

## ART IN THE PUBLIC REALM: FOCUS

Marco Dessardo. Working drawing / photo-montage for *The Drainage*.Marco Dessardo. Working drawing / photo-montage for *The Drainage*.

# The Risk of Blocked Drainage

VISUAL ARTISTS IRELAND REPORT ON THE SAGA OF MARCO DESSARDO'S COMMISSION FOR THE WEXFORD QUAYS.

IN the middle of December last year, local Wexford papers ran a number of stories with headlines such as “Council in hot Water over ‘rejected’ Quay Sculpture”; “Fiasco of the rejected quay front sculpture”; “Will we spend ?125,000 on the statue nobody wants?” and “Artist says decision at this stage ‘unfair’<sup>(1)</sup>”. The articles all referred to the decision of Wexford Borough Council to overturn the recommendation of an independent selection panel to commission Paris-based Italian artist Marco Dessardo to produce a sculpture, entitled *The Drainage*, to be sited on and around the newly refurbished Wexford waterfront.

The story begins in the summer of 2006 when a selection panel was convened for the Public Art Programme of Wexford County Council, which included 12 new commissions. The briefs for these projects were devised by James Moran, Wexford County Council's Public Art Programme Co-ordinator, then sanctioned by Rosaleen Molloy, County Arts Officer and Pat Collins, Wexford Borough Council Town Clerk after both made amendments. Amongst the 12 commissions was one advertised as Wexford Borough Council, Wexford Main Drainage Commission.

It is important to distinguish here between Wexford ‘Borough’ Council and Wexford ‘County’ Council. The difference between the 2 bodies is a significant issue and from reviewing the brief for the Wexford Borough Council, Wexford Main Drainage Commission it is not clear which of these 2 parties were acting as the ‘commissioner’. The initial press advert for the commission makes a reference to partnership. The front cover of the brief and the title of the project suggest Wexford Borough Council as the commissioner, however, within the brief under the heading Commissioning Procedures, there is a clear suggestion that the County Council is the commissioner, but it is not explicit. There is a further ambiguous section within the brief titled ‘Role of Wexford Borough Council’ which fails to clarify the matter. It suggests a limited role for the Borough Council but does state that the successful artists would be offered a contract by the Borough Council. It is clearly implied throughout that Wexford County Council would act as co-ordinators of the competition/commissioning processes. The Commission was to be half-funded by percent monies relating to the development of Wexford's main drainage scheme, with the other half coming from Wexford Borough Council.

As it happened, the commission was not awarded when the first round of applications were received, as none of the submissions were thought to be of sufficient quality. The decision was then taken to invite eight artists – nationally and internationally – who had not

Marco Dessardo. Project proposal model for *The Drainage*.

previously participated – to make proposals for this commission. Each member of the selection panel was invited to put forward some names for consideration and invitations were sent out. The outcome of this process involved a reconvening of the panel in early October 2006 in order to consider the new round of submissions.

The members of the selection panel were – Alan Counihan, artist; Annette Moloney, public art specialist; Barbara-Anne Murphy, Wexford County Councillor; Brenda Oakes, artist / arts consultant and Sean McLoughlin, Executive Architect for Waterford City Council. We understand that the Borough Council had been invited to participate in the process but that an elected representative was unavailable to attend on the day and that the Borough Council were represented for part of the meeting by the Town Clerk.

Marco Dessardo's proposal was selected by the panel. County Councillor and selection panel member Barbara-Anne Murphy was quoted in the Wexford People (13 Dec '06) as saying that she believed *The Drainage* would be a “wonderful” feature on Wexford's award winning Quay front. Following his selection meeting, Dessardo was issued with a letter, dated 13 Oct 2006, from James Moran, (on Wexford County Council headed paper) notifying him that his proposal had “been recommended by the Selection Panel” – to whom this recommendation was being made, was not specified.

Subsequently, the artist was called to a Borough Council meeting on 4 December 2006. It was reported that some Councillors were unclear as to who the artist was and as to why he was there <sup>(2)</sup>. The minutes of the meeting simply record that “Mr. Dessardo gave a presentation to the meeting with regard to the proposed sculpture for Wexford Quay Front following which questions raised by members were answered by Mr. Dessardo who then departed from the meeting. Following discussion and on the proposal of Cllr. Nolan seconded by Cllr. Byrne it was unanimously agreed that the proposed sculpture entitled *The Drainage* would not be accepted”. The artist was informed, this time by the Town Clerk of Wexford Borough Council (dated 12 Dec 2006) that “following careful consideration, the members of the Council have decided unanimously not to proceed with *The Drainage* on this occasion”

Dessardo's proposal comprised of a series of site-specific sculptural interventions encompassing various locations suggested in the brief – a road junction of 1798 Street; the North Side of Wexford Bridge, on and around Wexford Bridge and Wexford Marina Pier. Dessardo stressed that *The Drainage* “is not a monument. It is a sculpture, requiring time to discover”. The Drainage was to use components gathered in and around Wexford harbour and connect them together utilising stainless steel piping, an iron mold, lumps of concrete and an abandoned boat. The artist envisaged viewers walking along Wexford wharf progressively discovering elements of the sculpture “running under the city, under the bridge, then underwater” – while existing elements of sky, water and surrounding structures of the quayside and pier were choreographed into their experience of the work. In support of the work Dessardo had envisaged a range of elements relating to community participation – including setting up a website to report on the progress of the work; an exhibition, lecture series and a short film. On the practical side the artist also noted how his work would be durable and would require no maintenance. There is a full and informative presentation of the proposal on Dessardo's website.

It was reported in local news coverage that one Wexford Borough Councillor described the work as ‘awful’ adding, “Really it wasn't the artists' fault, it was the fault of whoever set down the grounds for commissioning the piece” <sup>(3)</sup>. Labour Councillor George Lawlor speaking on the Derek Mooney radio show stated that the proposed work was “certainly modern” and that “this is something that just isn't right”, he then went on to describe the Borough Council's preference for a work that was “correct and proper” <sup>(4)</sup>. The Councillor also remarked that Dessardo's proposal was out of context, in terms of references to the area, local history and the social usage of the Quays.