A Painted City: Belfast's Tradition of Public Art

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Dedication

To the Mayer Men:

Walter, for being my home base.

Eli, for helping me find my purpose.

Isaac, for bringing me joy.

Abstract

A Painted City: Belfast's Tradition of Public Art emerged out of an interest in the artistic impact of the century long tradition of political murals in the city of Belfast. The intention was to determine if the presence of the painted murals and the act of painting in public influenced the artistic production of contemporary artists. This research centres on artists and arts professionals with interviews focused primarily on the artists' training and artistic practices. A thematic analysis of the interviews sheds light on the shared experiences of mural artists from both sides of the sectarian divide. By providing a brief history of political mural painting in Belfast, and linking that history to traditional or sanctioned murals created by trained artists, this thesis demonstrates that the political murals are an important part of the history of public art in the city. Studying the murals as examples of public art, rather than only political propaganda, further demonstrates their influence on the city's visual culture. While Belfast's political mural trends can be linked to public art movements by academic artists, the research shows that the self-taught political muralists have had the most significant influence on the city's use of painted walls as an essential part of its creative identity. Discussing these influential artists using the language of art criticism validates their practices and connects them to the field of art history. The research finds that self-taught artists and especially those who create political murals have had a significant impact on younger artists working today in the contemporary Street Art movement. With government and private sector efforts to improve Belfast's urban landscape, the continued presence of the political murals provides a visual record of the city's past. As the city continues to manage the peace process, question of the future of the political murals is one that has yet to be answered. However, a new generation of artists have flooded the city with art in public spaces creating a dialogue between the city's past conflicts and its hopeful future.

Declaration of Originality

Declaration: I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own original research and does not contain the work of any other individual. All sources that have been consulted have been identified and acknowledged in the appropriate way.

Signature of Candidate:

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Signature of Supervisor:

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Professor Eugene O'Brien

Date:

13 January 2025___________

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This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance of Professor Eugene O'Brien, whose support reversed decades of self-doubt in my ability to research and write effectively. Professor O'Brien provided thoughtful insight that challenged me to dig deeper into the art theory supporting my research while encouraging me to have confidence in the direction of the thesis. Along with Professor O'Brien, the leadership of Dr Julianne Stack and Dr Rebecca Breen, of Mary Immaculate College's Research and Graduate School, created the most supportive environment I could have imagined. My second supervisor, Stephanie Mitchell, was also instrumental in providing feedback regarding current art theory and criticism. Her input proved to be invaluable. I could not have imagined a better collaborative process with these two supervisors, and the Research and Graduate School team at Mary Immaculate College.

As with many who study the murals of Northern Ireland, Bill Rolston's seminal research on the topic has proven to be the foundation on which this thesis was built, and his influence can be found throughout the following pages. The tireless efforts of Cathal Woods and Seosamh MacCoille, of Extramural Activity, to chronicle the ever-changing murals in Belfast have made it possible for scholars from around the world to study these important works. The pair have compiled a truly valuable archive of an ephemeral artform, one that deserves to be publicly funded and protected. Adam Turkington's efforts to promote the work of street artists through audio interviews and film, along with his willingness to speak to scholars and journalists on behalf of the Belfast Street Art

movement has elevated the city's profile within the movement internationally. His published candid conversations with local artists about the state of public art in Belfast have provided much needed context for this research. Turkington's insight and historical knowledge of the city's painted walls was invaluable. Most importantly, this project would not have been possible without the generosity of time and spirit provided by the artists and arts administrators who were interviewed. The evolution of the thesis relied heavily on the voices of artists, and each person provided context that shaped the thesis's direction. The artists' personal perspectives are the driving force of the pages that follow, and it is my hope that by focusing on their insight, this thesis will demonstrate their value to the creative culture of the city of Belfast.

Portions of this thesis have been disseminated at the following conferences:

Foundations of Art: Theory and Education Conference, Panel: Talking Place: Public Art and Geographic Narrative. Presentation: *The Belfast Story and the Power of Public Art,* Spring 2023, Denver, Colorado.

American Conference for Irish Studies National Conference, Panel: The Troubles in Print, Paint, and St. Patrick's Day. Presentation: *Belfast's Murals as Cultural Touchstone for the Irish Diaspora,* Summer 2023, San Jose, California.

North American Conference for British Studies, Panel: Women and the Reimagining of Modern Ireland and Northern Ireland. Presentation: *Aerosol Revolution: Contemporary Women Street Artists and their Role in a Changing Belfast,* Autumn 2023, Baltimore, Maryland.

American Conference for Irish Studies National Conference, Panel: Landscape, Place, and Identity in the Visual Arts in Contemporary Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Presentation: *Women Are Watching: International Artists and Belfast's Painted Walls,* Summer 2024, Limerick, Ireland.

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List of Abbreviations

CNR:	Catholic/Nationalist/Republican
BID:	Business Improvement District
BPttA:	Building Peace through the Arts
DUP:	Democratic Unionist Party
IRA:	Irish Republican Army
LTA:	Learning Through Art
PIRA:	Provisional Irish Republican Army
PUL:	Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist
PUP:	Progressive Unionist Party
RUC:	Royal Ulster Constabulary
UDA:	Ulster Defence Association
UFF:	Ulster Freedom Fighters
UVF:	Ulster Volunteer Force

Introduction

Belfast is often regarded as a divided city. Whether through self-imposed religious and ethnic segregation, or division due to the 'peace walls' erected during the period of armed conflict between the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (CNR) community and the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist (PUL) community[1]. The walls of division constructed during this period known as 'The Troubles' have been maintained, and the city continues to find itself divided by both physical and psychological barriers. Though there are efforts to move past this perception and offer a better narrative of the city and its people, Belfast is marked by generations of political murals, which provide an artistic legacy of the city's history of division.

This thesis evaluates political murals in Belfast through the lens of their role as public art. If murals are treated as public art, rather than as solely political propaganda, one can accurately gauge the way in which they have impacted current art movements and also evaluate how they fit within the larger context of the visual art culture of the region. In

[1] As this thesis continues, CNR and PUL, rather than Catholic, nationalist, republican, Protestant, unionist or loyalist, will be used to refer to any mural, artist, or community member that is associated with either side of the sectarian divide. Since the meaning and implications of these words have changed over the decades, it is unclear which term each artist would have used to self-identify. Therefore, this thesis will not attempt to place a specific moniker onto the individuals. Traditionally, both loyalism and unionism are concerned with the continuation of a union with the United Kingdom. Though the two words are often used interchangeably, each person's definition of what constitutes a loyalist versus a unionist may differ. To some, loyalism is considered ethnic nationalism of Ulster Protestants, while others see loyalism as a class distinction or a stance that supports militant action to stay within the United Kingdom. Similarly, the terms nationalist and republican are often used interchangeably, though to the community they have subtle differences with the former being in favor of a thirty-two county Ireland solution through government action and the latter being open to militant action.

published scholarship, government programming, and community events, murals are often equated with other forms of cultural and political display rather than visual art. However, murals follow the formal elements and principles of visual art. They adhere to the definitions of public art set out by scholars in the field, and many of their artists can be categorized as outsider, folk, or self-taught artists. More than disposable bunting or a temporary bonfire, the Belfast murals are the most enduring and prominent elements of cultural display. They are the visual and artistic backdrop of the lives of the community, and their presence has informed the way the public chooses to express themselves through painted walls. Political murals are a visible part of the city's artistic culture. Studying artwork like Belfast's murals as both an artistic expression and a historical document enhances our understanding of the current visual culture of the city. By bringing the sectarian images into the context of Belfast's history of mural painting, public art, and art made outside of the traditional fine art institutions, these illustrations of Belfast's history can be evaluated on more than just partisan grounds.

Though there is significant research published on the topic of the murals, there is a dearth of scholarship about the murals in the field of art history. However, this thesis relies on art history theory and criticism, rather than on texts specifically about the political murals, for the theoretical support. The definition of public art established by Cher Krause Knight in her seminal text *Public Art: Theory, Practice, and Populism* is used to demonstrate how the political murals are, indeed, examples of successful public art. Public art is defined by Krause Knight as art that is 'designated for a larger audience and placed to attract their attention; it intends to provide aesthetic experiences that edify, commemorate, or entertain; and its messages are comprehensible to generalized audiences'

(Krause Knight 2008, 22).

Additionally, the experiences of the artists of the political murals are centred in this research. Artists' training and background is examined in conjunction with an exploration of the art theory associated with outsider art, folk art, and artists who are self-taught to establish that the murals should be studied and valued as a part of these art historical traditions. With a study of artists working outside of fine art institutions, the following text also examines the processes by which the city's artists continue this community-based tradition, demonstrating that city's most influential artists can be found working in public art and community art programming, not necessarily within the traditional fine art practices.

Belfast is not only home to a rich political mural tradition, but it also has one of the most vibrant Street Art scenes in the world. Urban Street Art festivals like the annual Hit the North bring artists from all over the world to adorn the city's gables, temporary fencing, and peace walls with murals. The Street Art movement is multi-national, anti-sectarian, and embraces numerous artistic styles. Some of the artists working within the Belfast Street Art movement see their work as a direct response to the city's political murals (Cooper and Costello, 2017). They seek to show the world that Belfast is more than a divided city. Street Art curator and advocate, Adam Turkington, states, 'we already had a tradition of murals and writing on walls here, which is more often than not associated with division. So, to create a body of work that is a counter narrative to that is really powerful' (Cooper and Costello, 2017). In addition to the Street Art movement, Belfast has experienced an influx of government arts programming, community-initiated projects, and small business efforts to refurbish the city and replace some of the more obvious sectarian

imagery with murals that are less overtly divisive. As well as evaluating the Belfast political murals as examples of public art, new Belfast public art programming is studied to determine if the move to fill the city with non-sectarian public art has impacted the city's creative identity.

By bringing the political murals into an art-historical context, evaluating artists' training as well as their creative process, and discussing the impact the murals have had on Belfast's artistic legacy, this research demonstrates that the political murals of Northern Ireland are more than a visual expression of sectarianism. Rather, they are firmly grounded in the history of public art in a region with a century-long mural tradition, and they are the visual representations of two narratives of a shared experience. They can, along with the new mural movements, serve as evidence of a historical movement and commemorations of cultures.

Therefore, the main objectives of this thesis are to establish the characteristics of public art along with the accepted definitions of outsider art, folk art, and the art of self-taught artists to demonstrate how the political murals fit within the parameters of each. Formal, iconographical, and contextual analysis of political murals will bring sectarian images into the greater context of Belfast's history of mural painting in order to evaluate the images on more than partisan grounds. Political murals will be discussed within their place in the history of public art, giving a fuller understanding of the images and their impact on the current creative identity of the city. This research will demonstrate that if the political mural tradition continues, it may be possible to view them as the visual representation of an authentic experience from a specific period in Belfast, while also placing them in the context of a tradition of mural painting and public art in the region.

With an appraisal of artists working within the Street Art movement, this thesis will determine that the presence of the political murals has influenced generations of artists and the creative identity of the city, making mural painting, and now contemporary Street Art, one of the city's most significant creative expressions.

Literature Review

This project aims to fill a gap in the scholarship focused on the political murals. Historically, they are rarely treated as art. In fact, Bill Rolston, the established expert on the topic of murals in Northern Ireland, writes in his first volume of *Drawing Support*, a series of five books pictorially cataloguing the murals, 'it is easy to dismiss the political murals of the North of Ireland. Established artists and art historians do so on the grounds that they are not art' (Rolston, 2010, i). However, if the characteristics of public art along with outsider art, folk art, and self-taught artists introduced in this thesis are used, these images are affirmed as the most pervasive and possibly most impactful examples of art in the region.

A thorough literature review of the scholarship on this topic shows that, though there are a few books and many journal and newspaper articles about the murals, they are generally written for the fields of sociology, anthropology, or political science. Much of the scholarship about the political murals of Northern Ireland categorizes them as a form of cultural display rather than as art. They are grouped with flags, bunting, kerbstone painting, bonfires, and parades. For example, in Neil Jarman's study of the visual culture of Northern Ireland, *Material Conflicts,* murals are discussed after a long history of parades, banners, and flags. Jarman's primary goals regarding murals in this text are

twofold: he seeks to 'discuss the semiotics of the paramilitary iconography and consider how these groups use both new and established symbols to situate themselves within the wider unionist tradition and legitimise themselves in the political arena', as well as document the republican mural tradition as part of a broader 'culture of resistance' (Jarman, 1997, 215; 234). In Jack Santino's text *Signs of War and Peace,* murals make up a very small section of a thorough discussion of public symbols of conflict in Northern Ireland (Santino, 2001). Though Dominic Bryan and Gillian McIntosh address murals in their article 'Symbols: sites of creation and contest in Northern Ireland,' their primary focus is on the changes in symbolism, since the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. The changes in symbolism along with evaluations of how those symbols reflect 'shifts in stance' are also found in Tony Crowley's extensive writing on the topic (Crowley, 2011; Crowley, 2015; Crowley 2022, 87).

Historically, published materials on this topic focus on the ways in which the murals have reinforced sectarianism and influenced identity. Judy Vannais states, 'the primary purpose of the paintings is providing a touchstone for cultural identity and a sense of belonging within communities struggling for meaningful identity' (Vannais 2000, 21). In the 2006 article 'Local Symbols, Global Networks: Rereading the Murals of Belfast,' Debbie Lisle challenges 'the notion that the political murals of Belfast simply reinforce those static [sectarian] boundaries' (Lisle 2006, 28). Rather, she argues that the murals can be re-interpreted to demonstrate that the 'two communities' reading of the murals glosses over the much more complex identities and societal structures that exist in a city that has a growing diverse population (Lisle, 2006).

More recently, much scholarly attention has been paid to the Art Council of

Northern Ireland's Building Peace Through Art: Re-imaging Communities Programme, which 'aimed to address poor community relations by encouraging communities to reflect on and plan for ways of replacing divisive imagery with more positive concepts - succeeding in challenging communities and their use of symbolism' (Wallace Consulting January 2016, 6). Tony Crowley, in his 2011 article 'The Art of Memory: The Murals of Northern Ireland and the Management of History' evaluates the state funded Re-imaging Communities Programme and is critical of how the effort to replace sectarian murals with apolitical imagery supposes that the community in question is offended by sectarian mural content. Crowley observes that this is not often the case, and the programme can be seen to have impacted the community's sense of identity (Crowley 2011, 31). Rolston also addresses the Re-imaging Communities Programme and concludes that 'to lose the political content along with the form of expression would be an ignominious end for this unique and lasting art form in Northern Ireland' (Rolston 2012, 462). The most recent assessment of the Re-imaging Communities Programme comes from Katharine Keenan in her 2022 book *Belfast Imaginary: Art and Urban Reinvention.* Though her text evaluates parades and festivals as well, Keenan qualifies the murals as art and brings attention to 'third way' murals; a term she uses to describe murals that are 'officially sanctioned, via financial, technical, and logistical support, by the municipal government in Belfast and are meant to be socially inclusive and family friendly' (Keenan 2022, 8). Whether writing about the political murals themselves, or their replacement, most of these scholars continue to focus on how the murals have impacted identity, sectarianism, and shared spaces. This thesis, however, will shift the focus to the impact that the political murals, along with the efforts to change them, have had on the creative culture of the city.

The topic of the murals' impact on tourism is one that runs through much of the published materials about the murals since the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. In *Murals and Tourism: Heritage, Politics and Identity,* a collection of essays regarding the burgeoning international mural tourism industry, the section on Northern Ireland covers an array of topics: Maria T. Simone-Charteris evaluates the Northern Ireland government efforts to Re-image the murals, Siun Carden focuses on the presence of the Irish language in West Belfast murals, and Katy Radford evaluates the murals as trauma tourism (Skinner and Jolliffe, 2017). In each of these essays, still, there is little discussion of the murals as art, though Radford does use the term 'artist' for Rita Duffy, a traditionally trained artist and member of the Royal Ulster Academy who created a photographic mural in collaboration with the Shankill Women's Centre in Belfast (Skinner and Jolliffe 2017, 256). While sectarianism, identity, and tourism play a role in the following chapters, this thesis seeks to steer the mural conversation toward the intention of the mural artists, the influence of the political murals on artists working today, and the shared history of art within the public sphere.

In the available scholarship on Belfast's murals, the elements and principles of art are rarely mentioned. Additionally, though the history of Northern Ireland political mural painting is chronicled thoroughly by Rolston and others in several publications, the murals' relationship to the history of art is not widely incorporated. References to art history can be found in the images themselves, however. Political muralists, who are often self-taught and outside of the fine art world, have traditionally appropriated art imagery from artists who have received some form of artistic training; a topic that will be covered in depth in Chapter Three. These artists incorporate familiar art symbols and images into their murals

to connect their work to the past. For example, meandering chain imagery frames the iconic mural of Bobby Sands by the artist Danny Devenny (Fig. 1, page 1). This chain is both a reference to the imprisonment of Sands as well as a visual reference to Celtic knotwork or ribbon interlacing, a familiar design found on Celtic high crosses and in early Christian manuscripts. Additionally, the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist murals of King William III on horseback found all around the city are replications of an image of the king from an academically trained artist (Fig. 2, page 1). The source of this particular symbol is likely a lithograph version of the artist Benjamin West's painting *The Death of Frederick, 1st Duke of Schomberg (1615-1690) at the Battle of the Boyne, 1st July 1690* (Loftus 1983, 10) (Fig. 3, page 2). These are just two examples that demonstrate that the artists are considering the art history of the region in the planning and execution of the murals, a point that is of utmost importance if the political murals are to be considered a significant contribution to the artistic output of Belfast.

There is also a clear connection between some CNR muralists' tendency to exalt members of their community as martyrs and the images of saints and martyrs that are pervasive in the iconography of the Catholic Church. In contrast, many PUL murals rely heavily on symbols rather than martyr imagery in keeping with the historic Protestant iconoclasm and use of symbolism rather than human figures ('Mural Artist', 2023). While Rolston attributes the PUL mural painters' interest in symbolism to the lack of that community's heroic actions available for depiction, this thesis will argue that the history of Protestant art, and its focus on symbolism rather than martyrdom, is an intentional choice by the artists (Rolston 1991, 41-42; 'Mural Artist', 2023). Experience in the field of art history informs this research and provides a different perspective as well as context to the

available scholarship on these images. Understanding the political murals within the framework of art history can help the broader community recognize that the images do not exist as solely political objects. Instead, they are a part of a more extensive history of the visual culture of the region.

There is also minimal scholarship on the Belfast mural artists themselves. Aside from Gerard Kelly, Danny Devenny, and Mark Ervine, few of Belfast's mural artists are lauded in the public domain. With one English language monograph and one Irish language first-person text on the artist Gerard Kelly, known as 'Mo chara', the research specifically focused on the experience of artists is quite slim (Saleeby-Mulligan 2009; Kelly, 2018). Though Gerard Kelly's imagery has drawn scholarly interest because of the apparent skill level and symbolism included in his work, with Rolston paying particular attention to his elaborate efforts, his murals are certainly not the only images that display symbolism, visual complexity, and technical virtuosity (Rolston 1991, 104).

In many academic publications, artists names, training, and intent are rarely mentioned. Though some artists prefer to be anonymous, it is possible to identify their work by style and content and demonstrate their value to the cultural identity of the city without using their names. Keenan's *Belfast Imaginary* relies on artist interviews for some of its contextual information. This text has wonderful anecdotal quotes from artists, and Keenan clearly gained the trust of many of her interviewees. However, in Keenan's interviews, as with many other sources, the artists' responses often veer away from the art object and artistic process and toward the political realm and community identity (Keenan 2022, 134-135). Often, published interviews with artists focus primarily on the artists' political views rather than their artistic process; even interviews with artists within the

Belfast Street Art movement are often focused on politics, identity, and sectarian topics. This type of questioning can discount the artists' creative inspiration and reinforces the sectarian divide in the city. By focusing the narrative on the purpose, value, and history of public art, as well as the intention, training, and process of the artists, this thesis sets itself apart from other scholarship on the topic. This research incorporates art-focused interviews with a broader variety of artists, including a number of artists from the contemporary Street Art movement, trained academic artists who engage in mural work, as well as artists creating political murals, and will bring to the fore role of the artist in shaping the visual landscape of Belfast.

Methodology

In the initial phase of this project, I planned to employ reception theory, an art history methodology that recognizes that the viewer's reception of the work of art actively completes the process started by the artist. Using a framework called Learning Through Art (LTA), developed by The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Kinder Foundation Department for Learning and Interpretation, reception theory would allow me to gauge the community perception of the public murals. However, as research progressed and artist interviews provided greater context for the mural tradition, it became clear that the community perception of the murals would not be the primary focus.

Belinda Loftus, the first art historian to write at length about the murals, interviewed community members about the images without much of an authentic response. Loftus notes that when asked about the murals, women in the street gave answers that indicated they were supportive of a peace process but were 'the kind [of answers] you would

cautiously give if accosted in such a way by an unknown woman with an English accent' (Loftus 1983, 14). Authors like Serena Clark, and a number of newspaper and internet journalists, have engaged in community interviews to gauge the public's perception of the political images, but the interviews focus on political views. The answers often insinuate that the communities see the murals as a mirror reflecting their own ideas or propaganda for either the Irish Republican Army (IRA) or loyalists/unionist paramilitaries. Clark's interviews were completed using a photo elicitation technique where she showed participants photos of murals to trigger a response. These responses were often informed by preconceived ideas about the images as well as long-held political opinions (Clark, 2017). Photo elicitation also divorces the object from its context. As context is an essential element in the study of public art, photo elicitation is not the most appropriate method of gauging a response to a public art object. Keenan engaged in street-intercept surveys in her data collection for *Belfast Imaginary.* Though this process engages the community member in front of the object in its context, many of the responses are similar to the answers elicited by Loftus's interviews. The community members are often guarded, and their answers seem to be informed more by community identity rather than the image itself. In Keenan's research, community members were also asked questions about whether they approved of the murals and the efforts to change them. Their answers demonstrate that even an on-site street survey will elicit answers that reflect the community member's preconceived ideas (Keenan 2022, 195-196). This confirms statements from my own interviewees who informed me even if the community engaged with a scholar seeking discuss their feelings about the murals, they would be somewhat guarded with the truth ('Mural Artist', 2023). Numerous trips to Belfast to experience the murals *in situ* informed

the focus of this research and steered it away from the public perception and the instinctual emphasis on the murals as symbols of politics of division that can be found in other scholarly assessments. To study the murals as public art, they must always be discussed with site-specificity, as they are one part of a multi-faceted vibrant built environment that includes political murals, Street Art, graffiti, and a variety of visual display.

After reviewing the interviews of community members made by Loftus, Clark, Keenan, and newspaper journalists, and after my field work in Belfast began in earnest, it became clear that gauging the public perception of the murals would not be the focal point of this project. My methodology, along with my thesis, would need to be updated. Whether the community thinks of the murals as fine art or not has become immaterial. What will be demonstrated through my interviews with artists and arts professionals is that the mere presence of the murals has shaped Belfast's creative identity and inspired a rich artistic ecosystem in the city. Therefore, input of artists is paramount. This research relies heavily on one-on-one interviews with artists who are either part of the historic political mural tradition or have been influenced by the presence of muralists and murals.

