

"Obsessive—Generous"

Toward a Diagram of Mark Lombardi
by Frances Richard

Who is James R. Bath?

A nodal point in Mark Lombardi's drawing *George W. Bush, Harken Energy and Jackson Stephens*¹ c. 1979-90, 5th Version, 1999, James R. Bath appears in the upper lefthand corner of the 16 1/2" x 41" piece of paper. The spatial syntax of Lombardi's drawings—which map in elegantly visual terms the secret deals and suspect associations of financiers, politicians, corporations, and governments—dictates that the more densely lines ray out from a given node, the more deeply that figure is embroiled in the tale Lombardi tells. Thirteen lines originate with or point to James R. Bath, more than any other name presented. Among those linked to this obscure yet central character are George W. Bush, Jr., George H.W. Bush, Sr., Senator Lloyd Bentsen of Texas, Governor John B. Connally of Texas, Sheik Salim bin Laden of Saudi Arabia, and Sheik Salim's younger brother, Osama bin Laden.

The drawing is done on pale beige paper, in pencil. It follows a time-line, with dates arrayed across three horizontal tiers. These in turn support arcs denoting personal and corporate alliances, the whole comprising a skeletal resume of George W. Bush's career in the oil business. In other words, the drawing, like all Lombardi's work, is a post-Conceptual reinvention of history painting, a document of factually verifiable yet extremely pared-down relationships limned in a double light of international fame and cryptic realpolitik. Or rather, the light is triple. For, though he possessed the instincts of a private eye and the acumen of a systems-analyst, Lombardi was of course an artist, and from the raw material of wire-service reports and books by political correspondents, he drew not only chronicles of covert, high-stakes trade, but technically pristine and sensually compelling visual forms. His project's sources are profoundly art-historical, even as they are obviously journalistic, and the creative tension between abstracted, self-propelling image and direct verbal communication propels his work. Delicately balanced and gracefully enlaced, these lines and circles read from across the room as purely retinal explorations of two-dimensional space. Their stylized complexity, however, lures the eye in, to a point where language registers as legible and referentiality asserts itself through the scrim of form. A narrative emerges. Looking shifts toward reading, and Lombardi's one-two punch lands.

¹ Jackson Stephens rivals Bath in his role as conduit between high-level factions. A Little Rock, Arkansas tycoon who attended the U.S. Naval Academy with Jimmy Carter and staked Sam Walton to found Wal-Mart in 1970, Stephens was owner of the notoriously toxic WTI Incinerator in East Liverpool, OH, and a munificent contributor to the campaign warchests of *both* Bill Clinton and George Bush, Sr. He was also embroiled in the BCCI affair through his association with BCCI satellite Union Bank of Switzerland—UBS, in turn, contributed \$25 million to the moribund Harken Energy Corp.

James R. Bath, it turns out, is a Texas businessman, a sometime aeronautics broker whose firm, Skyway Aircraft Leasing, LTD., was a Cayman Islands² front amassing money for use by Oliver North in the Iran-Contra affair. Bath also served as an agent minding American interests for a quartet of Saudi Arabian billionaires, one of whom was Sheik Salim bin Laden, the oldest son and heir of Sheik Mohammed bin Laden, father of fifty-four children including Osama. According to reports by the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, and others, Bath did business in his own name but with the Saudis' money; tax records indicate that he collected a fee of 5% on their multimillion dollar American investments. In 1979, Bath contributed \$50,000 to Arbusto Energy, a limited-partnership controlled by George W. Bush. As Bath had little capital of his own, oil insiders trace the funds to his silent partners, specifically Salim bin Laden. Such cash infusions from Bath's client sheiks and George H.W. Bush's cartel cronies could not, however, prop Arbusto up. The venture collapsed in 1981 and merged into the Spectrum 7 Energy Corporation. Spectrum—still with W. at the helm—evolved through more near-failures and mergers into Harken Energy, which, in 1990, embarked upon a sweetheart deal to drill oil wells in Bahrain—this regardless of the fact that Harken had never drilled an overseas well, nor a marine well of any kind. Oil industry cognoscenti again assume that the Bahrain contract was orchestrated as a favor from the Saudis to the American chief executive and his family. The favor paid. On June 20, 1990, George W. Bush sold two-thirds of his Harken stock at \$4 per share. Eight days later, Harken finished the second quarter with losses of \$23 million; the stock promptly lost 75% of its value, finishing at just over \$1 per share. Two months later, Iraq invaded Kuwait, and the Gulf War began. All these events are cited in Lombardi's drawing.

Meanwhile, another Bath associate, Sheik Khalid bin Mafouz, was involved in the collapse (in July, 1991) of the Bank of Credit and Commerce, International, better known as BCCI. Among the sins of the Pakistani-owned BCCI were money-laundering on behalf of Colombian druglords, arms brokering, bribery, and aid to terrorists; when this cabal came unglued, millions of investors in seventy-three countries lost their life-savings. Although Bath was not personally implicated in the BCCI fiasco, an estranged business partner claims that that he, Bath, had been recruited to the CIA in 1976-77 by George Bush, Sr., after serving in the Texas Air National Guard as the buddy of George Bush, Jr. (in 1972, the two young men narrowly escaped arrest for cocaine possession). Bath's putative CIA connections, the Agency's operations in the Middle East, and the adventures of BCCI thus compose a kind of symmetry. The byzantine saga of BCCI's demise is plotted in the drawing that is perhaps Lombardi's masterwork, *BCCI-ICIC-FAB, c. 1972-1991, (4th Version)*, 1996-2000. Unveiled in the landmark P.S. 1 exhibition "Greater New York" in 2000, this piece signaled Lombardi's arrival at the cusp of art world fame; it is now in the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum. A wall-size panel schematizing twenty years of suspect alliances amongst scores of players, *BCCI-ICIC-FAB...* was the last major work the artist made before his death.

² "In the Caymans...there are no personal, corporate, or inheritance taxes, and it is illegal for an employee or officer of any bank or corporation to disclose any information about its assets, financing, or ownership. Not surprisingly, over 20,000 corporations, including 550 international banks and trusts, are currently registered to do business in the Caymans, which recently reported over \$400 billion in 'offshore' bank deposits for only 30,000 full-time inhabitants, an average of \$14 million per citizen!"

