Unfinished Artefacts: The Case of Northern Irish Murals

Stefan Solleder

Introduction

A specific feature of the Northern Ireland conflict has been the painting of ethno-political murals through activists that support or are affiliated with the main actors of the conflict: republican and loyalist paramilitary organizations as well as non-paramilitary, ethno-political organizations.

The current “tradition” of mural painting dates back to the early 1980s when republicans began painting on a large scale during the republican hunger strike of 1981 and when loyalists started painting murals with themes different from those of the “old Protestant tradition” of mural painting, which originates in the early 20th century. The typical theme was the founding myth King Billy Crossing the Boyne after the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. The typical purpose of painting was to decorate Protestant streets for the anniversary of the battle on 12 July. These murals were each based on one of two oil paintings, one by Benjamin West (1780), one by Jan Wyck (late 17th century). The reference to these paintings has been made on murals by displaying king and horse in the same posture. One example (based on West) is a mural painted in 1991 in Bond’s Street, Waterside, Derry/Londonderry. The posture is typical although the king is not riding to the right as on the “original” but to the left (photo online at University of Ulster’s CAIN website, extract of Murals of Derry, page 81).

Murals are typically painted on “common” walls (residential and commercial buildings etc.) as visual displays connoting and marking everyday urban space ethno-politically (for recent loyalist examples on Newtownards Road in East Belfast see Google Street View, July 2015, for recent republican examples in Beechmount Avenue / Falls Road in West Belfast see Google Street View, May 2015). These two examples demonstrate the typical placement of murals in locations where many people can hardly avoid seeing them. In several other cases murals have been painted off the main streets in residential areas.

Concerning the political “quality” of the locations, “most murals are to be found in the working-class...
estates of Belfast and Derry, the areas that have been most affected by the violence and most polarised by sectarian divisions,\(^{[7]}\) meaning that these areas have been representing ethno-religiously quasi-homogenous “strongholds” of the main actors of the Northern Ireland conflict. With most murals having been painted within these areas, they are usually not means of communication between the two “communities,” but means of an internal process of political communication on both sides.\(^{[8]}\) (Figure 1 is an example for a loyalist mural that can be seen from “neutral” territory as well. Google Street View, April 2015, gives a good impression of the mural’s location.)

Figure 1. UVF mural displaying paramilitary emblems, masked and armed gunmen, and a statement concerning the Peace Process, painted in 2004.\(^{[9]}\)
Source, Stefan Solleder, photo taken on 12 April 2009.

If it does not reflect explicitly the political alignment of the local “community,” the “content” of a mural has at least the implicit approval of the local “community.”\(^{[10]}\) The murals change over time and are therefore “a sort of barometer of political ideology.”\(^{[11]}\) At the same time they serve the purpose of internal political mobilization.\(^{[12]}\) In this way they represent a facet of an ongoing and subtly changing political process. They are not unchanging anchors, nor are they passive symbols reflecting a static tradition or a resilient certainty, rather they are a dynamic element of an uncertain political context.\(^{[13]}\)

Furthermore, murals have not been completely uncontested—even within the areas where they have been painted.\(^{[14]}\) Rather, they are means of an ongoing process of permanent mobilization that has not necessarily been mobilizing whole local “communities” but at least a number of activists and supporters large enough to enable paramilitary organizations (in the past), political organizations (in the present) and/or ethno-political ideologies to play an important role. In this sense, murals indicate if and which ethno-political organizational actors and/or ideologies have a noteworthy amount of support in the area where they are painted.

Not surprisingly, one of the obvious characteristics of murals is that most of them disappear sooner or later: Some are replaced, some are erased completely. Yet these two types of disappearance do not reflect all possible transformations of the materiality of murals. Many murals do not just come and go; they are artefacts that quite easily become the objects of various material alterations by various actors. And all of these alterations are meaningful. Therefore, murals convey meaning not only as fixed, finished paintings with a certain “content” in certain locations at specific times but rather as ever-changing unfinished artefacts.