Interviews with artists and arts professionals were in a semi-structured format. The interviews were held at informal places chosen by the interviewees. Artists' homes or studios, coffee shops, and pubs allowed the artists to enter the interviews in a comfortable setting. Some artists accompanied me in visits to their murals and discussed their process in the presence of the artwork. Centring the artists' experience, and continuing to focus on their artistic interests, also helped me gain the trust of artists who do not often respond to interview requests from scholars. Though established questions were asked to all participating artists, a semi-structured interview format allowed for a more engaging

conversation, one driven by the artists' experiences. After the interviews were recorded, notes taken, and recordings transcribed, a thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's guide was completed on all qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Once themes began to emerge from the artists' interviews, a careful analysis of the images the artists created could begin. The themes that emerged from the artists' interviews shaped the direction of this thesis.

In the early stages of research, when most knowledge was based on secondary sources, the mural culture of Belfast seemed to be solely one of political murals made by partisan artists. However, through artists' interviews and with significant time spent in the city, it became clear that there is much more to the city's mural story than sectarian political murals. Artists engage in all types of public art. They cross sectarian boundaries and challenge the 'two-sides' narrative. They paint commercial imagery and work with community groups. The mural culture is multi-faceted, dynamic, and includes much more than the aggressive political murals that have come to symbolise the city's past. My experience working with artists in the Artist Studio Programme at Lawndale Art Centre in Houston, Texas, along with my decades of teaching in a nationally accredited college studio art department have given me insight into the importance of the artist's voice when evaluating artworks. Working directly with artists, seeing their studios, and touring their murals alongside them has given this research a depth of understanding of the power of the images and the influence of the artists in their communities.

The analysis of the murals themselves draws on the value of viewing artwork in its intended location, as seeing an art object on a bustling street is quite different than looking at the image on a computer screen, in a newspaper article, or replicated in print. Elizabeth

DeYoung considers the importance of being in the environment one studies, stating, ‘immersion in one’s surroundings is the first step to understanding the everyday realities of the landscape and the way in which the past is continually present within it’ (DeYoung 2018, 85). Reviewing Belfast’s visual culture in person has informed this research and encouraged a deeper understanding of how the murals function in their environment. As noted in John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing,* a seminal text for the study of art history:

> it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. (Berger, 1972)

For Berger, seeing implies an understanding of the subject of the image (Berger, 1972). Berger’s ideas encourage those who study the history of art to look keenly and analyse images in context, recognising that an object’s surround may change one’s interpretation. The emphasis on the importance of seeing, as opposed to looking, has informed this research’s emphasis on image evaluation *in situ*. For image analysis, the thesis combines formal, iconographical, and contextual analysis of the murals, in much the same way as one might analyse a piece of fine art in a major museum. However, image analysis was completed in *Field Notes* at the site of each mural discussed, rather than by viewing the images solely online or in print. In addition, the murals are evaluated through the lens of the characteristics of public art and the characteristics of outsider art, folk art, and the art of self-taught artists in order to evaluate their relationship to each genre and continue the focus on the importance of artists in the narrative of Belfast’s political murals.

The impact of the political murals on sectarian identities and the peace process will continue to be researched by sociologists and historians. However, the following chapters will not attempt to assess the political influence of the murals. Additionally, this project will not focus on the power the murals may have to reinforce sectarian identities or support paramilitarism. While all those topics have some influence over this project, the goal is to draw attention to the artists and the objects themselves. To be very clear, the methodology for this project, with its emphasis on artists' voices, will allow for this thesis to remain true to its purpose: to demonstrate that the presence of political murals had an *artistic* influence in the city, and the artists who engage in this type of public art have changed the trajectory of artmaking in Belfast.

Chapter Overview

Chapter One is titled 'History of Mural Painting in Belfast'. An introduction to the history of mural painting in the area is essential before the discussion of the impact of such images and their artists can begin in earnest. The paintings of specifically sectarian images that illustrate the divide between PUL and CNR communities, and commemorate the history of The Troubles, are part of a larger tradition of mural painting in the area (Rolston 2010, i). While other scholars have written extensive histories of sectarian mural painting in the region, the history of traditional (or academic) mural painting, as opposed to political murals by outsider/self-taught artists, is rarely included in these texts. The research completed by Joseph McBrinn for his dissertation, *Mural Painting in Ireland 1855-1959*, informs the focus of this thesis's chapter on the history of mural painting in Belfast (McBrinn, 2007). The dates of the earliest public PUL murals chronicled in Rolston and

Loftus's histories coincide with traditional mural programmes commissioned for Belfast City Hall among other high-profile buildings. Mural artists working today reference traditional mural painter John Luke and academic artist William Conor as influences on their work demonstrating that modern political and sectarian mural painters can be linked to the history of mural painting in the city (Gallagher, 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). While contemporary painters see themselves as part of a larger mural tradition, this chapter and those that follow will demonstrate that the primary influence on the creative identity of the city of Belfast is the presence of the political murals created by artists outside of the traditional fine art systems.

Belfast's distinctive tradition of murals extends beyond sectarian images and is one of the richest mural traditions in the Western world, pre-dating the well-known early twentieth century mural movements in Mexico and the United States. Understanding this history is critical to comprehending the community's desire to cover a wall with a message. Because of the tradition of mural-making in the area, people see the public artistic process as a valid and legitimate way to express themselves. 'The tradition of mural painting in the North of Ireland is almost a century old. Beginning around 1908, loyalist artisans – coach painters, house painters, etc. – began to paint large outdoor murals each July' (Rolston 1998, i). Though the beginning of this mural tradition is linked to PUL artists, the tradition has continued with CNR artists after the Hunger Strike in 1981. Since that time, both groups have expressed themselves visually through murals. The communities continue to turn to murals with their grief, disappointment, triumph, and joy. They use murals to brighten up their communities and connect to tradition. Even areas devoid of any outward signs of the joy of life, like playgrounds, planted flowers, or other decorative imagery, will

likely have a brightly painted political mural. Whether murals are painted as a response to a specific event, as a celebration of heritage, or as a territory marker, there is a regional urge to engage in the specific creative process of mural painting.

Sectarian mural painting is by no means a practice that ended with the end of The Troubles. Artists and community members claim the walls with murals and graffiti as a response to contemporary events, like the mural dedicated to the journalist Lyra McKee, who was murdered while reporting in Derry/Londonderry in 2019 (*Mural of Journalist Lyra McKee,* 2019) (Fig. 4, page 2). In August 2022, Irish language rap artists Kneecap unveiled a mural depicting a Police Service of Northern Ireland vehicle in flames with the text '*níl fáilte roimh an RUC*,' meaning 'the RUC are not welcome.' Kneecap defended the controversial image as an example of 'fine art' (O'Shea, 2022). Both of these examples, as well as the numerous paintings discussed in the following chapters, demonstrate that the community continues to use public art as a means of political expression, so it is valuable to consider these expressions as a part of the region's history of art.

Organisations like the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, among others, emphasize the city's history of public art by investing in community art programmes designed to promote peace. These community mural initiatives date to the 1970s, the most recent of which, Building Peace through the Arts: Re-imaging Communities Programme, was directly designed to replace sectarian imagery with non-sectarian subjects. The immense history of public display and public art in the area demonstrates that the city can foster a community of artists to empower the public to take art in their shared spaces seriously. The Arts Council of Northern Ireland's use of public policy to reshape the public spaces of Northern Ireland, along with the success of the contemporary street art movement,

demonstrates that the community seeks to express and heal through the arts engagement (Hocking 2015, 19).

The second chapter is titled 'Belfast's Murals as Public Art'. As stated previously, public art is defined by art historian Cher Krause Knight as art 'designated for a larger audience and placed to attract their attention; it intends to provide aesthetic experiences that edify, commemorate, or entertain; and its messages are comprehensible to generalized audiences' (Krause Knight 2008, 22). Krause Knight's definition is extremely broad and allows any number of media and processes to be included. Public art in Northern Ireland ranges from large-scale government-funded sculpture commissions to political muralists painting territory markers to graffiti artists working stealthily to make unauthorised marks on the city.

Murals introduced in this chapter and the following chapter will be analysed using traditional art-analysis practices. Formal analysis in art is a visual study that includes careful description of the artwork and its elements and principles. Since many of these images are seen only as political propaganda in scholarly circles, a formal analysis is critical to the discussion of the murals as art. When appropriate, an iconographical analysis will be employed to examine the symbols and icons to discover the mural's meaning or message. Though many of the scholars who have written about the murals include iconographical of analysis in their writing, there is little discussion of how the symbols in each mural may relate to the larger art historical context. Hence, a contextual analysis is essential and will accompany formal and iconographical analysis to allow for a more complete understanding of the murals. Contextual analysis considers the making and viewing of the work in its context, culture, religion, time period, and artists' point of view.

To appropriately evaluate the murals in Belfast through the lens of public art, the characteristics, value, and process for successful public art projects will also be introduced and discussed. In addition to the traditional characteristics of public art listed above, site-specificity, spectacle or temporality, education, and public engagement are considered in the evaluation of each mural. Studying the murals through these parameters allows for a clearer understanding of their current impact on the creative identity of the city. For Belfast, not only has public art provided a sense of place and identity, but it has also influenced generations of artists and changed the trajectory of the city's art history.

As Krause Knight states in *Public Art: Theory, Practice, and Populism,* 'we can best understand art's public functions when we consider the interrelationship between content and audience; what art has to say, to whom it speaks, and the multiple messages it may convey' (Krause Knight 2008, viii). Public art changes in context, and this is undoubtedly the case with the murals in Belfast: 'for any meaningful understanding of public art, it must be viewed in the complex matrix in which it is conceived, commissioned, built, and, finally received' (Senie and Webster 1998, xi). With scholarly definitions of public art in mind, in this chapter, Belfast's political murals are examined from the purpose of the mural's commission and creation through its reception by the public, relying heavily on input from artists and art administrators.

People viewing the murals as tourists likely have a different perception of them than those who see them daily. For those community members for whom the murals serve as a part of their permanent landscape, the impact of the murals continues to be both complex and dynamic. For artists looking for a viable career in the visual arts, the murals have provided both a backdrop, a tradition against which to rebel, and for some, political

mural production provided a training ground (Gallagher, 2023). However, as discussed in the Methodology section of this introduction, this thesis will move away from the singular focus of public perception of these pieces of art and centre the discussion on how the murals' presence has impacted the history of art in the city. The study of murals in Belfast is dynamic. As political tensions rise or ease, the context of the sectarian murals in the city also changes. Evaluating these images through the lens of the characteristics of visual art and specifically public art can form a foundation on which to build the ever-changing contextual analysis. Through the assessment of specific mural projects in Belfast and their emphasis on place, temporality, and community, Chapter Two provides an analysis of the ways in which the city's tradition of political mural painting follows the criteria for successful public art and has placed Belfast at the forefront of an international mural movement.

Chapter Three, 'Belfast's Artists: on the Outside', introduces the characteristics of outsider art, folk art, and the art of self-taught artists and discusses how the murals fit under the umbrella of these artistic categories. Outsider art, a term coined in 1972 by English art critic and historian Roger Cardinal, generally refers to art made by artists working outside the mainstream art world, or without traditional artistic training. Cardinal's definition of outsider art includes artists who are unencumbered by 'all kinds of cultural, social, indeed psychological prejudices' (Cardinal 2022, 7). Though the early study of outsider art focused on untrained artists creating unique objects to express their personal preoccupations, more recently, scholarship on outsider art has moved toward a more inclusive study of artists working with little regard to art markets and art institutions (Wojcik 2008, 179-180). The term outsider art continues to be debated amongst scholars,

and there are even regional differences in the way the term is used. American scholar Daniel Wojcik states,

> in the European context, outsider art is equated with *art brut*, a term that refers to works created by people with no artistic training, who are somehow disconnected from conventional culture and outside the art world, such as the mentally ill, trance mediums, self-taught isolates, and societal outcasts. In the States, by contrast, dealers and critics often use the term outsider art loosely, in reference to a mélange of non-mainstream works created by a varied demographic: untrained artists, children, inmates, contemporary folk artists, naïve artists, artisans from so-called Third World and developing nations, and members of specific ethnic groups. (Wojcik 2016, 6)

This thesis will use the Americanised definition of outsider art, though a clear discussion of the debate of the term is included in this chapter.

Just as there is disagreement amongst art historians about the term outsider art, the definitions of both folk art and the art of self-taught artists continue to evolve as the two fields are studied by art historians and critics. The early writings of art historian Belinda Loftus use the term 'folk art' in reference to the art world's understanding of the political murals (Loftus, 1983). This term, and the academic study of folk art in general, has undergone a transformation since the first publication of Loftus's writing on the murals. While many of the murals may adhere to the characteristics of folk art, the term is confusing to some and often evokes images that are decorative or utilitarian in nature.

Many artists who create the Belfast political murals create them anonymously, and

most are significant outsiders to the traditional art world. They are often either self-taught or have learned their trade from the generational dissemination of knowledge from one mural painter to another. Most muralists have minimal formal training, or they received their training outside of traditional art institutions. For example, Danny Devenny, a well-known republican muralist, began making art as propaganda while incarcerated for IRA-related activities in the 1970s. After his release from prison, he turned to mural painting. Though he has given extensive public interviews, and his artistic output is prolific, his lack of connection to the traditional art world, and his lack of formal artistic training, help categorize him as an outsider artist. Gerard 'Mo chara' Kelly has a similar art training story (Kelly, 2023). Both men, along with numerous others, began their art careers in prison creating propaganda or handicrafts while incarcerated. Both artists are established in the republican community and have inspired the generations of mural painters who followed them. Their training and their artistic output is evaluated in this chapter.

Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist mural artists interviewed for this thesis also discussed their lack of formal artistic training, similar to Devenny and Kelly. In the PUL community, young people who show artistic talent are encouraged to create murals at an early age (Ervine, 2022; 'Mural Artist', 2023). Through mural competitions and general support from the community, businesses, foundations, as well as paramilitaries, artists currently working on murals celebrating PUL culture rarely have a traditional art training background. Rather, many of them began painting alongside older muralists, and their skill was identified and cultivated within the PUL community.

Involving the artists directly, through interviews and in-person visits to studios and mural sites, is essential for this research. Their personal input establishes their artistic

intentions, influences, and process. While a few political muralists have given public interviews, they are almost exclusively asked about their politics, not their art. By returning to those who use visual imagery to express themselves publicly, this thesis presents a more complete understanding of the murals themselves. Though many of the artists discussed above have given public interviews, call themselves artists, and think of their work as art, very few Belfast political muralists have been treated as artists, or have achieved status in the fine art world through exhibitions or through the scholarly study of their work (White, 1996).

Outsider art, folk art, and the work of self-taught artists can be perceived as being less valuable than art that falls within the Western artistic canon, or art that is supported by major arts institutions. However, in the case of the murals around Belfast, artists outside of the art mainstream have shaped the landscape of the city. Since many of the city's political murals were made because of groups asserting their agency in response to territorial conflicts, studying artists employed by these groups is one of the keys to understanding the visual markers of conflict. They have drawn territorial divisions and influenced generations of artists and community members with their imagery. It is unusual for this type of grassroots art to be the most recognizable example of a culture's artistic output. Academically trained artists working in Belfast today often cite the presence of the murals as inspiration for their current artistic trajectory (Gallagher, 2023; Doran, 2023; Constance, 2023; Seedhead Arts 'KVLR', 2023). Mural-making is now a profitable industry in Belfast. Rarely have self-taught artists left such a legacy in the creative culture of a region.

Chapter Four, 'Belfast's Artistic Legacy', evaluates present mural production and looks to the what the future may hold for the political mural tradition. Recent studies by

the Executive Office of Northern Ireland have evaluated the need to protect all forms of cultural display. However, the protection of murals plays a minimal role in this Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture, and Tradition Final Report, and a concrete conclusion has not been found:

> The Commission recommends that the Northern Ireland Executive develop an accredited arts, education and training initiative in relation to murals. Drawing on local and international expertise, this initiative would combine skills development with social and cultural history, community participation and artistic awareness through the creation and display of murals. It would facilitate and enable communities to erect positive images that reflect the identity, culture and traditions of their neighbourhoods. The Northern Ireland Executive might consider giving consideration to the long-term funding of such an initiative. (Northern Ireland Executive Office 2021, 136)

This recommendation by the Commission is directly in line with programmes that seek to bridge the divide in the community through public art. Chapter Four of this thesis discusses the efforts of The Art Council of Northern Ireland's Building Peace through Art: Re-imaging Communities initiative and how that large-scale investment in public art has shaped the city's current public art landscape. The chapter also explores the vibrant community arts programming and the Belfast Street Art movement to demonstrate mural painting's place in Belfast's creative economy. These initiatives often treat the city's political murals as propaganda, though they seek to replace the sectarian murals with public art or surround such objects with images that inspire joy (Seedhead Arts 'Friz', 2022). By

replacing or diluting the political murals with politically neutral public art, both formal and grassroots programmes have changed the visual landscape of the city.

The Commission's recommendation, the Building Peace through Art: Re-imaging Communities Programme, the continued efforts of community arts organisations, and the Belfast Street Art scene, reflect a general desire by those who did not live through The Troubles to move away from sectarianism and to use art to do so (Moylin, 2020). These movements are not new, however. As noted earlier, government and community efforts to remove sectarian images began in the 1970s and have had varying degrees of success. Rolston argues that programmes like the Art Council of Northern Ireland's Building Peace through Art: Re-imaging Communities Programme is not the most effective and sensitive way to change the artwork in Belfast's communities. Rather, he writes that communities must re-evaluate their own images and make the choice to change their public art from within (Rolston 2010, 10). This process has begun in some of the Belfast communities where well-known street artists are hired to change murals or add Street Art to the gable walls to inspire a pride of place for the community members. Examples of this type of collaboration between community activism and government funding are discussed further in Chapter Four.

There is also evidence that some of the city's muralists are engaged in efforts to bring about community engagement through artistic collaboration (Sengupta, 2021). Artists like Mark Ervine and Danny Devenny have worked together on murals and given numerous interviews on how the pair have bonded through their shared love of art (Fig. 5, page 3). Their collaboration seeks to demonstrate to both their opposing communities that they may be more similar than had been previously thought. By working together, these

two artists from different backgrounds have demonstrated the possibility of art to bridge a divide. Ervine and Devenny's work together has been highly publicized as an example of cross-community bonding and is evidence of the type of community-focused art programming that has flourished recently. Many of the funding agencies for public art after 1998 required some form of integrated collaboration, and the cross-community process and impact on shared space is often the focus of scholarly writing about community engaged mural projects. While shared space and peace initiatives are certainly of critical importance, this chapter will focus primarily on the *artistic* legacy of the political murals and the impact of artists like Ervine and Devenny on artists working today.

Painting on buildings, an act that was once considered illegal, subversive, dangerous, and even an expression of terrorism, has been made into a viable career choice because of the proliferation of the political murals and the infrastructure created for their maintenance, removal, and replacement. International artists are moving to Belfast because of the opportunities available for public artists (Thompson, 2019; Seedhead Arts, 'Friz', 2022). Street Art events have corporate sponsorship and positive news coverage celebrating the painted walls of the city. Support systems like the arts administration organisations Daisy Chain Incorporated and Seedhead Arts facilitate arts programming, Street Art events, and public art commissions. While they are not the only organisations that have emerged to support the burgeoning public art movement in Belfast, they have focused on Street Art because it is one of the most profitable forms of art programming (Turkington, 2022).

The new public art projects overseen by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Belfast City Council, Daisy Chain Incorporated, and Seedhead Arts, as well as many of the

murals created within the Belfast community arts programming fall within the larger context of a rise in the production of murals and Street Art worldwide. This contemporary international movement has been motivated by the need for a backdrop for social media as well as the desire for authentic experiences to counter growing urban homogeneity. The international Street Art movement has also boosted an industry of art support mechanisms with the development of websites and apps to track mural painting around the world (streetartcities.com, n.d.). Whether official commissions or independent expressions, murals and public art across the world provide a sense of place and identity through visual expression. It is natural for Belfast, the city with a century-long mural tradition, to serve a pivotal role in this international public art phenomenon.

Finally, the 'Conclusion' considers if the political murals are treated as a part of a larger public art tradition, and not simply as a manifestation of a divide or as symbols of propaganda, they may then be recognised for their influence on generations of artists and the artistic legacy of the city of Belfast. It may be possible for the murals to be viewed as benign, in much the same way 18th or 19th century oil on canvas history paintings are no longer viewed as powerful pieces of propaganda. Steps toward the reception of the sectarian murals as nonthreatening reflections of the past may have already begun with the thriving tourism industry around the murals. People seek authentic spaces, and, in viewing the political murals in Belfast, viewers find a reprieve from the similarity of global cities (Beinhart 2020, 162). There is an argument that in addition to documenting the political and cultural history of the city, the murals provide economic support and should therefore be maintained. If the political murals remain intact, it may be possible to view them as the visual representation of an authentic experience from a specific period in Belfast while also

placing them in the context of a tradition of mural painting and public art in the region.

The city is in a visual arts transitional period. Political murals, cultural murals, historical murals, community murals, and Street Art have all become a part of the visual landscape. All these painted walls are linked by the history of mural painting in the city. Through community outreach, educational programming, and careful study of the artists and artworks, it may be possible to make room for all forms of public art in the city. As Eoin McGinn, a street artist who is involved in many of the Street Art events in the city and has worked with communities to revitalise their shared spaces, states, 'the political murals still have a place in Belfast because of its history, but my work is nothing like that' (Cooper and Costello 2017). The presence of the political murals, their Re-imaging, the artistic programming funded after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and the rise of the dynamic Street Art movement have made Belfast more than a divided city. Belfast is *a painted city*.

Chapter One: The History of Mural Painting in Belfast

Several scholars have written about the history of the Belfast sectarian mural tradition. As noted in the Introduction of this thesis, much of the literature on the topic is written for the fields of sociology, anthropology, and political science. Tony Crowley created a database of mural images with some 15,000 images dating from 1996 to 2016 and is currently planning a monograph on the mural tradition's full history (Crowley, 2022). Crowley's research seeks to 'make sense of those materials, murals in the case of *Murals of Northern Ireland* archive, … to read the signs carefully, patiently, contextually, historically; to pay attention to detail and form; to grasp the significance of a single item in relation to a tradition; to grasp complexity and nuance' (Crowley 2022, 116). Crowley is among several scholars and photographers who have spent decades documenting the murals as they change. Bill Rolston published five visual histories in paperback form, while other scholars and professional photographers join Crowley's efforts to chart the mural changes through digital catalogues (Rolston, 1998, 2003, 2010, 2013, and 2022; cain.ulster.ac.uk, n.d.; ccdl.claremont.edu., n.d.; extramuralactivity.com, n.d.).

