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## The Sinister Beauty of Global Conspiracies

By ELEANOR HEARTNEY

**C**onspiracy theories are a grand old American tradition — the mother of them all being the speculation surrounding President John F. Kennedy's assassination. In the entertainment field, paranoia sells — from the novels of Tom Clancy to the "X-Files" to an endless series of Hollywood blockbusters. After pornography, among the most visited sites on the Internet are those devoted to conspiracies.

But what if it's all true? The conspiracy industry, with its mostly unproved if not unprovable charges of vast webs of shadowy operatives, secret political alliances and illicit money channels, has been given a boost by recent events. The Sept. 11 attacks provided a glimpse into a world of loosely bound international terrorist cells while inspiring a host of wild charges about the secret involvement of the United States and other governments. The Enron scandal uncovered a network of off-the-books partnerships, and, more recently, the director Michael Moore announced that his next documentary, "Fahrenheit 911," would delve into connections between the Bush and bin Laden families.

Mark Lombardi would not have been surprised, as can be seen in "Global Networks," an exhibition of his delicate filigree drawings that map his version of the flow of global capital. The show opens on Saturday at the Drawing Center in SoHo and remains on view through Dec. 17. In these works, solid and broken lines, circles and squiggles enmesh the names of organizations and individuals in webs of often surprising interconnections. One drawing charts the workings of the Vatican Bank, in the process linking its directors to the Mafia and the illegal transport of firearms.

Another purports to show how Iraq was armed in the 1980's through a secret scheme supposedly involving the top levels of the American and British governments and Italy's largest bank, the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro. Yet another follows the course by which the Bank of Commerce and Credit, International (B.C.C.I.) was accused of having become a funnel for a variety of illegal operations, including laundering drug money, supporting the Iran-Contra operation and backing Afghan Mujahedeen fighters.

Lombardi died, a suicide, at 48 in March 2000. (Conspiracy theories notwithstanding, those closest to him cite a series of personal reversals.) Since then, his work has attracted a growing body of admirers. One of them is Robert Hobbs, a professor of art history at Virginia Commonwealth University and the curator of this exhibition, which was organized under the auspices of Independent Curators Inc.

Mr. Hobbs first encountered Lombardi's work through a review in *Art in America* magazine in June 1999. Immediately, he was impressed by its sheer beauty, by the delicacy of the curving lines, delineating abstract force fields created by the global movement of money. He describes the works variously as webs, rhizomes and constellations. "It was a mental and visual seduction," he said.

Mr. Hobbs was also intrigued that the drawings showed only a sliver of a larger, inaccessible reality. "The drawings exist," he said, "between what is known — the people, the organizations, the court judgments — and the unknown, which is what is between them. In that sense, they are about the difference between the ideal and the real."

Mr. Hobbs never got a chance to meet the artist. But after hearing of Lombardi's death, he resolved to do something to bring the work to a larger audience. This turned out to be a job of monumental proportions. Along with a studio full of complex, meticulously delineated drawings, Lombardi left behind a file of 14,500 index cards with information on the subjects of his investigations, all drawn from publicly available sources. His tiny studio also contained hundreds

of books on art, politics, banking, history and espionage that had served as source material for his charts.

In order to prepare the catalog for this show, Mr. Hobbs had to tease out as best he could the factual underpinnings of each work. "In the end," he said, "I had to produce my own reading of them. I'm just suggesting one set of narratives, but there are probably many others."

What kind of artist devotes his life to ferreting out global conspiracies? Joe Amrhein, director of the Pierogi Gallery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, has represented Lombardi's work since 1998. He is quick to distance Lombardi from the Hollywood stereotype of the crazy conspiracy theorist. "He was not a paranoid," he said. "He was not a negative person." Nor, Mr. Amrhein said, did Lombardi have a political ax to grind. He noted wryly that "you probably need to have less understanding about the connections to be political."

Instead, Mr. Amrhein said, "he was just completely fascinated by connections, how one thing led to another, how the C.I.A. would back a coup in Australia, someone would be murdered in Turkey and things would happen in Indonesia."

LOMBARDI, who had a background in art history and worked at various times as a reference librarian, a curator and a researcher, initially conceived of his drawings as an adjunct to his unpublished writings on complex events like the Reagan drug war and the savings and loan crises. Eventually, he realized that the drawings were the real end product of his research. At the time of his death, he was beginning to gain some attention in the art world, receiving favorable notice for his solo shows and invitations to appear in important group shows.

Since his death, he has received other kinds of notice as well. After an article about Lombardi's work appeared in The Wall Street Journal, several people called the Pierogi Gallery to inquire about buying not the drawings but the collection of index cards. And in October 2001, an F.B.I. agent showed up at the Whitney Museum, where Lombardi's drawing "BCCI-ICIC-FAB, c. 1972-1991 (4th Version), 1996-2000," which is in the museum's permanent collection, was on view, to examine it for information on Al Qaeda's financial network.

Mr. Hobbs suggested that a renewed global awareness following Sept. 11 has intensified interest in Lombardi's work. "The real import of Mark's work may not be understood for years," he said. "He presented us with the image of a vast reservoir of money outside international boundaries and limits. He gave us a picture of something we haven't seen before."

Mr. Amrhein put it a little differently: "His work shows us that these things are always going on. People just forget about them from time to time."

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