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Fragments in a Narrative

Bill Burns, Galerie Chantal Boulanger, Montréal, January 19 - February 16, 1991

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FRAGMENTS IN A NARRATIVE

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Glancing out the picture windows of Galerie Chantal Boulanger, the codified structure of the city reveals itself, in signs, flags, emblems and architectural detail: visible inscriptions of ownership and power on the cityscape. In the middle distance a snail-shaped logo adorns an otherwise unmarked office tower. Regardless of the genealogy of this particular image-sign, I respond by assuming that the accumulated labour of people and technology produced in that building is transfixed by and harnessed to this logo.

Bill Burns's paddle opus operates similarly, appropriating the symbolic power of the corporate logo, and also the sophistry with which that power is deployed. Yet it is still tempting, when confronted with the insistent repetition of the paddle-sign, to try to ascribe to the paddle a fixed meaning, discovering an origin that will serve to "explain" some of its unfamiliar applications in the exhibition. For the paddle, or rather its likeness or its outline, is the alleged subject-matter of every work in the gallery, in diverse media including photo-works, maquettes, drawings, blueprints, collage, and sculpture.

The "real" paddle has existed for millenia in many cultures, a hand-crafted physical object gently mediating between the surface of the landscape and the individual wielding it. Perhaps the paddle conceit can be read as an evocation of "primitive", pre-industrial technology, which is then juxtaposed to our society's nature/culture relationship – post-industrial, information-based. But I believe this iconography is meaningful to Burns's work more as an ironic subtext. More remarkable than the expressive object itself is the process of its transfiguration into art and sign in the social formation. The work seems humorous or absurd because the mediating mechanisms – economic, linguistic, aesthetic – that transform mundane objects into disembodied representations have been suppressed. Here, the paddle is magically proffered as "pure" commodity rather than "authentic" artefact.

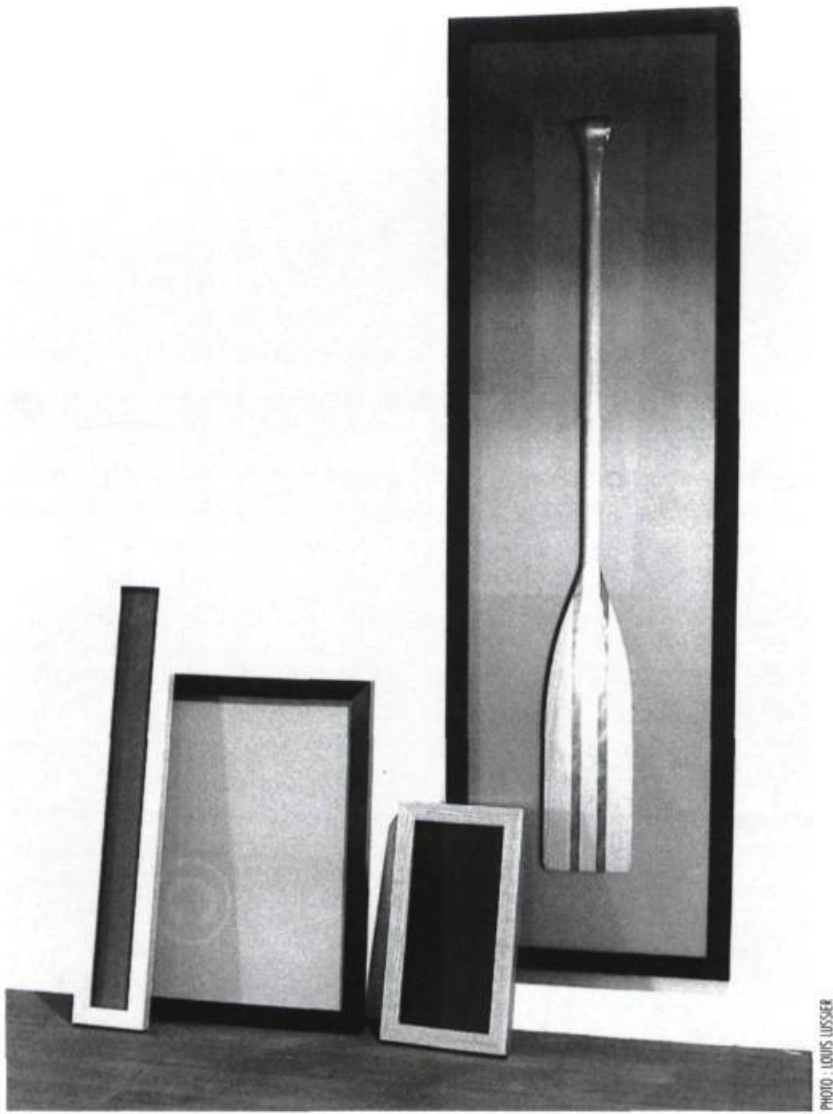
Burns' three photo-works present the evidence of this reification. Each work consists of a black-and-