In addition to the scholars listed above, Neil Jarman adds to this topic with assessments of how the murals relate to sectarian spaces and charts their symbolic changes over the decades (Jarman, 1997; Jarman, 1998). Given the constant updating, repurposing, and Re-imaging of these murals, the cataloguing of them is a seemingly never-ending process. The histories of symbolic changes and catalogues often seek to chronicle political changes that prompt mural painting, explain the mural subjects within the context of such

political changes, and contrast the differences between murals created by the CNR artists and the PUL artists. While each of these scholars have laid the groundwork and added a wealth of information to this field of study, the following brief history will attempt to add art historical context to the sectarian mural narrative. By surveying relevant artistic movements and including information about additional public and municipal murals created by academic artists, this chapter will demonstrate the presence and influence of a more traditional mural programme in the city in contrast to the sectarian, grassroots murals made by self-taught artists. As both of these mural traditions were part of the history of public art in Belfast, this chapter will demonstrate that the two are often closely aligned.

The primary art historian to engage with the topic of sectarian murals in Belfast is Belinda Loftus, an English scholar and artist with family connections to Northern Ireland. She moved to the region in the 1970s and began her study of the visual imagery of the area. She completed her dissertation, *Images in Conflict: Visual Imagery and the Troubles in Northern Ireland 1968-1981* in 1982 and published several articles in *Circa*, an art criticism magazine, in the 1980s, as well as a book related to the topic in 1990. Since then, few art historians or art critics have engaged in the discussion, relegating the discourse on murals to the topics of peace-making, shared space, and identity within the fields of sociology and political science. Loftus states 'if you ask anyone with an interest in art what they think of loyalist wall-paintings, their response will generally be to describe them either as mindless sectarian graffiti or as folk imagery, suitable for preservation with an Arts Council grant. Both definitions implicitly separate the paintings from the world of fine art' (Loftus 1983, 10).

As Loftus points out in 'Loyalist Wall Paintings', especially in the middle of the

twentieth century, the lines between fine art artists and political mural painters are not quite as distinct as one may assume, stating, 'they [loyalist muralists] have also at times overlapped with the personnel of the fine art world' (Loftus 1983, 11). Loftus notes that John Luke, a well-established academic mural painter and famed painter of the current mural programme inside the Belfast City Hall building, painted images of King William III, a subject that would be considered extremely sectarian by current standards. She also notes that George Wilgaus, a well-known early to mid-twentieth century sign painter and PUL mural painter in the Shankill area exhibited his artwork locally within fine art establishments, though he did not have traditional art training (Loftus 1990, 34). Wilgaus was friendly with the highly-regarded Belfast artist, William Conor, and discussed artistic endeavours with the academic painter (Loftus 1983, 11). It is also well-documented in newspaper articles from the time, as well as in Bill Rolston's writing, that in 1933 William Conor, praised the gable wall mural paintings of the early twentieth century, stating:

> Whilst walking through the streets of our city during the weekend I was amazed at the amount of high artistic merit displayed on many of the mural decorations painted on various gables, representing King William of Orange crossing the Boyne, the Siege of Derry, and other important incidents of this historic period. It seems there is a revival of that very ancient art of decorating wall spaces. (Conor 1933, 7)

In the same letter published in the *Belfast Telegraph* (and quoted in Rolston), Conor also praised the artists' enthusiasm and 'embellishment of our city streets' (Conor 1933, 7; Rolston 2012, 447-448). Both John Luke and William Conor are among the mid-century

academic artists referenced by some contemporary academically trained mural painters, as well as sectarian mural painters, as artistic inspiration, again blurring the lines between the world of sectarian murals who are self-taught and the world of traditional fine art (Gallagher, 2022; 'Mural Artist', 2023; Reynolds, 2023).

Loftus was one of the few figures in the fine art establishment to study the murals, especially after the return of unrest and violence in the 1970s. She advocated for the art world to pay greater attention to the imagery in an effort to analyse 'the political messages coded in their style as opposed to their content' (Loftus 1988, 17). To fully explore these murals through the lens of art historical rhetoric and methodology, Loftus argues for the following propositions:

> That in order to understand the relationship of visual images to society, it is necessary to abandon the traditional, hierarchical, evaluative separation of them into categories such as fine art, popular imagery and the mass media, except insofar as the evaluation and categorization is part of those images' real, existential function; that any specific visual image is the product of a maker or group of makers whose work is conditioned by overlapping social, political, economic, and religious factors, by virtue of their personal context, the technology involved in the production of their work, its location within institutional structures and its use of existing visual conventions; that the private and public significance of visual images are interlinked; that an image is not static, but is further developed each time it is used or re-produced, and that in the course of these processes it both acquires additional layers of meaning and has a real impact on social, political,

> economic, and religious developments; that this living, developing image is not isolated, but the various stages of its production both derives meaning from and contributes meaning to the overall visual language of its producers/users, and is appropriated by them to the specific visual language codes with which they shape their view of the world; and those visual language codes can be seen interacting in a kind of dialogue in which opposition and overlap are both important. (Loftus 1988, 23)

Though these propositions offer a thorough framework to examine the murals through the lens of art history, since Loftus's 1990 publication, *Mirrors: William III and Mother Ireland*, the academic fine art establishment has generally stayed away from making public statements on the topic of Belfast's sectarian murals. As noted in Rolston's 2012 essay 'Re-imaging: mural painting and the state in Northern Ireland', 'no artist in the North of the stature of Conor was to praise murals from that point [1933] on. Instead, art commentators, who may merely have frowned on the murals in Conor's day, now reject them out of hand' (Rolston 2012, 449).

The history of public mural painting in Belfast is tied to outsider artists, people who are self-taught, and those who are outside of the traditional fine arts institutions. It is these grassroots murals for which the city is known. However, though the sectarian murals were often motivated by political changes, the question remains, why did the first painters of sectarian murals turn to art to express themselves? Though the first murals can be linked to political changes, early twentieth century PUL murals also regularly coincide with traditional academic art mural programmes, which makes the production of these sectarian

murals more complex than a simple reactionary visual representation of a political ideology. While the political changes that may have prompted outdoor mural production have been deftly chronicled, public murals are also a part of the larger artistic visual landscape of the city of Belfast; a landscape that includes public academic art, community art, and murals that are non-sectarian. As such, it is important to study the myriad of public art related factors that may have encouraged the mural-making tradition.

1908

Most histories of the Northern Ireland political murals date the beginning of the mural tradition to 1908, the date of the first known mural painted by a PUL artist in Belfast (Loftus, 1983; Rolston, 1991). This first mural joined with arches, flags, and bunting as part of the Protestant community's visual celebrations of the Twelfth of July.[2] In a newspaper article from 1958, the artist of the first 1908 mural, as well as several other murals dating from 1910, 1914, and 1919, is identified as John McLean, a shipyard watchman (*The First King William Painter* 1958, 4). Both Loftus and Rolston confirm this artist's identity and imply that he may have acquired the newly developed commercial paint from the shipyard where he was employed (Loftus 1983, 11; Rolston 1991, 20). Early accounts confirm that McLean did not have artistic training and was entirely self-taught (*The First King William Painter* 1958, 4). Loftus's research also identifies Tommy Henderson, a Shankill area house painter and proprietor of a local house paint store, as the

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[2] The Twelfth of July is the date on which Protestants in Northern Ireland celebrate the victory of the Protestant King William of Orange over the Catholic King James II in 1690 at the Battle of the Boyne.

artist who created a 1912 mural (Loftus 1990, 31). As both of these artists did not have formal artistic training, McLean, and Henderson soon thereafter, began the city's tradition of murals created by outsider or self-taught artists.

Because of the lack of artistic training, these early images tended to be copied from a well-established set of images of William III that could be found on postcards and prints in the city. As was the case all over Europe in the early twentieth century, new technologies made for inexpensive printing of well-known paintings. Though the artists who initially painted copies of King William on gable ends in housing estates would likely not have seen the original paintings that served as their inspiration, the availability of postcards, prints, and even tea towels, as Loftus points out, would have made it likely that images to copy were readily available. Even as the mural tradition grew between the two world wars, outsider artists continued to copy from 'a complex tradition of Williamite imagery developed between the Dutch monarch's campaign in Ireland in the 1690s and the early years of this century' (Loftus 1983, 10) (Fig. 6, page 3) [3].

Loftus, Rolston, and others credit the availability of commercial paint as well as the unionist community's response to the Third Home Rule Bill as the impetus for the first murals (Loftus 1983; Rolston 1991; Jarman 1998). The first murals were created by Protestants – people in the ruling political majority – however, the artists themselves were working-class. As is still often the case with murals, the painting of a wall is an early

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[3] Because these historic murals are no longer extant, this image has been used to provide an example of the type of King William III imagery that has been historically painted by the PUL community. With the exception of John Luke's mural programmes, and a possible community mural from the 1980s, the specific murals discussed in depth in this chapter are no longer *in situ.*

response to the community's feeling of neglect or underrepresentation, and a PUL mural painting is often the first outward symbol of the working-class's displeasure ('Mural Artist', 2023). Julian Watson notes that 'the loyalist murals were first on the scene at the beginning of the century. While the design may have been derived from existing loyalist imagery, it is still a source of wonder that these murals appear to have developed completely independently, without any contact with other forms of wall-painting' (Watson 1983, 4). Loftus notes that the PUL community turned to images of William III 'whose chief role… has generally been that of a symbol of eternal certainty in times of confusion' (Loftus 1983, 11). The timing of the 1908 mural is curious, though. In addition to the feeling of underrepresentation and anxiety about the Third Home Rule Bill, the 1908 mural creation may have been inspired by additional events, as this first outdoor PUL mural coincides with the building of Belfast City Hall, the planning for the building's publicly lauded, yet somewhat contentious, interior mural programme design, the redesign of the mural programme at Ulster Hall, and numerous public lectures and newspaper articles about mural painting.

There is a well-documented mural tradition on the island of Ireland that pre-dates John McLean's first PUL mural from 1908. Dr. Joseph McBrinn, in his 2007 dissertation *Mural Painting in Ireland 1859-1955,* discusses several major secular mural projects planned Belfast at the turn of the century (McBrinn, 2007). The secular mural programmes were large-scale municipal paintings that were commissioned and designed to send specific uplifting messages to the people, while also decorating public spaces. These early twentieth century Belfast murals fit squarely within the European tradition of mural painting and are a part of a larger international focus on mural-making at the time.

McBrinn links the commissioning of these civic murals to the earlier revival of religious mural painting on the island of Ireland, noting that there was an adverse response to interiors that were 'left bare' (McBrinn 2007, 118). As is clear from McBrinn's research, as well as from a review of Belfast newspaper articles from the period, there was an international mural movement between the turn of the twentieth century and the beginning of the First World War.

Around 1906, a series of art reforms on the island of Ireland demonstrated that the art establishment and government were increasingly friendly to mural artists. These reforms were based on Parliamentary report from 1906, which was concerned with government support of Irish artists. McBrinn notes that fostering of an atmosphere in which Irish artists could thrive was an issue agreed upon by both nationalist and unionist communities at the time (McBrinn 2007, 152). It is in this environment that Robert A. Dawson, a mural specialist, was chosen to lead the prestigious Belfast School of Art as Headmaster. Dawson instituted mural painting courses as well as a mural painting prize at the Belfast School of Art. Additionally, civic mural commissions were encouraged to utilise students in the creation of the images, marking public mural painting as an important part of an art student's education (McBrinn 2007, 121-122).

Lectures on the subject of mural painting were sponsored by the Belfast Art Society in 1906, as the group invited Dawson to speak on the topic (*Belfast News Letter* 1906, 9). Additional public lectures were held in Belfast at the Municipal Technical Institute in June 1908, just one month prior to the first PUL mural painting by John McLean. In the June 1908 event, John Ward, Headmaster of the Dublin-based Metropolitan School of Art, spoke on the history and importance of murals and continued 'at some length to the art of the

Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and medieval schools [of art], emphasis being laid on the importance of study of architecture to the painter, the decorative artist, and to the designer in any branch of art' (*Northern Whig* 1908, 9). In both of the 1906 and 1908 lectures, mural painting was discussed as significant to the history of art and essential to any architectural project (*Belfast News Letter* 1906, 9; *Northern Whig* 1906, 11; *Northern Whig* 1908, 9). Though it is difficult to argue that the painters of the first PUL murals may have attended art lectures, advertisements for these events, as well as detailed reviews of the lectures' contents, can be found in local newspapers, making it clear that murals were not only on the minds of the people but also an integral part of the architectural and refurbishment projects that were employing the working-class in Belfast.

Belfast's most high-profile mural programme of the early twentieth century was the scheme developed by Robert Ponsonby Staples for the reception room on the first floor of the new Belfast City Hall building. Staples approached the architect of the building, Alfred Brumwell Thomas, and worked with him as the building took shape. Staples argued that a city the size of Belfast should have mural production on par with cities of similar size, like Edinburgh, a city with significant state investment in art in public spaces (McBrinn 2007, 152). The initial design proposed by Staples was inspired by the artist's own 1884 painting focused on the shipbuilding industry, though after concerned comments from the community that there should be a greater representation of other subjects, additional panels were later designed to reflect the myriad of industries in the city. As Belfast was an industrial city with a complicated sectarian history, the inclusion of contemporary industry, rather than historical or religious subjects, seems to have been an intentional choice by the artist (McBrinn, 2007). An earlier mural commission in the Ulster Hall included rather

benign historical subjects, and the artist planned to stay away from that type of imagery. The industrial, working-class subjects chosen for the City Hall mural were similar to those that would be carried forward by later PUL political muralists as symbols of their own heritage ('Mural Artist', 2023). Contemporary murals that include these industrial subjects like shipbuilding and linen industries are often considered sectarian by later standards (*Field Notes Newtownards*, 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024)). Industry was not only the subject of the Staples City Hall mural programme, but local industrial titans provided the primary funding source as well. The Belfast City Hall mural scheme was funded through the creation of the City Hall Decoration Fund, which was advertised in local newspapers. Captains of industry from around the city, publishing magnates, and individuals donated to the fund to ensure their commercial interests would be represented favourably. By suggesting additional funding opportunities from the public, rather than relying on state funding, Staples had a range of patrons who felt they had some say in the design and outcome of the project (McBrinn 2007, 156).

McBrinn notes that the building of Belfast City Hall, and especially its accompanying murals, 'constitute in their scope, intention and technique the most important programmes of mural decoration undertaken in Ireland between 1850 and 1950, as well as Ireland's most articulate response to the international revival of mural painting in the period' (McBrinn 2007, 120). In a Belfast Art Society meeting in 1906, in reference to the opening of City Hall, R.A. Dawson stated that it would 'stand as an object lesson in art for generations to come' (*Belfast News Letter* 1906, 8). These murals were likely finished by 1909, and they were displayed publicly and initially garnered high praise. However, the murals were never installed in City Hall. It seems that politics got in the

way, and the artist found himself at odds with one of the main philanthropists and political figures in the city, the Lord Mayor of Belfast, Earl of Shaftesbury. Staples published a letter attacking the Lord Mayor for failing to frame the murals, and thus preventing them from being installed (Staples 1909, 12; McBrinn 2007, 161). McBrinn notes that though his paintings had been previously approved, there were political and social issues that likely prevented their installation. Staples 'departure from historical subjects to a radical new depiction of modern life and of the worker, his Liberal politics, advocacy of Home Rule, and Socialist sympathies, were utterly at odds with Belfast's Unionist Corporation as well as with the merchants and local gentry who financially supported the scheme' (McBrinn 2007, 166).

As is the often the case with art planned for public spaces, bureaucracy and funding sources fundamentally control the project. Though the murals were not installed, their commission, funding, and creation was quite public. On several occasions, the murals or their studies were displayed for community response. There were numerous newspaper articles about the project and the individual funding associated with it. Staples even argued for the opportunity to paint at the City Hall site rather than in a studio to allow for greater public access to the paintings (McBrinn, 2007). Along with a general interest in murals at the time, these public discussions about a high-profile mural scheme demonstrates that mural-making was in the air in the city.

It is difficult to draw an exact connection between Belfast's major architectural and mural programmes and the appearance of the first PUL mural created by a self-taught artist in 1908. However, the two are not entirely unrelated. As evidenced by public mural lectures, newspaper articles and advertisements about those events, and widely publicised

Ulster Hall and Belfast City Hall mural commissions, murals were in the community lexicon, in the public eye, and were put forward as an integral part of all the architectural projects happening in Belfast in the early part of the twentieth century. The subjects of some of these municipal murals were contemporary and not specific to religious or cultural traditions of the communities. Rather, they celebrated the industries associated with the city; industries in which the working-class, self-taught artists who created the first outdoor PUL murals worked. At least in the first few decades of the twentieth century, there was an alignment between the dates of the creation of murals by self-taught artists and the production of more traditional academic murals in municipal buildings and other public spaces. Even as the century progressed there are often traditional or state-sponsored murals that coincide with the sectarian murals for which the city is known.

1930s

In 1920, a major political shift occurred when the Government of Ireland Act was passed by the Parliament of the United Kingdom, establishing a Parliament for Northern Ireland and partitioning six counties in the north away from the rest of the island. The six counties that made up Northern Ireland were to remain part of the United Kingdom and were majority Protestant. The partition of the island was enacted in May 1921. Though partition was rejected by Sinn Féin, the political party devoted to a united Ireland and Catholic/Nationalist interests, 'Ulster Unionists decided to accept the Act. In particular, they believed that the six counties which were to make up Northern Ireland would be the largest area they could control without fear of Catholics becoming a majority' (cain.ulster.ac.uk, n.d.). In Northern Ireland, the successful shipbuilding and linen

industries were dominated by the Protestant majority, and the Catholic minority were denied access to jobs, education, and housing; a struggle that will eventually culminate in a civil rights movement and finally armed conflict later in the century.

Though there were several murals made in the 1920s in the city, a sudden increase in outdoor mural production happened in the 1930s. McBrinn notes that after 'the formation of two governments in Ireland, in the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland, hopes for State patronage of artists became a question of paramount importance, and from the 1920s to the 1950s Ireland experienced an important revival of mural painting on a widespread scale' (McBrinn 2007, 217). The 1930s revival of 'that very ancient art of decorating wall spaces,' as William Conor puts it in 1933, can be found in both academic, or 'official' mural commissions, as well as those created in the Belfast tradition of outdoor political murals created by artists outside of the traditional art institutions (Conor 1933, 7). In addition to outdoor PUL images focusing on major historical events, King William III, and other PUL subjects, there was somewhat of a boom in academic mural painting in the 1930s, including large-scale decorative programmes in a variety of public buildings as well as mural decoration in newly built schools.

Large exhibitions like the Glasgow Empire Exhibition in 1938 provided opportunities for the Northern Ireland government to commission murals for their pavilions, which were largely used for propagandistic purposes with the murals later installed in Belfast City Hall (McBrinn 2007, 251). A review of newspaper articles from the 1930s shows that mural-making made an impact on the public visual culture of the city. In addition to photos of academic murals in production, many of the local papers advertised mural painting and drawing classes, and art exhibitions that included murals (*Students' Art*

Exhibition 1935; *Belfast News Letter* 1934 and 1936; *Belfast Telegraph* 1937; *Every One an Arbiter of Art*, 1938; *Ministry of Education for Northern Ireland Summer Vacation Courses* 1936, 1936). In the 1930s, mural painting was considered of utmost importance in building design and decoration and was valued by the community at large.

The types of images created by self-taught artists during the 1930s are often replications of earlier murals which illustrate the well-known image of King William III on horseback, a subject that dominated the landscape at the time. Rolston calls this period the 'Golden Era' of unionism and lists several murals from the period that include subjects such as, the Coronation of King George V and Queen Mary, The Battle of the Somme, and a mural of the ship named 'Mountjoy' (Rolston 1991, 20-21). There is not complete photographic evidence of these murals, but the replications that exist demonstrate a continued reliance on artistic models from fine art sources of earlier generations (Rolston, 1991). The creation of these murals coincided with the festivities around the Twelfth of July celebrations, which saw the streets filled with bunting, flags, arches, and even fairy lights. The older murals themselves were often refurbished or replicated to varying degrees of technical success. As Rolston notes, 'the variety in the traditional King Billy murals derived more from the individual skill of the artist than from artistic flights of fancy' (Rolston 1991, 21).

Unlike those who create contemporary political murals who tend to work anonymously, many of the artists from the 'Golden Era' in the 1930s are known by name. Rolston and Loftus combed newspaper articles for mural unveiling and dedication notices to document the identity of many of these artisans, finding that they often were working-class craftspeople by trade with little to no formal artistic training. Newspapers

documented the unveiling of these outdoor murals and occasionally pictured the artists (Rolston 1991, 21). Though the artists may not have had training, they were highly regarded in the community, a trait that is still true of some sectarian mural artists today (Rolston 1991, 24; Kelly, 2023; 'Mural Artist', 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). In addition to the artists having prominence in the community, Jarman goes further to add that the murals themselves were 'soon recognized as an established feature of Protestant popular culture, and after partition in 1921, helped to define the political and cultural parameters of the Northern Ireland state' (Buckley 1998, 84). The creation of the murals from this period seems to be both an effort to preserve heritage and foster ritual within the Protestant community as well as a response to the larger emphasis on murals internationally.

The PUL murals of the 1930s were celebrated with exuberant descriptions in newspaper articles each year, with no sense of discounting them for being created by untrained artists. In fact, a great deal of pride seems to be placed on the murals. Through descriptions of the paintings, directions on how best to view all the celebratory imagery, and notes about the purpose behind such visual display, these articles give a good sense of the fervour with which the Twelfth celebrations were approached. An article in the *Belfast News Letter* notes:

> In this generation an added significance has attached to Ulster's day of memories, and the Battle of the Somme ranks with Derry, Aughrim, and the Boyne as dearly-bought victories which Ulster remembers with gratitude and honourable pride. This aspect of the 'Twelfth' is stressed in the many striking mural paintings, which attain

> the high standard of imaginative conception and artistic execution which in recent years won the praise of the distinguished Belfast artist, William Conor. (*'Twelfth' Stage Set* 1935, 9)

Rolston notes that the 'politicians were leading from behind' within the unionist community in the mid-1930s, as the working class seemed somewhat at odds with their political leaders (Rolston 1991, 19). The increase of outdoor PUL murals of the 1930s is often linked to political issues like unemployment, sectarian conflicts, and political violence of the period. However, much like the year 1908, mural-making was in the air at the time both locally and internationally, with murals of all kinds in high production (Loftus 1983, 11). Regarding the increase in academic mural production during this time, Julian Watson notes, 'there are a fair amount of internal murals in these islands dating from the 30s, 40s, and 50s, many of them "socially concerned", and most of them somewhat forgotten' (Watson 1983, 5). Watson, one of the first art writers to note that these academic paintings were no longer deemed important to the art traditions in the area, also draws comparisons to the international mural movements of the 1930s in Mexico and the United States and questions what influence they may have had on Northern Ireland, a topic that should not be overlooked.

The history of mural painting worldwide is intrinsically linked to political movements, and mural-making often requires some form of state or corporate sponsorship. The cost of materials, the public nature of murals, and the access to the real estate needed to create such a monumental image demands that some forces of power are often involved. In the early twentieth century, this was certainly the case for the muralists in Mexico and

the United States, many of whom were commissioned by their respective governments to create imagery that would inspire the public. In the 1930s, mural production in Northern Ireland joined these highly publicized public art movements. Both the Mexican and American mural traditions employed traditionally trained artists, unlike the Belfast outdoor mural tradition, which began and has been maintained primarily by artists working outside of mainstream art institutions (Loftus 1990, 16). According to Julian Watson, it was the Northern Irish *academic* mural production of the mid twentieth century was influenced by the Mexican mural tradition as well as the New Deal American muralists, noting that Mexican murals 'had a very strong "fine art" bias,' with techniques that were 'meticulous and directly derived from the great Renaissance masters' (Watson 1983, 4).

