

Mark Lombardi: Conspiracy as Art

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The tragic death of Mark Lombardi, a suicide by hanging in March 2000, was an unnatural end to a highly creative life. Using only what was publicly available, primarily news articles and investigative books, Lombardi had been documenting the interconnections between individuals, banks, and other financial companies (a recent show in Brooklyn, New York, at Pierogi Gallery included volumes from Lombardi's personal library, with titles like *Trust Me*, *The Arms Bazaar*, and *The Grease Machine*). These relations were in many cases illegal and resulted in fines and jail terms for those involved; however, the sordid history of white-collar crime was not so much the primary topic as was the relations between people, often between elected individuals and heads of banking. Even more eye opening was the way Lombardi presented his information—by drawing arrows between names and companies in designs of genuine linear beauty. Looked at from a distance, the schema of the interdependence between unsavory arms dealers and corrupt officials took on a classic modernist beauty; close up, the simply drawn circles named names of people deeply involved in activities that would eventually send them to prison.

Indeed, names of individuals such as Oliver North, the Marine colonel who lied to the United States Congress about selling arms to the Contras in Iran in the 1980s, make their way to light, illuminating what Lombardi called “Narrative Structures,” which connected not from top to bottom but from side to side. This kind of non-hierarchical relationship resulted in what the curator Robert Hobbs has called “rhizomic schematization”: Lombardi's global details are usually arranged horizontally, or circularly, with the center or nucleus of cupidity branching out in windmill fashion. But however depraved the intersections of financial greed may be, one cannot help but admire how Lombardi took these tangential contacts and drew them in visual patterns that described the corruption with remarkable finesse. Those in the art world who remain formalist in their outlook may hesitate before the mass of information that is part of each drawing, but even their supposedly impartial outlook cannot but be impressed by the sheer beauty of what they see.

The gap between the data and their presentation is lessened both by Lombardi's skilled gathering of facts and by his ability to render those facts as appealingly modernist within the visual scheme of their placement. We must remember that, at the time of his death in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Lombardi was clearly interested in making his way as an artist; his friends included Fred Tomaselli, the noted Brooklyn painter. In fact, Lombardi was clearly trained to become a person in the art world; born in 1951, he studied art history at Syracuse University, graduating in 1974. Even before finishing college, Lombardi distinguished himself as an archivist; as chief researcher, he undertook the factual support for the exhibition “Teapot Dome to Watergate,” a show of collaged materials at the Everson Museum in Syracuse, which documented the long history of American government scandals. James Harithas, the Everson Museum's director at the time of the

exhibition, moved to Houston to run the Contemporary Arts Museum, choosing Lombardi to be curator there. Lombardi then held the position for two years, at which point he became reference librarian for the art holdings of the Houston Public Library.

Lombardi also attempted to establish himself in the art world of Houston—by starting a gallery there in 1980, a year-long project that included a show of his own art. At this point, Lombardi began collecting materials for two books he wanted to write—one was to be on America's drug wars, while the other was to celebrate the nearly forgotten art category of the panoramic painting, which, like Lombardi's future work with scandal, took the long synoptic view describing structures of public significance. It seems clear that Lombardi was not only a prodigious researcher, he was also looking for ways to document what he found through art. His late drawings provide the viewer with large amounts of material, which he organizes into imagery of genuine interest separate from the highly politicized content they bring forth. This is important to note because Lombardi's art can in fact be divided between its content and its visual expressiveness, so that one can experience the lyric grace of the drawings without spending too much energy on what they mean politically. At the same time, it can be argued that the drawings represent a pure content—that is, a meaningfulness so central to their imagistic arrangement that its gestalt can be considered purely as conceptual material—in this case documenting financial ties resulting in scandal.

Documentation of the ties between money and the reality of New York's commercial transactions preceded Lombardi's efforts to record financial scandal, which began in the 1980s. Indeed, in 1971, Hans Haacke demonstrated the effect of business on New York City land holdings in the piece titled *Shapolski et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time System as of May 1, 1971*. The piece made use of 142 photos of apartment buildings in Manhattan; two maps, of the city's Lower East Side and Harlem, were marked with the sites of the holdings, while six charts established the financial ties among the group of negligent landlords, spanning a twenty-year period from 1951 to 1971. Two years later the New York artist Gordon Matta-Clark presented *Realty Position—Fake Estates: Block 3398, Lot 116, 1973*: this piece consisted of collages constructed from photos, deed certificates, and maps documenting one lot of fifteen Matta-Clark had purchased in auctions. The lot, like the rest of those he bought, is too small to be used for constructing a building or otherwise developed. These works constitute a small but important legacy for Lombardi, who used only publicly available sources for his art. Additionally, the political aspect of Haacke's and Matta-Clark's efforts must be acknowledged; they not only record shady business practice but also incorporate the practices into the art itself—by including the documents and certificates that cinch the deal.