The next section will present a theoretical perspective on murals as artefacts. Based on this perspective a typology of the material alterations of murals will be developed afterwards. Finally, this article will discuss the implications of the ephemeral character of murals for doing research on them: The typology will be contrasted with current practices of documenting murals (collections and databases). The central argument is that murals, as unfinished artefacts with unpredictable “individual biographies,” resist attempts to find and ultimately document them.
Key to doing research on murals is to understand what one has found when spotting and documenting a mural: not just an image, not just an artefact, but also the ephemeral material instantiation of an artefact.

**Murals Are Images Are Artefacts**

Neil Jarman distinguishes between two dimensions of murals:

“For as well as being elaborate visual displays, the murals are also objects. As such they are more artefact than art. As artefacts they are produced to be seen at fixed sites and in specific locales, and an extension of their significance is generated by a semiotic dynamic which involves the images taking meaning from their location and the location in turn having a differing significance because of the paintings.”[15]

The underlying assumption behind this argumentation is the conception of murals as material objects, i.e. artefacts. As such they are inseparable from their materiality. Of course, they convey a certain “content”—messages and meanings—visually. But this is what they do, and not what they are.

This view is compatible with the definition of an image that was proposed by Leon Battista Alberti already in the 15th century and that is supported by the art historian Horst Bredekamp in his *Theorie des Bildakts (Theory of the Image Act)*.[16] According to this definition, any material object showing traces of human processing is an image. This definition makes the human-made materiality of an image one of its defining features (and not one of its aspects).

In this sense, Northern Irish murals are specific (layered) arrangements of paints of different colors, i.e. “paintings,” on specific walls in Northern Ireland.[17] The symbolic meanings of murals are inseparable from their materiality as they are constituted through it. The paint on the wall does not make up the full message conveyed by a mural. Because of their materiality murals necessarily have a location in time and space that in turn modifies what the paint on the wall conveys. Knowledge about this seems to guide the process of painting (be it consciously or unconsciously). Bill Rolston notes:

“[W]hich themes are displayed in murals, as well as when and where they are displayed, can speak volumes of the ideological stance of those supporting the mural and, more specifically, of shifts in those ideologies.”[18]

This means that murals are not symbolic expressions that appear at random in certain locations at certain times. The (selected) locations and times are constituents of the “messages.”

Furthermore, the symbolic “content” of a mural is not always and not only determined by the time of its “appearance,” the paint on the wall and the location of the wall. Once a mural is painted, it is inevitably subject to further human actions that go beyond its initial placement in a certain locale at a certain time. To be more specific: The materiality of murals does not only enable human actors to engage with murals (e.g. restore them, deface them etc.), it makes it impossible not to respond to a mural (even the “non-activity” of letting a mural decay can be considered to be a meaningful practice).

This article will focus on this aspect and develop a typology of what has been done with/to murals, i.e. their materiality, “on location” in Northern Ireland in the last 35 years. As Neil Jarman argues, “[m]any people have recorded the growing number of mural paintings and analysed their changing
Doing research of this kind implies tracing the alteration of the “content” of murals through time. Instead of focussing on the painting of new murals, this article will discuss the “fate” of murals as artefacts once they are painted—in this sense following an approach to murals put forward by Neil Jarman and Jonathan McCormick already in 1998 and 2005. The purpose of the typology being developed is to highlight how a focus on the materiality of murals opens up a broader perspective on the ways these images continue to produce meaning throughout their “lifetime.” The key to such an extended understanding of murals is a focus on the practices “prompted” or enabled by their materiality. Thus understood as unfinished artefacts, the cultural negotiations facilitated by murals revolve around these subsequent practices rather than the symbolic “content” of the depicted.

The Typology

In their article “Death of a Mural” McCormick and Jarman argue that

“if the creation of a mural is part of an active political process then disappearing an image is no less a political act. It becomes an active intervention on the built environment, an interaction with political discourse and propaganda and a means of re-imaging political meaning and context.”

They present a typology of the reasons for the disappearance of murals that includes “seven categories: (1) Retirement; (2) Redundancy; (3) Recycling; (4) Redevelopment; (5) Reclamation; (6) Remonstration and (7) Restoration.” The idea of this article is to develop an alternative typology with eight categories that overlap with the ones presented by Jarman and McCormick but moves the focus from questions about why changes occur towards an investigation of the effects of material changes. What the actors do alters the materiality of the murals, and therefore how the murals represent politics in Northern Ireland. This means that a typology of changes of the materiality of murals opens up a broader perspective on what murals convey as “barometers of political ideology.” Therefore, each type of action will be regarded as to what it demonstrates and not what causes it. The typology does not claim to be exhaustive, but represents the most common types beyond the “most obvious” process, the painting of a mural: (1) restoration, (2) defacement, (3) abandonment, (4) relocation, (5) replication, (6) modification, (7) erasure, and (8) replacement.

