate; and dense areas.would appear frenetic.[3]

If this assessment is accurate, then *BCCI-ICIC & FAB, 1972-91* (4th Version), 1996-2000 is Lombardi's symphonic masterwork. Measuring 52 by 138 inches, *BCCI-ICIC & FAB, 1972-91* required six pencils to complete and untold hours of cross-referenced research. Clusters of activity, like meteorological dis-

turbances, emanate from dozens of nodes. The density of text necessitates the viewer take a number of steps backward, since the facts can easily overwhelm the piece's beauty. Only from a distance can the work be seen, rather than read.

II

The octopus was not drained of its symbolic heft during the nineteenth century. The 7 September 1904 issue of the American humour magazine *Puck* featured "Next!" a political cartoon by Udo J. Keppler. In it, J. D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil is personified as a rapacious octopus, with tentacles encircling various industries (shipping, copper, steel) and threatening the White House. Fifteen years later, the pro-prohibition newspaper the *American Issue* ran a cartoon of "The Liquor Octopus" in its 4 January 1919 issue, where a cephalopod grips the earth, with tentacles that read Debauchery, Crime, Poverty, Disease, and Waste.

Indeed, the octopus embarked upon a burgeoning career in the field of propaganda during the early twentieth century. Here is V. I. Lenin, writing in a 1921 pamphlet *The Tax In Kind*:

> We know perfectly well that the economic basis of profiteer-
> ing is both the small proprietors, who are exceptionally wide-
> spread in Russia, and private capitalism, of which every petty
> bourgeois is an agent. We know that the million tentacles of
> this petty-bourgeois octopus now and again encircle various
> sections of the workers, that instead of state monopoly, prof-
> iteering forces its way into every pore of our social and eco-
> nomic organism.[4]

Likewise, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* mentions Socialist agitator Tommy Hinds, who "had set out upon the trail of the Octopus as soon as the war was over" — a reference to the collusion between big business and government.[5] And yet the octopus, while clearly a political animal, had no ideological alle-giance, as it was also used by various fearmongers to illustrate the insidious creep of Communism in America.

The octopus as visual aid suggests that words often fail to describe the interconnections of various political and corporate machinations. As Lombardi admitted, his landscapes first emerged from the necessity of trying to untangle the knotted and frayed threads that connected various Savings and Loans frauds. In a somewhat apocryphal story, a sketch made on a napkin during a 1993 telephone conversation with a Los Angeles attorney about Adnan Khashoggi (a Saudi Arabian arms broker implicated in the Iran-Contra Affair) was the moment of creative genesis for Lombardi's graphite spider webs.

As art, Lombardi's drawings have been described as neo-conceptual, clear-ly influenced by Hans Haacke and Gordon Matta-Clark. One of Haacke's best known works, *Harry Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real*

Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971, combines photographs, maps, and charts to detail the activities of slumlords over a twenty year period in New York.

Sol LeWitt, explaining Conceptualism, said that "The idea becomes a machine that makes the art." Lombardi reinserted aesthetics into the machine, creating beautiful ideas. As Richard writes, "The marks of pencil on paper — basic tools of notetaking as well as draughtsmanship — purge the work of overt decoration in good Conceptual fashion. But they also insist upon tactility and gesture, an expressiveness not typically associated with Conceptualist strategies."[6]

As alluded to earlier, Lombardi defies easy categorization within the contemporary art world. His influences include investigative journalism, the information design of Edward Tufte, the charts, graphs, and diagrams favoured by the business world and perhaps the spy novels of John Le Carré.

Easier to locate are Lombardi's politics, which he wore both on his sleeve and canvas. He cited Herbert Marcuse's theories that link political critique and formalism as an important influence. Marcuse offered a germane route to thinking about ideological content and aesthetic form, and as Hobbs writes, "Lombardi's affinity for Marcuse was tied to this New Left philosopher's ideas about the value of the alienating effect of some art, which pries people away from the chimeras of dominant ideologies and enables them to see the world dialectically, individually, and passionately."[7]

Lombardi's art if not predicted, then definitely foreshadowed current sociopolitical developments. Hobbs suggests that Lombardi created "the first art to visualize the new global order that has seemed to be one of the key sources of power in the late twentieth century and thereafter."[8]

As historical approach, Lombardi's work is more difficult to situate. While influenced by history and panorama painting, Lombardi was not necessarily a historian and described his work as narrative structures. Chronological progression is expressed in his rectilinear works through long horizontal lines that bisect swirls of intrigue. These tiers represent a basic timeline that progresses from left to right, although, as critic Robin Utterbach observes, "it would be difficult to make a coherent and revealing written narrative using nothing more than one of these drawings as a source."[9] His diagrams encourage the viewer to roam the data matrix, making a linear discernment of his chronologies and narratives difficult.