In 1932, the academic artist William Conor was commissioned to create a large mural for the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery. In addition to the mural by the highly regarded Conor, two other academic artists, John F. Hunter and William Gordon, were commissioned to create two large panels in the same building. Both commissions were privately funded, with Conor's being funded by Sir Robert Baird, a local newspaper mogul, and the Gordon and Hunter murals funded by the Haverty Trust:

> founded with money left by Mr. Thomas Haverty, himself an artist and exhibitor in the Royal Academy, London … which he directed should be applied for the purpose of encouraging Irish Art. The pictures to be purchased should be the work of painters of Irish birth, who live in Ireland, and preference should be given to what are called 'historical,' or if not that, what are called 'fancy subjects,' with an occasional 'landscape' of very high order. (*Belfast Mural Decoration* 1933, 7)

All three murals commissioned for this building were widely publicized with 'in-process' images, unveiling celebrations, and reviews published in local press (*Belfast Mural Decoration* 1933, 1; *Mural Painting Presented to Belfast Museum and Art* Gallery 1934, 14). The subject of Conor's mural is 'a hybrid image of ancient and modern Ulster', including both industries like shipbuilding and linen as well as Bronze Age warriors with banners and spears culminating in 'the equation of modern industrial life with the glories of a past historical age' (McBrinn 2007, 262-263). Gordon and Hunter turned to indigenous subjects, with Gordon's mural depicting an ancient trade connection between the early Irish and 'Mediterraneans' in *Phoenicians and the Early Irish* and Hunter's mural, *The Boar Hunt*, depicting a rural hunt scene (*Belfast Mural Decoration* 1933, 7).

Regarding both subject matter and style, the academic paintings of 1930s Belfast seem to be closely linked to the international mural movement. Similar to Conor, Gordon, and Hunter's return to Bronze Age imagery, international artists like Diego Rivera also depicted indigenous imagery and pre-colonial themes (Watson 1983, 4). The Mexican muralists as well as the academic painters in Belfast placed an emphasis on socialist subjects, and focused on the contemporary worker and industries associated with the locations in which their paintings were placed. These types of subjects continued to be prominent in officially sanctioned mural production like the paintings commissioned for the Northern Ireland submission for the 1938 Empire Exhibition in Glasgow (McBrinn 2007, 256). In Belfast, even though the outdoor murals are often associated with the international mural movement, it is the academic mural commissions of the 1930s, rather than the outdoor sectarian paintings, that were more closely aligned with the international murals both through subject matter and style.

By all accounts, the history of sectarian public mural painting in Northern Ireland predates the well-known early twentieth century international mural movements in Mexico and the United States to which the Belfast political murals are occasionally linked by scholars and artists (Rolston, 1990; Lisle, 2006, 33, Flannery, 2006; 'Mural Artist', 2023; Reynolds, 2023). Scholars often focus on the political differences between those international movements and the images created in Northern Ireland, noting the emphasis on indigenous culture and socialist leanings of the Mexican muralists. Rolston goes further, stating:

> A remarkably similar phenomenon had occurred in Ireland in the same period with the rediscovery and reinterpretation of Celtic culture. As in the Mexican case, established artists, particularly playwrights and poets rather than visual artists, had been an integral part of the forging of a new national identity and consciousness. But the mural painters of Northern Ireland were not part of this national movement. This is how the Mexican and Northern Ireland murals differ most. It is not just that the former are "art" and the latter, even at their best, could never have been awarded such an accolade. Rather, it is that the Mexicans were on the side of a successful nationalist revolution. The Irish muralists sided with those in whose interests the full national revolution was thwarted. (Rolston 1991, 112-113)

Regarding the Mexican mural tradition and its association with murals in Northern Ireland, Flannery concurs with Rolston, noting, 'they may be state-sanctioned, but they are understood as revolutionary affronts to vanquished oppression' (Flannery 2006, 81). The point made by most of these scholars is that the Mexican mural traditions are politically

more closely aligned with the republican/nationalist communities in Northern Ireland rather than the PUL mural artists of the early twentieth century.

Aside from political leanings, an important distinction between the international mural movement and the outdoor murals created in Belfast, is that the artists in Mexico, and later in the United States, had some form of traditional art training, and their murals were commissions, not personal expressions of ritual, identity, and cultural history. In Belfast, the well-known outdoor murals were grassroots, created by self-taught artists, and completed without official state support. Even though the artists who initially created Belfast's first murals were part of the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community, these men were working-class. They were not a part of the ruling political elite and had no sway over cultural choices in the city. The international mural artists are more closely aligned with academic mural painters, as pointed out in Watson (Watson, 1983). Artists like William Conor, W.R. Gordon, John Hunter, and later John Luke were working in a municipal art function and were supported by those who wielded power in Belfast society. These well-known muralists' projects were widely documented and publicised in local press. The city's municipal public art programmes kept mural-making on the minds of the members of the community, and they had an impact on the visual culture of the city and the other artists working at the time.

A Mid-Century Call for Mural Preservation

In the early part of the century, academic mural production was promoted in Britain by teachers like Henry Tonks at the Slade School of Art in London (Chabanais and Goldberg 1994, 235). It is at this institution that the artists working in the 1940s and 1950s in Belfast

first attempted paintings on a large scale. As noted earlier, it is known that famed Belfast artist John Luke painted a gable end mural of King William III, one referred to by Martyn Anglesea in the *Irish Arts Review* as 'a juvenile effort' (Anglesea 2002, 112). However, the artist began painting large-scale images in earnest during his time as an art student at the Slade. His most visible and important mural project came later, though, as the Committee for the Encouragement of Music and Art (which later became the Arts Council) commissioned him to create a mural in the Belfast City Hall interior arch beneath the dome to celebrate the 1951 Festival of Britain (Fig. 7, page 4). As the mural was painted *in situ*, the public would have been aware of its creation. It was also carefully documented in newspapers, from the commission through completion, and even received published reviews after the work was unveiled (*At the City Hall* 1952, 4).

The subject of Luke's City Hall mural, similar to Staples's earlier mural programme that was never installed, stayed away from content that would be considered controversial at the time, instead focusing on the city's founding and industrial history including 'Sir Arthur Chichester reading the Charter, the Cave Hill, a ship, symbols of the rope-making industry, a weaver's cottage, flax and linen on a bleaching green, a spinning wheel, a handloom, the old White Linen Hall, and old St. Anne's Church' (*Artist's 12-Hour Day* 1951, 4). Though some critics questioned Luke's 'garish' colour choices and write that they hope the colours will diminish over time, the murals were generally well-received and were a spark that led to numerous mural commissions over the coming decade (*At the City Hall* 1952, 4). Luke's City Hall mural is still in place, and the artist's work has provided inspiration to mural artists and easel painters since its creation ('Mural Artist,' 2023; Gallagher, 2023; *Field Notes RUA,* 2023). Luke's success with the City Hall mural also

led to two other mural commissions in Belfast for the artist; one for the Provincial Masonic Hall in 1956 and an additional mural for the Belfast College of Technology begun in 1961. There was a public outcry for further additions of murals and embellishments to public spaces after Luke's mural was completed (*Embellishing Belfast* 1952, 8).

Along with John Luke, a number of other Belfast artists worked in mural production in the 1950s and early 1960s. Sidney Smith added to the visual landscape of the city after he was commissioned to paint murals in public places along Great Victoria Street as early as 1944. The artist painted at least thirteen large murals in the city between the years of 1944 and 1947 (Chabanais and Goldberg 238). In 1956, Smith was hired to paint murals in newly built steamships as well. In addition to the mural design and execution, he was directly involved in the design of the interior spaces of *The Pendennis Castle* ship, a process that would have likely put him in contact with the workers in the shipyards of Harland & Wolff (*Pendennis Castle Murals*, 1958).

Academic, municipal, and commercial mural painting continued to thrive during the 1950s and early 1960s. Though these paintings were often created for interior spaces, the academic murals were the primary form of public art created in the city at the time. As Watson also notes, aside from PUL murals in the city, 'it was still at this stage, a rare event for a painting to be put up on the outside of a building' (Watson 1983, 5). Even if the academic murals were largely for interior spaces, the act of painting would have been somewhat public, as these murals were often created in public spaces like government buildings, retail establishments, or restaurants. At the time, the mural production was also chronicled in a variety of press. There are many newspaper articles which discuss the virtues of artists who engage in mural-making, mural contests, pleas for more murals, and

photographs of students at work on murals (*Another John Luke Mural,* 1956; *Artist's 12 Hour Day*, 1951; *Pendennis Castle Murals*, 1958; *Embellishing Belfast*, 1952; Anon, 1958).

After the boom in academic murals in the 1950s, and a few major mural commissions in the 1960s, there is little attention paid to interior mural production in the city. It is significant to note that the academic murals – those created by trained artists, through public commissions, publicized in the press, and celebrated by dignitaries – are largely forgotten (Watson 1983, 5). While John Luke's City Hall and Masonic Lodge murals are still extant, the whereabouts of the Gordon and Hunter Belfast Museum and Art Gallery murals that were the subjects of many articles in their time, are not known. Though these panels were created for an art institution, the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, it seems as if they were stored and forgotten when that museum, now the Ulster Museum, underwent renovations in 1969. As a response to an email inquiring about their location, museum staff could not find any information about the murals within their collections management system and pointed to Joseph McBrinn as the authority on the murals (Picture.Library, 2022). McBrinn states that he last saw the murals in 1995, and they were rolled and placed in storage at the Museum's Botanic Gardens Building. He assumes they continue to be stored somewhere in the museum (McBrinn, 2022).

Though Luke's 1950s murals are noted for their unique colour palette, Smith's mural production in the 1940s and 1950s was extremely traditional. With their tendency toward realism and naturalistic colours, the academic murals that garnered so much local press from the 1930s to the 1960s were already somewhat old fashioned at the time of their creation and were destined to be forgotten (Watson, 1983). As McBrinn notes, regarding

another set of murals by the muralist William Gordon, 'the propagandistic element in the [1938 Empire Exhibition] frieze was slightly out-of-step with the more abstract Modernist styles used in other murals in the exhibition, although the imperial symbolism was resolutely British' (McBrinn 2007, 257). However, when seeking reasons for the decline in traditional murals, one can also point to the changing political tides, conflict, violence, and the destruction brought by bombing campaigns in the coming decades as reasons for the decline of state and individually sponsored mural production. It is unclear if these widely publicized mid-century academic murals had any impact on the outdoor murals of the time. However, as was the case in the early part of the century, mural-making was on the minds of the community and may have fostered the interest in both preserving and reviving the outdoor mural tradition.

In 1958, a small article appeared in the *Ireland Saturday Night* newspaper in which the first PUL artist, John McLean, was identified. The author of 'The First King William Painter' offers significant support for PUL mural paintings from earlier in the century. In this article, the author also shows concern that the older murals need to be photographed 'before this time-honoured form of craftsmanship dies out', and the author also previews an upcoming 'Twelfth competition with prizes for the most attractive specimens [that] might stimulate interest in these fading walls' (*First King William Painter* 1958, 4). By about 1950, the 'Golden Era' of PUL mural painting had died down, and, aside from comments from the community about the fading murals and 'dying art of gable painting,' there was little attention paid to the gable end walls (Joseph Tomelty quoted in Rolston 1991, 26). Citing sources that lament the decline of mural production, Rolston points out that the 'amateur King Billys were no longer painted by adults with a long-term

commitment to the ritual but by youths and children' (Rolston 1991, 28) (Fig. 2, page 1[4]). The trend of youthful painters will continue, as young people become more politically engaged and see wall painting as an act of defiance, a way to express themselves, and a source of pride within the PUL community (Ervine, 2022; 'Mural Artist', 2023). Though authors lament the deterioration of outdoor murals in the 1950s, there was an overwhelming increase in self-taught/outsider artists' outdoor sectarian mural painting in the 1970s, as community-minded and eventually sectarian political art soon overwhelmed the city's appetite for official interior art (*First King William Painter,* 1958).

Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist Mural Revival and 'Brightening the Place Up'

Conflict on the island of Ireland between Protestants and Catholics dates back hundreds of years, long before the partition of the island in 1921. In the 17th century, this discord was exacerbated by the plantation of Protestant Scots and English into the area in the north of the island of Ireland, an act that upset the indigenous culture, led to subjugation of Catholics, and fuelled violence in the centuries that followed. John Darby points out that beginning in 1609:

> essentially [the Plantation of Ulster] sought to transplant a society to Ireland. The native Irish remained but were initially excluded from the towns built by the Planters and banished to the mountains and bogs on the margins of the land they

[4] This image is an example of the type of King Billy images that were painted or preserved in the mid-century, however, it was painted at a later date. The mid-century images are no longer extant.

> had previously owned. The sum of the Plantation of Ulster was the introduction of a foreign community, which spoke a different language, represented an alien culture and way of life, including a new type of land tenure and management. In addition, most of the newcomers were Protestant by religion, while the native Irish were Catholic. (cain.ulster.ac.uk. n.d.)

After the plantation of Protestants into the area, oppression of the Catholic community and conflict between the two groups continued. In the mid-twentieth century, this discord culminated with the founding of the Campaign for Social Justice in 1964, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association in 1967, civil rights marches and demands by Catholics in 1968, and eventually violence with 1969's Battle of the Bogside. At that point, Northern Ireland entered a period of thirty years of armed conflict, known as The Troubles or often locally called 'the conflict', which resulted in a rise in the prominence of paramilitaries, devastating bombing campaigns, targeted killings, and the deaths of more than three thousand people. It is important to point out that, as Darby noted in 1995 during The Troubles, 'the broad outlines of the current conflict in Northern Ireland had been sketched out within fifty years of the plantation: the same territory was occupied by two hostile groups, one believing the land had been usurped and the other believing that their tenure was constantly under threat of rebellion' (cain.ulster.ac.uk. n.d.).

With the beginning of violence in 1969, we see the return of PUL mural production as well as an effort by traditional art organizations and academic artists to use art as a tool to benefit the community. As violence intensified, outdoor sectarian murals became more prominent, and they reflected the unease and confusion that existed within the PUL

community. Watson notes, 'there is little doubting that they represent accurately some of the overriding concerns of many of the people in that community' (Watson 1983, 4). Rolston concurs, 'as in other periods, mural painting became an accurate barometer of the political atmosphere' (Rolston 1991, 31). With youth gangs, paramilitaries, and individuals vying for supremacy and power within the PUL community, the older symbols of union became less prevalent, and a new iconography emerged (Rolston 1991, 32). As such, murals painted by PUL artists in the 1970s reflect a lack of hegemony within the community itself.

In Loftus's first publication about the topic, 'Loyalist Wall Paintings,' she credits the change in PUL murals to generational changes and lack of skill amongst the artists, stating, 'in general the gradual replacement of the old elaborate scenes by simple flags, badges and heraldic emblems is evidence of the declining skill of those involved in loyalist wall paintings' (Loftus 1983, 12) (Fig. 8, page 4). This seems to miss some of the broader context, as pointed out by Rolston and Jarman among others. Jarman notes that 'the paintings were used to situate the paramilitary political practices of loyalism and republicanism within the broader political bodies of unionism and nationalism. They were used to refine traditional beliefs in line with the changing circumstances of political and military conflict' (Buckley 1998, 86). In other words, as the unionist community sought to define its differences and paramilitaries focused on differentiating themselves and asserting their power, they used symbols on walls to both define territory and to help to define and create their own self-identity.

Flags and paramilitary symbols are easy to read. They communicate boundaries and identify power players. As Jarman points out, 'although these were always very public

displays, the messages have been primarily directed at those broad communities of support which sustained paramilitary groups rather than outside bodies of opinion' (Buckley 1998, 86). These paramilitary symbols directed at the working-class within the housing estates, which gained prominence in the 1970s, have often been thought of as threatening; however, the community response to such images is hard to gauge. As noted earlier in the Introduction, it is difficult to get an honest response from community members about the paramilitary images. Though they may only speak under the condition of anonymity or refuse to speak publicly, they understand the messaging of these symbols (Buckley 1998, 95; 'Mural Artist', 2023).

Along with an increase in PUL mural imagery in the 1970s, the city experienced several years of outdoor community art efforts. Though Rolston points out that there were community mural programmes in many areas in the United States, the community-minded murals in Belfast differed from other cities' grassroots images that seemed to spring up organically in neighbourhoods that had a politically conscious constituency (Rolston 1991, 50). In Belfast, the community art programmes that emerged in the late 1970s were funded by the government, included artists from traditional academic art backgrounds, and sought to dampen the violence in the downtrodden communities. Rolston calls these programmes 'low level environmental improvement', a phrase that is similar to the common refrain heard about murals and Street Art: 'brightening the place up' (Rolston 1991, 51; Watson 1983). It seems that the intention of the community mural programme in the late 1970s was really 'a cosmetic solution' focused more on urban blight and distracting the 'politically aware urban youth' (Lisle 2006, 37; Rolston 1991, 51). However, since these communities had already experienced seven decades of mural production in the city, and

their daily lives were filled with trauma and fear associated with armed conflict, the people expected more from these pieces of public art.

The negative response to the community mural programmes in the late 1970s demonstrated the city's expectations for their public art. Community workers were quick to comment on the murals, implying that art should do more than just decorate, it should seek to solve a range of humanitarian issues, a mentality that is still present amongst many cross-community organizations as well as local public art programmes. In Jackie Redpath's article 'No Murals Here,' Redpath states:

> dozens of gable walls in Belfast have been covered by the "student" murals over the last five years, sponsored by the Belfast City Council under the name of community art. Around the Shankill we've had the full range from John Travolta to Jack and the Beanstalk and Henry the Eighth with his wives to Mackie workers. The main features of this grand aided summer activity is that its inspiration and labour was largely a student activity and few skills were passed on to the kids they worked with. In no way was it a development of natural local growth. Even when the tenants' groups attempted to give some political bite to the paintings, to comment on rent increases or housing conditions, their ideas failed to re-emerge from the City Hall consultation process. (Redpath 1983, 21)

Redpath served as a community worker in the Shankill area; he was not an art professional. His writing about the murals reflects the general feeling of disconnect between the power structures that commissioned local art students to create the murals, and the people living in the areas where the community murals were placed. Redpath's article was published in

Circa an art magazine that dedicated an entire volume to mural painting in 1983.

In the same issue, writing from the CNR point of view, Des Wilson, who worked in the Springhill Community Education Project, is equally critical stating:

> With brilliant flair and astounding absence of sensitivity, the artists painted a series of wild animals, set in a jungle. Then they went away leaving the residents to contemplate their handiwork and to wonder if it really represented the artists' view of them and their district. (Wilson 1983, 19)

This is an issue that continues to present itself in Belfast, as the working-class residents often find themselves at odds with both the artists who may be piloted in from other communities, as well as those in positions of power who may oversee the commissioning a large-scale art project.

In addition to the criticism levied by community leaders, artists and arts professionals were also quite critical of the community art efforts in Belfast. In notes from the National Mural Conference in 1983, Julian Watson reports that artist and critic Deanna Petherbridge:

> weighed in strongly against many facets of the contemporary mural 'movement'. Many wall-paintings supposedly painted in the spirit of art-for-the-people were fine examples of hypocritical condescension ... Such murals swiftly became eyesores to match anything in the area. (Watson 1983, 32)

This is definitely harsh criticism, but it is not entirely unwarranted. The process that produced the community art murals in the late 1970s and early 1980s did not follow

established public art norms; rather, those in power made choices without actively involving the community and listening to their needs. Frustration with the mural making process can be felt in Redpath's comments, and disappointment and even disdain from the fine art establishment is evident in Watson and Petherbridge's response to these community murals. As Rachael Young points out, however, the artists, most of them students, should not be faulted for the failure of the programme. They likely answered a tender and had little opportunity to advocate for either the community's ideas or their own artistic expression (Young, 2024). Rather, the murals' subjects were chosen specifically because they would not incite strong emotions from any viewer (Fig. 9, page 5).

There are a few community murals that escaped such criticism, namely the murals that included images of local residents. A series of murals created in 1978 included locals on a park bench, footballers, boxers, and local pensioners. About this group of murals, Rolston states:

> Although they had no opportunity to be involved in the artistic process, except perhaps in discussing the theme, helping with the painting in minor ways, and generally supporting the artists, local people genuinely identified closely with the murals that depicted local people, activities, and scenes… such murals were "theirs". (Rolston 1991, 61)

One such mural, which is no longer extant, was a candid group portrait of local children placed on a gable end on Disraeli Street, and it was written about favourably in local press. Regarding the mural, one of the artists, an art student named Ernie Francis, stated 'we wanted something different that would have the active support of local people – something

they would be familiar with' (*Belfast: the city as portrait gallery* 1977, 8). Similarly, a series of panels also commissioned by the Department of Environment, and painted by the artist Brendan Ellis, was unveiled and kindly received in 1979. Ellis states the images are 'a cross-section of ordinary people in Belfast who have interested me' (Simpson 1979, 3). Though people generally enjoy seeing themselves portrayed positively in art, more importantly, a sense of ownership is essential for successful public art. Public involvement in the artistic process remains significant. This is a lesson that public art commissioners and traditional art institutions in Belfast will relearn through the decades. Whether they were viewed as successful art for the public or not, these community murals were created by academically trained artists and were illustrative of traditional fine art systems. They were created exclusively by artists who attended the Belfast College of Art and Design, and financial support came from the Belfast City Council's Community Services Department with funds supplied by the Northern Ireland Office (Rolston 1991, 55).

By the 1970s, traditional mural-making had gone out of fashion within the art colleges, though, and murals were no longer included in the advertised College of Art and Design course listings. The artists who participated in the community mural programmes would likely not have taken any classes in the medium. There are a few interior murals created outside of the city; however, generally these types of murals were not the primary focus of the art establishment. With little attention being paid to large scale interior mural projects at the time, the community murals that employed student artists and were funded by the Belfast City Council were the main form of state-sponsored public art in Belfast from their beginning in 1977 through the early 1980s. No matter the public perception of the murals, they existed side-by-side with the growing number of political murals, making

the late 1970s and 1980s a visually rich period in the city's history.

The First Republican Murals Emerge

In the early 1980s, the community mural programme continued, and there was also a resurgence of PUL murals around 1985 as a response to the community's frustration over the Anglo-Irish Agreement. However, the main change to mural production in the city in the 1980s was the painting of the first murals by the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (CNR) community. Until this point, there was no visual imagery associated with the Catholic minority on gable walls in Belfast. Though recent census figures report that Catholics outnumber Protestants for the first time in the history of Northern Ireland, this group has traditionally been in the minority since the Partition of the island of Ireland in 1921. As such, this community was not permitted to express themselves in public ways. The minority was oppressed even further as the display of symbols associated with republicanism were outlawed under the Flags and Emblems Act of 1954. This act both protected the display of the Union flag and forbid any emblems that 'may occasion a breach of the peace', which included the tricolour flag of the Republic of Ireland. According to this law, an 'emblem includes a flag of any kind other than the Union flag' (Northern Ireland Parliament, 1954). Since 1954, any act of public visual display by the CNR community could be met with fines and imprisonment. Therefore, there were no CNR murals until, at the height of The Troubles, the community began to illegally paint their messages on walls in an effort that Rolston calls 'an explosion of murals' (Rolston 1991, 79). The spark that lit the CNR mural torch was the death of the first person on Hunger Strike in 1981, Bobby Sands.