Table 1 maps the types identified by McCormick and Jarman to the types identified in this article. The second column indicates how the types identified by McCormick and Jarman are related to the types identified in this article. Each row can quasi be read as a “sentence.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>McCormick/Jarman</th>
<th>relation</th>
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<td>retirement (1)</td>
<td>is a combination of</td>
<td>defacement (2) and abandonment (3)</td>
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<td>redundancy (2)</td>
<td>causes</td>
<td>erasure (7) or replacement (8)</td>
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<td>recycling (3)</td>
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<td>redevelopment (4)</td>
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<td>reclamation (5)</td>
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<td>remonstration (6)</td>
<td>is expressed through</td>
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<td>restoration (7)</td>
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<td>replication (5)</td>
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Table 1. McCormick’s and Jarman’s typology mapped to the typology of this article.

Restoration, Defacement, and Abandonment

Restoration means that a mural is—depending on the amount of damage—either repaired or repainted completely on the same wall / in the
same location. One common cause of damage is the weather. It makes repairs from time to time possible: There is always the option to let a mural decay, to abandon it. Restoring a mural conveys a message beyond the “content” of a mural in its spatial context. It expresses that the mural is still important. Ironically, a mural with everlasting paint would not enable the actors to demonstrate its importance through repairing it. One example for restoration is the original Bobby Jackson mural that was repainted on the same wall every year from the late 1920s until 1994 (see below, sec. “Relocation and Replication”).

An example for the abandonment of a mural is documented in Figure 2. Since 2007, when the photograph was taken, the process of decay continued, presumably until 2015. Google Street View documents this process and that the wall was finally (cleaned from old paint?) and painted white in June 2015.


The case of abandonment documented in Figure 2 is different from that documented in Figure 3. The mural and its wall in Figure 3 became blocked when the house on the left-hand side was built. Originally, the mural faced Falls Road, a main road in a Catholic area in West Belfast. The wall was an excellent location for murals and was painted with at least one other mural (in two different versions) in 1994.[27] If a mural is abandoned in this manner, the message conveyed is different from that of a mural that is abandoned although not being blocked. In the one case, no information concerning the importance of the message of the mural is given. In the other case, the action of not-restoring a mural and its slow decay demonstrate that the mural has lost its importance.

Figure 2. Abandoned mural, Ebrington Street,
In other cases building activities destroy murals completely. One example is the predecessor of the Bobby Sands mural on the gable wall of the Sinn Féin office building on Falls Road (Figure 4).

In 1990 the first version of the mural was painted, followed by a second version in 1995. In November 1999 the whole building was demolished and rebuilt. *The Irish News* reported that “a party spokesman vowed it would be replaced” and that he assured “Bobby Sands will be back.” Afterwards, in 2000, the current version was painted by Danny Devenney and Marty Lyons. It has only been modified slightly since, presumably in the weeks before 20 April 2015. One could argue that the three different versions are three different murals—they differ and the current version has not even been painted on the same wall. While the original wall has vanished, however, the location with its basic features has not. The current wall is still the gable wall of a building on the same spot and the building still houses office rooms of Sinn Féin. The location makes these three wall paintings three different versions of one mural. The Bobby Sands mural is an example for the restoration of murals in cases in which their “canvas,” their wall, is coincidentally destroyed, but rebuilt.

In the case of the demolishing and rebuilding of a mural’s wall it is not “natural” decay that enables the actors to repair/repaint a mural, but
reconstruction processes that happen coincidentally. Nevertheless, these processes offer—just as “natural” decay—the actors the opportunity to underline the importance and symbolic value of a mural through restoring it.

