

Nick Brdar

SATELLITE FOR PILTDOWN

Satellite for Piltdown: a drawing by
Nick Brdar

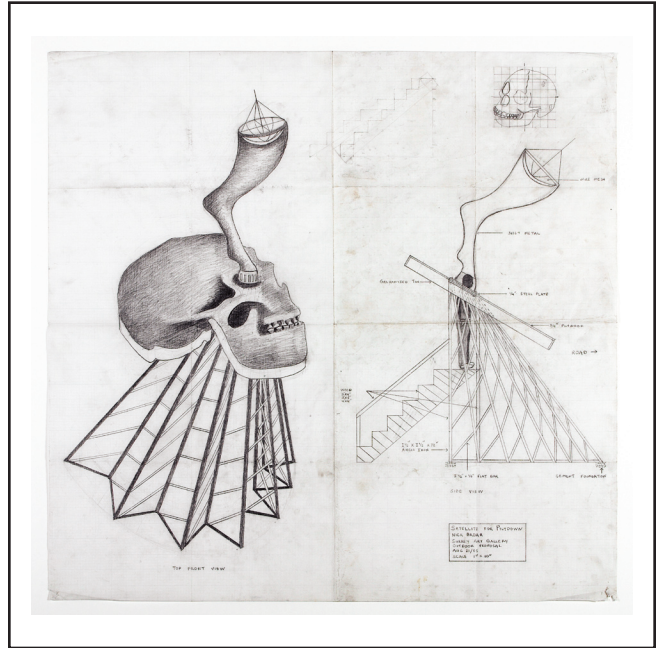
BY BRIAN GRISON

Artist's Statement (1985)

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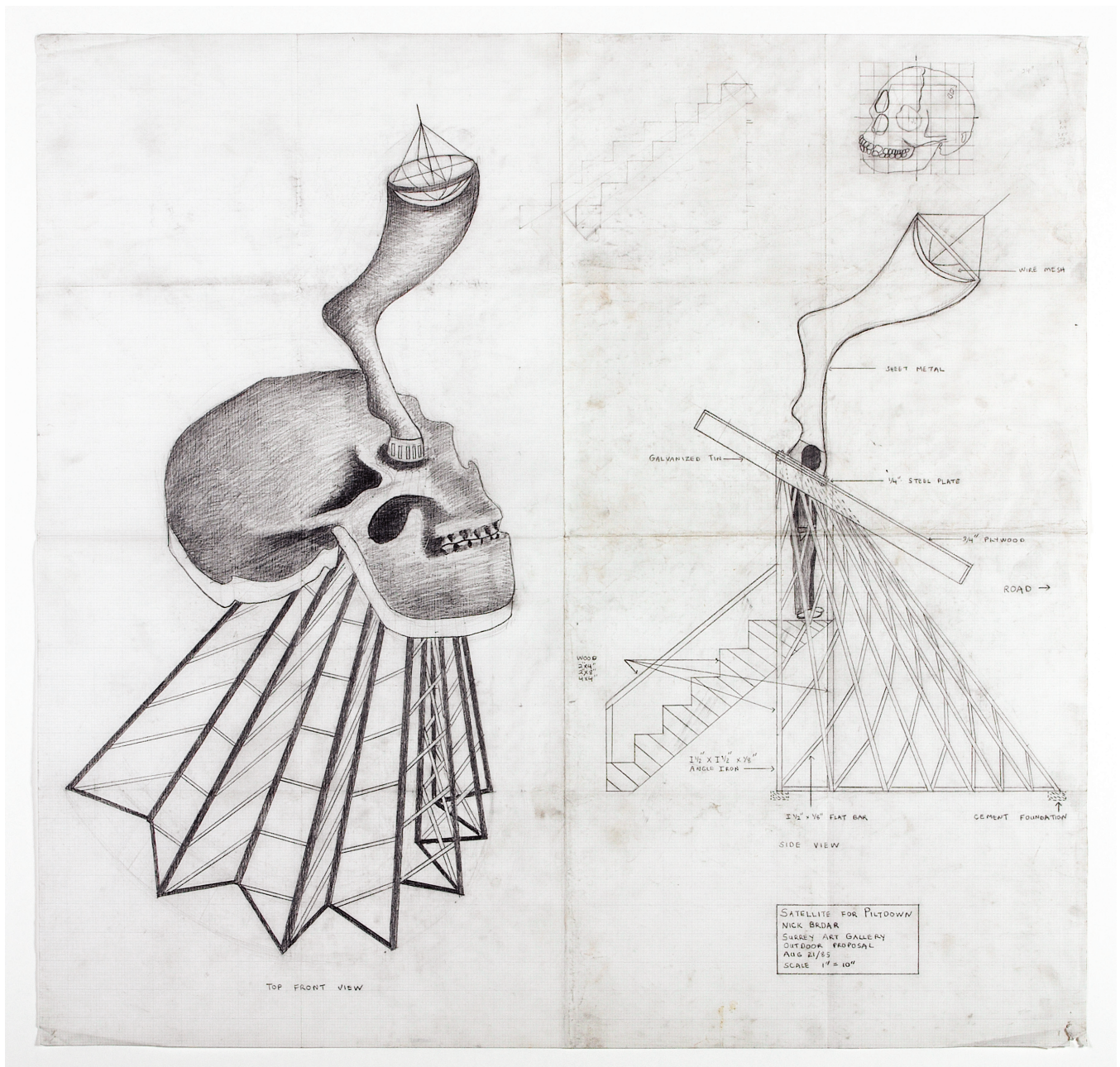
By Brian Grison, 2008