-Mark Lombardi, "The 'Offshore' Phenomenon: Dirty Banking in a Brave New World," *Cabinet* No. 2 (Spring, 2001), p. 86.

For those who followed the BCCI scandal—or the Harken Energy/insider trading scandal, or the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro scandal, or the Lincoln Savings & Loan scandal, or any of Lombardi's pet juggernauts—these diagrams summarize rather than amend available knowledge. He was always careful to explain that he did not conduct primary investigations, but culled his information exclusively from the public record; a basic Internet search yields multiple references to the Bath/Bush/bin Laden connection. However, ferreting out and adding up in one's own head the myriad fragments scattered across the infotainment megascape is a very different experience from standing before Lombardi's rhythmic plots. In the strangely contemplative and yet galvanizing presence of these images, the graphic equilibrium with which he invests his subjects is transformative. To track these events in the context of the drawings is to experience their import freshly, to undergo a shock of mixed recognition and surprise.

It is also to enter into a subtly intimate dialogue with the mind that laid them out in this order. Palpably handmade and unencumbered by technological gadgetry of any kind, the drawings bespeak the individual effort of a single consciousness, a watchdog enthusiast profoundly engaged with matters most of us find impossible to manage. Filtering the dizzying spectrum of contemporary power relations through his idiosyncratic vision, Lombardi imposed upon the actions of these profligate VIPs a compositional harmony that in itself constitutes a critique. Like Diego Velasquez in the court of *Las Meninas* or Jan van Eyck in the home of *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride*, the incisive social portraitist has quietly included his own observing presence in the picture.

"I am pillaging the corporate vocabulary of diagrams and charts...rearranging information in a visual format that's interesting to me and mapping the political and social terrain in which I live," Lombardi told the videographer Andy Mann in February, 1997. "He was totally consumed by the stories he was following," recalls his friend and collector Mickey Cartin.

I loved talking with Mark about his work. His eyes would come alive, almost as if they were pushing his glasses away from his face...He worked alone on a solitary project, a massive inventory of facts and the challenge of configuring them in a legible fashion, in a small, lonely room, an internal process. But when he had a listener, he came alive. If you were willing to listen, and I was eager, he could go on for hours...I believe that what really drove the work was the lust for information and the informed artistic sense that could translate it into a visually attractive whole.

True to their origin as traces of mental process, the images were not static, and in a sense were never complete. When new intelligence surfaced, Lombardi would revise existing drawings to include it, interweaving the divagations of his own awareness with events unfolding in the news. Since this is, de facto, what we all have to do each day, Lombardi's personal feats of attention segue again toward the public realm, this time not as comments upon the tawdry activities of bigshots, but as testimonies to the thoughts of Everyperson trying to navigate mediatized reality. "I wish that he were here now," says gallerist Deven Golden, "to give us his overview of the world stage, which I know would be delivered with a puff of his cigarette through a Cheshire smile." More than one colleague has echoed Golden's sentiment, missing not only Mark Lombardi's friendship but the drawings he might have made in recent months, wishing

for his particular parsing of what are now known as "the events of September 11th"—not to mention the "events" of the November 2000 election.

Making this sleek yet polymorphous art, Mark Lombardi had achieved notable success. But his success was recent, and it is difficult for the reputation of an emerging artist to survive untimely death—especially when the work is ostensibly dependent upon the ephemera of headline news. Eighteen months after his suicide, however, Lombardi's reputation flourishes. Major collections are acquiring the drawings; they are regularly included in important thematic exhibitions. In agreement with the Lombardi family, Joe Amrhein of Williamsburg's Pierogi Gallery has undertaken management of the estate, negotiating with collectors, administering exhibition loans, and addressing issues of conservation and display. Encouraged by Amrhein, critic Robert Hobbs and the Independent Curators International have recently committed to mounting a retrospective—venue, scheduling, and number of works to be determined. In anticipation of such developments, a group of artists, gallerists, critics, and curators who support Mark Lombardi's legacy have graciously contributed their thoughts and reminiscences to this article.

Mark Lombardi was born in Syracuse in 1951, and received his B.A. in art history from Syracuse University in 1974. Upon graduation, he moved to Texas at the invitation of curator Jim Harithas, who had been appointed director of Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum. Lombardi worked as a curatorial assistant to Harithas, as an arts librarian at the public library, and as a gallery assistant and preparator, eventually becoming owner and director of Square One Gallery and Lombardi Gallery. In 1994 he abandoned neo-geo abstract painting, and embarked upon a fresh body of work. The vision for this novel enterprise arrived in an apparent "eureka!" moment—doodling on a napkin while talking on the phone. "Knowing his mind, I'm sure he looked at that napkin and saw possibilities for the next twenty years of work," says his close friend, painter Greg Stone. "He thought in branching structures. He would have seen the whole instantly." According to Deven Golden, whose gallery represented Lombardi from 1998 until its closure in 2000, Lombardi gravitated toward the new idea because "the diagrams were more visually interesting than his paintings. And, perhaps just as importantly, they pulled together everything Mark was interested in—drawing, social/commercial interactions and their hierarchies, and politics—into a single pursuit."³

Showing this new material, Lombardi began to gain recognition in Houston, where he was already well known after two decades of administrative involvement in the

³ As Golden, tells it, Lombardi made the first drawing while "talking to a friend of his, a lawyer, in California. Mark was telling him about a couple of banks that had closed in Texas, and the lawyer said, 'Yeah, and because of that, these Savings and Loans closed in California.' Mark said, 'I don't understand.' And his friend proceeded to tell him how a series of byzantine corporate connections tied the various financial institutions together. It was very convoluted, and so Mark made some notes—he obviously was predisposed to thinking about this sort of thing. As Mark told it to me, it was kind of like how some artists, for instance, do the *New York Times* crossword puzzle in their studios to help them clear their minds. Anyway, every couple of days, after going over his notes and diagrams, he would call his friend back in California and ask him more questions, which would lead him to make more diagrams. Then, one day, after what I understood to be a couple of months of working on these diagrams to 'relax,' Mark had his 'aha!' moment."

arts. Solo shows were installed at the Lawndale Art and Performance Center (where he was chosen by guest curator Paul Schimmel, of LA MoCA) and at Robert McClain & Co. At the latter space, in September 1996, Lombardi met Williamsburg-based artist Fred Tomaselli, who told him about Joe Amrhein and Pierogi Gallery.

