

STEFAN BANZ — PHARE AVANT

Underground Carpark, Old Town, Biel, Switzerland, 2009–2013

SCULPTURE

Concrete, 150 x 185 x 120 cm, 2010

INSCRIPTION ON METAL PLATE

Prior to commencement of the urban building project “Obere Schüsspromenade” with its underground car park, the municipality of Biel had in-depth archeological excavations carried out so as not to run the risk of destroying possible archeological treasures. It was found that the building site had at one time been part of a sea bay that spread a very long way eastwards and in the course of time became filled with the rocks and stones entrained by a glacier where the River Schüss now flows. There were no really valuable finds: three of the excavated objects—a millstone, a hewn timber beam and the bottom of a tanner’s vat—were to be preserved for posterity by a decision taken by the municipal council on 1st April 2009. Immediately prior to their transport from the site the excavated ground subsided and, with a loud roar, swallowed the entire archeological yield. The workmen standing in the immediate vicinity escaped with no more than a fright.

So as not to jeopardize the planned building project, geological investigations were immediately started. In the course of these investigations, the experts came across a huge block of stone that lay like a boulder amidst the piled up rocks and stones that had filled the bay. The results of analyses showed that it dated from prehistoric times and was between 65 and 68 million years old. What is particularly remarkable about this find is its appearance: it bears a striking similarity to the W203 front headlamp of a C class Mercedes.

From what we know today, it is very unlikely that a human civilization existed in prehistoric times, and certainly not one that manufactured automobiles that were virtually identical to those of our present day. But the facts speak for themselves. Moreover, this mysterious object fascinates us precisely on account of the strangely paradoxical anachronism, for if this object were in fact a car headlamp from the age of the dinosaurs, we would have to deduce from its dimensions of 150 x 185 x 120 cm that the vehicle to which it belonged must have measured 15 meters in height, 18.5 meters in length and 12 meters in width. But that is not all. The experts have also found that the boulder comprises not only of a mass of stone but also contains pieces of wood that could easily have originated from a tanner’s vat bottom dating from the 19th century, although the dendrochronological expertise limits its period of origin to the last three million years of the cretaceous age.

This paleontological sensation calls in question not only all hitherto acquired knowledge about the development of human civilization but also establishes a direct link between prehistoric times and the present day. But not only that: as a “headlamp” it is an obvious choice of symbol for the new car park, where hundreds of cars come and go every day.

In the autumn of 2010 I therefore suggested to the municipality of Biel that the boulder, as a symbol of the “invention of the invention” and the “eternal recurrence”, should be placed at the entrance to the car park, thus permitting the immediate and direct experience of its magical aura and elegance.

As the “Phare avant” had remained well protected in the silt against light, air and rain for millions of years, I suggested at the same time that a replica be made in order that the boulder could be returned to its original place of finding and thus outlast our present civilization in an optimum state of preservation for millions of years to come.

Stefan Banz, Cully, December 1, 2011