III

For some, the tentacles of Rockefellers and Communists might intimate false consciousness, for others, conspiracy. Lombardi had an uneasy relationship with those who prefer to wear hats of tin-foil. The business card he printed

upon moving to New York in 1997 read "Death-defying acts of Art and Conspiracy."[10] Yet he was critical of those who "used speculative information to create conspiracy theories."[11]

To label a conglomeration of power as conspiracy risks marginalizing it, yet American history continues to be riven with such a style of thinking. Richard Hofstadter described this tendency as The Paranoid Style in American Politics in a 1964 *Harper's* essay of the same name and novelists such as Don DeLillo (*Underworld, Libra*) and Umberto Eco (*Foucault's Pendulum*) have also explored the topic.
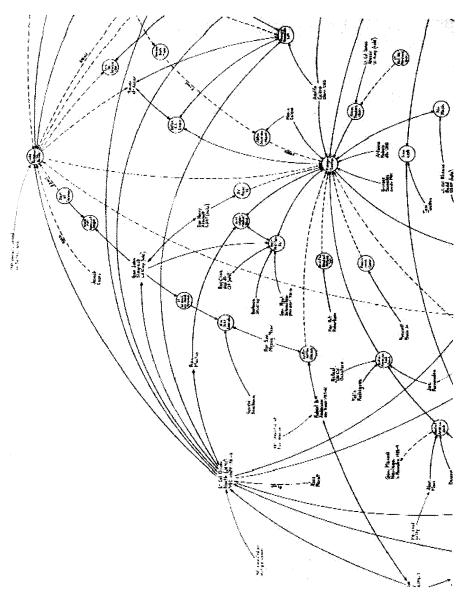
In *Publicity's Secret*, Jodi Dean argues that the very notion of conspiracy is ideological, and suggests that technoculture and the Habermasian conception of the public sphere have few discernable differences: "If the information age is the new political hegemony, its ideology is the public sphere. The presumed value of information — the public must know — morphs political action into compliant practices of consumption: good citizens must have magazines, televisions, Internet access."[12] And just as the desire for material goods is insatiable, according to the logic underpinning consumer society, so too is society's appetite for information. As Dean ponders: "How do we know when we have enough information, when the ultimate secret has been revealed? We don't."[13]

Here, Lombardi's relationship to facts and secrets is worth considering. Hobbs argues that, "Although the ostensible subject of these works appears to be the unveiling of conspiracies — and certainly the criminal component of the work continued to be an important factor for this politically motivated artist — his work began to transform his major goals from those of a sleuth to those of an architect of knowledge."[14] This architecture is even more remarkable given that Lombardi used a rainbow of red, green, and yellow index cards (a box of which was included in the exhibit) to organize his information.

Yet the incriminating beauty of Lombardi's shuffles and patterns might not be sufficient. In her conclusion, Dean writes:

> The politics of the public sphere has been based on the idea that power is always hidden and secret. But clearly this is not the case today. We know full well that corporations are destroying the environment, employing slaves, holding populations hostage to their threats to move their operations to locales with cheaper labor. All sorts of horrible political processes are perfectly transparent today. The problem is that people don't seem to mind, that they are so enthralled by transparency that they have lost the will to fight.[15]

Information may wish to be free, but truth does not automatically bestow liberty.

Oliver North, Lake Resources of Panama, and the Iran–Contra Operation, ca.
1984–86 (4th Version), 1999 (detail)
63 x 82 7/8 in. (160 x 210.3 cm)
Colored pencil and graphite on paper
Collection of Daniel Silverstein

IV

On the evening of Wednesday, 22 March 2000, police discovered Lombardi in his Williamsburg loft. He had taken his own life at age 48. Given the content of his work, it is easy to assume his death was part of the conspiracy. While there remains no satisfying explanation for his suicide by hanging, it is clear he was not silenced by any of the subjects of his art. Instead, many suggest Lombardi never recovered from a sprinkler malfunction in his loft that ruined numerous works, including a third version of *BCCI-ICIC & FAB, 1972-91* that was scheduled to appear 10 days later in P.S. 1's Greater New York show. Lombardi spent four sleepless days and nights creating the fourth version, which left him physically and emotionally exhausted. A terminated relationship, plus his parked car being totaled, added further psychic static.

Roberta Smith, in her *New York Times* obituary wrote: "Mr. Lombardi's interest in presenting pure information qualified him as a Conceptual artist, but in many ways he was an investigative reporter after the fact."[16] As if to underscore this contention, on 17 October 2001 the Whitney Museum of American Art received a phone call from the FBI, seeking a reproduction of *BCCI-ICIC & FAB, 1972-91*, hoping the drawing could help them better comprehend the financial tentacles of Osama bin Laden's terrorist octopus. If journalism is the first draft of history, then these artworks are methodical blueprints of exquisite draughtsmanship highlighting the architecture of global currency flow.

In his unpublished manuscript about the history of panoramic painting, Lombardi wrote, "the historian is reduced to random glimmerings obtained via shards, scraps and bits of ephemera to begin the reconstruction."[17] As an artist, Lombardi created stained glass from fragments, facts, figures, and pencil lead refracting bright light upon dark scandals.

Notes

[1] Robert Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi Global Networks* (New York: Independent Curators Intl., 2003), 13.

[2] Frances Richard, "Obsessive-Generous: Toward a Diagram of Mark Lombardi," *Wburg.com* 2, 2 (2001/2002), available at http://www.wburg.com/0202/arts/lombardi.html (accessed 12 October 2005).

[3] Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi Global Networks*, 45.

[4] *V.I. Lenin, Collected Works*, Vol. 32 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 329-65.

[5] Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (Tuscon: Sharp Press, 2003), 317.

[6] Richard, "Obsessive-Generous," 10.

[7] Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi Global Networks*, 40

[8] Ibid., 20.

[9] As quoted in ibid., 47.

[10] Ibid., 19.

[11] Hilary Maslon as quoted in Richard, "Obessive-Generous," 10.

[12] Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 35.

[13] Ibid., 42.

[14] Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi Global Networks*, 17.

[15] Dean, *Publicity's Secret*, 173-4.

[16] Roberta Smith, "Mark Lombardi, 48, an Artist Who Was Inspired by Scandals," *The New York Times*, 25 March 2000.

[17] As quoted in Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi Global Networks*, 21-2.