Mark knew my work and we struck up a conversation. He said he was thinking about moving to New York—I gave him my number and told him to look me up. I thought he was a riot and that his work was really good....He was funny and manic with a racing mind that was always trying to "connect the dots." He seemed to be a perpetual student of interdisciplinary information—which is so much more interesting than people who talk about art all the time....Mark needed a good honest dealer who would be "into" his work for the right reasons. After we discussed what it was that he wanted, we both thought that Joe would be the perfect guy.

Lombardi moved to Williamsburg in 1997. A series of small but successful group shows ensued, beginning with "Selections: Winter 1997" at the Drawing Center. Lombardi also established contact with Amrhein, though no specific planning on his part to court Pierogi Gallery was obvious to Amrhein when they met.

I had walk-ins who would stop by the gallery to show me their work, and Mark was one of them. He came in basically off the street, and we went over his bio quickly—he had work at the Drawing Center at the time. He had slides with him, which were difficult to read, but when I talk to artists I look for enthusiasm and confidence, and he had that—he was very compelling about the corporate vernacular that he was using. So later he brought in some drawings, and I was amazed by them. It took a few meetings, but I took a piece and hung it in the office, and then I did a studio visit, and we decided to do a show.

"Silent Partners" opened at Pierogi in December, 1998, followed by the group exhibition "Why Can't We All Just Get Along?" at Deven Golden Fine Art, and an invitation to join Golden's roster. Lombardi seemed to be in his element, relishing the social math of the gallery scene. "An art lifer, I thought," remembers artist Deborah Ripley. "He was a booster," recalls Roebling Hall gallerist Christian Viveros-Fauné.

He liked the shows we were putting on, and he would come around and look and talk. He was generous. Not shy about stuff he liked....He was great at explaining his own work. He had been a gallerist, and all his reflexes would come out.

Mickey Cartin, who, like Amrhein, was introduced to Lombardi by Fred Tomaselli, agrees:

I was immediately struck by Mark's enthusiasm and authenticity. Here was a guy who knew his way around the art world. He knew what it took to make a career, the right people to hang around with, how to draw attention to himself, which buttons to push, but these were not the things that mattered to him. He was more interested in fact-finding and record-keeping, in how to convey information and document the underground business world. His project was unique, and his dedication to it astounded me.

Such encomiums to an artist's lack of ego while acknowledging his skill in knowing "which buttons to push" could sound dubious, but part of the impression Lombardi

made upon his new community seems to have arisen precisely from this combination of practiced sociability and genuine ebullience. "I would ask for advice on basic art 'business' questions, and he was very generous," remembers artist Beth Campbell. "Mark was a very generous person, very open and honest," echoes gallerist Becky Kerlin, who showed Lombardi's work at Gallery Joe in Philadelphia. Golden tells the story of his first meeting with Lombardi, not as an artist on the make, but as an art mover unpacking someone else's work in Golden's space. The dealer remembers particularly that the art handler paused to look at and comment thoughtfully upon the current show.

That clarified his motivations for me.... Mark never asked me to come by his studio. That is, he did not "hit" on me when he was delivering artwork to my gallery. My seeing his work at Pierogi was just happenstance—stopping by to see what show Joe had up and seeing Mark's work hanging in Joe's office.

Favorable reviews appeared by Roberta Smith in *The New York Times*, Raphael Rubinstein in *Art in America*, and Boris Moshkovits in *Flash Art*; synergy began to build through word-of-mouth introductions and coincidental sightings of the work. P.S. 1 senior curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, for example, saw a piece in the 1999 group show "Monumental Drawings" at Exit Art. The next year she brought Lombardi into "Greater New York."

"It seemed like he was having a great time of it—a dream come true," says Tomaselli. "He had a lot of opportunities opening up that he seemed very excited about....He felt that he would be in the Biennials soon, and of course he would have been," recalls Hilary Ann Maslon, Lombardi's girlfriend in the last year of his life. Christian Viveros-Fauné concurs:

The temperature was going up...he was making a living doing the drawings. That might have come as a shock to him. The standard story is that if you're a forty-something artist and you haven't made it by then, you're not going to make it. It might have thrown him for a loop. [But] he was minutes away from being in every big show around.

On March 22nd, 2000, less than a month after the triumphal opening at P.S. 1, Mark Lombardi hung himself in his apartment.

"Mark was about a year away from really connecting with museum collections, so I'm just following up for him on what he would have been able to do if he were around," says Joe Amrhein. In practice, this means honoring an arrangement Lombardi made with Amrhein in the midst of the hubbub surrounding "Greater New York."

He was inundated, and he called me and said, "I want you to take all the work." Curators and collectors, and even other artists were calling his studio; people were asking for this and that all the time, and he couldn't handle it. Deven had closed his gallery by that point, so it just seemed the most logical thing for me to bring all the work here, and have people come here to see it.

Amrhein estimates that Lombardi gave him eighty drawings. Roebling Hall, where Lombardi had participated in a group show called "World Trade" in 2000, also had a few pieces, as did Kerlin's Gallery Joe. Amrhein explains, "Mark was only making this work for about a six-year period, so there isn't tons left. Maybe ten of the large, finished drawings." These highly refined examples—with prices currently ranging from

ten to twenty thousand dollars—are accompanied by smaller drawings in various states, from finished pieces to rough notebook studies. Stylistically the material ranges from horizontally-oriented works like *George W. Bush, Harken Energy and Jackson Stephens* to the tighter, more circular structures that developed out of the time-line format. Pierogi also has the prototype for a new display format Lombardi was considering, a drawing transferred onto plexiglass and mounted in a light-box. Undergirding these primary visual documents are Lombardi's library of reference books and voluminous files of index cards, on which he cross-referenced his exhaustive reading and Internet research by noting particulars about each figure in a given series.

Lombardi referred to these pieces as "narrative structures," a phrase that emphasizes not only the dramatic chronologies embodied within the drawings, but the sequential or accreting process by which they were constructed. Such emphasis on process poses interesting questions for those now interested in exhibiting the work, viz., how to contextualize the finished images with the preparatory sketches and research material. Though Lombardi was ambivalent about the relationship of this back-matter to the polished works on paper, the well-thumbed books and thousands of index cards eloquently illustrate the obsessive, almost performative nature of his endeavor. Not surprisingly, "obsessive" is the adjective his friends most often choose—along with "generous"—to describe the man and his art. In combination, the two terms epitomize the figure of the artist as compulsive articulator, a solitary node tying collective experience together. The drawings' overt narrative of swashbuckling venality thus rests upon a metanarrative about the dedicated monomaniac who gathers up the threads and recounts the story.

