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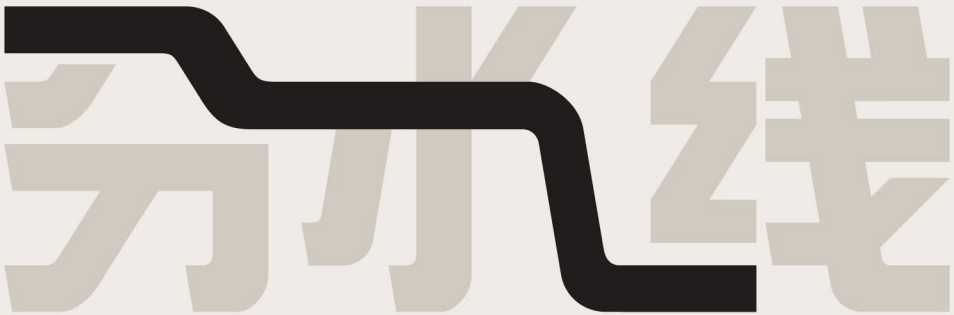
A NARRATIVE OF URBAN RECYCLE



ALESSANDRO ARMANDO
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curated by
VALERIA FEDERIGHI

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分水线
WATERSHEDS

Watersheds. Narrative of urban recycle / Alessandro Armando, Michele Bonino, Francesca Frassoldati
with contributions by: Antonio De Rossi, Giovanni Durbiano, Mauro Berta, Jiang Feng, Mattia Giusiano, Valeria Federighi
Design and production: Valeria Federighi

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Guangzhou Hong Kong Torino Venezia

华南理工大学建筑学院

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SHAPING THE UNCERTAINTY
Revealing implicitness in ordinary practices

Mauro Berta

Watersheds is a research basically aimed to retrace and to make comparable some complex urban transformation processes – in very different cultural and social contexts, like Italy and China – by representing them through a shared graphic formalism, trying to investigate not only the mere results of these transformations, but most of all the multiple relations among their physical effects and the whole of material and immaterial conditions preceding them, such as political decisions, public debates, technical documents etc.

The underlying research question of this work is quite simple: is there – within the ordinary practices – any system of implicit correlations and interdependences eluding the canonical narratives, but which could foster – if they were made explicit – a better understanding of the transformations themselves? And if yes, how could it be represented and used in order to improve a better awareness of the design process?

As it has been said, the four cases share programmatically a common condition, which is a substantial lack of any overall architectural vision, leading the transformation. The redevelopments of Lizhiwan, Kai Tak, Sangone and Piave rivers, namely, are neither the outcomes of any linear top-down processes, nor the fulfillment of any ideal design concepts, but they are rather the complex – and somehow unpredictable – results of a superposition of a large number of self-ruling events, documents, circumscribed rationales and partial material effects, sometimes opposite and spread over long-term periods.

Trying to retrace such a geography is a challenging task, most of all because it needs to combine in a unique interpretation a number of variables in some way incommensurable, like – for instance – intangible events (discussions, regulations, deeds etc.) and their concrete effects (evacuations, land reclamations, new buildings etc.) whose placement in space and time, furthermore, is sometimes exactly defined but often blurred and vague. The diagrams of *Watersheds*, in other words, aim to gather physical space, people, policies and procedures in a synoptic visualization, in order to spatialize the political dimension of the design processes within an unconventional narrative of the urban transformations: a work having a precise cultural background.