The defacement of a mural offers the actors the opportunity to underline the importance of a mural either through restoration or through abandonment. Many murals have been damaged “by young people, by rival paramilitary groups, by political opponents and by the security forces.”[34] The Bobby Sands mural (Figure 4) was defaced the night before the opening of the new Sinn Féin office in 2000.[35] (For an example of a heavily damaged IRA mural see a photo in Tony Crowley’s collection.)[36] During the 1980s several republican murals were “paint bombed” by British security forces.[37] In other cases murals have been damaged with graffiti,[38] sometimes involving the acronyms of adversary paramilitary organizations.[39]

In the case of defacement through British security forces the muralists sometimes refrained from restoring the mural. They let the destruction caused by the adversary speak for itself. In one case the muralists added a plaque to a destroyed mural that read: “This mural was designed and painted by the creative talents of Derry republicans. It was vandalised by the destructive talents of the RUC and British Army. July 1984.”[40] McCormick and Jarman regard defacement as “an act of remonstration” against the existence of a mural.[41] This is plausible, even obvious. Nevertheless, the term defacement will be preferred. The reason is that protests and campaigns directed against murals that can result in the erasure or replacement of murals constitute another sub-type of remonstration.[42] In this point the causes of changes would enter the typology again and not the changes themselves. Rather, the two material processes erasure and replacement caused by remonstration should be included in the typology.

The combination of damage caused through weather or defacement and abandonment forms McCormick’s and Jarman’s type “retirement” (of a mural).[43] In order to highlight the active role played by the actors and in order to distinguish between two completely different processes (that can be linked), this article proposes to introduce the types abandonment and defacement instead.

In McCormick’s and Jarman’s typology “restoration” refers to the repainting of a mural’s original or modified version “whilst retaining the core message.”[44] The modification of a mural conveys in itself a message that is different from cases in which a mural is restored to its original state or replaced by a new mural. Nevertheless, this article supports McCormick’s and Jarman’s proposition not to categorize any differences between original and repainted version as modification. Rather, modification should be used in cases, where the “core message” is at least slightly changed.

Before turning to the processes of modification (as well as replacement and erasure), this article will demonstrate that there is a process similar to that of restoration, relocation, which in turn is similar to replication.

Relocation and Replication

Sometimes murals are being relocated, i.e. painted anew in another location, sometimes murals are replicated. Both processes are similar but can be distinguished. In the case of replication the theme of a mural “travels” through Northern Ireland and appears some time later in other murals. One example for this is a loyalist mural in Bond’s Street in Derry/Londonderry’s Waterside painted in 1997 by “Attitude Artwork”[45] (see Figure 5).
Figure 5. Eddie, *The Trooper*, as UFF member, Bond’s Street, Waterside, Derry/Londonderry. The badge on Eddie’s shoulder reads “UFF” (Ulster Freedom Fighters). On the right-hand side two murals in the Catholic Bogside of Derry/Londonderry can be seen (see Google Street View, June 2015, for these murals). Source, Stefan Solleder, photo taken on 15 July 2007.

The mural is based on the cover artwork of the single *The Trooper* released by the heavy metal band Iron Maiden in 1983 (for the cover see Iron Maiden’s official Youtube channel). After 1997 several loyalist murals were painted based on Iron Maiden’s *The Trooper* cover artwork, among them one in Carrickfergus in 2000, one in Belfast in 2001 and one in Belfast before 2003. These three murals are clearly based on *The Trooper*, but implement and combine this theme with other visual elements in completely different ways than the 1997 version. Therefore the process of modification is in this special case involved as well. The *Trooper* theme presumably “traveled” from the 1997 mural (the oldest one) to the other murals, what demonstrates the relevance of this theme beyond its original locale and indicates a broader symbolic process. The diffusion of the *Trooper* theme happened although the original idea behind painting it on a mural was “local”: The zombie was meant to symbolize the skeleton in the coat of arms of Derry/Londonderry descending from the city walls and defending Protestants. It is therefore likely that the *Trooper* murals in other locations conveyed a similar, yet slightly different “message.”

A typical case of relocation is the mural in Figure 1. Painted in 2004, it is the nearly exact “copy” of a mural that was painted a few meters away on another wall in 1995. The original mural was destroyed on 25 February 2000 when the house was demolished to make way for a community center on site.