Both Golden and Cartin stress the step-by-step inquiry through which each piece evolved. As Golden tells it:

You will often notice that his drawings have indications of which version they are. Version 1 would never be marked as such—this would be the first lay-out sketch, where Mark would try to get a handle on which information would be included, and in what relationship. Version 2 would lay out the various players, and assign them proportional space—this would often change between versions 2 and 3. Version 3 would be an "all but finished" drawing, about medium sized, that had all the players in their orbits. Version 4 would be the final version, and would include the addition of red pencil describing "final results" for characters and corporations, i.e. "Gerald Bull found murdered in hotel room."...Mark would supply a written essay or index for the exhibition that gave a one or two paragraph description of each conspiracy.

Cartin outlines a similar procedure:

The rules for the drawings seemed pretty clear. Maybe like this: Begin by learning about an immense criminal conspiracy. Then, 1) Get all the facts that exist. 2) Create a time-line or some spatial relationship in which to order them. 3) Create a uniform representational system, e.g. red lines for one type of event, broken lines for another, etc. 4) Test the schematic plan on smaller sheets; no need for clear order or neatness on these test studies. 5) Create a composition that will make visual sense. 6) If another fact is uncovered, create an updated version of the drawing. In this way, Mark developed a system...a set of rules that governed the outcome and a commitment not to deviate from them, [with]...an insistence on a product that finished with a visual coherence, beauty if you will.

To illustrate this layered approach for collectors, Amrhein has made it a policy to assemble packets of working drawings to accompany large, finished pieces when they are sold—recent sales to the Whitney, the Altoids Curiously Strong Collection, and the Jewish Museum follow this pattern. Conservation of the drawings' inherent interrelationships is important, Amrhein feels, because

it reveals the process; the sketches inform each other. The lineage should be set up that way because in a sense they're all one piece, and when the drawings are shown, it's nice to have the contextualizing group.

Amrhein has not included cards in the packets of drawings accompanying large-scale acquisitions. "I don't break up the index cards. The files are one complete sort of research device, an object in and of itself. I would not consider it a piece of art work, but it is an amazing document." In the same vein, he has held back from sale a set of rough images that he hopes to preserve as a microcosm of Lombardi's graphic vocabulary.

There's a group of about thirty early sketches that are unbelievable—a museum should take all of them, because to have them as a body of work in and of itself would be amazing, to have them in one place, where everyone could see them. They're so intuitive and loose that they belong together—there are some rogue pieces among the working sketches that stand alone, but this body of work should be kept intact.

Influencing not only the contours of a given installation but the relative value of process versus product within the larger body of work, the role assigned to supporting materials in the future will clearly have a strong impact on the critical appraisal of Lombardi's oeuvre. Most specifically, perhaps, the decision to include the research materials in formal presentations of the work emphasizes what most observers agree to call the neo-Conceptual basis of Lombardi's idea, raising corollary questions about historical precedents for the project or lineages in which it might be situated.

These questions were equally valid, of course, in his lifetime. Golden remembers that "possible ways to present the work were a constant discussion," and exhibitions personally installed by the artist solved the problem by various means. No secondary materials were included in the Pierogi show or at Roebing Hall. "I told him, 'It would be really great to see your process,' Amrhein recalls. "He was on the fence about it. I was fascinated by the cards, but he didn't want to reveal that; he thought it was a side element, a private code." Similar conversations seem to have taken place each time Lombardi hung a show. "Vicious Circles: Drawings" at Deven Golden Fine Art in 1999 included "some very preliminary sketches...to give people an idea of how the drawings grew." Finally, when Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev installed *BCCI-ICIC-FAB...* with Lombardi at P.S. 1, they chose to present a selection of sketches, books, and index cards. Christov-Bakargiev remembers that the artist was excited by the new presentation, and the "Greater New York" experience provides a model for ways in which the installation of a retrospective might be handled. As plans develop for the ICI show, Amrhein's discussions with curator Robert Hobbs have raised the possibility of presenting a vitrine with books and index cards. They might also collect, for the first time in an exhibition context, all seven successive versions of a particular drawing titled *World Finance Corporation of Miami, Florida c. 1970 - 79* (this one chosen simply because all seven versions remain accessible to Pierogi). Installing such a series would allow viewers to walk through the structural evolution of a specific narrative, and thus discover for themselves how Lombardi's clean and carefully calibrated final

forms modulate the diagrammatic content. In general, those considering the impact of a large-scale solo show seem to agree that the inclusion of developmental drawings and objects is necessary, as long as the fluctuant yet vivid line between preliminary and perfected versions of the drawings is maintained.

"His library fascinated me, and I saw his card-file as an object of intrigue in itself, like a drawing folded up and tucked back into its womb," muses Mickey Cartin.

[But] the composition was almost as important as the fact-filled story he was telling. If not, the work might have just ended in the form of the index card files. Those files, or each individual, atomic fact upon each individual card, could be seen as the object of art in itself, in a Duchampian sense...If Mark had stopped with the cards, then I would be much more inclined to think of him as a Conceptual artist.

For Viveros-Fauné,

His reputation will hang on the project itself. It's centered on the big, finished drawings, obviously. But thinking back through the work to the process is important. The number of index cards—what is it, 10,000?—some extreme number. I would install those, and the books. When he showed at Roebing Hall, Mark didn't want to. He felt the work spoke for itself, and obviously he was right. But it's brilliant to consider that level of involvement, that level of dedication. You get the minute attention to detail, the precision, the psychotic character of his interest.

For Golden,

As interesting as his index cards, notes, and library were, they were not actually his art, any more than any other artist's sketchbooks and notes are art. That is not to deny their immense interest, and I certainly agreed with showing the index cards at P.S. 1....But I think that Mark and I generally felt, as far as showing in a gallery situation, that the focus should be on his art. That is why for his solo show at my gallery we highlighted the drawing even over the content—which, after all, had a way of speaking for itself.