Mapping history. Some milestones of visual representation in the scientific culture

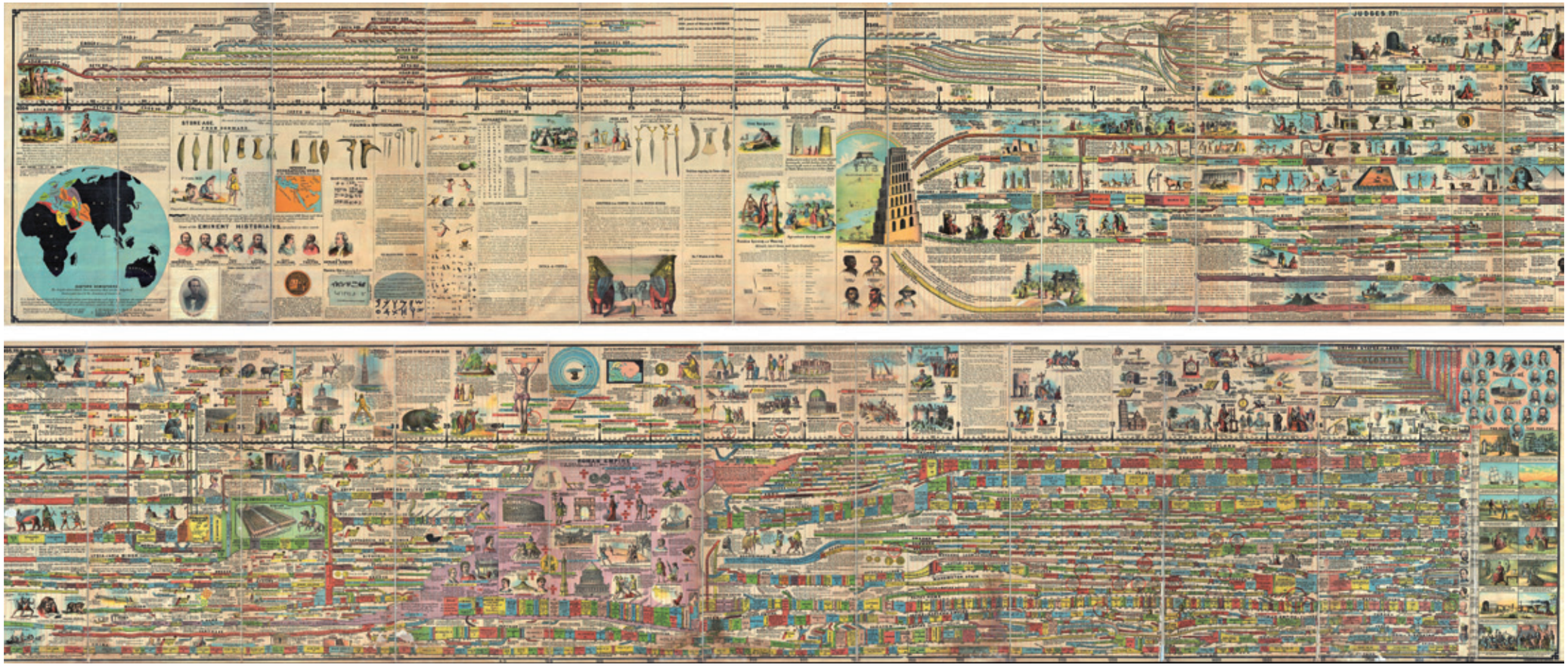
Data maps, which means the graphical representation of storylines and abstract information, are basically a product of modernity. As Edward Tufte explained in his studies, though cartography has deep roots in antiquity, it is only during the 17th century that the skills of geographers and historians (and – thereinafter – physicists, naturalists, physicians etc.) began to converge in some brand new forms of representation (Tufte, 2001), matching the concrete dimension of the physical world with the immateriality of chronicles and statistics, and giving history and natural sciences a new intuitive guise.

Some early attempts had actually already been made during the late Renaissance period – like, for instance, Mercator's *Chronologia* (Mercator, 1569) – but those first examples were still nothing more than simple table charts, trying to harmonize the different measures of time and history, coming from the traditional sources (Brotton, 2012).