In 1985 Nick Brdar made a working drawing toward the sculpture, *Satellite for Piltdown*, which he conceived and constructed for a site-specific installation in a group exhibition, *Six Projects for Surrey*, organized by the Surrey Art Gallery and installed in Crescent Park, a public park in south Surrey, British Columbia from July 11 to August 31, 1986. At the end of the exhibition, the sculpture was disassembled and either discarded or recycled into other projects. Only

Nick Brdar
Satellite for Piltdown, 1985

graphite on graph paper
(91 x 93.3 cm)
SAG 1990.05.01

Photograph by Cameron Heryet



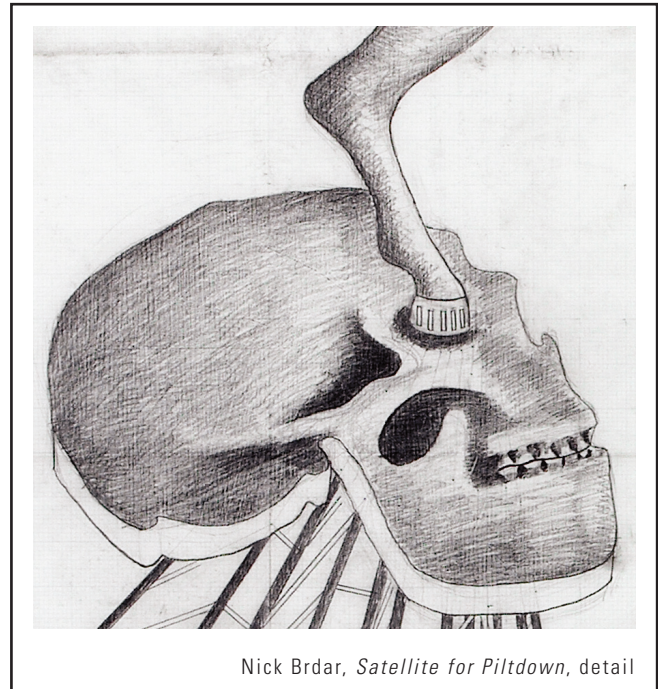
Nick Brdar, *Satellite for Piltdown*, 1985, graphite on graph paper (91 x 93.3 cm) SAG 1990.05.01 Photograph by Cameron Heryet

one component survived – a horse or a deer leg – that is now in a private collection in Victoria. The working drawing is almost the only evidence that the sculpture ever existed.

The drawing, *Satellite for Piltdown* can be read as a catalogue of possible meanings for the sculpture. The notion of unarticulated meanings acknowledges the open-endedness of ideas embodied in much of Brdar's art. However, the drawing is rather distinct from this particular open-endedness because it refers to a specific object. On the other hand, even though the drawing is preliminary and therefore secondary to the sculpture, it has its own set of open-ended meanings, some of which might have little to do with the sculpture. Drawings for sculpture, or drawings as designs or instructions for construction, exist in two realities: their own independent aesthetic one; and that of their purpose. In a sense, the very notion of a drawing for sculpture is a contradiction – one exists in the mind, whereas the other exists in the world – and in many cases the drawing is more revelatory of the artist's thinking and imagining than the finished piece to which it refers.

Brdar drew *Satellite of Piltdown* on a single sheet of blue gridded drafting vellum, a drawing surface that is commonly preferred by architects, engineers, industrial designers and graphic artists. Many sculptors and fine-art drafters use drafting vellum as well. Their drawings, intentionally or not, automatically assume the authority of quasi-scientific perceptual rigor that is commonly associated with the work of architects and engineers.