Bobby Sands was a young member of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) who was arrested for firearms possession after a gun battle with the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) that followed the PIRA 1976 Balmoral Furniture Company bombing. He was imprisoned at HM Maze Prison and led the 1981 Hunger Strike which protested the removal of Special Category Status for PIRA prisoners. This special status provided privileges afforded to political prisoners rather than criminals. Ten prisoners died in the 1981 Hunger Strike, which was the culmination of five years of increasingly drastic protest methods by the republican prisoners at HM Maze Prison.

The first CNR murals are dedicated to Sands along with the other prisoners who died in the 1981 Hunger Strike (Fig. 10, page 5[5]). As Rolston points out, it is logical that the subject of the first major CNR murals are images of the hunger strikers given that their deaths were the impetus for the murals (Rolston 1991, 79). However, the history of Catholic imagery should also be considered. As a response to the Protestant Reformation and its ensuing iconoclasm, the Catholic Church reinforced its celebration of saints through the depiction of expressive images of their martyrdom. Since the Counter Reformation and resolutions set forth during the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century, martyr imagery has been an integral part of Catholic art theory and practice. The 1981 Hunger Strike resulted in the deaths of a group of young people whose images were turned into familiar symbols of martyrdom.

[5] The Bobby Sands mural, Figure 10, is not one of the original murals from the period after the Hunger Strike. It is an image painted by Danny Devenny between 2000-2005 and then repainted in 2015. However, the artist used the same source photograph as the earlier Sands images. This is an example of the type of mural portraying Sands that has been in production since the first of its kind in 1981.

The first murals of Bobby Sands were created by copying a photograph of the youthful man smiling toward the camera. The image has since been replicated over again through the decades. In addition to this portrait image, though, there are murals that reflect the CNR artists' interest in religious imagery as well. Images of skeletons in a cruciform pose, the Sacred Heart of Jesus alongside a prisoner, and a Hunger Striker and Rosary, are just a few examples of the types of murals painted in 1981 that aligned Catholic imagery and emphasized the Catholic focus on sacrifice with images of martyrs and martyrdom. Noel McGuigan points out that CNR artists use images that 'were easily understood because they comprised of familiar symbols from the Catholic nationalist culture…. Religion is a recurring theme. There are specific religious images of Christ, of crucifixes, the Virgin Mary, and the Angel of Death. There are also implicit religious symbolism' (McGuigan 1983, 16).

Even PUL artists recognized that the images being created by the CNR artists were more likely to feature martyrs, stating 'most of them's just paintings of their men like hunger strikers …. They're not paintings of hatred they're paintings of what they call their martyrs' (PUL artist quoted in Loftus 1983, 12-13). As martyrdom is not a key aspect of Protestantism or Protestant art imagery, PUL artists stay away from these types of images. Further, Protestant church iconography has a history of being aniconic due to the early tradition of iconoclasm after the Protestant Reformation. Even as that community began to amass casualties in the height of the conflict, their murals do not capitalize on martyr imagery as a powerful form of public messaging. Loftus points out that rather than creating martyr images, PUL artists turn to William III as the community's:

> key figure in this concept of heritage. He too has traditionally been seen by Ulster Protestants less as a political conqueror of Ireland's Catholic population, than as a timeless defender of their faith, the King of the Pious, Glorious and Immortal Memory who rides the white horse of the Saviour of the Apocalypse, and an immediate reminder of the kind of leadership expected, but by no means always obtained, from the prominent figures in the local Protestant community (Loftus 1983, 13).

This is a significant distinction between the CNR images of the 1980s and those of the PUL community in the same decade. The differences found between them are not only because of their political opposition, but the artistic differences can also be attributed to the history of art within each religious organisation as well as how the artists were approached and trained, a topic that will be covered in depth in Chapter Three.

Since the PUL community's mural history is often linked to using murals as a means of expression when they feel underrepresented, there was an increase in PUL murals after the 1985 Anglo Irish Agreement. This treaty was intended to help bring an end to The Troubles, but unionists objected to the Irish government having an advisory role in the process. Though many of the murals that followed the 1985 negotiations are attributed to a 'young Shankill Road man, Alan Skillen', during this time, several young people who demonstrated artistic skill were approached to paint images of the PUL response to the Anglo-Irish Agreement on gable walls (Rolston 1991, 39; 'Mural Artist', 2023). Usually, these murals were created using the historic images of William III, symbols associated with paramilitaries, and symbols associated with the history of Ulster Protestants. Some PUL

muralists who continue to paint today got their start as teenagers painting responses to this political shift ('Mural Artist', 2023).

Rolston points out that 'republicans have an advantage: their clarity of ideology, cause, and target lends itself to romantic and heroic representation. But the bulk of loyalist military activity has involved the assassination of lone and unarmed nationalists. The problem for loyalist mural painters is how to portray the groups involved in heroic form' (Rolston 1991, 41). With hindsight and more context, it can be noted that while CNR murals turned to martyr imagery, PUL murals turned to aniconic symbols of their cause as well as saviour-themed imagery, as pointed out in Loftus's early writings on the topic (Loftus, 1983). Each group made artistic choices that were informed by the current ideological and political climate, skill level of artists, but also their own religious artistic traditions. Additionally, each side of the sectarian divide laid claim symbols and specific images in order to self-identify, mark territory, and provide their community with a sense of heritage, culture, and pride. Even when tragic circumstances in the PUL community resulted in the painting of a mural, PUL artists did not immediately paint images that could be read as martyr images precisely because that type of symbolism had been previously claimed by the CNR artists. The binary aspect of this sectarian divide encouraged PUL and CNR artists to choose symbols that would be easy for their respective communities to read and, more importantly, distinguish from the imagery on the other side. This will cause a clamouring for symbols and themes that continues today.

After the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement

Mural production continued in both communities through the 1980s and 1990s, though

there was a decline in formal academic commissions of large-scale public art. While images of IRA gunmen were prominent in CNR murals before around 1994, the community began to eliminate those types of aggressive images in the mid-1990s. After 1998, images of footballers, Celtic mythology, and martyrs, along with a focus on international anti-colonialism subjects adorned the walls in this community. While PUL imagery in the 1990s continued to focus on commemoration of historic events, paramilitary symbolism, and flags, the emergence of more threatening paintings of men in balaclavas with guns casts a shadow over some of the community's benign imagery (Rolston 2012, 452). After negotiations for a cease-fire in 1994, secret talks between the two sides of the conflict continued. In 1998, the people of Northern Ireland voted overwhelmingly in favour of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, putting an end to thirty years of armed conflict. It is at this point that we see the return of government-sponsored academic art used to change the visual landscape, remove aggressive sectarian imagery, and rehabilitate the city streets in Belfast.

As early as the year 2000, art critics begin to lament the lack of officially sanctioned public art that speaks to the people of Belfast, or represents them in any way, with Judy Vannais stating:

> Murals painted in the post-war slums partially alleviated the blighted landscape and later, after redevelopment they punctuated the monotony of sprawling housing estates. While not their primary purpose, murals can be seen to be, in part, a response to an urban environment which was undifferentiated at best and alienating at worst.… As Belfast considers the future of its civic spaces it may be wise to

> reflect upon these aspects of the mural movement here. A city that desires its inhabitants to breathe life into its public spaces would do well to include those very people in the creation of its vision, to give them ownership, either through participation or identification with what is created. (Vannais 2000, 22)

Vannais's point is one that many others have made, namely that the murals in Belfast, no matter their subject or style, alleviate bleakness in some areas. The next two decades of mural painting in the city will take on the challenge to both remove sectarian imagery to create more welcoming shared spaces as well as 'brightening the place up', a phrase that finds itself in nearly every newspaper article about a new mural or Street Art project.

Through initiatives by Belfast City Council and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, mural replacement began in the communities that still had visual evidence of sectarianism (Rolston 2012, 453). In 2006, a large-scale effort to actively change the more threatening images that appeared on Belfast's walls was underway. The programme, Re-imaging Communities: Building Peace through the Arts, began as:

> an important element in the process of converting and transforming these visible signs of sectarianism and inter-community separation. The intention has been to encourage communities to reflect on and plan for ways of replacing divisive imagery with imagery that reflects communities in a more positive manner. A consortium approach was adopted which included the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI), the Department of Social Development (DSD), the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), the Community Relations Council (CRC), The Police Service of Northern Ireland

> (PSNI), The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE), and the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). (Independent Research Solutions 2009, vii)

As noted in this quote from the first Final Evaluation of this programme, the consortium approach led to seven organisations having a say in this effort. Though the programme was managed by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, and this agency distributed the funds, many groups were involved.

The Re-imaging Communities Programme has received a fair amount of criticism from scholars, many of whom lament the 'top-down', 'blandness of the least common denominator' and permanence of the artwork that was produced (Rolston 2012, 459, 460; Keenan, 2022). Keenan notes that in Belfast, 'mural painting is also a living practice that is reactive to current events and culture change.… Mural painting, and arguably the mural itself, is a social process, wherein the networks and exchanges among the people connected by an image are much more important than any specific symbol represented therein' (Keenan 2022, 99). This point is significant when discussing the Re-imaging Communities Programme. The artwork commissioned through this programme and installed in place of aggressive sectarian imagery was chosen by a consortium, sometimes facilitated by academic artists, and, in many cases, was a permanent display. These elements put the artworks at odds with the tradition of mural painting in the city which was an ever-evolving, working-class artform. Even with some distance between the current visual climate in the city and the beginning of this government programme, the Re-imaging artworks still seem overly formal when compared to the lively tradition of mural painting. Rolston notes 'the

impression from viewing the range of Re-imaging murals is that their sting has been pulled; they have been sanitised, de-politicised' (Rolston 2012, 460). In a visual landscape that has always been dynamic, responsive, and reflective of the working-class communities, this official public art effort does not align with previous mural tradition in the city. However, as will be discussed further in Chapter Four, the act of painting in public, the inclusion of the community members in many of the Re-imaging projects, and the large-scale investment in public art serves as a starting point and will have a lasting artistic impact on the city.

The successful pieces of public art in the city are part of a longer mural tradition, one that is rooted in self or community expression, led by artists outside of the mainstream art community, and meant as a messaging system for the public. The messages found on the walls continue to shift following the interests of the public. While the Re-imaging Programme does succeed in replacing many of the sectarian murals, sectarian imagery does not disappear entirely. Though there are continued efforts by Belfast City Council, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, and numerous community groups to 'brighten the place up' since the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, images associated with each side of the conflict are still produced. Images of gunmen are rarer, as noted earlier. However, each side of the sectarian divide, and the smaller groups within those communities, commission political images that claim symbolism associated with their community's history. These new symbols may not be as blatantly aggressive or 'grim' as one newspaper called the images from the 1990s, however, as one mural artist notes, the community understands the new symbolism as part of 'their' community heritage as opposed to the heritage of the opposing side (*Pressure Grows for Prime Minister to Act*

Over Hume-Adams Initiative 1993; ‘Mural Artist’, 2023).

The main impact the Re-imaging programme had on the city was a boost in funding to community arts organizations, as well as raising the profile of artists working in the public realm. Hélène Hamayon-Alfaro’s assessment of the Re-Imaging Communities Programme notes that it increased visibility of artists and arts organizations through the funding of community arts, adding:

> the shift from arts policy to cultural policy greatly benefitted community arts. Though the increase of the total arts budget remained moderate throughout the period [1995-2007], the ACNI’s dedicated community arts budget rose significantly.… This scheme reflects the British government’s view that artistic mediation coupled with community participation could help further the reconciliation agenda. (Hamayon-Alfaro 2011, 131)

The goal, therefore, was to create shared spaces and ‘help communities erase visible signs of sectarianism’ not necessarily to create effective public art (Hamayon-Alfaro 2011, 132). The primary successes, however, are the government and cultural power structures’ recognition of the importance of mural painting and public art; the funding that provided artists an opportunity to make a living creating art in the public sphere; and the integration of community groups in the art making process. This will set the stage for a boom in mural painting in the 2000s and 2010s and a Street Art movement that thrives in the city today, a topic that will be covered in depth in Chapter Four.

Conclusion

This chapter provided art historical context for the well-documented political mural tradition, demonstrating that the murals for which the city is known were not the only forms of public painting created in Belfast throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Though political changes and anxieties may be the impetus for many sectarian murals, academic art movements often align with heightened political mural production. Especially before the outbreak of violence during The Troubles, there are many blurred lines between academic mural-making and that of sectarian outdoor murals. Mural production in Belfast also often coincides with larger international mural movements, like those in Mexico and the United States in the 1920s and 1930s as well as the community art movements worldwide in the 1970s. Contact between artists, public statements by artists and arts professionals about the political murals, and a city-wide emphasis on mural-making will create a culture that values mural production to express concerns, declare allegiances, and draw territorial lines, as well as combat urban blight, bring communities together, and create shared spaces. Even though the sectarian murals may have imagery that is divisive, it is their authenticity and immediacy that continues to draw people to them and sets them apart from the academic painting tradition that may have informed their process and style.

Chapter Two: Belfast's Murals as Public Art

The field of public art criticism continues to refine the definition of public art. As Cameron Cartiere points out, 'over forty years since *public art* was coined as a term, it has yet to be clearly defined in any art history text…. Yet the evolution of the terminology to describe public art is an acknowledgement of the complexity of the practice' (Cartiere and Willis 2008, 8-9). Accepted within the field of public art history are both broad definitions that may include the prehistoric cave paintings at Lascaux, as well as narrow definitions that are singularly focused on artwork linked to large-scale government arts initiatives, like the arts programming of the United States Works Progress Administration or more recent 'percent-for-art' requirements for new architectural projects (Cartiere and Willis 2008, 8). Cartiere offers one of the broadest definitions of the artform with 'the practices of public art weave in and around themselves, existing in layers. Public art can incorporate a single object or an entire street or cityscape. Public art exists in urban centre, suburbia, rural regions, cyberspace and contexts of augmented realities and economic and art spaces of international flows' (Cartiere and Zebracki 2015, 3). The range of definitions of the term *public art* can be overwhelming, as one links specific art movements to the history of public art. However, a thorough review of the definitions of the term finds many consistencies. Audience/public engagement, intent, and place are all themes that critics of public art link to the field. Though traditional art criticism rarely engages with the mural tradition in Belfast, each iteration of Belfast's history of mural making fits within the larger history of public art practice and is guided by the themes that are traditionally accepted within the field of public art.

As the field of public art criticism began to grow in the late 1980s, Deirdre O'Connell wrote an evaluation of the state of public art in Belfast. Published in the art criticism journal *Circa* and titled 'Out of the Plaza: Some Strategies for Placing Art in Public Places', this article considers several art programmes in the city, stating:

> Examples of any kind of public art here are relatively few and up until now any rare specimens have tended to be the variety of the DoE [Department of Environment] civic decoration parachuted into the plazas and quaysides of any city-port in the form of the ubiquitous buoy-fountain. (O'Connell 1987, 20)

Though the article dates from a period when there were prolific muralists painting sectarian images on nearly every vertical surface, O'Connell makes no mention of such murals, already an established public art tradition in the city. More recently, Malcolm Miles writes about public art projects from 1985 and 1987 in the United Kingdom that were created to specifically respond to the conflict in Northern Ireland. His essay focuses on traditionally trained artists, and, again, there is no mention of murals, the primary form of art in public spaces in the area (Cartiere and Willis 2008, 67-68). However, Tony Crowley, who has compiled a large archive of the murals and recorded their changes, states, 'murals in their entirety constitute a complex, changing, fascinating body of public art that brings an added element to the understanding of the conflict in Northern Ireland and the "peace" that has followed' (Crowley 2015, 58).

Within some fine art establishment communities in Belfast, there continues to be a divide between what is considered 'real' public art and the city's political murals, an artform that has become a large draw for tourists, a major source of civic investment, and

the instinctual form of artistic output for artists in the city (*Field Notes RUA,* 2023). In this chapter, accepted academic definitions of public art will be discussed, along with corresponding mural examples from Belfast to demonstrate that though the sectarian murals in the city are often primarily discussed as examples of political ephemera, many of the murals should be studied as evidence of the city's public art tradition. Additionally, measures of success in public art will be addressed in relation to Belfast's mural tradition, demonstrating that the murals adhere to these benchmarks as well. As such, Belfast's political murals are not only examples of public art, but many can be considered part of a successful public art practice that has influenced the current artistic climate of the city.

In *Public Art: Theory, Practice, and Populism,* Cher Krause Knight's definition of public art states the art should be 'designated for a larger audience and placed to attract their attention; it intends to provide aesthetic experiences that edify, commemorate, or entertain; and its messages are comprehensible to generalized audiences' (Krause Knight 2008, 22). Krause Knight's definition is admittedly a very broad one that can include many types of artistic practice; however, this definition is one that is universally accepted as a starting point for the study of public art. She is regarded as an expert in the field and is a co-founder of Public Art Dialogue (an international professional organization dedicated to public art criticism) as well as the co-founder and co-editor of the academic journal *Public Art Dialogue* (Krause Knight and Senie 2020, xv). As will be discussed in this chapter, all aspects of Krause Knight's definition of public art are applicable to the political murals in Belfast.

Another prolific writer in the field, Cameron Cartiere, elaborates on the range of public art's possibilities, stating, 'under the vast umbrella of public art one finds permanent

works, temporary works, political activism, service art, performance, earthworks, community projects, and "plop" art' (Cartiere and Willis 2008, 9). From the beginning of Belfast's tradition of painted walls in 1908, to current CNR and PUL sectarian and cultural murals, an emphasis on location, audience, edification, and commemoration can be found. These murals adhere both to Krause Knight's definition of public art and also fit within Cartiere's 'vast umbrella' as they often blur the lines between art object, performance, and political activism. Though there are currently over one thousand murals on the city's walls, many thousands of historical murals are no longer extant (Extramural Activity, n.d.). The few sectarian murals discussed in this chapter were chosen as examples of successful public art because they are currently *in situ* and were created by living artists who could be interviewed. Therefore, information about artist intent, context, and public interaction with the images could be gathered.

Audience

In their 2020 volume *A Companion to Public Art*, Cher Krause Knight and Harriet Senie dedicate several chapters to the importance of audience, noting 'among the diverse and complex elements that comprise the study of public art, audience is and remains unquestionably the most elusive one. Considering that public art identifies an audience in its very title this is more than somewhat ironic' (Krause Knight and Senie 2020, 229). Their text reorients the field of public art criticism to incorporate the ideas of artists with a call for others to do the same; 'too often the artist's voice is excluded or marginalized in art history texts such as this one that are supposed to survey the field with breadth and depth' (Krause Knight and Senie 2020, 1). The two historians invited artists working in

the public sphere to contribute writings about their philosophies on the fundamentals of public art. Similarly, the research in this chapter relies heavily on artists' statements about their approach to creating art in public spaces.

Senie notes, 'away from the protective "art" frame of a sculpture garden or gallery space, public art is vulnerable to certain public uses that change or distort its meaning' (Senie 2003, 3). This is certainly the case with public murals in Belfast, as they have become the global symbols of the conflict in the area. Such proliferation of the replication of imagery will certainly have an impact on the response to murals on site. As noted earlier in the Introduction, seeking definitive answers about how an audience may respond to a mural is not the primary goal of this research. Rather, this text will turn to the intent of artists and their emphasis on audience as they create art for the public in Belfast.

Artist Jonny McKerr (also known by his Street Art moniker, JMK) says, 'I just love this idea of artists giving their creative, you know, their creations to the public for nothing' (BBC, n.d.). McKerr is known for his grayscale additions to the Belfast Street Art scene, however, he has also created some of the city's most striking murals that might be considered sectarian: the 1995 *An tOcras Mór* mural in the New Lodge area of North Belfast (Fig. 11, page 6), as well as a pair of World War I and World War II commemorative murals in the North Belfast PUL Tiger's Bay community (Figs. 12 and 13, pages 6 and 7). McKerr is a rare example of an artist who has created murals for each side of the sectarian conflict and therefore has the experience of considering an audience from a community that is not his own.

Famed CNR mural artist, Danny Devenny, explains, 'I understood through discussions with republicans in prison that it's very important that we articulate and explain

what the struggle is about', noting that the intent of his mural work was to reach a large audience and control the narrative (Conway 2010, 167). The contemporary artist Ciaran Gallagher, who first picked up a paintbrush to create CNR murals with Danny Devenny, notes that his murals are not created for the art world but for people to enjoy in a public place saying, 'part of the attraction to murals is… you know you are going to have an audience of people who are not necessarily people who are interested in art' (Gallagher, 2023). This artist bristles at the thought of a patron purchasing one of his paintings and then placing it in an obscure location where it will not be seen by others (Gallagher, 2023).

Regarding the responsibility an artist has to their audience, prolific muralist from the PUL community, Mark Ervine, states:

> most of the stuff or all of the stuff that I would paint as a mural is something that's been talked about within the community, and there's been a dialogue in and around. Because I'm putting it out in public, and people live in and around it. So, I have to make sure that it's palatable for those for those people that live in and around that, and they are in agreement. It's not just the case of me going on a whim and painting whatever I fancy on the wall, because it wouldn't work. (Northern Visions, n.d.)

He adds, 'I think you have a responsibility to the people that you represent, first and foremost' (Ervine, 2022). Ervine's father, the late David Ervine, was a member of the loyalist paramilitary group the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), the leader of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), and an integral part of the peace process, which gave his artist son a glimpse of how one person can impact a community (Ervine, 2022). Regarding the relationship of the artist to their audience, Hilde Hein states, 'as a public phenomenon, art

must entail the artist's self-negation and deference to a collective community' (Hein 1996, 1). Though they may find themselves on opposite sides of the political divide, many of the artists interviewed for this research share an interest in impacting a larger audience while representing the concerns and shared history of their constituency rather than their own personal interests. This is especially true of artists who began painting before the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. For some of these artists, the need for audience impact is essential for their desired political message, however, artists also value public art's ability to communicate historical and cultural information (Ervine, 2022; Kelly, 2023; 'Mural Artist' 2023; Molloy, 2023).

