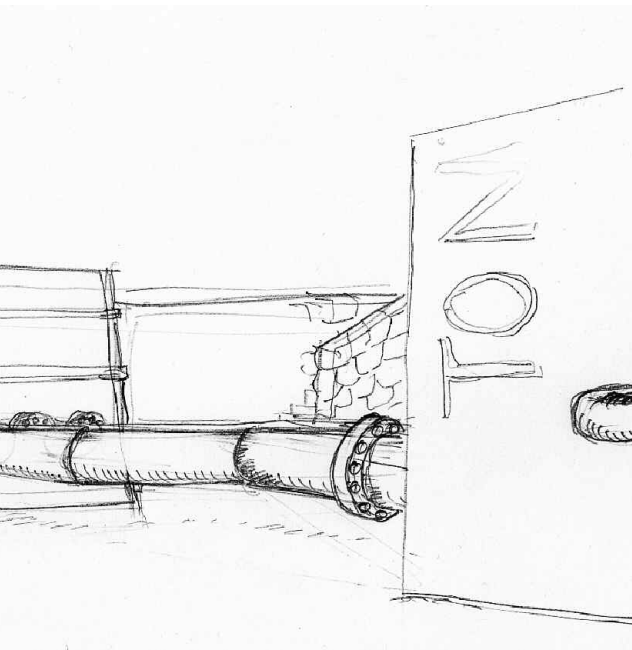


ART IN THE PUBLIC REALM: FOCUS

Marco Dessardo. Working drawing for *The Drainage*.

and suggested that *The Drainage* “would be OK for a drainage project, but not for the waterfront”. Of course the paradox here is that from the outset the project had been called The Wexford Borough Council Wexford Main Drainage Commission.

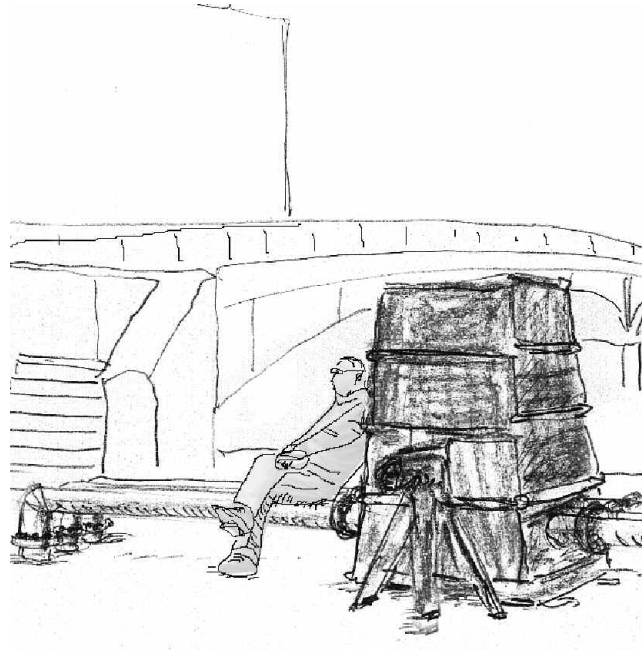
Artist Alan Counihan, who was a member of the selection panel, has described the affair as “not only grossly disrespectful of Mr Dessardo, but also professionally insulting to members of the selection panel and makes a mockery of the selection process. It should not be allowed become a precedent”⁽⁵⁾.

The artist is currently looking into his legal position with regard to seeking some financial recompense for the rejection of his winning design. As he stated to Patrick O’Connell, writing in *The Echo* “I did my job, they were not supposed to have this opportunity to cut off the competition like this.... It is very clear that I have won the competition, They are not disputing this ... normally, at the very least, ‘creation’ expenses would be covered ... this normally constitutes 20 percent of the total cost of the project. A lot of work has been done in the design. I will see where I will go with this.”⁽⁶⁾

Looking back to the Artists Brief and the procedures used in this instance there are a number of particular issues that should be noted. Firstly there was no Public Art Working Group set up to oversee this or the other 11 associated projects that were part of this programme. *The Per Cent for Arts Scheme General National Guidelines* clearly recommend the establishment of such a group with representation from all relevant parties⁽⁷⁾. A working group is distinctly different to a selection panel in that it over sees the project as a whole from start to finish. The members develop a vision for the project, set clear aims and objectives, criteria, over see the development of a brief and procurement procedures, some members may also be involved in selection. The working group also help to see the project through to completion once an artist is selected.