Nick Brdar's drawing for *Satellite of Piltdown* resembles an architectural or engineering rendering in two distinct ways, each evident in the two vertical halves of the sheet of vellum. An illustrative rendering of the finished sculpture occupies the left half. This



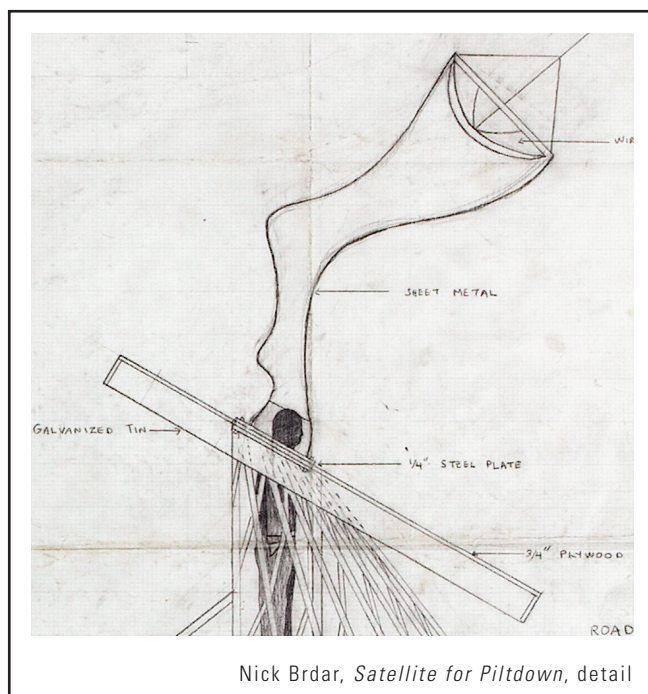
Nick Brdar, *Satellite for Piltdown*, detail

is more or less a three-dimensional representation, drawn in ink and graphite, resembling a traditional architectural presentation drawing. The drawing displays a steel mesh structure that resembles buttresses supporting a flat, slightly tipped, irregular disk-like object, which, seen from one side, resembles a full-tone profile of a human skull. Rising from the open socket of the right eye is the hind leg of a horse or a deer. From the top of this leg, an antenna points skyward. Below this image, the phrase "The Front View" acts as a subtitle to the left half of the drawing, as well as a cue for the viewer's understanding of Brdar's design.

On the right half of the vellum, the same subject has been reconfigured as a schematic to assist in the construction of the sculpture. This rendering shows a side view of the sculpture with the silhouette of a male figure standing at the top of the entrance stairs that rise in the midst of the supporting steel structure, which is not shown in the left-hand drawing. The man's head projects through the right eye of the skull, and into the underside of the animal's hoof. He peers

at the world through several small vertical windows set into the hoof. From the top of the animal's leg, at the point where it would join with the thigh, the satellite dish points to the sky. With neatly printed text in pencil, again reminiscent of an architectural or engineering drawing, Brdar identifies materials and dimensions for the components of the sculpture, as well as the scale of the drawing relative to the sculpture. In the upper-left corner, he includes a diagram of the stairway and in the upper-right corner he has drawn a gridded image of the skull.

Information passes down through the antenna or satellite dish, through the primeval wildness of the mind that the animal leg represents, and into the mind of the viewer, where it is combined with the observations made through the windowed hoof. This complex spectrum of meanings mimics Brdar's thesis about the unreliability of knowledge which he discusses in his artist's statement for the *Six Projects for Surrey* catalogue.¹



Nick Brdar, *Satellite for Piltdown*, detail

In his reference to Piltdown Man in his statement, Brdar points to a hoax contrived by some English archeologists. In 1912, evidence of an early humanoid skull was discovered near the village of Piltdown, England. About forty years later, this evidence was exposed as false. In 1953, the skull was discovered to consist of the lower jawbone of an orangutan combined with fragments of the skull of a modern human. Due to the media frenzy (which I can recall, even though I was only six years old) the discovery that Piltdown man was a hoax became a famous international scandal in academic and popular communities.

Brdar conceived the idea of his sculpture when he saw a photograph of the Piltdown skull while browsing through an anthropology book. He was intrigued by how he "knew the name from common knowledge but had never seen an image of it."² He was also interested in the "idea of how these fragments added up to such a powerful social symbol given what they represent." Because the site of the exhibition in Crescent Park did not generate ideas, he decided to construct *Satellite for Piltdown* because he assumed that, like him, many residents of Surrey would be familiar with the Piltdown hoax without knowing the skull that engendered it.

Although Nick Brdar began his artistic career as a sculptor, over the years, his practice has evolved into work with computer animation. In a statement written in 2005, he describes himself as a computer animator, concept artist, digital artist, graphic designer and special effects artist. Today, instead of working with carpentry and welding tools, he works with computer animation and painting programs such as Adobe PhotoShop and Corel PhotoPaint, and with three-dimensional digital animation and rendering

programs such as Alias, Wavefront, Maya, Kinetix and 3D Studio MAX.