The "speaking for itself" that both Viveros-Fauné and Golden "hear" in the project underlines Lombardi's interest in creating traditional (i.e. non-Conceptual) objects of beauty, available for aesthetic contemplation without theoretical buttressing.⁴ Such "speaking" is part of the project's narrativity, its interest in non-difficult or transparent communication. Lombardi's webs of conspiracy may lead the mind to boggle, but they are not hard to read and do not require extensive art-historical background to understand. As Viveros-Fauné puts it, "His work is a kind of high-end tabloid, and that's part of its punch." Here, again, Lombardi doubles back upon Conceptual examples. His patterns conceptualize narration, but also depart from the visually restricted, anti-pictorial grammar of high Conceptualism. What Viveros-Fauné calls "Pop Conceptualism" encourages the viewer to consider the implications of reading current-events as art, even as its geometric elegance appeals directly the eye. Presenting nothing but data and pattern, Lombardi reminds us that data *is* pattern; his use of media (paper and pencil; books and magazines) is so apparently simple that simplicity

⁴ Though, as Golden remarks, Lombardi did write about his subjects, and offered these writings in the gallery, along with legends or visual keys explaining the drawings' systems of notation.

dissolves into itself, problematizing the very concept of "mediation." Simultaneously revoking and reinscribing sensuality, 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. Similarly, the index cards (again handwritten, on paper) accentuate the origin of the object in disembodied idea, but also stain that imagined purity with the sweat of hands-on study.

"It's a human being mapping human activity, and it's beautiful, even if the facts are hideous. People respond to that," says Greg Stone.

Seeing the work they feel connected to it. They realize, "This is part of the world; this is not divorced from normal, worldly experience." Mark's drawings talk to everyone, just as he would talk to or hang out with anyone.

Significantly, these "real-world" responses often involve law enforcement personnel, corporate-style institutions, and journalists—the very professionals whose information vocabularies Lombardi "pillaged." Stone tells, for example, about the time he brought a friend who wrote for the *Wall Street Journal* to see *George W. Bush, Harken Energy and Jackson Stephens*.

He was riveted—he knew every character. He stood there poring over it for forty minutes murmuring "Oh, my God..." Then he went back to his office and looked it up—the *Journal* had reported on the link between Bush and bin Laden, and Mark probably got his information from that article. But my friend said he hadn't fully understood the implications until he saw it all laid out that way.

Painter David Brody invited his cousin, a private investigator, to see the Pierogi show. "He was fascinated because, as he told me, 'This is exactly the kind of thing I do when I'm on a case.'" Joe Amrhein, meanwhile, recounts the story of an unnamed corporate art collection whose enthusiasm waned suddenly:

They were very excited about acquiring the work until their legal department had a look at it. Then they had to back off, because some of the names that appeared in the piece were sitting on their board of directors.

Most spectacularly, Whitney curator Lawrence Rinder, who brought *BCCI-ICIC-FAB...* into the Museum, reports that "one curious event involving this piece occurred recently when, following the September 11th attacks, the FBI requested permission to examine it." Rinder does not discuss the agents' findings. But the picture of federal authorities trooping through the Whitney to read Lombardi's rendering of history blurs the always wobbly art/life line into an infinite regression, a situation Lombardi would undoubtedly have appreciated.

In this hall of mirrors it is important to bear in mind, however, Lombardi's insistence that his work was always aesthetic, never investigative. "I asked Mark," Stone remembers, "'How would you feel if some shady character bought your work just to hide it from the public and shield himself from nasty revelations?' 'I could only hope I'm that important,'" Lombardi replied. Maslon recalls,

I asked him a couple of times if he ever felt that he might be putting his life on the line with his work. He had a nonchalant attitude about that. He considered it a possibility, but because all the information he was tying together had been published—nothing was conjured or guessed—he

waived his doubts. He was very critical of people who used speculative information to create conspiracy theories.

For Cartin, Lombardi was compelling, both as a friend and as an artist, precisely because of this blur, which in his view extended from the social phenomena of banking and government to the interior structures of personal psychology.

I take an interest in people who are so obsessed with their life's work that they cannot help themselves, or edit their thoughts, or at times even make sense, so excited do they become when another human being expresses an interest in their ideas. This passion and extreme inner focus is what got me so interested in Mark. I guess you could say that all artists' work, if it is authentic, is an expression of their inner selves, their emotions, ideas, intellect. Maybe Mark was trying to make sense out of his own emotional disorganization, as he was organizing and working out a system for exhibiting the facts he had assembled.

What went wrong for Mark Lombardi? "People were lining up to meet him. His whole life was about to change," says Greg Stone. "He had what every artist is looking for; it was all happening." Most acquaintances agree that, as Stone asserts, "He was ambitious. Mark wanted to be a famous artist. No doubt about it." Fewer saw the tension that the ostensible gratification of this ambition seemed to cause. "Joe said to me a couple of times, 'I think there's really something wrong with Mark,'" remembers Amrhein's partner, Susan Swenson. "But he always seemed so together." "He got caught," Stone says.

He was fascinated by the evil of the people he was drawing, and he had bargained with the devil, in a way. He was having relationship problems; he was getting paranoid and sleep-deprived. We were supposed to have dinner, and we could never schedule it. "We've got to do this," I said, and Mark said, "Yeah, we better, because time is running out." Three weeks later he was dead. He was numbering his own days.

"Mark was obviously very obsessive," says Maslon.

About his work, his career, our relationship. I was involved with him for a year, so I was just getting to know him and really found out a lot more about him after his death. So, with many limitations, I can tell you what I observed. Mark had a lot of dichotomies. Maybe one of them was that he craved a very orderly, safe, and certain environment, but certainly flirted with danger in his work. He completely cut himself off from the outside world when he worked, and he worked intensively for long hours, often not going out or talking to people for two or three days....He would also fall into deep depressions, but he didn't show them to me—at least not in any obvious way. He would tell me, though, that he had been depressed.

Like Amrhein, Christian Viveros-Fauné now wonders if he should have heard a warning in Lombardi's request that his gallerists take work out of his studio. "It sounded reasonable at the time. Now it seems like he might have been prepping himself for something. But a lot of this is just Monday-morning quarterbacking." Such speculation is, of course, inevitable in community where there has been a shocking loss. "There has been a lot of collective soul-searching," Viveros-Fauné continues.

