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Interlock: A Tale of Art and Conspiracy

Patricia Goldstone · Wednesday, November 18th, 2015

The following is an excerpt from Patricia Goldstone's new book *Interlock: Art, Conspiracy, and the Shadow Worlds of Mark Lombardi.*

If, as Ezra Pound remarked, beauty lies in seeing all of the connections, it was Mark Lombardi's peculiar gift to find his artistic voice in what was intended to remain silent.

Perhaps there was something more at stake than the struggle of an artist to find a unique brand of expression. His voice was his connection to the world: Without it, he was to tell an interviewer some years later, "I felt like some kind of schizophrenic." That may be the common fate of most people without voices, but it is funny, and sad, and more than a little chilling, to hear Lombardi describe his big breakthrough as "all about me": "The painting and writing had little relationship to one another, and I felt that something was lacking from both. I kept thinking I needed something, some type of medium or vehicle of my own devising, that would unite the two, and now, with this schematic form, I had it… It was all about me, incorporated everything I wanted to say in a manner I felt totally confident about."

Mark realized that he could, as his friend Jim Hatchet put it, "build a better mousetrap." He would do this, literally, by redrafting the interlocks he had already drawn for Sissy Farenthold into aesthetically pleasing terms.

Although they can take several forms, such as a flow-of-funds chart, interlock searches most often follow a pyramid structure, comparing a lot of companies at the bottom where the base is wide until the true players emerge at the top. Interlock searches have a lot of practical drawbacks in litigation or even as a law enforcement tool. But, for an artist like Lombardi, who was noted for his enthusiasm for and skill at research, their very obscurity presented a unique opportunity to reclaim Conceptualism from the academy that had hijacked it in the mid-1980s.

Lombardi used horizontal timelines to create more fluid and hence more dynamic search structures and, ingeniously, gave them a consecutive narrative thrust by "buttoning" each drawing to the next with a middleman figure that made his entire body of work, as the artist put it, "one continual drawing in my head." The great tragedy of Mark Lombardi is that, now, not only is his head gone but his body of work has been broken up so that it is only with the greatest difficulty that the entire narrative can be reconstructed.

In his notes, there was an unpublished manifesto in which he defies the protocol of Conceptualism by making clear his intention as an artist to surpass the limitations of investigative journalism. to

"go deeper" and detail connections more fully than the capabilities of publishing allowed, to "seek to improve every aspect of the process" by "compiling and organizing info (Internet, government doc, legal docs)"; "interpreting product gathered" from banking, finance, and law; and "clearly conveying" the information by means of drawings which, anticipating Julian Assange by at least a decade, were "geared to a larger market,"

He would do this by cunningly recycling his BCCI book research, tracing the players backward to the 1960s and even earlier, and then forward to the present day. His first New York dealer, Deven Golden, said, "Everything Mark did is one large drawing—there's usually one figure that connects one drawing to the next. All of the drawings originally came out of two boxes of three-by-five-inch index cards, the two file boxes on BCCI. BCCI is the ur-drawing. Lots of players are in BCCI and then they branch out. The Bush family is in most of them, in World Finance Corp., Iran/Contra, Neil Bush/Silverado. The connective figures are usually the bagmen that allow people to connect up and money to change hands…" As we shall see, Golden's thesis is borne out by close examination of the artist's third version of his BCCI masterwork, which would be severely water-damaged in a mysterious studio flood. In it, Lombardi linked all of his drawings together on timelines which show how their subjects all fed the growth of BCCI.

The cards are for the most part a hybrid of standard historiography and filmic storyboarding, which Mark condensed into bullet points of essential information and then carefully alphabetized. Once he had assembled enough data on one of his subjects, he began sketching by placing the relevant index cards detailing specific connections next to the drawing-in-process, then organizing them into larger, aesthetically pleasing networks using a horizontal timeline and a drafting instrument known as a French arc for the sake of what he called "compositional unity."

As we have seen, Lombardi called his postmodern interlocks "narrative structures," suggesting they were visible narratives that can be read just the same as a newspaper story. Small circles in his drawings identified the main players in his scenarios—individuals, corporations, and governments—along the timeline, with arcing lines showing personal and professional links, the often-dramatic curvature suggesting what is known as the "arc" of a dramatic scene. Solid lines or arrows traced influence, dotted lines traced assets, and wavy lines traced frozen assets, like those of the shah of Iran.

By further use of the French arc to connect different sets of players, Lombardi extrapolated the boxy or pyramidal forms of conventional interlock charts into arcing bursts which could be taken for the trace-patterns of Fourth of July fireworks or the constellations of a summer night sky until the viewer realizes, particularly in the later, more elaborate drawings, that he or she is looking at a visualization of the distortions created by corruption in the global (literally, globe-shaped) economy.

In the French arc, Lombardi finally found a way to compensate for his lack of technical drawing skills, using it to transform his weak and squiggly sketches into dramatic supernovas that strongly evoke the explosion of the natural financial order by some uncontrollable force.

Lombardi once joked to his friend Andy Feehan that you could tell people the truth and few would really care. In that sense, his insistence that he was "only interested in creating traditional objects of beauty, available for contemplation without theoretical buttressing" is tongue-in-cheek, an invitation to a prankishly exciting but dangerous game of hide-and-seek.

Or, as a critic more breathlessly put it: “Their fragile wholeism is poisoned by the sinister and cynical events they describe. The art critic might have been speaking for John Kerry’s Senate investigating committee on BCCI. In 1994, just as the committee lamely wound down its probe of how the rogue bank manipulated the commodities and securities markets by acknowledging that it lacked the resources to complete it, Lombardi produced, at white-hot speed and as if on cue, a series of eight drawings that were a laundry list of the leads the Senate said it lacked the resources to explore. They include the relationships between BCCI and Banca Nazionale del Lavoro, the large state-owned Italian bank that collaborated with US and British intelligence in a plan to finance the Iraqi arms buildup of the 1980s (BNL). They also include links between the bank and late CIA Director William Casey (the first version of BCCI-ICIC-FAB); the extent of BCCI’s involvement with Pakistan’s nuclear program (Gerry Bull), and the dealings of its directors with fraudulent S&L chief Charles Keating on which Lombardi is shockingly explicit in view of future Fed chief Alan Greenspan’s endorsement of Keating (Lincoln verso: Silverado).

In 1996 Paul Schimmel, now chief curator at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, returned to Houston to jury a blind exhibition at the Lawndale Art and Performance Center. Among the anonymous entries was a small, oddly pretty diagrammatic drawing entitled Neil Bush, Silverado, MDC, Walters and Good that, as the Houston Chronicle put it, “mapped the complicated relationships of Neil Bush and the failed Silverado Savings and Loan in Colorado” in such a way that “Naturally, the piquancy of the subject contributes to the intricacy of the visual experience.”

“When I saw this obsessive-compulsive chart, filled with facts and paranoid fantasy—there was nothing like it,” Schimmel said. He awarded it a prize and was astonished to receive a phone call from his old frenemy, Mark Lombardi, who according to Schimmel said, without any intentional irony, “how much it meant to him, that I had picked him without knowing it was him. It was his first big recognition.”

Featured image: – Still images from a recorded interview filmed by Andy Mann, c. 1996 (Photo Credit: Mark Lombardi Estate)

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