Brdar's shift from sculpture to electronic media is reflected in his personal and artistic history, and the drawing, *Satellite for Piltdown Man*, points toward Brdar's current practice. The viewer can read the drawing as a study for a twenty-foot high sculpture constructed of wood, steel, plaster and paint, or imagine the gridded surface of the drafting vellum as a pixilated rendering and schematic of the non-material reality that exists only in the mind of the artist and viewer.

I would like to conclude by suggesting that *Satellite for Piltdown* is also a self-portrait. Brdar depicts himself both riding the satellite and employing it as an observatory. Human consciousness, the observatory and the satellite are all part of a fallible mechanism and system for gathering data, building knowledge and gaining wisdom. As suggested by the story of Piltdown Man, all knowledge is ephemeral and can be falsified as it passes through the lens of the human imagination. The fact that Brdar's drawing has been folded several times conveys metaphorically the secret, magical nature of an artist's research and the resultant creative product of his imagination.

Notes

1 Nick Brdar, "Artist's Statement," 1985, published in *Six Projects for Surrey: Kim Adams, Nick Brdar, Barbara Cole, Nomi Kaplan, Joey Morgan, Alan Storey* (Surrey: Surrey Art Gallery, 1986) 7. (reproduced in this Open Book publication.)

2 Writer's Note: All quotes are by the artist from personal communications.

Artist's Statement (1985)¹

My interest in the use of the Piltdown skull image is in its special relationship to history and the general public. As a false representation of history, it has nonetheless secured itself a place in it. Its relationship to the viewer is through its name rather than its image. The collection of differing fragments to combine into an inclusive whole has a connection to my work in process. It also establishes a sense of my false relationship to the site.

The overall piece will act as a totem of contradictory images and structures culminating in the satellite dish, which attempts to unify and send them elsewhere. The spiralling base acts as an architectural sign of growth using a constructed method to approach a modeled form. The skull is a sign of death but due to its cutout nature and distorted viewing shouldn't reach its full negative significance. The horse's leg will be modeled in the round so as to merge with its presence as a natural unreflecting moment.

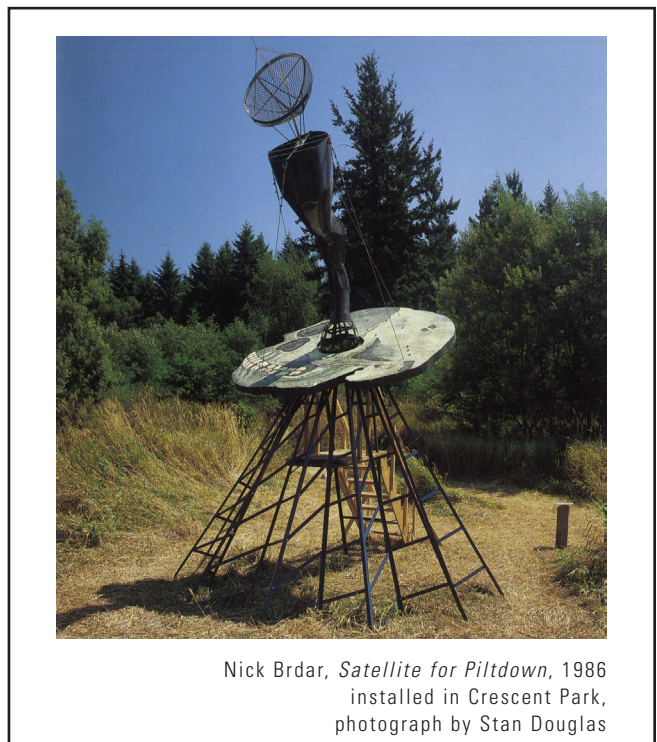
Artist's Statement (1986)²

This work attempted to access a social memory about a specific artifact, namely the skull of the Piltdown Man. This archeological hoax was unearthed in Sussex, England on December 18, 1912. At the time, it was hailed as the missing link between the Neanderthals and modern Homo sapiens and was a boost to England's self-image. It went undetected until the 1950's when it was exposed by radiocarbon dating technology.

The fusion of the conflicting fragments, one ape jaw and nine pieces of human cranium, was accomplished by the clever filing of the back molars as well as the convenient non-discovery of the linkage between the jawbone and the skull. My work was intended as a monument to this fossil turned artifact which has secured an ambiguous place in history by demonstrating that history is truly a reconstructed event.

1 Nick Brdar, "Artist's Statement", 1985, published in *Six Projects for Surrey: Kim Adams, Nick Brdar, Barbara Cole, Nomi Kaplan, Joey Morgan, Alan Storey* (Surrey: Surrey Art Gallery, 1986) 7.

2 Nick Brdar, "Artist's Statement", 1986, published in *Six Projects for Surrey: Kim Adams, Nick Brdar, Barbara Cole, Nomi Kaplan, Joey Morgan, Alan Storey* (Surrey: Surrey Art Gallery, 1986) 27.



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