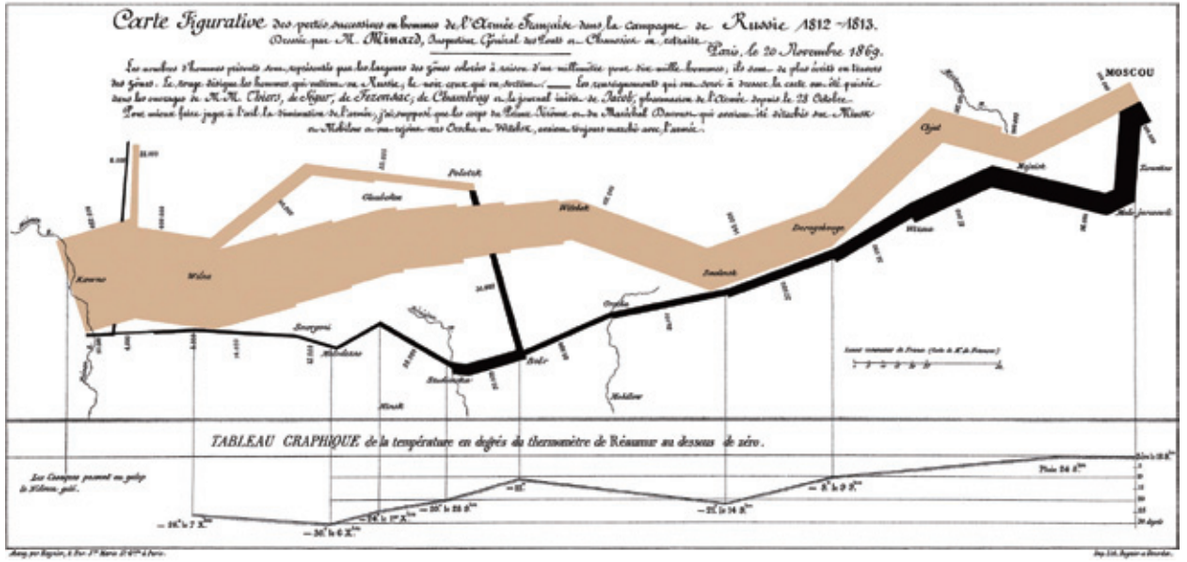
The real meeting point among scientific storytelling and visual representations could be actually found between mid-18th and mid-19th century, when two different approaches – a more abstract one and a more physical one – were developed independently.

A forerunner of the first type is the early work of Joseph Priestley, whose *Chart of Biography* (1765) and *New Chart of History* (1769) became an essential epoch-making reference. 'Priestley-style' (Rosenberg, Grafton, 2010) diagrams, conceived within the framework of the Empiricist theory, had a wide influence in the following visual culture, creating a new branch of works: some of which more pictorial – like F. Strass' *Strom der Zeiten* (1804) – or even naïf, like the impressive S. C. Adams' Synchronogical Chart (1881):

(1804). Friedrich Strass, *Der Strom der Zeiten*



(1881). Sebastian C. Adams, *Synchronological Chart or Map of History*. New York: Colby & Co.