Lombardi's own research filled shoeboxes with index cards—some 14,000 of them at the time of his death. Clearly, so much information was overwhelming to him; Lombardi had to find another way of presenting what he knew. The schematic, or visual, representation of his knowledge made much of the materials quickly absorbable, although it is also true that there is sometimes a complexity of influence that is hard to follow. But this problem surely is not Lombardi's fault; instead, it refers to a reality so subterranean and murky, its

design confuses even the most knowledgeable. One hesitates to draw large-scale inferences from Lombardi's materials; however, the intrigues usually involve American politicians and financiers. And, sad but true, the contacts are known for their accuracy: at one point, even an F.B.I. agent sought out the drawings in order to understand the sequences of influence in a particular scandal. The real problem has to do with the kind of graft and scandal Lombardi reported; going back to the 1970s, he makes it clear that those in power tend to become corrupted by that power. It may in fact be true, given the size of the American companies and the amounts of money that changed hands, that Lombardi was right to emphasize United States official involvement in illegal schemes, which occurred no matter which political party was running the show.

To know about the hidden machinations of America's captains of industry is sobering, but also exciting, especially for stalwarts of the left, who feel—rightly, I think—that it is about time the perpetrators of harm be exposed for their crimes. It is also true that seeing the relationships laid out as Lombardi proposes would persuade even the naïve to consider conspiracy theory. What are we to make of conspiracy as art? Even if one's notions about Lombardi's materials tend toward the skeptical, who can turn away from the facts he presents? Lombardi saw himself as a conceptual artist—someone taken with the idea behind the image—but the power of his art lies in two points: first, the information is true; and second, the communication of his data became increasingly elegant as he continued to make his drawings. The idea of a panoramic painting containing massive amounts of information supported Lombardi's notion of narrative structures, which offered facts as visual phenomena. In light of Lombardi's notional intelligence, there really is no disconnect between the ways and means of his art and the information itself. But we, as his viewers, tend to divide form and content, in part because it can be done so easily. It can therefore be argued that, to some extent, Lombardi lost his way while posting ties that led to scandal—primarily because the data remains reified as data per se, even when it is partially transformed by Lombardi's esthetic treatment of the factual material.

It is easier to see the manipulations in the drawings themselves, which are highly legible in their presentation of supposedly tangential but actually important relations between institutions and people. In *Inner Sanctum: The Pope and his Bankers Michele Sindona and Roberto Calvi, ca. 1959-82 (5th Version) (1998)*, we experience a billowing mass of data on a piece of paper just over ten and a half feet long. Artistically, it is hard to fault the drawing, with its elliptical lines elegantly making contact with nexuses of information. Sindona, a lawyer of poor background, quickly fell in with the Mafia; moving to Milan, he became an associate of the Gambino family, which asked him to handle money received from the sale of heroin. Further financial dealings Sindona headed resulted in losses, and Sindona eventually was found to be thoroughly crooked, ending up being poisoned to death in prison, while serving life imprisonment for ordering the murder of an opponent.

Calvi, chairman of Italy's second largest private bank, maintained close ties with the Vatican; as steward of the Banco Ambrosiano, he exported some \$27 million out of the country. Then, in June 1982, the bank collapsed: its debts were thought to be as high as

1.5 billion American dollars. Later on that year, he was found dead in London, more than likely murdered. Both Sindona and Calvi belonged to Masonic lodges, a membership that would encourage secret conspiracies. The men's ties to the Holy See and other contacts are brilliantly reconstructed in Lombardi's drawing, whose landscape orientation argues for a community of near equals rather than a ladderlike hierarchy. Even the Vatican was implicated in the banks's troubles: it paid \$224 million in American dollars to the creditors of the Banco Ambrisiano, on the basis of its responsibility in the bank's failure. On a more recent note, the contacts of Bill Clinton brought about various hostile investigations concerning his associations; however, his relations with the Lippo Group and COSCO (China Ocean Shipping Company) did not reveal illegal activity on the part of Lippo manager John Huang, who was involved with Clinton's election campaign. But the tracing of the president's contacts results in a beautiful image, which looks like two spheres sharing space. A major company, Hong Kong's China Resources holdings, joins forces with the Lippo Group of Jakarta in the HKCB Holding Company of Hong Kong. The curving lines reiterate the fact that these connections occur; however, it is wise not to presuppose their illegality in all cases. This is perhaps the weakness of Lombardi's grand plan; the way he describes contacts and associations can encourage a certain paranoia, the reality of which cannot always be tested. In the drawing, *Oliver North, Lake Resources of Panama, and the Iran-Contra Operation, ca. 1984-86 (4th Version) (1989)*, we revisit the Iran-Contra scandal, with the absurd Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North leading the way. Lake Resources, a company North dreamed up to hide the selling of arms to so-called moderate Contras in Iran, did not in fact exist. In 1986, its accounts were seized in Switzerland; North himself was exempted from prosecution by government immunity.