We've all talked it through a lot. Everyone seems to feel that Mark was always slightly on edge—stable, but slightly unstable, you know? He carried it off with such nonchalance. We were all friends with him. We all liked him. We all respected him. But none of us were close to him. Mark was a great bullshitter. I didn't know much about his past. He'd talk about Texas, about the gallery, he'd talk your ear off, but not about personal stuff. He talked a blue streak, put everything on the table, but he wasn't talking about himself.

Both Maslon and Swenson quote one of Lombardi's sisters who told them, in Maslon's words, "that she felt, when he moved to New York, that it was the beginning of the end for him. I think she sensed that Mark liked to have a safe, controlled environment, and New York City is the antithesis of that." Several friends refer cautiously to bouts of excessive drinking and other addictive habits, and close observers admit that in spite of his success, as Golden puts it, "there's no doubt that Mark was going through a rough patch." His truck had been totaled while parked on the street; he talked of leaving New York for Australia. Maslon states frankly that when she returned from a trip to Brazil immediately after the "Greater New York" opening, she found that "he was acting very strange—very manic, very erratic. It looked like he hadn't slept in a week."

Those who noticed this apparent sleep-deprivation and knew about its cause return to the circumstances as a possible catalyst for Lombardi's breakdown. Some ten days before the "Greater New York" opening, a sprinkler system in his live/work space malfunctioned. Rusty water destroyed a number of drawings, including the version of *BCCI-ICIC-FAB...* that Christov-Bakargiev had already selected for P.S. 1. "Mark's studio and apartment was, literally, a dark hole," as Golden describes it, and at the time of the sprinkler accident, both the culminating expression of his current body of and a mock-up for a new formal experiment were packed into this inner sanctum.

Maybe the whole space was 300 square feet, and I think he had one window. It was permeated with the smell of cigarette smoke. There were drawings piled under the bed, and he would spread them out on the kitchen table for me to look at. On one wall he had the very large backlit plexiglass piece, more a prototype than anything else, and on his longest wall he had the large BCCI drawing. He considered it his Ur-piece because 80% of the conspirators of his later works showed up somewhere in the BCCI scandal.

"Mark knew 'Greater New York' would be huge for him, and he stayed up for days in a row redoing the BCCI drawing. I don't think he ever recovered," Greg Stone declares. Still, Stone acknowledges that Lombardi was pleased with the remade piece. Amrhein agrees on both counts.

I think the manic period of remaking the drawing was a big element in his psychological deterioration. Of course there were other factors. But I don't know if he ever recovered from that week. The second version turned out to be a beautiful drawing, though, and he was happy with it.

"A flood doesn't add up to hanging yourself from the rafters," Viveros-Fauné points out, and for Golden, "The destruction of the BCCI drawing was bad, but I wouldn't call it catastrophic. No doubt, it bummed him out. Still, his new one was even better, and I know that Mark thought so as well." Lombardi did not stress the importance of the incident to Maslon, and neither Fred Tomaselli, an intimate friend with whom he often discussed studio practice, nor Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, who worked closely with him installing at P.S. 1, knew about it until after his death.

"He told me he had been taking sleeping pills," Maslon recalls.

So when he disappeared, so to speak, i.e. he wasn't answering his phone or returning calls—which made his mother very concerned, as he used to talk to her at least every other day—and he hadn't shown up at a number of events I knew he was really excited about, I thought maybe he had OD'd.

Maslon called the police. Her profile of Lombardi's mental state and habits were sufficient to convince them to force the door of his apartment; they found his body, alongside a champagne bottle that he had opened, apparently drunk from, and suspended from the ceiling.

Invariably, when people who know the substance of his work hear of his death, they wonder if Mark Lombardi could have been murdered. His own story seems to eerily overlap the red-pencilled codas in his drawings, "...found dead in his hotel room..." "...apparently assassinated..." Tempting as such conspiracy theories are, however, no evidence argues for them. "I asked the detective involved in the case if he thought Mark might have been killed," Maslon explains.

He didn't think so. There were no signs of forced entry and the apartment was pretty securely locked. Also he said that Mark was a classic case, i.e. above-average intelligence, on the verge of success, and he had never spoken about or threatened suicide.

Susan Swenson recounts similar conversations with the police regarding forensic and psychological indicators. Along with Hilary Ann Maslon, Swenson and Amrhein were the first friends to arrive at Lombardi's apartment, and in the days following his death, they arranged with his family for the collection and storage of all the artwork and research matter that remained there. The index cards, testament to thousands of hours of Lombardi's time, were taken back to Syracuse by his parents; their agreement with Pierogi offers to make the files available as specific curatorial or research needs arise. Meanwhile, Amrhein and Swenson have stored Lombardi's library and other ephemera recovered from the studio, and Swenson has attempted to construct a complete curriculum vitae and catalogue raisonné.

We photographed everything, all the books and his working set-up, so that his arrangement could be reconstructed if necessary. We pulled drawings out from under the bed, looked at every bit of paper, because we weren't sure what might be important. I even went through his trash and pulled out an old copy of his resume, when I was trying to put together information for his obituary.

Nevertheless, Amrhein acknowledges that he does not have a complete catalogue of Lombardi's output.

He was selling work out of his studio, and other galleries had work; it's hard to make a complete list. I know there was work he sold and never had photographed. I have, or can account for, most of what he showed me, but I remember being in his studio and him pointing to a drawing and telling me, "That's the first one of these I ever did. I better keep that one." He also had some sketchy things based on new ideas he was working on, which he kept, and I haven't seen them since. They weren't in the apartment when we got there, and his parents don't have them.

The sketches Lombardi showed Amrhein laid out plans for a new series, distinct from the other unrealized idea to display the network-style drawings in light-boxes.

Tantalizingly, these works may have suggested a coming-together of the "narrative structures" work with the abstract painting Lombardi had pursued for years in Texas. Amrhein recalls,

He told me before he died that he'd come to the end of the drawings. He was going to move on to something else. Still information-based, using graphs to show range of wealth or knowledge, using a kind of neo-geo format. There were sketches, but no finished work. I don't know if this was a cryptic comment about death, him telling me "This body of work is over." But he was planning a new idea, and those drawings are gone. They weren't in the apartment. It's a mystery.