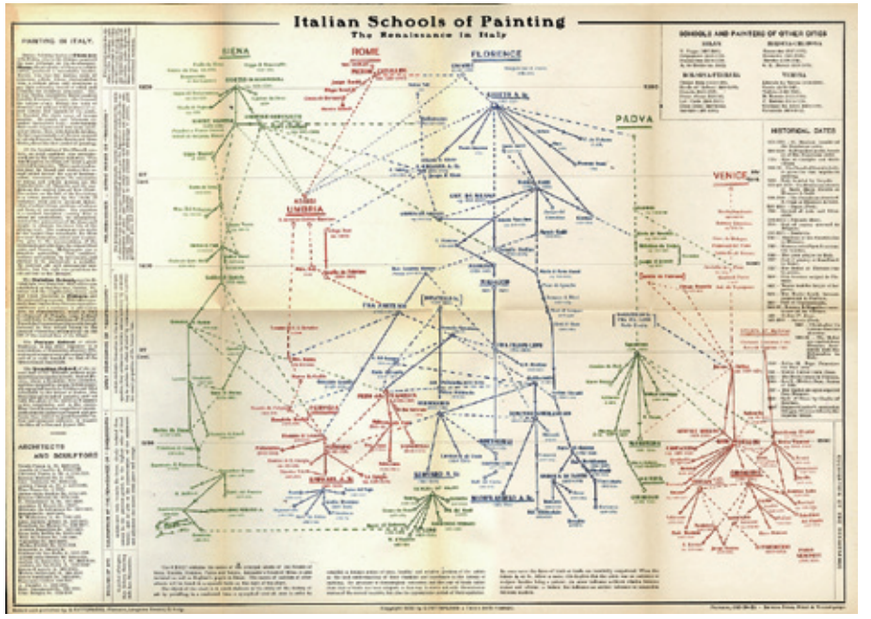
some others more essential and broad circulation-oriented, like J. Spark's renowned *Histomap*, published by Rand McNally in 1931, or the several History of Art didactic charts, appeared during the 20th century.
Unlike Priestley's charts, the famous historical maps by the 19th century French engineer C. J. Minard developed instead an approach more fitting to the physical dimension of the events. In Napoleon's Russian campaign and Hannibal's Italian expedition maps (1869), the numeric amounts of human losses are expressively materialized by the thickness of the lines retracing the troops' itineraries, and – in the first one – they are also related to the temperature trend of the Russian winter. These pictures, giving military history an unprecedented dramatic aspect, are probably the first examples of what we call nowadays 'infographic', and they were strongly influenced by the innovations in the scientific representation introduced some decades before by W. Playfair (Playfair, 1801).
Even though their graphic style is rather different, the most part of the examples belonging to both these two families of visualization share a common hermeneutic approach, that is to say that their aim is often merely interpretative or, at least, educational; but seldom data mapping – either physical or abstract – has been used also with an anticipatory and non-neutral purpose, to prove a theory, to induce some changes in peoples' behaviors, or to steer policies and decision-making. Which is much more interesting for our research.

(1869). Charles J. Minard, *Carte figurative des pertes successives en hommes de l'Armée Française dans la campagne de Russie 1812-1813*

That is the case of the medical mapping, appeared in the middle of the 19th century. The pioneering study of John Snow about the 1854 cholera epidemics of Broad Street in London introduced for the first time the disease cartography to circumscribe and identify the source of infection: in the same period – in the aftermath of the Crimean war – the famous nurse Florence Nightingale used abstract and eye-catching visualizations to persuade the members of Parliament to improve the sanitary conditions of the troops, by showing that – in the Army engaged in the East – the mortality for preventable diseases was much higher than the one for wounds (*Mortality of the British Army*, 1858).

But one of the most interesting uses of visual representation as an instrument to foster and steer a political debate is represented by the work on conspiracies representation made by the American conceptual artist Mark Lombardi whose *Narrative Structures* (1990s) – strongly influenced by the critique of Capitalism by H. Marcuse (Burke, Tierney, 2007) – analyzed the complex geographies of some international scandals of the late 20th century, retracing – with a node and link graphic style – the untold rapports among politics, companies, banks, wars etc.

Lombardi's graphs represent definitely – from a methodological point of view – one of the nearest approaches to *Watersheds'* visualizations, not only because the graphic formalism is quite similar, but most of all because both of them share the same attempt of reducing different streams of events and groups of actors into a unique interpretative structure, whose aim is to influence the process itself.



(1930). Giovanni Fattorusso, *Italian Schools of Painting*

What do *Watersheds'* diagrams show?

The four charts presented in the research prove, first of all, the non-linear nature of the urban transformation processes, revealing the real margins of negotiation – sometimes very narrow – of the supposed decision-makers, and measuring the effectiveness of the project strategies.

Like the former storyline charts, they have an overall synoptic nature, allowing to understand at a glance the whole extension of complex facts, helping to take a critic distance from the objects of study.

Like Lombardi's charts, however, they are based on a nested structure. Every node of the chart could hold potentially entire subsystems of events and subjects, which could be expanded as needed, to deepen the study and to investigate single facts or chains of events.