Another example for relocation is a loyalist mural that was originally painted by muralist Bobby Jackson in the late 1920s in the Fountain area of Derry/Londonderry. It was repainted each year until the wall collapsed in 1994 and repainted (with a few modifications) in 1995 on another wall in the same area (see Google Street View, July 2011). Rolston calls the new version a “replica.” The argument of this article is that the term “replication” should be reserved for cases like the *Trooper* mural above. The reason is, that the Bobby Jackson mural was object of a process of restoration that took place in another location. Therefore, the term relocation might be more appropriate. Replication should be reserved for those cases, in which a “copy” of a mural is painted and where the aspect of “continuing” a specific mural is not involved.

Acts of relocation endow the respective mural with a special importance and meaning as its producers could as well simply refrain from repainting it in another location. Other murals did not even experience a restoration on the same wall after being severely damaged just hours after their completion. In August 1989, a mural was painted on the wall of the Sinn Féin building on Falls Road and destroyed through “paint bombs” by British security forces only six hours later. The mural was not restored. Instead, a new mural was painted on the same wall. This does not necessarily mean that the mural had already become obsolete. Rather, the argument works the other way round: The restoration as well as the relocation of a mural can be interpreted as demonstrating its very special symbolic status.
The type *replication* is not at all included in McCormick’s and Jarman’s typology. Relocation is a process that can occur in the case of “redevelopment,” i.e. when buildings or whole streets of houses are refurbished or demolished and replaced with new buildings. \[58] Redevelopment is therefore a prerequisite for the process of relocation and relocation is the process that conveys meaning.

**Modification, Replacement, and Erasure**

The changes of the Bobby Sands mural (Figure 4) are obvious, but minor compared to changes that occurred in other cases of modification and that demonstrate deeper symbolic changes. One example is a republican mural in Ballymurphy Crescent painted in 2002\[59] (see photo in Tony Crowley’s collection). \[60] The mural is a memorial to four male IRA members that were killed in action during the Northern Ireland conflict. In the background they can be seen together with two female republican activists and weapons while having a rest in a safe house. In the lower foreground the portraits of three of the IRA members can be seen, on the right-hand side the mural is dominated by the fourth, Tommy Tolan, standing hands on hips and wearing plain clothes, i.e. a brown suit. An earlier version of this mural was painted in 2001/2002 (see photo in Tony Crowley’s collection). \[61] In the original version Tolan is not wearing a brown suit but a *green military jacket*, blue jeans, and black leather gloves. And his hands are not on his hips, but *holding a rifle*.

The modification of this mural can be interpreted as a symbolic de-paramilitarization. First, the rifle, the army jacket and the black gloves are gone in the later version of the mural. Second, Tolan is represented in two “modes.” Both versions depict him in paramilitary “mode” in the background: no army clothes, but standing next to a heavy weapon, a RPG7 rocket launcher. While the first version shows Tolan only while being in the “underground”—in a safe house in the background and “ready for action” in the foreground—the later version involves a Tolan in civilian “mode” in the foreground. This can be interpreted as a symbolic popularization of an IRA activist of the past in the sense that he is represented not only as a paramilitary but also as a “common man.”

Such a modification of a mural demonstrates that murals should not be interpreted in isolation from past murals. The interpretation of a modified mural should not only be based on what it depicts after modification. Rather, its symbolic “content” after modification is as well constituted through what it does not depict anymore.

Similarly, the processes of erasure and replacement are revealing as well. Erasure means, first, the complete removal (e.g. with white or brick-colored paint) of a mural that is not followed by the immediate painting of a new mural (replacement) or, second, the destruction of a mural through redevelopment processes that is not followed by its relocation or later restoration in the same spot. As McCormick and Jarman show, erasure and replacement can be caused by “redundancy” (the mural has become obsolete or inappropriate) and “remonstration” (protest against a mural succeeds). “Reclamation” (a wall is reclaimed and the mural is erased) equals more or less erasure (the erasure of a mural implies control over the wall). Nevertheless, reclamation focuses more on the process that leads to the erasure of a mural than on the material process of erasure and its demonstrative character. “Recycling” (the wall) in McCormick’s and Jarman’s list consequently equals modification (or replacement).\[62] Sometimes painting over murals was publicly declared to be a “clean-up” campaign, for example prior to the painting over of several loyalist paramilitary murals in the lower Shankill area of West Belfast with support of the “local community.”\[63] In such a case, painting over murals is endowed with a certain meaning beyond its material dimension.
In some cases the erasure is done so badly that it is clear that a mural is hidden below the outer layer of paint. Contours of the hidden mural might still be visible, sometimes the white paint on a red brick building is simply an “eye-catcher,” sometimes the paint is not opaque and/or only on those parts of the wall where the mural was (see Figure 6 for an erased loyalist mural).