For an artist like Gerard Kelly, a striking public image is the best way to reach a large audience with a message supporting the republican cause (Kelly, 2023). Kelly is a former IRA prisoner who was instrumental in the CNR mural movement during the 1980s and 1990s. As Kelly states, 'the murals are part of the struggle, and if people can't express themselves on a wall, what can they do?' (White, 1996). His earliest murals were created as memorials to members of the CNR community who were killed in the conflict, as well as elaborate large-scale copies of political cartoons, and renderings of Celtic heroes copied from Jim Fitzpatrick's *The Book of Conquests.* Rolston notes that Kelly's work was set apart from murals that emerged during the Hunger Strikes; as the artist took his time and created a wall that was 'unique at the time in both its use of colour and amount of detail' (Rolston 1991, 104). Kelly painted his last major mural, *Honour Ireland's Dead,* in 2015, a work that was intended to celebrate the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising (Fig. 14, page 7). About this mural, Kelly states:

> The one thing I wanted to do was to unify republicans around the issue of commemorating our dead, painting a mural in the middle of the Falls Road, where a lot of these groups would see it, where I knew a lot of people would come up and start to question me as to what I was doing, and I knew certain people would come to ask so that they could carry the answer back and then make their assessment of you — our community is small and everything that is done is analysed and picked over. But the message I wanted them to get was to be proud of the men and women of 1916 and to carry on the struggle for Irish freedom in whatever form. (Kelly 2018, 166)

Kelly knew that the location he chose would lead to a larger audience, one who would be especially receptive to this message of commemoration and historical reverence. This large-scale depiction of the significant moments in the struggle for Irish independence can be seen as Kelly's swan song as it includes several motifs he has used throughout his career; symbols other artists copied into their own CNR murals throughout the last few decades (Goalwin, 2019; Kelly, n.d.). These images are easy to read and understand by Kelly's targeted audience, another important characteristic to consider when planning and executing of a successful piece of public art.

For this artist, uniting the audience was at the forefront of the planning of this mural, and audience has always been a top priority as he plans his public art. His foremost concern for murals and public art more generally is that the message is clear, as he considers himself primarily an activist (Kelly, 2023). Kelly's first foray into public art was not a mural, however. His first large scale piece of public art was the inscription of a large letter H on

the Black Mountain that overlooks Belfast.[6] This was a reference to the internment of IRA prisoners in the HM Maze or 'H Blocks' prison. Kelly states, 'the message on the mountain was for all the world to see. Everybody in our community could see it and it lifted their spirits. We were even on the TV! To this day, when the snow is on the mountain and is melting, I can still see the outline of it' (Kelly 2018, 29). This experience helped galvanize Kelly's ideas about the best ways to reach a large audience with public art, and he continued to seek out visible locations for his murals in an effort to reach the largest audience possible (Saleeby-Mulligan 2006, 215).

From early in his career, Kelly recognised the direct and indirect audience who is impacted by public art. As Harriet Senie notes, 'there certainly is an immediate audience – those who pass it sporadically or on a daily basis. And there is an indirect audience – those who read about it or see it on television, should it become famous or infamous' (Senie 2003, 2). In a 2015 interview with *Northern Visions,* Kelly reflected on the audience for his earlier works:

> millions of people were getting to see our work from a very, very small community that was isolated and demonised, that our work was going worldwide. So, we had France, German, Italian, American, Canadian, Japanese, Russian reporters over the years coming in and doing interviews in front of them [murals]. So, they were

[6] The practice of placing messages on the mountain continues through the work of the West Belfast Art Collective known as Gael Force Art, a group that was started by Kelly and three other artist/activists. While this is also a form of sectarian public art in the city, the practice will not be the focus of this thesis.

> giving us free coverage and publicity that they couldn't buy. (Northern Visions, n.d.)

In Belfast, a city for whom news articles about the conflict are often accompanied by an image of a sectarian mural, the secondary audience impact of public art has the potential to be as influential as the primary. Artists on both sides of the sectarian divide understand public art's responsibility to an indirect audience.

Glen Molloy, an artist who paints both politically neutral Street Art, as well as PUL cultural murals, states, 'I'm taking it [murals] out to the house. I'm taking it out of the city centre to the places where public art really matters; because these places only have ever had political paintings' (Molloy, 2023). Molloy's paintings can be found all around the city, especially in areas that the artist feels are somewhat neglected by the mainstream street artists, or by those artists supported by schemes funded by Belfast City Council. Molloy emerged from the city's graffiti movement, and credits the presence of the political murals as inspiration for turning to mural painting rather than graffiti tagging:

> it was a reaction to the paramilitary paintings, and people liked it. And you could just basically stand in broad daylight… Nobody ever said anything to you. It was just like, "all right, son." And then sometimes if you're in a certain area, if you're painting, like, you know, if you painted it red, white and blue, nobody was ever going to say anything. (Molloy, 2023)

Molloy does not consider his work to be political, and for much of his painting career he stayed away from commissions for overtly sectarian imagery. However, recently, he received several commissions for PUL cultural murals. One of these highly publicised

2023 works is a vibrant depiction of a young drummer found at the entrance to the Shankill neighbourhood, a traditionally PUL area of the city that witnessed significant violence during The Troubles (Fig. 15, page 8). From its commission to its execution and eventual unveiling celebration, this painting is an excellent example of the consideration of audience in the planning, design, and placement of a large-scale work of art.

Located on a highly visible building near the entrance to the Shankill neighbourhood from the city centre, this gable wall is both a desirable location for mural artists and important for organisations who are interested in using the space to send specific messages to the community. The *Shankill Drummer* gable wall was first painted with an emblem for the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), a paramilitary group who used the wall to claim territory. A decade after the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the wall was covered with boards printed with an old photograph of the Shankill area along with the words 'Shankill Original Belfast Since 455 AD The parish of Belfast was formerly called… Shankill, which signifies Old Church' (Extramural Activity, 2023). Those 2009 boards were replaced in 2021 with a sombre depiction of the faces of five important Shankill area figures created by local street artist Eoin McGinn, who paints under the name Emic (Fig. 16, page 8). This monochromatic mural was commissioned after the 2020 global pandemic, and 'reflects the spirit of togetherness which has brought the community through the past year' (Greater Shankill Winter Festival, n.d.). McGinn's mural was intended to elevate the community's spirits after the trauma of the pandemic; however, the colour palette and slightly distorted view of the faces was seen as grim by those in the neighbourhood (Drummond, 2024; *Field Notes Shankill*, 2024). Though it is standard practice for murals in Belfast to be replaced, because of the audience impact of the location,

this site has seen rapid turnover.

Molloy's *Shankill Drummer* mural stands in stark contrast to the previous images painted on this wall. It was created in aerosol with a psychedelic colour palette; vibrant hues of blue, purple, fuchsia, yellow, and orange form the abstract background. A larger-than-life image of a young boy playing a traditional parade drum with a baton is the only subject. The image was painted from a photograph of a young boy, and Molloy notes that the drum is one that every child growing up in the Shankill or other PUL areas would have played (*Field Notes Shankill,* 2024; Drummond, 2024). Drum lines and parades are a great source of pride within the PUL community. Celebrations that mark 12 July, the victory of Protestant King William of Orange over Catholic King James II, have traditionally included drum corps, and can be traced to the late seventeenth century, though they gained prominence in the late nineteenth century (Jarman 1997, 27-28). As such, this image might still be considered a sectarian image by many, as these types of parades have been used as intimidation, and the image itself represents only one side of the divide within the community. It does not, however, contain imagery that is overtly threatening. Rather, in this high-profile painting, the artist has taken a simple image – one that is intended to celebrate the local cultural heritage – to create a mural that is audience-focused. It is intended to bond the community together through fond memories of playing drums and watching parades as children, while it is also intended to welcome people to the area (Drummond, 2024; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024). At a time when the segregated areas of the city are beginning to diversify, the choice of a subject that represents only one side continues the conversation about sectarianism.

As is often the case with public art such as this, an image may have multiple

interpretations (Zebracki 2013, 305). As Serena Clark notes:

> the problem in Northern Ireland is not that the symbols are not understood but that two communities understand them in two distinct ways. Embedded between two communities is distrust, fear, and sectarianism. This phenomenon has developed over years of opposition and distorts the understanding of the expressive activities of 'the other.' (Clark 2019, 265)

Debbi Lisle adds, 'the symbols have an internal target: they generate messages of inclusion, belonging, and membership that bolster existing cultural boundaries… Second, the symbols have an external target: they generate messages of exclusion and intimidation' (Lisle 2006, 38). Therefore, an image that may be considered purely cultural or a symbol of heritage by one community, may be seen as a warning to another as is the case with Molloy's 2023 mural (*Field Notes Shankill,* 2023; Bonner, 2024; Drummond, 2024; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024).

About the *Shankill Drummer* mural, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) councillor Ian McLaughlin states:

> over the past six months we have had young people engaging in community activism through graffiti removals and community clean-ups. As part of this we looked at doing something more artistic that would not only brighten up the area but create a welcoming and positive atmosphere here at the gateway of the Shankill. This artwork symbolises all that is good about celebrating the history and culture of the Greater Shankill, in a respectful and meaningful way. (Fitzpatrick M., 2023)

Community activist Stacey Graham adds, 'people coming up the Shankill now see this striking mural rather than a piece of derelict land. There's so many people working in partnership to make these things happen, but there's much to be done still' (Fitzpatrick M., 2023). The mural was a culmination of a larger clean-up project led by Alternatives Restorative Justice in which young people collected garbage and cleaned up graffiti. The activities around the mural – neighbourhood clean-up, opening celebrations with music and activities, and community engagement – demonstrate the audience-focused nature of the *Shankill Drummer* mural (Drummond, 2024; Fitzpatrick M., 2023; *'Hypocrite' boss slammed for showing up at Shankill mural unveiling yards from scene of UVF killings*, 2023).

If this image is intended to be uplifting for the Shankill area community, from a formal artistic point of view, it is successful. It is vibrant, lively, and easily recognisable in the landscape. As a mural that is intended to be audience-focused, it is also successful. By many accounts, Shankill area community members feel that it brightens up the area of Peter's Hill. However, like any piece of public art that is placed in a location previously associated with sectarianism, the installation of *Shankill Drummer* has not escaped controversy. The mural's opening celebration was attended by a leader of the UVF paramilitary, John 'Bunter' Graham, who was criticised for attending the unveiling festivities near the location where his forces 'murdered several loyalists' (*'Hypocrite' boss slammed for showing up at Shankill mural unveiling yards from scene of UVF killings*, 2023). Though the man's presence impacted the tone of the opening ceremonies, in general, this mural has been celebrated by the public and is an example of their interest in moving beyond the paramilitary imagery that has long been associated with the area (Drummond,

2024; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024; Fitzpatrick M., 2023).

Molloy's *Shankill Drummer* mural demonstrates an important artistic choice that is consistent with mural artists on each side of the cultural divide: the use of recognisable imagery and symbolism that is easily understood by a general working-class audience within their communities. Hein posits that 'the audience no longer figured as passive onlooker but as participant, actively implicated in the constitution of the work of art. Effectively, the work's realisation depends on the audience's bestowal of meaning upon it, a contentious social and political undertaking' (Hein 1996, 3). Audiences in Belfast have generations of experience in decoding and bestowing meaning upon artwork. This can be both a benefit and a hindrance. In some cases, audience members who are accustomed to being surrounded by murals that are associated with their cultural traditions may reject images that are art for art's sake or represent unfamiliar imagery. They are, however, deft at determining whether or not a mural is a success (Drummond, 2024; Bonner, 2024; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024).

As early as 1983, the political muralists' attention to recognisable imagery that could be easily read by their audience was noticed by the art establishment with Christopher Coppock commenting on the murals' imagery, writing that it is 'immediate, it is up-front, no-nonsense politics…' (Coppock 1983, 3). If a mural created to represent a specific community is to have an impact, and that impact depends on the audience reception, artists agree that their symbolism should be palatable for the general community member who encounters the piece. John Johnston, a professor specializing in artistic interventions and creative thinking in post-conflict societies, has been involved in numerous Belfast mural and Street Art projects, and he notes that the imagery must be

'clear and unambiguous' in order to be successful with a general audience (Baker 2016, 180). Artists in the older generation of muralists have been critical of artists within the contemporary Street Art movement whose imagery is a reflection of their own artistic interests rather than the needs of the audience (Ervine, 2022; Molloy, 2023; 'Mural Artist', 2023). As artist Katy Beinart points out, there are 'challenges for the artist negotiating the line between compromising the integrity of the artistic idea, while meeting the community's need to feel their heritage is represented, or the audience's need to consume a version of that heritage' (Beinart 2020, 161). These differing opinions of artists, audience, and commissioning bodies creates diversity within mural production in the city.

Johnston also notes that though the artists 'may produce their works to communicate specific *to* the public, they rarely engage in dialogue *with* the public' (Baker 2015, 189). He points out that CNR artists are more likely to be known by name and to engage with the public than PUL artists, but all artists are unlikely to make changes to imagery based on public feedback. This is a tide that may be shifting, however. Artists interviewed for this research seemed open to collaborating with the public and making changes as needed, while also noting that the increased international attention to the mural tradition has made criticism of an image's formal characteristics and symbolism more likely. The public has come to expect a certain standard of mural production, and murals that do not meet that standard may be changed more quickly than others as evidenced by the swift change from McGinn's 2020 Shankill mural to Molloy's *Drummer* ('Mural Artist', 2023; Bonner, 2024; Drummond, 2024).

Edification and Commemoration

Cher Krause Knight's definition of public art, noted above, includes 'aesthetic experiences that edify, commemorate, or entertain'; a theme that can be found in many other definitions of the term (Krause Knight 2008, 22). Seitu Jones, in a study of murals in marginalised communities in the United States, notes:

> public art challenges and supports values and traditions; public art inspires; public art informs. Public art documents our place in time by visually rendering issues, ideas, traditions, and history. Through visual symbols, signs, and images, it identifies and comments on the challenges that affect us. Public art can be a mirror we hold up to ourselves and a reflection of ourselves we present to the outside. Unlike work displayed in museums and galleries, public art is a shared and common experience. (Senie and Webster 1998, 282)

Artists working on sectarian or cultural murals on each side of the political divide, and who consider themselves part of the larger mural tradition of Belfast, would agree with Jones's description of public art's role in 'rendering issues, traditions, and history' (Senie and Webster 1998, 282). Jones's emphasis on art that inspires and informs is one that is particularly relevant to the communities in Belfast, as each group has created murals at times when they have felt marginalised or underrepresented. Artists on both sides of the political divide make references to not learning their own histories, feeling underrepresented, and needing to voice the concerns of their communities through public art (Kelly, 2018; Ervine, 2022; Molloy, 2023; 'Mural Artist', 2023). Images like the New Lodge Road *An tOcras Mór* and Tiger's Bay *Belfast Blitz* not only provide aesthetic

renderings of important moments in history, but they also serve as ways for each community to connect to moments in the past where there was a collective experience; a process that helps contemporary groups to create a sense of communal identity (Crowley 2022, 103) (Fig. 11, page 6 and Fig. 13, page 7). Historic moments of trauma, oppression, sacrifice, and success all become part of the visual representation of a community's history.

Many mural artists interviewed for this research note that their work is intended to celebrate the full scope of their community's culture on the walls (Ervine, 2023; Kelly, 2023; 'Mural Artist', 2023). Artists believe in the power of public murals to 'educate the community about their own heritage and history in a creative way' ('Mural Artist', 2023). Danny Devenny states explicitly, 'the murals are not created to offend; their purpose is to educate' (Conway 2010, 167). Each side of this sectarian divide in Belfast uses mural-making to inform and educate their communities with images associated with their own history. Especially since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, each community has sought out symbolism that connects them to their own history, and they have incorporated those symbols into their political mural imagery. For example, symbolism associated with sacrifices in World War I, the red poppy, and the building of the Titanic have become synonymous with the PUL community (Rolston, 1991, 1998, 2003, 2010, 2013, and 2022). Sarah Campbell points out that this transition of symbolism in the PUL community emerges:

> as people struggled for moral and cognitive frameworks to understand, assess, and sometimes resist the changes in their lives, memories of earlier successful resistance flourished. Events such as resistance to Home Rule in 1912 represented structures

> of meaning that were constructed through a process of streamlining their representations and imagery. (Bosi and De Fazio 2017, 97)

Celtic mythological symbols and knotwork (or ribbon interlacing), the Great Hunger, and a focus on martyrdom have come to be associated with the CNR community, a process that began for many artists after viewing Jim Fitzpatrick's *The Book of Conquests*, first published in 1978. Fitzpatrick's book was passed from republican prisoner to prisoner in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and its colourful images celebrating Celtic heroes were copied and traced (Rolston, 1991; Kelly, 2023). This effort to claim symbols of cultural identities and move away from overtly threatening images is ongoing, with artists seeking new symbolism that can be incorporated into the iconography of their side ('Mural Artist', 2023; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024). However, the use of images related to cultural traditions and historical achievements, rather than those of intimidation and violence, does not negate the sectarianism of a mural. Rather, artists note that the communities have absorbed the new imagery as a symbol of their side of the cultural divide ('Mural Artist', 2023; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024).

Crowley points out that murals are used to create cultural hegemony or collective identity (Crowley, 2022). Though this is true of murals on both sides of the conflict, regarding CNR murals, Crowley notes, 'one way of doing this was through images that drew attention to distinctive cultural features such as Gaelic sports, music, the Irish language, mythology, and religion. Above all, however, the murals emphasized a shared history, and they did so by focusing on constitutive historical moments' (Crowley 2022, 102). Symbols are often contested as they evolve, and each group continues to seek out

new symbolism for their side while criticizing the choices of the other, as noted in a statement by the DUP's Jim Wells in his criticism of nationalist symbols, 'we are looking for a symbol that represents nationalism but doesn't represent terrorism' (BBC News 2002 cited in Bryan and McIntosh 2005, 135). Because symbolism shifts, new images are incorporated, and murals are often changed, this type of public art can serve as a map of how the community in Belfast illustrates their own concerns, identities, and histories. A BBC news article gives further context to this phenomenon:

> for outsiders, Republican and Loyalist murals present a fascinating picture of how two communities, living side by side, can have such a different sense of history. Both communities paint murals commemorating 1916, but while Republicans paint the Easter Rising, Loyalists paint the Battle of the Somme. Loyalists paint the Relief of the Siege of Derry; Republicans paint Wolf Tone. Both communities paint the Irish mythical hero Cú Chulainn, but Republicans depict him as an Irish Nationalist, while Loyalists depict him as a patriotic Ulsterman, defending Ulster against Celtic invaders. (BBC, n.d.)

Whether the mural is focused on the history of a political movement, such as the Gerard Kelly 2015 *Honour Ireland's Dead* mural on the Falls Road and McQuillan Street or if it links to significant moments of action that reinforce a narrative, such as Dee Craig's *Highland Soldier* mural along the Disraeli Street, discussed later in this chapter, each group uses wall painting to provide enlightenment about historic or cultural achievements (Fig. 14, page 7 and Fig. 17, page 9 respectively). Though these two artists represent opposite sides of the cultural divide, their interest in the way the public perceives their art is very

similar. Both artists create exclusively public art; both began painting sectarian images during the height of The Troubles; and both artists, as they age, are considering their artistic legacy and the legacy of painted walls in the city. For their subject matter, each artist seeks out cultural touchstones specific to their community: artists, mythological figures, historical figures and events, writers, politicians, and musicians whose image will instil a sense of community pride (Kelly, 2023; 'Mural Artist', 2023). Some of the murals can serve as educational history lessons, though their main purpose is to control the narrative that unites their community.

John Johnston refers to Belfast's murals as 'public pedagogy', adding that the murals serve a specific edification purpose in the community:

> calling the public to attention, inviting them to act. They do so through a complex pedagogical relationship where the teacher/artist projects ideas and meanings onto the public in order to influence their behaviour and thoughts. This form of public pedagogy works by deploying a combination of recognizable historical narratives that are appropriated and entangled with the issues of the present. (Baker 2015, 180)

Eoin Flannery also refers to the murals as a form of pedagogy, noting, 'while the political murals can perform, and have performed, as effective pedagogical tools, members of the local communities read such pedagogy as simply an extension of the propaganda war that adhered to the northern dispute' (Flannery 2006, 77). Artists also agree that the messages being communicated to the community can act as both an educational tool as well as symbols of those in power in their community (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). While the images may also serve roles in the propaganda war, their ability to edify the public is

one that is consistently reinforced by artists (Vaughn, 2012; Ervine, 2022; Kelly, 2023; 'Mural Artist', 2023; Devenny, 2024; Devenny and Rolston, 2024). Public pedagogy is a term that would likely be embraced by these Kelly and Craig, as they both expressed a keen interest in claiming the historical narrative for their communities to provide the public with a connection to the past. Kelly's choices as he created his final mural, *Honour Ireland's Dead*, are an example of public pedagogy and a demonstration of his sincere interest in creating an image that would educate the public about their history. In his own words:

> many images of 1916 are from the inside the GPO [General Post Office]. I wanted to do one from the outside to give the viewer an idea of the forces the revolutionaries were facing outside, the amount of artillery and firepower. I wanted all republicans to identify with it, and so I had Cumman Na mBan, Fianna Éireann, the IRB, the IRA, the Irish Volunteers, and the Irish Citizen Army in it. All these groups and movements needed to be referenced, to indicate that they all came together with one objective. So, I included all of these, and Ériu as well as Cú Chulainn, and the men and women of 1798. (Kelly 2018, 166)

Kelly's mural is a complex image-based timeline of Irish resistance beginning with a depiction of the Irish mythological hero Cú Chulainn on the left and continuing with a map of the four provinces of the island of Ireland, the goddess of Ireland Ériu, and finally culminating with a phoenix rising from the flaming General Post Office and the 1916 text declaring the Irish Provisional Government. Between these recognizable symbols are emblems and references to the history of the republican movement. The mural combines images from the history of Kelly's own mural career, as well as images from other well-

known murals from the CNR community. In this mural and many others, Kelly's image choices often have a fine art or photographic source, a topic that will be covered thoroughly in the following chapter. This complex mural, with its colourful, clearly discernible, and recognizable imagery and explanatory text is easy for the audience to understand. As noted above, Kelly states, 'the message I wanted them to get was to be proud of the men and women of 1916 and to carry on the struggle for Irish freedom in whatever form' (Kelly 2018, 166). He hoped this image would both incite discussion and foster a sense of unity and pride, while also serving as a lesson in the history of the republican movement.

PUL artist Dee Craig's mural career began as a teenager when he was asked to paint symbols associated with the UDA on walls in East Belfast. His first murals were in response to the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement and were part of a wave of PUL mural production representing the community's opposition to the treaty during the mid-1980s. After his first encounter with mural work, Craig embarked upon a career painting murals responding to his community's interests. In addition to the cultural murals he created, the artist also painted several murals associated with loyalist paramilitaries which depict traditional armed, balaclava-clad men. Of these murals, Craig states, 'I've never regretted any of my work, you know, because at the time it was the feelings. It was representing my feelings and my community's feelings through the art' (Vaughn, 2012). However, after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, as the city underwent an effort to eliminate the paramilitary murals, Craig was instrumental in painting over many of the more aggressive scenes with murals celebrating cultural and historic achievements that may be considered cultural touchstones for the PUL community ('Mural Artist', 2023; Abernethy, 2016).

Craig's efforts to both represent his community's ideals as well as edify the public

can be found in a number of works dedicated to subjects of historic sacrifices of the PUL community in support of their union with the British. Murals associated with the Battle of the Somme in World War I, commemorations of individual soldiers or others who gave their lives for the cause of the Empire, and images of Queen Elizabeth II, are all included in the artist's recent mural production. Craig continues to seek out new subjects that will instil a sense of pride in his community while affirming their connection to the British and ideals of loyalism. As early as 2008, he, along with other PUL artists, began to use painted walls and community art programming as an opportunity to provide history lessons to their community. Even somewhat obscure celebrations of the community's connection to the British Empire and later the United Kingdom can be found in his work; for example, a 2023 mural celebrates the efforts of the citizens of Ballymena who contributed to British fundraising efforts to purchase Spitfire planes during World War II (Cousins, 2023) (Fig. 18, page 9).