white photo of a paddle surrounded by three smaller photograms in muted tones of red, yellow and blue, discreetly carrying the mark "R", "Registered" "C", "trademark" or "tm". In the photographs, the paddle as object is alienated from its ethnographic context. Suspended in a timeless zone, the paddle has apparently ascended to that rarefied aesthetic space promised by (the simulated) colour-field painting. Since both paddles and single-tone paintings are often generic-looking, lacking a signature style, trademarks become crucial in establishing the potential value of the object / *objet d'art*.

The work in the exhibition can perhaps be read as fragments in a narrative about the manipulation of perception, using the paddle as aperture. *Paddle Viewer*, a box-camera, seemingly empaled on an actual paddle rests on a tripod and can be aimed by the spectator both out the window and into the gallery space. But the paddle hinders the freedom to look where and how one pleases. *Paddle Viewer* is a non-negotiable mechanism for viewing the world, a hegemonic device insisting that henceforth the paddle-matrix will inform all perception.

Illustrating this despotic principle are a series of glass-encased *maquettes*, miniature landscapes on which the paddle-shape has been imposed as a defining gestalt. Some of these meticulously-constructed models imitate natural landmarks, such as *Paddle Valley* or *Paddle Perce*, while others, *Paddle Factory* and *Paddle Aircraft Carrier*, simulate the "naturalization" of industrial or military installations in the landscape. The truly dystopic results of enforcing a master-plan on the face of earth are more obvious in *Paddle Deforestation Project*, where ecological devastation paradoxically has a logically designed look. Another work "documents" a paddle-shaped mass of burning tires; again, a toxic phenomenon is spuriously contained within the same ideological shape. Burns's exhibition could be a portrait of the "New World Order" recently proclaimed by the American government, a world where the identities of disparate territories and peoples will be inscribed with a new and improved Bush-shape.

The toy-like scale of the maquettes doesn't,



Bill Burns, *Paddle picture with red, yellow and blue picture*, 1989-90; 150 cm x 19,5 cm x 132,5 cm.

however, elicit sublime horror or even a solemn response. As with advertising and propaganda, the attractive packaging of the concept allows this aggressive restructuring of the landscape to be read as something familiar and palatable.

After these case-studies of the transformation of the corporeal world, Burns extends his teleological argument. Blueprints and works on paper trace how this paddle-shaped reality has permeated medical, metaphysical, and celestial zones. Like Catholic miracles where the cross or the Madonna's face "appears" to the true believer in the sky, in the blueprint *Paddle Galaxy* dense clusters of stars form an unmistakable paddle configuration. The very structure of ideology has been interiorized and inexorably projected onto the cosmos. In *Paddle Body Massage System* and *Paddle Brain*, the same hidden order has been "discovered" in both the psyche and the physiology of the human being. In this grouping of works, the rigidity of this Weltanschauung assumes

ludicrous dimensions, while its inflexibility at the level of individual expression is also more evident.

Although Bill Burns has produced work with the paddle motif before, the success of this exhibition lies in the exercise of the same conceit with the insistence of a religious or political crusade. Although the paddle might seem an arbitrary rallying point, following the example of the cross, the swastika or the corporate logo, it is the pretext for the creation of a pseudo-utopic schema, a unification of natural resources, human industry, and spiritual energy.

The exhibition might conclude with an untitled object, a metal case, like those to carry rifles or instruments, which opens to reveal a hollow paddle-shaped casing; to emphasize that this has not been the life-story of a fetish object, the skeptical spectator is ultimately presented only with its absence.

JOHANNE SLOAN