The exquisite circle Lombardi uses in documenting the would-be daring activities of Oliver North doesn't seem to have too much to do with actual events. Indeed, there doesn't seem to be any real reason to use that particular arrangement of imagery. But then Lombardi was an artist, and he freely chose to present his details in an overall placement that would best bring them to light. Using colored pencils—negative events are presented in red—Lombardi made it clear that these concurrent events were in fact the result of powerful persons holding control of large amounts of money. What is saddest, perhaps, is the degree to which the American government has expended its energies trying to do away with governments on the left—its behavior clearly leaves much to be desired. One's relationship to this material may actually be mollified by its presentation as art; the protagonists of conspiracy surely didn't know that their behavior would be documented by a single person, whose persistence as an archivist resulted in remarkable insights into a murky world of government officials, military men, and plain crooks, all of them conniving toward a seemingly greater good—usually having to do with money.

Lombardi's political affiliations are pretty clear; he regards the machinations of his studies as the crimes that they are. His position can be contextualized from his emphasis on abuse of power—in America especially. Puzzling, even funny, his chartings of the shadowy contacts of those in full breach of the law look like a disgruntled liberal's recognition of the truth. The orientation toward conspiracy theory places Lombardi on the further reaches of the left; however, such notions are not usually taken seriously, and are dismissed by more down-to-earth intellectuals. Yet the associations cannot be denied.

Lombardi's charts are not the work of a deranged intelligence; rather, they present the results of hard work and research. It would seem that the worst imaginings of the left regarding the right's comrades in arms is true; money is washed and weapons are bought in amounts that stagger the imagination.

It would be easy to dismiss Lombardi as a crackpot, someone unstable enough to take his own life. But that would not undo the actual truth of his materials, which he researched with determined effort to build a credible case against the perpetrators of all sorts of financial crimes. American political art has never been all that good; witness the embarrassingly bad creative writing conceived of in response to the Vietnam War or our involvement in Iraq; art doesn't fare much better. Yet Lombardi shows us again and again what many progressives in America have long felt to be true, namely, Americans exist in an empire in which global power is maintained through the concentrated use of dirty tricks.

One way of looking at the problem is to realize just how globalized the American military is, with a presence in 132 countries. The numbers tie in with a notion of American mentality that is imperial but lacks the will to remain lawful in its relations with the rest of the world. Many have assumed this is true; serious journalists publish books that prove it. But Lombardi's art is the first of its kind to clearly document the excesses of (mostly American) empire in work whose lyricism is imagistically induced. The visuals cannot be denied; they report on crimes committed by a spider's web of connections, often with only tangential relations—at least at first glance.

As an artist, Lombardi doesn't have contemporaries that he can easily be compared to. Instead, his work stands out and apart from both formalism and the overt politicization of American themes. What he really does amounts to an estheticized journalism, in which he presents the results—and also the consequences—of his industrious pursuit of the truth. Given the many facets of his imagination, he may be considered many things: activist, artist, journalist, and archivist come to mind. It is important to remember that just as Lombardi's work cannot be relegated to a particular category of information, neither can the artist himself be fixed in a particular vocation.

Finally, the notion of conspiracy as art may need some defense as a category of the imagination. We are of course accustomed to artists who visualize the horrors of war—we consider Goya's *Disasters of War* one of the great achievements of art, at least partially because of its refusal to tone down the violence that took place. But Lombardi's material remains abstract; in other words, he presents concepts whose particularity he proves by tying information together—not with images but with signifiers (lines with arrows) that indicate a relationship. The schemes are hardly figurative in their nature, taking in some cases the geometric forms of spheres or ellipses. But Hobbs's term "rhizomic schematization" holds true for Lombardi's enterprise. As schemes, they come close to business presentations—at least in terms of their visual forms. They do not, for example, represent the facial features of those responsible for the crimes that they are documented as committing. Instead, the weight of Lombardi's achievement lies in the

abstract portrayal of personal relations; it is a matter of quickly tying connections to each other in a way that is artistic.

Who would have thought that the presentation of such data could be both so precise and so artistic? We have Lombardi to thank not only for the beauty of his drawings; we must also praise the way he was able to present information in so concise a manner. That he found a way of schematizing connections many of us would find repellent makes him both a commentator and artist of genuine invention. Visualizing so much valuable information proves that it is possible to realize an image that would communicate facts, just as the panoramic paintings make visible centers of power to their audience. Lombardi, clearly a likable sort in photos of himself, shows us what exactly he had in mind.