One of the Trooper murals was among the murals that were erased in 2003 in the lower Shankill area. Google Street View, April 2015, reveals that the Trooper mural has been about to make its way back through the layers of paint that cover it. In the lower left and right corner the Trooper mural depicted a human skull. The left skull has been reappearing, since the layers of paint covering it have nearly completely fallen off. The “returning” of the Trooper mural has a “creepy” aspect since the Trooper (Eddie, the mascot of Iron Maiden) is undead—a zombie. For sure, there are no supernatural powers at work in the lower Shankill area, but it is still macabre that one of the skulls on this paramilitary mural is surfacing again. This case might be unique (especially concerning its “creepy” aspect), but it is one of many cases where murals do not go away after being covered with white paint.

The hasty erasure of murals demonstrates that the respective murals have not only become obsolete or unimportant, but downright inappropriate. Furthermore, such walls are still marked. They have neither been transformed back into “common” walls, nor has the white paint marking the locations of past murals that had become inappropriate been erased itself through new murals. Nevertheless, these walls demonstrate change.

An example for the erasure of murals through redevelopment processes is the UDA/UFF mural painted (presumably) around 2000 opposite the Trooper mural (see Figure 7). According to Google Street View the mural had already vanished in May 2009 when the whole house had been painted. Apparently, no other mural has been painted on that wall at least until June 2015 (the Trooper mural still existed).
In this case the erasure is “subtle” as it is molded into the refurbishment of a whole building. No matter whether the erasure happened “coincidentally” or whether it was accompanied by demands for an erasure, the way the mural was removed—not leaving a trace—does not demonstrate what a badly covered mural demonstrates. The non-appearance of a repaint or a new mural together with the wall being painted properly and in the same fashion and color as the whole house involve not just the erasure of a mural, but also the erasure of a mural site. The wall has been reclaimed as a blank “common” wall of a “common” house—a symbolic message in itself.

One republican example for the replacement of murals is the Bobby Sands mural (Figure 4). Its first version was painted in 1990 on a wall on which at least three IRA murals were painted in 1989. The visual representation of Bobby Sands and the 1981 hunger strike tells a different story than the representation of the armed campaign of the IRA.

Figure 8 gives an example for a loyalist mural that was replaced in 2012. Located at the northern entrance to Sandy Row and displaying an armed and masked gunman together with a slogan that clearly marks territory, it was replaced with a King Billy mural (see photo on Extramural Activity).

The new King Billy mural is not a King Billy Crossing the Boyne mural, since it merely displays a portrait of the king. Nevertheless, it refers explicitly to the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. On the one hand, it signals a return from paramilitary murals back to the “old tradition” of painting King Billy murals, seemingly “reversing” the process that took place, e. g., on the wall on which the Trooper mural was painted. The latter was painted in 1997 on the same wall as the King Billy Crossing the Boyne mural painted in 1991 and mentioned in the beginning of this article. On the other hand, it is an unusual and therefore new “depiction” of the king. This case of replacement demonstrates that the meaning conveyed by a replacing mural is as much dependent on the replaced mural as it is on its own “content.”

Practices of Documenting Murals

As this article demonstrated, not only the original “content” of murals (how they are painted in a certain location at a certain time) determines their meaning and significance. The “fate” of murals and mural sites is meaning-generating as well. Nevertheless, processes like restoration, defacement, abandonment, relocation, replication, modification, erasure, and replacement have not
been documented as thoroughly as the painting of murals. Data about what was painted when (and where) is available. Tony Crowley and Bill Rolston have done a great job taking photos of hundreds of murals since the 1980s and making them publicly available (Rolston does typically only mention the date of painting, in some cases only the date when the photo was taken; Crowley includes—if available—the date when the mural was painted and the photo was taken). Projects that began documenting murals in the last two decades are Jonathan McCormick’s Mural Directory and, launched a few years ago, the website Extramural Activity. McCormick documents when a mural was first visited by him and its state at the time of his last visit (still existing, decaying, or already painted over). Sometimes even modifications or the replacement of a mural are mentioned.