In 2008, John Keery, a PUL mural artist and community worker in East Belfast, remarked on the new slate of PUL mural subjects, saying, 'a lot of young people today don't know anything about the Somme or the signing of the Ulster Covenant… These murals show us where we come from but take the guns out of the equation' (Coll, 2008). Historical subjects have long been a part of the PUL mural tradition, however. As Gregory Goalwin notes, the 'earliest loyalist murals sought to provide legitimacy for the Protestant ascendancy and the political status quo by portraying significant events from the region's history' adding that events like the Battle of the Boyne entered into 'Protestant mythology' (Goalwin 2013, 200). It could be argued that the Battle of the Somme has also entered the realm of mythology for the community, as it is the subject of dozens of murals in and

around the city according to Jonathan McCormick's mural directory (*cain.ulster.ac.uk*, n.d.). Rolston dates the earliest depiction of the Battle of the Somme by PUL artists to 1935 adding that in the 1980s PUL mural production, 'some murals appeared that could be read as solely historical in content and commemorative in intent' (Rolston 1991, 21; 44). Though the Battle of the Somme is considered a PUL subject by those who compile mural collections and databases, the topic has been a source of competition between rival loyalist paramilitaries who seek to claim the Battle's symbolism to legitimise their own contemporary actions as well as mark territory (Graham and Shirlow 2002, 881, 893). Artists working today, though they continue to portray these mythologised battles, are also seeking out historical narratives that may be new to the PUL community or may speak to a broader audience about the history of the region (Ervine, 2022; 'Mural Artist', 2023).

One example of Craig's interest in providing a broader history lesson to the community, even in his sectarian mural production, is his *Highland Soldier* mural on Disraeli Street in West Belfast (Fig. 17, page 9). This street is home to several gable end murals, many of which are dedicated to members of the paramilitary organisation the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). The UVF is a loyalist paramilitary founded in 1965, while the Ulster Volunteers were founded in 1912 as a unionist/loyalist paramilitary in opposition to the Home Rule Bill. The UVF often links itself to the original Ulster Volunteers in imagery associated with sacrifices for Britain, like the Battle of the Somme, in which many Ulster Volunteers perished (Bryan et al. 2010, 41). This conflation of the modern paramilitary group (UVF) with the early twentieth century Ulster Volunteers is the source of symbolism of many murals in PUL areas of Belfast, a point Rolston has made about murals that date to the 1980s (Rolston 1991, 45). As Rolston considers this connection the paramilitary

continues to make in its visual representations, he notes that 'the UVF has the easier task; given its claim of descent from the original UVF' (Rolston 2003, 12). Though the *Highland Soldier* mural does not specifically reference the most recent period of conflict, it is still considered sectarian because of its location, UVF symbols, use of the poppy, and the mural's efforts to link the actions of the recent UVF Volunteers with Royal Highland Fusiliers and the 1912 Ulster Volunteers, the latter of which fought together at the Somme (Extramural Activity, 2019).

Crowley states, 'it should always be remembered that these new texts [murals] are themselves likely to be coded in ways that are easily decipherable in the semiotically-sensitive context of Northern Ireland' (Crowley 2015, 70). The UVF red hand emblem serves as the 'coding' that exists in this mural, and it reminds the viewer of the contemporary participants and organizations who wield power in the housing estate as well as in the sectarian conflict. However, the mural also contains the emblem of the Highlanders, the Flag of the UVF, and the flag of the Young Citizen Volunteers (founded in 1912).

The mural is dominated by the central figure, a larger-than-life image of a Highlander solider created using the *Highlander Soldier Memorial* in Inveraray Scotland as a model (Fig. 19, page 10). Craig does not have an academic art background and often turns to images that were created by established, traditionally trained artists for inspiration. This a practice that is shared by most of the traditional mural painters as well as many street artists in the city. In this case, the memorial sculpture used for inspiration was created around 1920 by the Scottish sculptor William Kellock Brown. Though the source material is a sculpture, Craig is known for his use of photographs and newspaper clippings as source

material, and the photographic image to which this mural can be linked is one that was taken by the War Memorials Trust in 2013 and is publicly available online (Imperial War Museums, n.d.). Belfast's muralists' appropriation of the artistic output of academically trained artists is a trend that began with the use of Williamite imagery in 1908 and will be explored in depth in the following chapter.

If edification is a primary goal of some of the sectarian murals, the images must be understood by the public, a point noted in Krause Knight's definition of public art listed above. Craig has included recognisable flags and emblems that have a long history in Belfast's murals alongside a symbol that may be new to the public: the Highlander emblem. This emblem, positioned on the right just opposite the Ulster Volunteers emblem on the left, references the Battle of Assaye, an 1803 battle in which the predecessors of the Royal Highland Fusiliers fought on behalf of the British in the Maratha War ('Mural Artist', 2024; Extramural Activity, 2019). By including both familiar and unfamiliar imagery, the artist has encouraged the viewer to look more closely and consider the subject of the gable wall. He notes that there is significant support for loyalism in Scotland, and the city of Belfast receives many Scottish visitors during their periods of historical celebrations, like the parade and bonfire season in July. The artist considers the Highlander image a symbol of solidarity between Ulster and Scotland, a reminder of the 'bygone days that still exist today', and one that may encourage a stronger look at the bond between the two regions ('Mural Artist' 2024). John Johnson's term 'public pedagogy' is appropriate for the work of artists like Craig who are 'deploying a combination of recognisable historical narratives that are appropriated and entangled with the issues of the present' (Baker 2015, 180). Historical themes, such as the Highlander, gained greater prominence after the

Belfast/Good Friday Agreement as communities were encouraged to seek out new symbolism for their culture.

In addition to murals focused on edification, commemoration plays an important role in murals for both sides of the cultural divide. With Craig's *Highlander Soldier* mural, the lines between edification and commemoration are blurred, as the poppy wreaths on the right side of the image are certainly commemorative of specific volunteers whose names area listed just below each wreath (from left to right/top to bottom): Volunteer J. Rankin, Volunteer Br. Creer, Volunteer B. Wilson, Volunteer B. Creer, and Volunteer A. Steele. This mural commemorates the deaths of these men with the poppy wreaths to the left, while also informing the public about sacrifices of World War I as well as Ulster's connections to the Scottish Highlander Fusiliers with the inclusion of the Highlander as the primary figure. The distinction between a mural that commemorates and one that edifies is often difficult to discern, as many of the murals on both sides of the sectarian divide realise both goals. As such, it is important, again, to return to the intent of the artist. For the *Highland Soldier* mural, it is clear from the artist's words, the size of the primary image, which was modelled after the war memorial in Scotland, that the intention of this mural was to amplify history of the Ulster Volunteers' connection to the Scottish brigade ('Mural Artist', 2024).

While Gerard Kelly's *Honour Ireland's Dead* mural commemorates the events of 1916 and includes portraits of those who played a significant role in the revolution, the artist also included images that would inform the public of the history of the movement rather than solely commemorate the dead. For CNR murals, commemoration became a significant source of subject matter during the Hunger Strike in 1981. Their murals 'sought to inculcate the notion of an unbroken tradition, stretching from the United Irishmen to the

Hunger Strikers', while PUL murals have 'served to inculcate a specific version of history' (Crowley 2022, 106 and 90). This blending of edification and commemoration can be found in numerous murals on either side of the sectarian divide. Often, commemorative murals 'communicate meaning largely unchallenged to the still fundamentally homogeneous communities that walls in a divided society create' (Crooke and Maguire 2018, 157). In these segregated communities, murals that are decades old and have passed into the realm of iconic, as well as new murals, continue to blur the lines between education or, to use Crowley's term 'inculcation', and commemoration or remembrance.

It is clear from a study of individual political murals that they follow the points set forth in Krause Knight's description of public art. They focus on a larger audience and keep location and visibility in mind during their planning process. The artists concern themselves with imagery that is easy to comprehend, again, focusing on the reception of the artwork by the audience. The political murals provide some form of edification or commemoration, and they seek to create a communal identity within their respective communities (Crowley 2022, 103). The success of more recent additions to the sectarian mural tradition, like Molloy's *Shankill Drummer,* demonstrates that the community is willing to shift away from aggressive imagery, and toward murals that also provide positive aesthetic experiences. As has been demonstrated, political murals follow the principles of public art. However, we must now turn to the question of whether they can be considered successful examples of public art.

Characteristics of Successful Public Art

'The relationship between art and environment, art and context, artist and audience remains

at the heart of any public art that's worth its turf' (Raven 1989, 210). Lucy Lippard's writing over three decades ago points out one of the most important elements of successful public art: a relationship. Public art, in all its forms, relies on a relationship with its environment as well as one with its audience. In an article specific to Belfast's public art, Mansil Miller claims that 'good public art should encourage public perception, which may be limited to a section of the community but which by implication strengthens a sense of identity and place common to all… it will succeed only if it relates to the place or the people in which it is located' (Miller 1987, 25). As demonstrated earlier in this chapter, for many artists working in Belfast today, the importance of the relationship with the audience is paramount (Ervine, 2022; Gallagher, 2023; 'Mural Artist', 2023; Molloy, 2023). Successful public art must foster a relationship with its environment and its community or intended audience, and it should be flexible and responsive to each, understanding that the context of the work may necessitate change in the mural itself. Patricia Phillips states, 'public life must also accommodate the actions of progress…. Public art and public life are not fixed' (Phillips 1989, 332). In Belfast, as public life and public spaces continue to evolve, and the citizens find themselves managing the process of peace in a post-conflict society, mural production is often burdened with a heavy responsibility. As 'larger trends in style and content can be seen to adjust themselves as broader political concerns and strategies also shift over time', a set of standards by which the success or failure of these images must be determined (Keenan 2022, 108; Vannais 2001). Lucy Lippard's reference to environment, context, and audience will be the guide for these measures.

Public Art and Place

Art historians, artists, and critics have differing ideas about how to manage the issue of site, place, context, and environment, though, specificity of location and its relationship with the audience is a significant topic within the discourse of public art. Suzanne Lacy contends, 'works of public art enter a pre-existing physical and social organization. How the work relates to, reinforces or contends with forms of expression of that community is a question that contributes to the critical dialogue' (Raven 1989, 290). Jeff Kelley differentiates between the terms site-specific and place-specific, stating:

> site is a place for art rather than the art of place… a site represents the constituent physical properties of a place – its mass, space, light, duration, location, and material process – [while] a place represents the practical, vernacular, psychological, social, cultural, ceremonial, ethnic, economic, political, and historical dimensions of a site. Sites are like frameworks. Places are what fill them out and make them work…. Whether an artwork merely occupies a site or expresses the sense of a place, the act of placing or performing a work of creative expression in public space alters how that space is seen, and how audiences see the work; if sufficiently noticed and engaging, it may also alter the ways in which both artist and audience see themselves and their worlds. (Fisher 1996, 43-44)

Senie goes so far as to demand that the term site-specific be banned because sites continuously undergo transformation (Senie, 2003). Belfast's murals are so often painted in locations that carry the weight of the region's history of conflict, violence, and division. Therefore, this text will use the term 'place-specific' rather than 'site-specific', both

because of the breadth of meaning given to specific areas of the city by its residents as well as the city's tendency to demolish its built heritage, creating an ever evolving 'site' (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2023; *Field Notes RUA,* 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024; *Field Notes International Wall,* 2024; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024). Jeff Kelley's depth and clarity in his discussion of place and an artwork's relationship to place will be a guiding factor as this section investigates the significance of place for murals in Belfast.

As they consider the evolution of murals in Northern Ireland, McCormick and Jarman agree that an artwork can alter the way a place is seen and experienced, noting that a political mural on a gable wall automatically changes the context of the environment, and 'situates a house and its locality within a universe of political conflict, sectarian divisions and paramilitary groups' (McCormick and Jarman 2005, 50). Jarman notes:

> as artefacts all murals are site-specific. Not in an artistic way which suggests they might be designed with a particular location in mind, but rather, their power as political statements and as symbols is enhanced by their location…. All murals create a new type of space, they redefine mundane public space as politicised place and can thereby help to reclaim it for the community. (Buckley 1998, 82 and 86)

Though Jarman is using the language of site-specificity, his discussion of the power of a mural to redefine place certainly coincides with Kelley's discussion of place-specificity above. Jarman also notes the importance of murals as objects that are found in community gathering spaces and situated along parade routes, noting that they are often used to segregate spaces in Belfast (Jarman 1997; Buckley 1998, 83).

Loyalist artist John Keery makes a more explicit statement about location and murals implying that the house or wall in question may already be a part of the 'universe of political conflict', stating, 'I have to remember that each one of these estates, that there will be a certain paramilitary group that runs the place. So really, they have… the authority to have the power to put it [a political mural] on whatever wall' (McCormick and Jarman 2005, 50; Vaughn 2012). In a city that remains segregated with peace walls bisecting neighbourhoods and preventing interaction, the practice of public art is used as a rallying point, a territory marker, a commemorative memorial, educational tool, or celebratory object (Crooke and Maguire 2018, 156-157). However, no matter what the purpose of the mural, its production and reception rely on the context of the mural's environment as well as a negotiation between those who control that environment and the community (Cartiere and Zebracki 2016, 57). For many cities, that entity that wields power may be city council or a community organisation. In some Belfast neighbourhoods, political parties and paramilitaries exert control and must approve changes to public art in areas under their respective direction (Coll*,* 2008; Vaughn, 2012; 'Mural Artist', 2023).

Possibly one of the most recognised murals in Belfast is the *Bobby Sands* mural currently on the gable wall of the Sinn Féin headquarters along the Falls Road (Fig. 20, page 10). Though previous images of Bobby Sands, the leader of the 1981 Hunger Strike, have adorned walls all around CNR areas of Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, and other towns, the first mural of Sands on the Sinn Féin headquarters wall dates to 1989, and was painted by Gerard Kelly (Crowley 2022, 104; Rolston, 1991). Rolston notes that the 1981 Hunger Strike was the reason for a 'mural explosion' in CNR areas, and the Hunger Strikers themselves were the primary source of content of those murals (Rolston 1991, 79 and 80).

Sands, a prolific poet and the first Hunger Striker to perish, was depicted more often than others. The various murals of Sands's smiling face, combined with numerous religious themed murals, solidified his role as a martyr for the republican cause and made his image carry a significant weight (Rolston 1991, 80-81). Because Sands had been elected to Parliament before his death, Sinn Féin, one of the primary nationalist political parties at the time, 'gained a lot from the Hunger Strike in popular support' (Rolston 1991, 89). Or 'the strike enhanced Sinn Féin's credibility and political base despite, or likely because of, its clear connection to the IRA prisoners' (Keenan 2022, 38). The political party leaned into using art to reinforce their connection to the Hunger Strikers. They recognized the power of a carefully placed mural, and 'murals became billboards of the republican campaign' (BBC, 2018). As Danny Devenny notes, 'through the murals you are sending a message to your own people. Most of the time you're not saying anything new but reflecting on what people feel. It gives them a spark to carry on, so you're always looking for the best way to show the things that are happening' (Conway 2010, 168). Mural production became the visual component of the Sinn Féin election strategy as well as their way of communicating their cause to the outside world (Rolston 1991, 90; Kelly 2023).

There has been an image of Sands on the Sinn Féin headquarters wall since Kelly's mural was painted in 1989. However, when the headquarters were rebuilt, the new building 'was not complete until Danny Devenny and Marty Lyons had produced a mural to IRA hunger striker Bobby Sands' (McCormick and Jarman 2005, 65). The current image was

created in 2005 and then refurbished in 2015 (Fig. 20, page 10).[7] The mural is a larger-than-life, vividly colourful depiction of the familiar smiling face of Sands surrounded by text from Sands's writing 'Everyone republican or otherwise has their own particular role to play' as well as his most famous quote 'our revenge will be the laughter of our children' (*Field Notes International Wall,* 2024). Devenny knew Sands while the two were incarcerated together, and notes that 'Bobby was a poet, a guitarist, a man of great humanity who loved life. My painting of him on the wall of the Sinn Féin offices in the Falls Road tries to capture that spirit' (Cole, 2009). The artist surrounded the portrait with a chain, in reference to the historic oppression of the Irish as well as the imprisonment of the Hunger Strikers, though the chain also serves as a visual reminder of the Celtic knotwork (or ribbon interlacing) designs that are part of the historic medieval Irish art tradition as well as hallmarks of CNR cultural murals around the city. The chain border is broken at the top by a familiar CNR symbol, the phoenix, a mythical bird that is symbolic of the republican cause as it is reborn from its own ashes (*Field Notes International Wall,* 2024). At the bottom the chain is broken by a lark, an image that accompanies many CNR murals and is referenced in poetry by Bobby Sands (Rolston 1991, 82 and 108).

As Sinn Féin sought to eliminate other nationalist or republican political parties, they found that they could utilise murals to that end (Rolston 1991, 89; Crowley 2022). Rolston chronicles the CNR murals immediately after Sands's death and notes the rise of the use of the medium by Sinn Féin as a part of their election strategy, noting 'it is evident

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[7] Danny Devenny's background, artistic style, and process will be covered in depth in the following chapter.

that the party had faith in murals as education and propaganda' (Rolston 1991, 91). Sands's image was included in election murals as early as 1983, and Danny Devenny's first mural painted after his incarceration was the likeness of Bobby Sands on the Sinn Féin regional office in the Short Strand area of East Belfast (Rolston 1991; Conway 2010, 167). However, Rolston also states, 'murals became clear party propaganda only occasionally, outside of election time' (Rolston 1991, 91).

If place-specific art is an essential element to the field of public art, the location of the *Bobby Sands* mural is an indispensable to the evaluation of this image. Located on the side of the Sinn Féin headquarters, the mural may not contain messages of obvious propaganda. There is not text about voting, nor is the name of the political party in the image, but the placement of the movement's most recognisable martyr on their wall is a strategic choice for the party. Similar to the Battle of the Boyne and Battle of the Somme in PUL communities, the Hunger Strikers, and especially Sands, have become mythologised in CNR culture. The celebration of Sands as a martyr for the republican cause and the equation of that cause with *only one* of the nationalist/republican parties gave Sinn Féin legitimacy. As this mural is also on the Black Taxi mural tour route, Sinn Féin also promotes this message to visitors from around the world. The mural serves as the draw for tourists who take photographs of the iconic image and then often spend time and money in the accompanying Sinn Féin bookstore (*Field Notes International Wall,* 2024).

Danny Devenny sees murals as a way to 'counteract the ongoing propaganda of the enemy, especially here in the local media', and Sinn Féin was doubly invested in the use of mural imagery send specific messages to the community in Belfast as well as an international audience (Conway 2010, 167). From the 1980s, the party employed many

artists who considered the act of painting CNR murals as activism and cultural work (Rolston 1991, 91; Kelly 2023). As noted earlier, CNR artists recognised immediately that public art had a secondary audience (Kelly 2018, 29). The political operatives as well as artists understood the importance of controlling the narrative that the secondary audience may receive (Kelly 2018; Belfast's Lines Redrawn 2009).

As Devenny notes, 'the murals impacted on solidarity in communities. We see them as vehicles – they deal with whatever is being talked about' (*Taking Paramilitaries off the Walls,* 2006). With this quote, Devenny is referring to the power of the murals to unify an otherwise diverse constituency. If the issues that face public art and prevent it from being successful stem from the tendency to treat the 'public' as a simple, broad constituency, the CNR artists try to recognize that the opposite is true (Senie and Webster 1989, 335). Similar to Kelly's interest in bringing all republicans together to recognize the history of their struggle in his *Honour Ireland's Dead* mural, Devenny understands that the mural that recognises the wealth of opinions and experiences within his audience may be able to bring about what Crowley refers to as 'cultural hegemony' or 'collective identity' (Crowley 2022, 102).

However, cultural hegemony is not the only goal of a large mural such as Devenny's *Bobby Sands* mural. Images such as these also communicate to an international community, part of the secondary audience, through their use as the setting for news stories, documentaries, and press conferences. Speaking in front of the mural in news reports, Sinn Féin party leaders continue to keep the image of Sands in the minds of the viewers. The mural serves as a backdrop for commentary about current events, and keeps his sacrifice for the cause, and his statements about every person doing their part, in the conversation.

The party equates Sands with *their* form of nationalism or republicanism and is able to continue this because of the place-specificity of the mural on the side of the organisation's headquarters. At any moment, the powerful image can be brought back into service for the party. As Devenny states:

> With a mural, all you needed was an idea – mostly a grievance – but not always. Your image, once created, and accompanying statement would be picked up by all the passing press crews and, even better [s]till, TV crews. Lazy camera crews who could not be arsed would plonk the anchor person in front of a big wall with a mural expressing unreserved support for the Irish struggle and even while their frontman was delivering verbatim the lies of the latest Northern Ireland Office press release, saying Sinn Féin had no support, the audience out there weren't fooled. (Devenny, 2022)

Another example of strategic paintings that have a complex relationship to their location or sense of place are a series of four grayscale murals on gable ends along lower Newtownards Road that serve as the entrance to 'Loyalist East Belfast' (Figs. 21 a-f, pages 11 and 12). These images were painted in summer of 2022, replacing a series of 2015 murals dedicated to a paramilitary group the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). The location is referred to by PUL locals as 'Freedom Corner' in a sardonic reference to the iconic *Free Derry* mural painted in the city of Derry/Londonderry (Coll, 2008). There were murals on this site for decades that were considered 'some of the most instantly recognisable in Northern Ireland…. depicting UDA symbols, gunmen, loyalist slogans and the crest of the Ulster Young Militants' (Black, 2015). The current murals took several

months to complete and depict four scenes that were pieced together from contemporary photographs: UDA East Belfast Brigade, known as G. Division, marching down Templemore Avenue before a 1972 rally at Stormont; women volunteers from the Loyalist Prisoners Aid working to prepare food; a UDA volunteer watching over a 1972 road block with a guard dog and patrol van in the background; and a young man along with four UDA men assisting a road block opposite the Berlin Bar on the Shankill Road in 1972 (www.loyalistconflictmuseum.com, n.d.). According to the additional text painted on the fencing, the murals mark the area as 'Loyalist East Belfast', and celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the East Belfast Brigade, which is why the photos used as inspiration were all dated 1972 (www.loyalistconflictmuseum.com, n.d.). Additional text is painted above a series of the flags of the United Kingdom (Union Jack, Wales, England, Scotland, and Ulster) and states 'the Ulster conflict is about nationality this we shall maintain' (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). This text is a copy of text that adorned the fencing around the previous set of murals. As the image of women preparing food is somewhat of an anomaly in paramilitary imagery, the artists have also included text in the mural for further explanation, 'during the conflict our women played an important role in supporting our prisoners while also keeping the family unit together' (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023).