The second issue is ‘responsibility’ for selection and appointment. There are limited mentions of this in the brief. Under the heading ‘Commissioning Procedure’ there is a line that states “all proposals will be assessed by an Independent Selection Panel, the members of which will have appropriate expertise in Public Art Commissioning”. The only other mention in the brief is that “All Artists’ proposals are subject to the approval of the Independent Selection Panel. Proposals will be subject to Health & Safety checks, which will be carried out by specialised staff of Wexford Borough Council”. There was a mention of the artists selection being a ‘recommendation’ in the first letter sent to the artist, but again the details were not clear. At no point prior to this was the approval of Council members made a condition of appointment. The National Guidelines state that the commissioning body should decide at the outset of the project whether it will delegate selection authority to the Selection Panel or make the final decision itself⁽⁸⁾. This information was not communicated in the brief and one wonders whether this had been considered by the County Council who were co-ordinating the competition process. The uncertainty as to who the commissioner actually was, only adds to this confusion.

It must be acknowledged that the National Guidelines are exactly what they say. They are guidelines and there is no statutory requirement for them to be followed. This openness can in many ways be seen as an advantage as it allows for bodies like Breaking Ground to continue to push the boundaries of the commissioning process and

Marco Dessardo. Working drawing for *The Drainage*.

develop new and exciting mechanisms for engaging artists with the percent for art scheme without being held back by a fixed and static set of procedures. What seems ironic in this case, however, is that the opening page of the brief quotes John O’Donoghue’s introduction to the National Guidelines while at the same time ignoring some of its key recommendations.

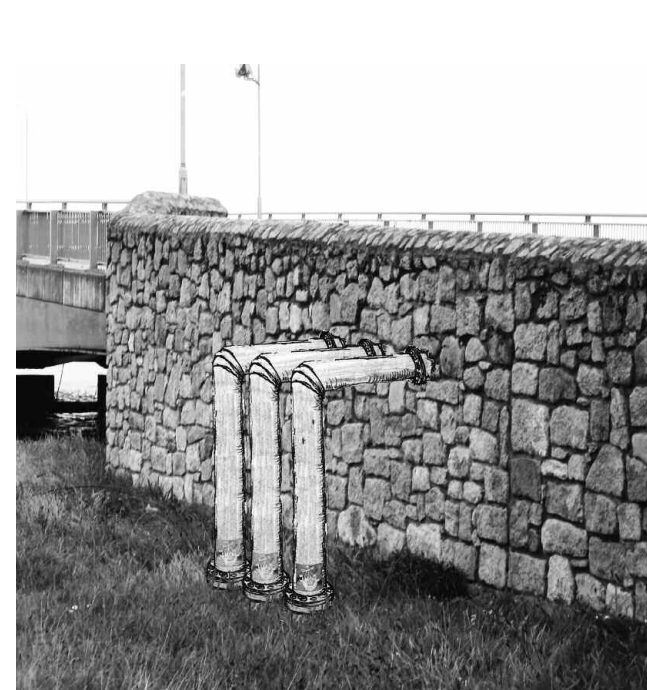
Other than comments made to the media by individual Council Members, the Borough Council had been remarkably quiet in offering an official reason for the refusal to appoint Dessardo. After forwarding an earlier draft of this article with a number of questions VAI received a statement issued on behalf of both Councils. It stated that the reason for rejection was that part of the proposed sculpture strayed outside of the 4 designated sites, which had been identified in the brief. On receiving this explanation we contacted the artist who stated that he had not been notified of this as a reason for his rejection.

Looking back at the locations described in the brief it is hard to see how both Councils reached their conclusion. It has to be said that the brief was not explicitly clear on defining the 4 sites. No plans were provided with the brief and the maps were of a size and scale that made them only useful for identifying the general area. Photographs of the site were more useful but again they were only provided at a thumbnail size and were not capable of defining the sites precisely. The text describing the site was also vague for example the extent of one of the sites is described as “on or around the Wexford bridge”. The Councils’ statement claims that the work strayed on to the Wexford Quays which were not part of the designated site. However, the element of the sculpture that is proposed for a small part of the Quays is also very much sited ‘around’ the Wexford bridge and is within an area that is identified in 3 out of the 6 photographs that were used to identify the particular site in the brief. There is one other aspect of Dessardo’s sculpture that was proposed as possibly being located on the Quays. However, in his proposal Dessardo clearly acknowledges that this is out side of the identified site and states that the particular element could alternatively be located in one of the designated sites.