If an artist's reputation survives because he or she has been inserted into a canon (if not *the* canon), then postulating art-historical precedents for Mark Lombardi's work becomes a primary task facing his supporters. It is a testament to the subtlety and flexibility of his drawings that the question "Whom do you see as Lombardi's forerunners or key contemporaries?" elicits such a wildly variegated field of comparisons. Plotting the formal and theoretical relationships among the assorted names mentioned would create a diagram of influence and reflection not unlike the images themselves. And, like his images, the matrix of relationship in which his colleagues place him itself describes a portrait of the larger community.

Here again the lineaments of Conceptualism arise repeatedly, only to be unraveled or complicated almost past recognition. Robert Hobbs, for example, gives equal weight to the term and to its ostensible opposite, the lyric. Lombardi's images "hit me very hard," Hobbs says.

I felt that at long last here was an artist who was focusing on our current situation. He impressed me because he touched on so many variables, particularly neo-Conceptualism and the global political scene. He was creating a new form of history painting that provided information about our world at the same time as he was developing a wonderfully lyric and highly original art.

Curator Richard Klein, who included Lombardi in his thematic exhibition "Art at the Edge of the Law" at the Aldrich Museum in Connecticut this year, likewise identifies a mix of neo- or post-Conceptualism with a contradictory or leavening ingredient. In Klein's view, the crucial alloy appears as a populist or entertainment-oriented code of ethics.

It is interesting that Lombardi developed such a tight, formalist way of picturing things that are ultimately moral. If heaven and hell exist, Lombardi's drawings are like power-point representations that St. Peter might create to determine accountability. Of course the work relates to Conceptual precedents, but it also really reminds me of crime writers like Robert Ludlum or John le Carré—complex plots with innumerable characters that are hard to keep track of.

Novelistic coherence and sprawling scope also arise in Deven Golden's mind, through comparisons to social satirists like Mark Twain and Charles Dickens. Garrulous, mimetic, and moralizing as these writers may be, in the context of Lombardi's interests they do not fall as far from Conceptual models as one might think. For, as Fred Tomaselli points out, the Conceptual stereotype of dry intellectualism is belied

by a covert investment in the very qualities Klein highlights. After all, the whodunit and the document of art-as-idea share a questing after ultimate truths, first causes.

Mark was part of a group of artists that was reclaiming Conceptualism from the academy that had hijacked it in the mid-eighties. His work was warm, messy, wacky, funny, subjective, but also serious and smart. It wasn't necessary to totally understand or agree with the complex power relationships depicted. Being overwhelmed by the information seemed to be part of its appeal, and as his work progressed, he gave equal importance to both form and content. I've always thought that the sensibilities of "outsider artists" and Conceptualists were more similar than the art establishment is willing to admit—at their best, they both manifest a compelling and visceral visualization of inner cosmology. Mark and I were both interested in this and we talked about it often.

Not surprisingly, when asked what kinds of images Lombardi had collected in his studio, Hilary Ann Maslon refers to "a book on alchemy, full of graphs and charts, the aesthetics of ancient maps, etc." The rhizomatic, fantastical, fractal-architectural forms suggested by such sources posit a world where order and disorder fuse and cross-pollinate—from this perspective, one could argue for a zeitgeist shared by many of Lombardi's Brooklyn peers. Fred Tomaselli, Greg Stone, David Brody, and Beth Campbell (among others) might all be said to play with elaborate spatial constructs that justify themselves in abstract terms, but also read as maps of social information and personal activity. These are not the heroic meditations of Ab Ex, but a compulsive, pastiche-oriented, cartoon-inflected inscription of overload. Tomaselli continues,

We were both interested in seductive visual strategies that contained the pathology of the "real" world. Mark's drawings reminded me somewhat of my own "Chemical-Celestial Portraits" of friends that I began in 1990, which were based on questionnaires that asked the "sitter" their birth-date and drug history. My resulting drawings resembled a night sky filled with pharmacological words. In both his drawings and my portraits, our "real" is personal and subjective, but appears to be based on empirical evidence.

This stylistic sub-set or cohort—like the artists ranged within Christian Viveros-Fauné's "Pop Conceptualist" rubric,⁵ or the so-called "chart art" of Campbell, Danica Phelps, or Janet Cohen—accept Conceptualism's challenge by interrogating the philosophical premises of art. But they also take obvious pleasure in surface and good-looks. "It's not eye-candy," as Viveros-Fauné says. "But at a certain level, it is."

From the Williamsburg nucleus, Lombardi's associative genealogy goes on, looping from hermetic-humorous visionaries like Alfred Jensen, Oyvind Fahlstrom, or Matthew Ritchie, to abstract diarists like Hanne Darboven and Roman Opalka, to practical intellectuals like Robert Smithson or Gordon Matta-Clark. Greg Stone, meanwhile, offers two names—Francisco de Goya, and Jackson Pollock—rarely connected in a single arc.

Think about it. Goya gives you topical, political commentary in the simplest graphic terms, demotic terms, with captions you don't have to

⁵ A loose concatenation in which Viveros-Fauné names Michael Bevillaqua, Lisa Youskavage, Inka Essenhigh, Roxy Paine, Bruce Pearson, etc.

read, but that transform the work if you do read them....[And] Pollock was also making webs. Pollock was mapping the internal, the psychological; Mark was doing the same thing with the existing economic structure. The world he rendered already existed and we were it. The same kind of layered, deliberate, but chance-determined structure that you would see in a Pollock, Mark was making in his webs of connections, and the effect is similarly revelatory. We didn't know what we were looking at when we read about it—it had to be articulated visually.

Circling back upon itself like the spheroid tracery of his later drawings, the hypothetical sociogram of Lombardi's art historical affinities might finally branch in two directions. On one hand, a statement by curator Susette Min (who included him in "Errant Gestures: Visual and Verbal Correspondences" at Apex Art in 2000) summarizes the multifaceted appeal of his enterprise.

I could see his direct hand as well as his process. More importantly, it was his obsession (via the meticulous lines, the copious notes, etc.) that draws you in and forces you to look at histories repressed or forgotten. I liked the fact that this kind of systemic charting, usually seen within the circles of computer system engineers, designers, urban planners, was pushed forward in an art context. He makes these familiar objects of design strange....Even though his charts focus narratively on the globalization of capital, he sustains a modernist fascination with formal structures...he seems to want to visually possess a concept of political history/landscape in its entirety....His works are interesting examples of debates on allegory...a dialectic of displaced connections that consider the relation of parts to fractured wholes.