Furthermore, media reports in the last two decades, Google Street View’s documentation of Northern Irish streets in recent years, and of course many other academic accounts of murals enable in several cases the reconstruction of when a mural was erased, replaced etc. (most of the time for processes in the last one or two decades, sometimes these processes can only be inferred from different murals that were painted on the same wall at different times).

The ways in which murals are documented appears to depend on the (theory-based) focus of attention of those documenting the murals. McCormick’s collection seems to reflect his (and Jarman’s) theoretical framework. Crowley’s collection gives (indirectly) information on the “span of life” for each mural (painted and photographed). Rolston’s documentations seem to reflect a focus on the painting and “content” of murals and their overall changes. Media reports, when they document the replacement or erasure of murals, apparently reflect (or are even part of) the larger political and symbolic processes leading to changes of the murals and their materiality. Google Street View, finally, can be considered to “coincidentally” document murals. They document streets and in doing so murals as well. Figure 9 documents a loyalist mural dedicated to Oliver Cromwell and painted in 2002.

It was also captured by Google Street View in July 2008. Interestingly, their algorithm for blurring faces was automatically applied to the mural and resulted in the faces of Oliver Cromwell and some of his soldiers being blurred.

The purpose, context, and/or theoretical framework of documenting murals seems to determine how murals as artefacts are “archived” (concerning the recording and publication of metadata as well as the handling of photographic material; see Cromwell on Google Street View). Similarly, typologies of the material changes of murals are subject to these preconditions. Yet, no matter how elaborate and detailed these theoretical preconditions might be and no matter how detailed documentations and databases of murals might be in theory, there is simply a practical obstacle to documenting all the details of mural-“biographies.” The huge number of murals that still exist makes it impossible to document everything that happens to all of them on a material level (for most murals of the past this data is lost anyway). Documenting all the existing murals in a certain area, their appearance and their “fate” is an extremely time-consuming if not impossible task.
Conclusion

What then is “the point” of elaborating a typology of the material changes of murals if this typology cannot fully be implemented empirically (or maybe only for a couple of murals)?

The typology clarifies how research based on “found”/documented murals should be conducted: Not taking what can be “found” as what “was/is” forms the basis for thorough empirical research on murals.

If we do research “in the field” (and not “in the laboratory”) and/or if we work historically (doing research on ephemeral artefacts like murals quite easily becomes historical research) the key to handling “gaps” in our data is to theorize the artefacts “we found” and those “we lost” in such a manner that we are still able to ask questions and answer them on the basis of those “we found.” Theorizing the ones “we lost” is presumably not the most obvious, but nevertheless an equally important part of the task.

If, e. g., we want to use the available data on murals for a study that seeks to trace the developments of murals throughout the Northern Ireland conflict and to relate these developments to the course of the conflict, one option is to specify what the changes of the “content” of murals mean theoretically: They mark the entry of new themes, “stories,” issues etc. into the “public discourse” and therefore into the chain of events that makes up the Northern Ireland conflict. The state-of-the-art research on murals highlights that they are important means of mobilization (see above, Introduction). One could ask then, which “content” entered the “public discourse” when, i. e. in which conflict situations. In a next step the “content” of murals could be interpreted in the context of these conflict situations in order to specify in detail what the murals did on the symbolic level, how and why the murals have been important tools for mobilization. From this perspective we could ask how the murals represented the past of the conflict until the time of painting and how the murals “legitimized” the conflict and its “story so far” in these moments. And we could ask how the murals enabled the further course of the conflict in these moments. This approach can reflect the knowledge that murals have “biographies” and can justify the “gaps” left concerning these “biographies” by highlighting that murals did and do not reflect eternal certainties, but attempts to make sense of the past.

To sum up: Treating murals as artefacts tells us how to treat them as images. Furthermore, it tells us how to treat visual data about murals (photographs of murals) that is available in the various publications mentioned above or that we collect ourselves on location in Northern Ireland: as snapshots of ephemeral material instantiations of artefacts.