So what exactly is it that led Wexford Borough Council to take the decision that it did? Why has it been so blatant in its rejection of Dessardo’s proposal? One could conclude that the simple fact of the matter is that it came down to a matter of ‘taste’ with Wexford Borough Councillors appointing themselves as the public guardians of artistic taste. One wonders if this is what the electorate had in mind when placing their votes, that their elected representatives would protect them from ‘bad’ art.

The arguments put forward by Councillor Lawlor on his radio interview with Derek Mooney are easily refutable. His assertion that the proposal did not reflect the maritime heritage or the history of the area or the people it represents hold little water. As argued by the artist and selection panel member Alan Counihan on the same radio show, Dessardo’s proposal, can easily be read as a work that is very conscious of the site, both in architectural, historical and social terms – and one that offered viewers an exciting and engaging experience.

During the radio interview Derek Mooney suggested that “wouldn’t it have been just fantastic if some artist had come up with the idea for a flock of Greenland white fronted geese that children could actually sit on. Wouldn’t it have just looked interesting, different, and lovely and gorgeous”. Councillor Lawlor eagerly agreed. Given the discrepancy between this and the County Councils stated

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

ambitions for its public art programme (the initial advert for the scheme stated that the commissioners welcome submissions that further the debate on what constitutes public art and Wexford County Councils web site stresses the function of public art “to provoke, to challenge, to change perceptions.”) it is difficult to see how this project could not have helped but end in failure and underlines the nagging question of why do local councillors feel so impelled to take it upon themselves to act as arbiters of artistic taste and quality?

Going back to more general procedural issues one can also see the Wexford situation as having arisen due to a persistent problem with the overall management structure of the percent for art scheme nationally. Despite the usefulness of the National Guidelines, commissioners still have to apply them on an individual basis – there is no central forum where they can go to for guidance or indeed share their experiences, both negative and positive, of the commissioning process. Therefore, it is often the case, that each time a competition is run there is, so to speak, a re-invention of the wheel.

Encouragingly the Arts Council identified the importance of addressing this issue in *Partnership for the Arts, in practice 2006 – 2008*, where they state a commitment to “examine the feasibility of a national resource service or support unit for the commissioning of public art”. Nonetheless, now that they are more than one-third of the way through the lifetime of this plan, there has been no publicised move to begin this process. In addition the Arts Council have not appointed a public art specialist since the contract of the last appointee, Annette Moloney expired in December 2005. Although the Arts Council have promised that the position will be advertised ‘shortly’. It is thus a sobering thought that without such a centralised resource, or public art specialist in place, that the risk to artists of experiencing a similar situation to what happened to Marco Dessardo in Wexford remains worryingly high.

Both the Arts Council and the Department of Arts Sport and Tourism were forwarded an earlier draft of this article and given ample time to respond. The Arts Council declined to comment and DAST did not respond.

Visual Artists Ireland

Comments upon and responses to this article, for publication in our next issue, are very welcome. In particular we would like to receive information on other competition winning proposals that did not get the go-ahead.

Marco Dessardo’s website currently documents the problems encountered by the artist with this commission, including downloads of the commission brief, his project proposal local press coverage along with correspondence with Wexford County and Borough Council – <http://dessardowexford.free.fr>

Notes

- (1) Various headlines from *The Wexford People* and *The Echo* on 12 and 13 December 2006.
- (2) *Wexford People* 13 Dec 2006 Council in Hot Water over Rejected Quay Sculpture “According to one councillor who described the episode as embarrassing, no-one seemed to really know what was happening or why the artist was there”
- (3) Will we spend €125,000 on statue nobody wants?. Patrick O’Connell. *The Echo*. 13 Dec 2006.
- (4) Derek Mooney Radio show. RTE Radio 1. Thursday 21 Dec 2006 “Labour Councillor, George Lawlor chats about a controversial proposal for a new sculpture in Wexford”
- (5) Email correspondence to the author from Alan Counihan.
- (6) From an article by Patrick O’Connell. *The Echo*. 13 Dec 2006.
- (7) *The National Guidelines for the Percent for Art Scheme*, which can be viewed or downloaded at www.publicart.ie
- (8) Ibid.