On the other hand, Greg Stone wipes the slate clean, returning the multiple chains of association to their origin in Lombardi's mind.

The genesis of this body of work was not directly influenced by anyone. Mark's knowledge of what had gone before assured him that the work would find a place in the art world, that it would be receivable—I think he probably understood this from the scribble on the napkin forward.

Distilled from a welter of dis- and misinformation and refined from dense archives of aesthetic experiment, Lombardi's "narrative structures" demonstrate a Cheshire understanding of the reciprocity between factual solidity and mutable appearance. In a media culture where few sources report the fine print on collusion between financial markets, political operatives, and corporate entities, and few commentators acknowledge how fluidly form and content, being and seeming blend, his work both emphasizes and redresses the lack of coherent analysis from journalistic and governmental experts. But perhaps more importantly, it obeys Joseph Kosuth's assertion that "art...fulfills what another age might have called 'man's spiritual needs.'"ⁱ Like John Baldessari, Lombardi culls from the annals of pop culture to make life's mediatized fragments speak back to themselves as art; on a profound level, Lombardi's drawings, as Baldessari says, "want to re-enchant and re-mythologize."ⁱⁱ A comparison with Hans Haacke's "Untitled Statement" (1966) becomes suggestive:

...make something, which experiences, reacts to its environment, changes, is nonstable...

...make something indeterminate, which always looks different, the shape of which cannot be predicted precisely...

...make something, which cannot 'perform' without the assistance of its environment...

...make something, which reacts to light and temperature changes, is subject to air currents and depends, in its functioning, on the forces of gravity...

...make something, which the 'spectator' handles, with which he [*sic*] plays and thus animates it...

...make something, which lives in time and makes the 'spectator' experience time...

...articulate something natural...ⁱⁱⁱ

For the natural, phenomenological, and sensory terms here, read social phenomena in Lombardi's realm: the "environment" is geopolitical; "indeterminacy" is informational; "light and temperature" "air currents" and "the forces of gravity" are expressed as market currents, degrees of risk, secrecy, and the force of law—or lack thereof. The spectator is asked to "play with" and "experience" time as packaged by communication channels, to articulate the perhaps-natural, perhaps-entirely-manipulated "somethings" of greed, coercion, and media attention—or its deficit. As Haacke puts it, "the viewer now becomes a witness. A system is not imagined; it is real."^{iv}

"Real," but redolent of fantasy and cerebration, Lombardi's images have the delicacy of snowflakes; they are a "plan that implies infinity,"^v as Sol Lewitt says. It could be argued that nothing is more rational than a reporter's step-by-step untangling of money-trails. But Lombardi is a visionary as much as a reporter, and his work is "mystic rather than rationalist" in that it seeks to comprehend incomprehensible scope, to graph in condensed form the power that quite literally rules the world. His drawings satisfy because they address a human need for coherent order drawn from chaos. Such a need, however, is bound to be frustrated. Instead of blueprinting perfection, the works' aura of mastery arises in the context of a sprawling dystopia. Their fragile wholism is poisoned by the sinister and cynical events that they describe—acid rain erodes the snowflake; the pattern is upset; inquiry must be renewed. As stories about reality, Lombardi's drawings offer a kind of wish-fulfillment for the confused but conscientious citizen—"Can you show me how this works?" In a way, he can. But on a deeper level, of course, it is not that such concerns about democracy and disclosure, pleasure and design, are ever answered. Rather, Lombardi inscribes a surface on which public happenings and their corollary thought-structures can be indexed. His drawings delimit a field in which aesthetic, geopolitical, and epistemological concerns are not mutually exclusive, where their self-mirroring identities are tabulated and given two-dimensional form. Or, to reverse the equation, in these drawings, the free play of geometric mark-making is imbued with forceful narrative significance, without becoming any less abstract, any less free.

Frances Richard writes poetry and criticism, and is non-fiction editor of the literary journal Fence and a member of the editorial group at Cabinet Magazine. She teaches at Barnard.

Notes & Sources

Interviews cited in this article took place in person and/or by email between May and November, 2001.

Many thanks to those interviewed, and to others who have contributed conversation and observations, including:

Joe Amrhein, David Brody, Beth Campbell, Mickey Cartin, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Alan Gilbert, Deven Golden, Kirsten Hively, Robert Hobbs, Yun-Fei Ji, Becky Kertin, Richard Klein, Hilary Ann Maslon, Susette Min, Sina Najafi, Kristin Prevallet, Larry Rinder, Deb Singer, Greg Stone, Susan Swenson, Fred Tomaselli, & Christian Viveros-Fauné

For general information, images, and memorial reminiscences about Mark Lombardi, see www.pierogi2000.com

For information regarding James R. Bath and his connections with George W. Bush, George H.W. Bush, Sheik Salim bin Laden, and Osama bin Laden, see (among many others):

www.pir.org/cgi-bin/nbonlin6.cgi?_BATH_JAMES_R
www.onlinejournal.com/Attack_on_America/Hatfiel-R-091901/hatfield
www.onlinejournal.com/Archive/Bush/SoftsSkull020700
www.groups.yahoo.com/group/my pagan/message/858
www.groups.hayoo.com/group/almomani/message/450
www.sfweekly.com/issues/2001-09-19/mecklin.html
www.conspiracyplanet.com/channel.cfm?channelid=39&contentid=269
www.orst.edu/dept/antrhopology/crisis_ruppertm.html
www.globalresearch.ca/articles/CHO109C.html

On Jackson Stephens, see www.freerepublic.com/forum/a37d95a0809ce.html

Endnotes

ⁱ Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy" (1969), in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, ed. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, (Berkeley, CA: UC Press, 1996), p. 847.

ⁱⁱ John Baldessari, "Recalling Ideas: Interview with Jeanne Siegel" (1988), in *ibid.*, p. 891.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hans Haacke, "Untitled Statement" (1966), in *ibid.*, p. 872.

^{iv} — "Untitled Statement" (1969), in *ibid.*, p. 879.

^v Sol Lewitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," (1967) in *ibid.*, p. 824.