REFERENCES

[1] The main paramilitary organizations have been (Provisional) IRA (Irish Republican Army) and INLA (Irish National Liberation Army) on the republican (“pro-Irish-Catholic”) side and UDA (Ulster Defence Association) and UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) on the loyalist (“pro-British-Protestant”) side. For a more detailed definition of “republican” and “loyalist” see Martin Melaugh and Brendan Lynn, “A Glossary of Terms Related to the Conflict,” CAIN (Conflict Archive on the INternet), 2 December 2015, http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/glossary.htm.

[2] There has been as well an increasing number of Northern Irish murals that are “non-aligned.” “Non-aligned” means that a mural is neither republican nor loyalist and not explicitly involved in the construction of ethnic boundaries. Typical topics are social issues like public health, suicide prevention, anti-drug...
initiatives etc. (see Jonathan McCormick, “A Directory of Murals in Northern Ireland,” CAIN (Conflict Archive on the INternet), 23 September 2015, http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/mccormick/; Extramural Activity, “About,” Extramural Activity, accessed 3 October 2015, http://extramuralactivity.com/about/). This article will not focus on this type of murals, but instead on the practice of painting aligned, ethnopolitical murals. Presumably, the typology of changes of the materiality of murals developed here is applicable to “non-aligned” murals as well.


[17] Sometimes murals are not painted directly on the surface of walls but on wooden boards that are later attached to walls (see McCormick and Jarman, “Death of a Mural,” 56, and own observations in Northern Ireland).


[22] Ibid.


[28] Ibid., Plate 65.


[35] Ibid.


[38] McCormick and Jarman, “Death of a Mural,” 56.


[42] Ibid., 65–67.
Ibid., 55–57.

Ibid., 67–69.

Crowley, “Murals of Northern Ireland,” mni01901; Murals of Derry, 69.

The cover displays the band’s mascot, Eddie, a zombie, dressed as a 19th century British soldier storming towards the viewer across a devastated battlefield. The Trooper is related to the Charge of the Light Brigade during the Battle of Balaclava 1854 (Crimean War). The official live video clip of The Trooper makes explicit references to this battle. Eddie appeared—with a few exceptions—on every Iron Maiden cover, each time as a different figure in a different context.


Rolston, Drawing Support 3, Plate 83.


The only visual constant is the posture of the forward-storming soldier-zombie. In this respect, they are similar to the King Billy Crossing the Boyne murals.

Judy Vannais, “Postcards from the Edge: Reading Political Murals in the North of Ireland,” Irish Political Studies 16, no. 1 (2001): 133–160, 149, doi:10.1080/07907180108406636. The skeleton in the Coat of Arms is said to be related to the Siege of Derry through a Catholic army in the 17th century (see Rolston, Drawing Support, 1992, Plate 13).


Rolston, Drawing Support 1992, Plate 1.

Rolston, Drawing Support 2, Plate 99.

Ibid.

Rolston, Drawing Support, 2010, vi.


Crowley, “Murals of Northern Ireland,” mni02038.

Ibid., mni00651; Extramural Activity, “Safe House”; Rolston, Drawing Support 3, Plate 37.


Coleman, “Writing’s on the Wall for Graffiti in Shankill.”


McCormick and Jarman, “Death of a Mural,” 58.
Coleman, “Writing’s on the Wall for Graffiti in Shankill.”


The wall was painted with a mural already in 1991 (see Rolston, Drawing Support 2, Plate 8) if not earlier.

Rolston, Drawing Support, 1992, Plates 73–74, 90.


Rolston, Drawing Support 3, Plate 87.

Crowley, “Murals of Northern Ireland”; Rolston, Drawing Support, 1992; Rolston, Drawing Support 2; Rolston, Drawing Support 3; Rolston, Drawing Support, 2010; Rolston, Drawing Support 4.


Google Street View is an excellent source for giving a first impression of what murals look like in their spatial context and to determine when murals still existed or were already gone. Furthermore, for several murals that ceased to exist long ago, the exact locations and walls of these murals can be identified from the desk (in cases where only the names of streets are given in documentations of murals).

Rolston, Drawing Support 3, Plate 100.