For this reason the charts are not a static and neutral representation of reality, but they are a dynamic and slanted one, allowing to make selections among facts and interpretations, to explore possible correlations and to create a critical interpretation of the events.

Finally this kind of approach allows to find and highlight some unexpected recurring events – or, specularly, some unpredictable differences in apparently similar situations - which could be studied not only to better understand the past transformation processes, but also to steer and improve the future ones. This is likely one of the most promising outcomes of the research.

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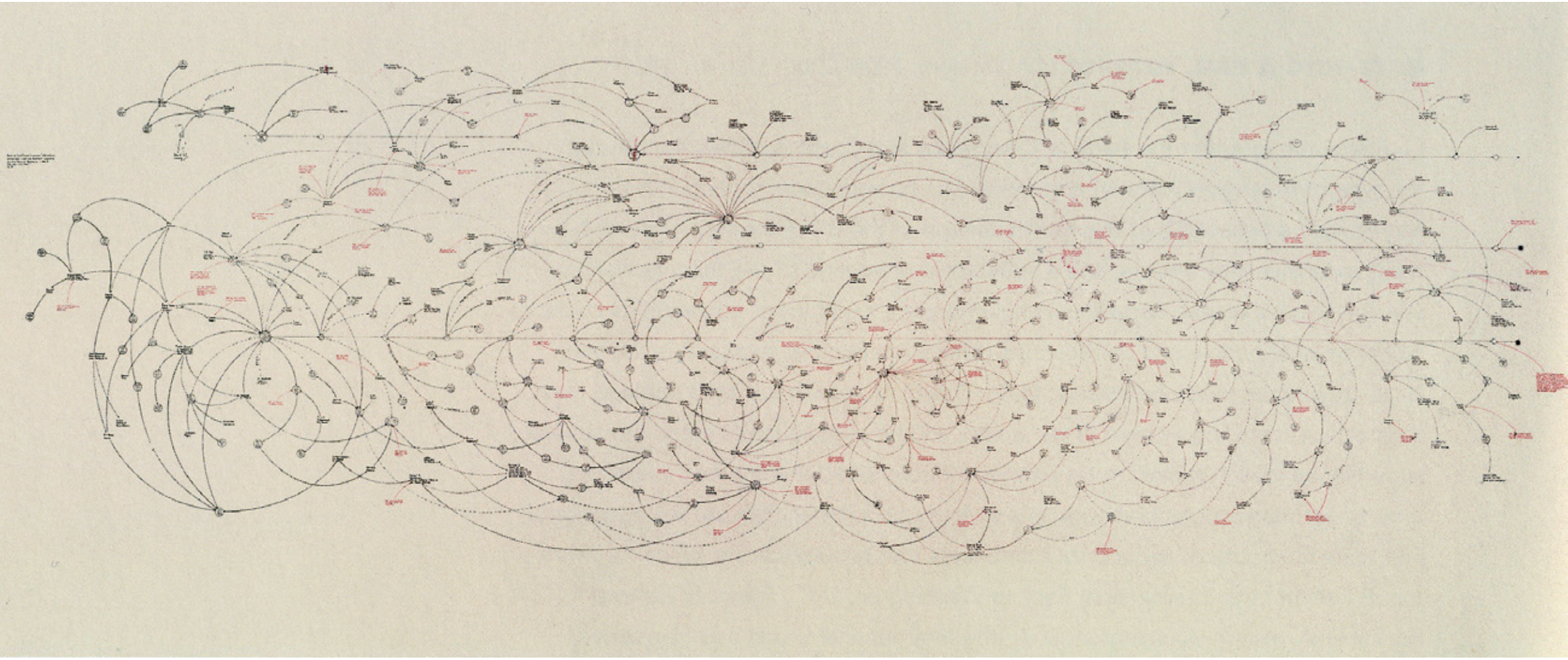

(1996–2000). Mark Lombardi, *BCCI-ICIC & FAB, 1972-91 (4th Version)*

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