While this series of murals is quite near the CNR Short Strand neighbourhood in East Belfast, most overtly sectarian murals are not in areas that would directly face the opposing community. Rather, as David Ervine states, 'people felt the need to express their symbolism deep in their own territory', raising the question about whether the mural changes its environment, or the culture of the environment is confirmed by the mural (Vaughn, 2012). Rolston notes that walls are 'strategic' but also agrees that murals are

primarily installed within familiar territory. Regarding the presence of paramilitary imagery on homes more generally, he continues, 'the chances are, given that this is the heart of UVF territory, that the people are very, very proud that they've got a UVF memorial on the side of their house' (Vaughn, 2012).

Political murals commissioned by paramilitaries, like those installed in 2022 on 'Freedom Corner', are used for commemoration and education in addition to serving as territory markers. Dee Craig, in a 2008 interview, notes that territorial divisions between paramilitaries are a continued source of mural production and change, noting that the area known as 'Freedom Corner' is a 'mostly UDA area' (Coll*,* 2008). Therefore, even though the images described above face the predominately CNR area of the Short Strand, and could be considered threatening to that community, they mark the neighbourhood as a UDA enclave on a street that has 'UVF signs painted on most shop fronts' (Coll*,* 2008). It also can be argued that the location of this series of paintings will always be considered sectarian, no matter how the content of the murals may change. The walls have held UDA murals for decades and therefore the walls themselves are associated with the UDA by the community (Black, 2015).

When the 2022 'Freedom Corner' murals were finished, local Councillor John Kyle commented that they were a 'less threatening' than the previous murals and were a step in the right direction, continuing, 'I think this is an evolution of street art, and what you have there now is closer to social history rather than paramilitary propaganda or threatening and militaristic murals with implied threats' (Rainey, 2022). This sentiment was not shared by all, however. Alliance Party Member of the Legislative Assembly, Peter McReynolds, remarked,

> we have seen a number of murals across Belfast successfully re-imaged in recent years, so it is disappointing to once again see paramilitary imagery in this location. Paramilitary murals glorify terrorism, promote fear and exert coercive control on local communities. We should instead be using murals to celebrate the positive aspects of East Belfast and Northern Ireland, instead of images of masked gunmen. (Rainey, 2022)

To be fair to both the artists and those community members who approve of this series of murals, there are no gunmen, nor are the figures wearing the traditional balaclavas associated with terroristic imagery in Belfast. Rather, all the figures are wearing sunglasses, and one figure's lower face is obscured by a scarf. Sunglasses are a hallmark of these artists' paramilitary imagery and can be found in many of their UDA murals. Even the women who are preparing food indoors have eyes shaded by dark sunglasses, a visual characteristic that has garnered laughter and criticism from some unaffiliated members of the community in East Belfast (Bonner, 2024; Mark-Fitzgerald, 2024; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). The contradiction between what is physically represented in the mural (sunglasses) and what is inferred by the audience (balaclavas and guns) is interesting and points to the power of the location. The walls previously held images of balaclava-clad gunmen and UDA emblems. Even though the visual evidence shows that there are no gunmen in the current murals, the figures are referred to as gunmen by McReynolds.

Walls that have been traditionally associated with aggressive sectarian imagery continue to have lingering associations with sectarianism even when the images have

changed. Glen Molloy's previously discussed *Shankill Drummer* is another example of this. Molloy's mural on the gable Shankill area wall was a UDA territory marker for many years, and therefore the commissioning body felt it may be difficult to get an artist whose political ideology did not align with the PUL community to paint a new mural in the location for fear that the artist would be associated with sectarianism (Drummond, 2024). Cameron Cartiere states 'place is not merely the categorisation of a specific kind of space, but also a function of personal perspective and individual relationship to space' (quoted in Zebracki 2013, 305). The 'personal perspective' of the location and its association with aggressive paramilitary imagery impacts each person's response to this series of murals.

Defining public space, Fisher states

> public space may be imagined as 1. A dead or neutral zone, 2. as a site of agonistic conflict from which citizen identities emerge and/or as a protected safety zone sheltering individual rights, and finally, 3. as an endangered commons needed for survival in a world of cultural difference and/or a fluid medium of exchange, in which cultural identities meet, are exchanged, and receive recognition. (Fisher 1996, 45)

In Belfast, though there are areas with public art that exist in a 'dead or neutral zone,' much of the political imagery can be found in Fisher's second description of location: 'a site of agonistic conflict from which citizen identities emerge' (Fisher 1996, 45). Each community has a tendency to place commemorative public art in sites where acts of violence occurred, and they use murals to claim territory either from the other side of the sectarian divide or from rivals within their own community. For Belfast, the importance

of a location is essential for the success of a piece of public art. Whether the image is installed to affirm a group's legitimacy and control a narrative, such as the *Bobby Sands* mural on the Sinn Féin headquarters, or the image serves as a multi-faceted territory marker, like the UDA murals on 'Freedom Corner', Belfast's murals are place-specific because of the relationship between the image and its surround. Senie notes, 'all sites have local, if not national, content established well before they are transformed by public art. Every public space has an evolving history of multiple uses, visual, social, and political, that directly or indirectly influence, if not determine, both artistic and audience response' (Senie 2003, 1). This issue of 'location content' is especially powerful in Belfast. Even images that continue to be altered, updated, or changed entirely have an association with specific themes or groups because of their location. Jarman points out, 'they [murals] 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' (Buckley 1998, 81). Because Belfast is still a segregated city, 'community is place-specific,' so muralists who are concerned with their audience must always consider the location and context of their imagery (Cartiere and Zebracki 2016, 5).

Public Art and Temporality

Patricia Phillips, a critic for *Artforum* was at the forefront of public art criticism and was an early advocate for the need for temporality in public art. Her 1989 article, 'Temporality and Public Art' urges readers to consider that 'public art requires a more passionate commitment to the temporary' (Senie and Webster 1989, 331). She continues:

> the temporary in public art is not about an absence of commitment or involvement, but about an intensification and enrichment of the conception of public. The public is diverse, variable, volatile, controversial; and it has its origins in the private lives of all citizens…. Ephemeral public art provides a continuity for analysis of the conditions and changing configurations of public life, without mandating the stasis required to express eternal values to a broad audience with different backgrounds and often different verbal and visual imaginations. (Phillips 1989, 335)

Senie adds that public art 'has to have the potential for an ongoing, or evolving relationship with its immediate neighbourhood, to be more than a one-day (or night) stand' (Senie 2003, 4). Bill Rolston concurs, 'you'll see frequently a perfectly fine looking mural, and you go by the next day, and somebody's painted it out. The reason is, it's done its job. Another mural is going to go on that wall because this is a strategic wall that lots of people are going to see, and the murals go on forever' (Vaughn 2012). Journalists agree with the findings of Rolston, noting in a BBC review of the changing imagery on Belfast's walls, 'if Nationalist and Unionist murals had remained static, they'd only be of finite interest. What makes them so engrossing is the way they've changed with the times, reflecting – and sometimes shaping – the changing political situation' (BBC, 2018). In addition to guiding the audience to the issues that are deemed important by artists, commissioning bodies, and community members in positions of power, murals 'also serve as a performative, placemaking effect by constantly renewing and reasserting [their] message' (Keenan 2022, 108). For these murals to remain relevant and effective within the community, they must

be open to change.

Artist Danny Devenny has always considered the murals as a part of public pedagogy or effective social engineering. In 2009, he stated:

> Since the advent of murals, there have always been very few votes involved, very few methods by which they appeared by choice. If you believe that these things are tools which set social tone - and that's what we mean by social engineering in this case - then I'm in favour of things which engineer a less aggressive and more inclusive and ultimately law-abiding community. I'm not sure that the choice is between no social engineering and social engineering, I think the choice is: what are you engineering towards? (*Belfast's Lines Redrawn,* 2009)

Devenny adds that the children who see murals in their daily lives are influenced by the subjects they see. If they are seeing work focused on violence, they will consider violence. If they see artists painting murals about history or current events, they will learn from those images (*Field Notes International Wall,* 2024). The CNR community has recognised and supported the social impact of the murals from their beginning, and they have been willing to change a mural whose purpose has been served to make sure they are in control of the narrative. Therefore, the current CNR mural production can be seen as proactive in many ways, as they seek out connections to issues that are relevant to their community. Devenny agrees that the murals can both inspire and reflect the concerns of the community 'these days other issues should be shown on the walls, the mortgage crisis should be shown. They are a reflection of what is going on. They should deal with things like the economic crisis, unemployment issues, be used to raise suicide awareness. I want to see young people

working on these themes' (*Belfast's Lines Redrawn,* 2009).

In addition to socialist causes, support for marginalised or oppressed groups, especially the people of Palestine, Cuba, South Africa, and African Americans and Indigenous People in the United States, are all topics that have been appropriated into the CNR mural iconography for decades (Rolston 1991, 94-95; Kelly 2018, 107-108). In January 2024, Devenny, along with support from Bill Rolston, Marty Lyons, Mickey Doherty, and volunteers from the CNR community undertook a new mural series on the International Wall along the Falls Road in West Belfast. This wall is sometimes referred to as the 'Solidarity Wall' and is the home of several murals that are traditionally reflective of either the persecution of the CNR community or their connection to international struggles. A 2024 series of murals demonstrates the CNR community's support of Palestinians in Gaza during the bombing campaign being led by Israel in response to the Hamas attacks of Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023. Though this mural project may seem reactive to the events that immediately preceded it, the idea for a mural exchange between Palestinian and CNR artists in Belfast began earlier in the year when Bill Rolston was contacted by a Palestinian artist, Rana Hammoudeh, who suggested replicating Belfast's International Wall in Palestine. After the bombing campaign began, however, it was suggested that Palestinian artists send their designs to be painted on the International Wall by artists in Belfast (Preston, 2024). Devenny and Lyons, icons within the CNR community, were both present as this project began (*Field Notes International Wall,* 2024). Though the early stages of the paintings, like the gridding of the wall, were undertaken by volunteers, Devenny and Lyons had a hand in the finished images lending gravitas to the works (*Field Notes International Wall,* 2024) (Figs. 22 and 23, page 13).

The process of painting the images in this highly visible location, which drew visitors, volunteers, community members, and news crews, may have been as important to send the message of support as the murals themselves. The CNR artists have a history of inviting young artists and community members to paint with them (Gallagher, 2023; Doran, 2023; *Field Notes International Wall,* 2024). Rolston notes many people participated in the painting of these murals, adding that only three were muralists and 'the rest are people who have just turned up to help' (Corscadden, 2024). This project is the embodiment of type of collaboration for which Devenny is known. The artist says 'we are giving the young Palestinian artists a canvas to paint on' (Devenny, 2024). While the Palestinian artists are not actually painting, it is their designs that will be included in the new series of murals, and public comments by the Belfast artists emphasised this point (Devenny and Rolston, 2024). The continued connection with the next generation of artists and activists has informed Devenny and this group of CNR artists' very public artistic practice. Musicians and poets are invited to participate, making the mural wall more than a site to visit or drive by, rather it becomes a gathering space. The artists engage with passers-by and their set up area becomes a space for information about the topics being painted (Devenny and Rolston, 2024). They give interviews to established news organisations as well as tour guides or Instagram influencers while also engaging with young people in the community. Their proximity to younger artists and activists helped the older generation of artists view digital space as public space. They utilize Facebook and Instagram to not only inform the public about the images but gain financial support with posts of GoFundMe pages to fund the mural supplies (Devenny and Rolston, 2024). Offering insight about their artistic practice digitally creates a global presence for their

public art (Zebracki and Palmer, 2018; Cartiere and Zebracki, 2015; Devenny, 2024). As John Johnston points out, the indirect audience has become as important as the direct one for projects in post-conflict zones, noting that through internet platforms, artists and activists create 'a participant viewer [who] remains engaged in the issues after the initial contact and becomes a further avenue of dissemination' (Baker 2015, 181).

Because of these artists' public artistic practice, and their presence online, there is an excitement in the air when an older mural is painted over. A sense of anticipation can be felt as the community wonders what will be painted (*Field Notes International Wall,* 2024). The excitement and attention to the murals can also be a catalyst for the demand for new images (McCormick and Jarman 2005, 70). In the case of the recent Palestinian support murals, since they were painted over a previous image of men from the blanket protests, a commemoration of the victims of plastic bullets, and a mural depicting Bobby Sands, the community understood that the new murals were significant. Along the Falls Road, images of Sands and other victims of the violence of the conflict carry the emotions of the CNR community, and Devenny notes that permission was given by the family of Jim McCabe to paint over the mural that drew attention to the campaign against the use of plastic bullets (Devenny and Rolston, 2024). Because of the significance of this location, and the subjects of the previous murals, each volunteer who assisted the artists found themselves recounting the reasons for the new murals to the visitors who inquired (*Field Notes International Wall*, 2024). This encounter with the public is an important part of the process of mural production, one that helps bridge the divide between artist and audience. The encounters are a celebration of the ephemerality of the artistic process, as audiences

see that murals are not permanent. Rather, they reflect the changing interests of the community.

The murals can be considered 'new genre public art', a term first coined by Suzanne Lacy in 1991 and defined later in Miwon Kwon's text *One Place After Another*, as art that is created 'not in terms of material objects but by the ephemeral processes of interaction between the local participants and the artists' (Kwon 2004, 104). Though the murals do eventually serve as material objects, it is the 'ephemeral processes of interaction' that creates much of their enduring impact (Kwon 2004, 104). As Rolston commented, 'we've had lots of conversations with passers-by and tourists, and all but one have been not just positive but ecstatic in terms of seeing us doing this, of keeping Palestine in people's minds. It's been very worthwhile so far. If the murals remind people Gaza hasn't gone away, they'll do their job' (Corscadden, 2024). Once the murals have done 'their job', they will likely be replaced by a new set of images (*Field Notes International Wall,* 2023; Vaughn, 2012).

Patricia Phillips states, 'public art does not have to last forever; it does not have to cast its message to some unmistakable but platudinous [*sic*] theme that absolutely everyone will get; it does not have to mark or make a common ground. As the texture and context of public life changes over the years, public art must reach for new articulations and new expectations' (Senie and Webster 1989, 335). The CNR community's use of the International Wall along the Falls Road is an excellent example of how public art can change as public life changes, and it demonstrates how the community uses mural painting to set new standards and expectations. At a point where the CNR community feels more secure in their own experience, they have turned their artwork to imagery that demonstrates

the support of others. Murray notes, 'these notions of community are shaped through public art, as the notion of community changes according to its relationship with artwork' (Cartiere and Zebracki 2015, 57). The tourists who visit this area to see the famed International Wall, and the *Bobby Sands* mural just a few blocks away, may not understand why Palestinian imagery, rather than images of the Hunger Strikers and other victims of the conflict, now adorns the walls. However, the 'texture and context of public life changes,' and the interests and concerns of the people of the area will continue to be reflected on the wall, and the new images will encourage viewers to seek out explanations for their presence (Senie and Webster 1989, 335).

McCormick and Jarman, in their essay 'Death of a Mural', describe several ways a mural may end its lifespan, noting that murals are either abandoned and left to deteriorate, deliberately removed or changed, or 'disappeared', noting that 'a need for permanence in the certainty of the past has been replaced by a more fluid and transitory social memory, within which schema previous imagery is removed and replaced without comment' (McCormick and Jarman 2005, 52). Writing before the rise of the prominence of social media, the two explain the act of disappearing a mural as a 'process that is rarely documented recorded or talked about… connotes the lack of public discourse over the removal' (McCormick and Jarman 2005, 54). However, 'disappearing' murals is a difficult prospect in the current media rich environment, as any time a mural is painted over, news cameras, onlookers ready to post on social media, and mural enthusiasts quickly arrive on the scene (Black, 2015; *Field Notes International Wall*, 2024).

The mural culture in the city embraces the near constant change associated with the mural tradition. However, there are a few murals in the city, like the New Lodge *An tOcras*

Mór (Fig. 11, page 6), that are such powerful images that they have become iconic; their impact on audiences as overwhelming today as it was decades ago. This is a rare occurrence, though, as McCormick, Jarman, and Murray all point out; the power of the murals is often driven by their mobility, their timely response to events in the community, and the spectacle of their creation. 'If murals act as a visual intervention on the landscape, and thereby change the nature of space, place, and locality because of their nature as artefacts and material objects, then so too do the shrouded and obscured images that they often become in the process of disappearing' (McCormick and Jarman 2005, 58). The public artistic process, or spectacle, means that the removal of one image may be just as important as the installation of another, and the remnants of the previous image may inform the way the new work is seen (McCormick and Jarman 2005; Cartiere and Zebracki 2016, 60).

The temporality of Belfast's murals also allows for experimentation. If a mural acts as a 'town crier' for the community, the artist has an opportunity to illustrate the community's changing attitudes (Ervine, 2022; Vaughn, 2012; 'Mural Artist', 2023). Though murals' temporal responses to contemporary issues may not always seem forward thinking to outsiders, artists continue to centre the representation of their community in their artistic ethos. Artists in the PUL community refer to some of their cultural images a 'stepping stone' to an art that is entirely devoid of sectarianism, recognising that the mural's temporality is essential to its success ('Mural Artist', 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). The city's willingness to embrace the murals as ephemeral gives artists and their audience an opportunity to have an ongoing dialogue.

Public Art and Community

Even before the large-scale community mural programme in the 1970s, community involvement has been a part of mural production in Belfast (Rolston, 1991). Whether artists turned to the community to collect paint and other materials, or they engage their audience directly by inviting them to help create the work, artists and community activists in Belfast recognise the importance of involving community members in the artistic process (Loftus, 1983; Rolston, 1991; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). Being directly involved helps a community feel a sense of ownership over the image. In Belfast, murals and mural-making have become a part of many major community programmes and often represent the culmination of a larger initiative focused on a diverse array of topics from mental health and drug addiction to civic pride. As evidenced in the community clean-up activities that surrounded the commission and creation of Glen Molloy's *Shankill Drummer*, murals in both CNR and PUL areas of Belfast are often accompanied by some form of community action. Gerard Kelly references community involvement in his work at many points. Regarding one mural commission, he notes, 'ordinary men and women like ourselves who came together to try and benefit everybody in the area by cleaning it up and getting the kids involved in an art project, to give them something to do and keep them occupied' (Kelly 2018, 142). A new generation of artists have been exposed to mural painting through efforts such as these, and these younger artists often credit participation in the older muralists' artistic process as a continued source of inspiration (Gallagher, 2023; Doran, 2023).

For the *Belfast Luminaries* mural, artist Dee Craig turned to community members for suggestions of cultural symbols and heroes to include in the work (Fig. 24, page 14).

Much of this artist's work is community-based, and often the source material comes from community members in the form of photographs and newspaper clippings. They help him paint sections of the mural, and because of their input, the community feels a certain ownership of the images in their neighbourhoods ('Mural Artist', 2023). Van Morrison, George Best, the Harland and Wolff shipyard cranes, and even the artist himself are included in the *Belfast Luminaries* mural that adorns the wall of the Eastside Visitors Centre. These are all cultural figures or objects that have come to symbolise the successes of the East Belfast PUL community. In the mural, the face of musician David Holmes has been obscured by a smiley face, demonstrating that these public images in Belfast are rarely considered precious, permanent, or untouchable[8]. With this mural, one that included a significant amount of community input, the artist is speaking directly to the local PUL populace. For Craig, and other artists in the PUL community, the celebration of the successes of these locals edify their audience about a history of Belfast that goes beyond The Troubles (Ervine, 2022 and 'Mural Artist', 2023). The artist states:

> I hope the artwork I have created is viewed as a celebration of the iconic people and places connected to East Belfast and inspires all who see it…. Public mural art is very powerful form of communication and leaves a collectively expressive, lasting visual legacy but equally as important as the product is the process behind it, it's not just a case of painting an image onto a wall, this type of project creates a

[8] The community anecdote about the smiley face over David Holmes's face is that the musician is responsible for its placement because he did not want to be included in this group of people, all of whom are celebrated as symbols of the PUL community (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024).

> platform for community involvement, education and ownership, giving participants the opportunity to explore, learn about & celebrate aspects of their culture, history and identity in a creative process. (*Eastside Artwork Celebrates Famous Places and Faces*, 2017.)

As noted above in discussion of Craig's *Highland Soldier* mural on Disraeli Street in West Belfast, the artist continues to seek out new symbols that will instil pride in his community ('Mural Artist', 2023). His cultural murals as well as more sectarian work can be found all over the city of Belfast; however, his greatest impact has been along Newtownards Road, and in the housing estates in East Belfast, an area where he feels personally invested in the future of mural painting (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). Craig has actively engaged with hundreds of community members in the process of mural design and production, recognising that they need to feel represented and involved if a piece of public art is to be successful ('Mural Artist', 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024).

Though it is important to consider the community impact and involvement as one embarks upon public art projects, these images should not be burdened with the power to solve all of society's problems. Harriet Senie remarks:

> Public art is not a substitute for urban renewal or social work, although projects may address or include such functions. Public art ideally creates better places and provides enjoyment, insight, and maybe even hope to its participants, viewers, and users. But it cannot correct deeper problems stemming from widespread

> unemployment and poverty, the neglect of public education and healthcare, and all the other social ills so glaringly ignored at the moment. (Senie 2003, 4)

Rather than expecting public art's success to be gauged by its power to problem solve, Senie encourages the critic of public art to ask:

> 1) Is it good work, according to its type: art, urban design, or community project? 2) Does it improve or energize its site in some way – by providing an aesthetic experience or seating (or both) or prompting conversation and perhaps social awareness? 3) Is there evidence of relevant or appropriate engagement or use? (Senie 2003, 4)

For Senie, 'successful public art has to score on all three or it isn't [successful]' (Senie 2003, 4). About Belfast in 1987, Mansil Miller writes, 'through art, public places can take on a character which draws people in, which informs them, which encourages and allows for growth' (Miller 1987, 27). Senie's terms for success, along with Miller's ideas, lean into public art's use as a positive social mechanism, however, others agree that public art does not necessarily have address the common good to be successful.

It can be problematic to only think of public art as a community project or consensus builder. Patricia Phillips states that:

> public art has been too often applied as a modest antidote or a grand solution rather than perceived as a forum for investigation, articulation, and constructive reappraisal…. It need not seek some common denominator or express some common good to be public, but it can provide a visual language to express and

explore the dynamic, temporal conditions of the collective. (Senie and Webster 1989, 331-332)

Artist Dominic Thorpe agrees stating, 'it is not the job of art to reach consensus across different "publics"' (publicart.ie, 2024). Donegal City Council Public Art Manager, Terre Duffy considers art that is not automatically embraced writing, 'effective public artwork does not patronise or placate its public and the instantly popular option must be balanced against the desire to raise the bar and the demands of enduring quality, creativity and professionalism' (publicart.ie, 2024). Critical of the tendency for art establishment to discount the community in public art dialogue, Suzanne Lacy states, 'discussions about art in public places are held largely by a class of critics and artists who ignore aspects of a complex and often highly politicized heritage. Questions of aesthetics… dominate the critical dialogue, with community involvement evaluated as an appendage of, rather than integral to, the critique' (Raven 1989, 289). In the case of Belfast's mural tradition, the complicated relationship between murals, artists, and the community changes swiftly, and an effective image may have a mixed or even predominately negative response.

For example, two murals that may be considered effective or successful public art, though they may illicit negative responses to both their content and style, are two grayscale murals along Newtownards Road in East Belfast; images that were painted as a specific response to political changes in 2011(Figs. 25 and 26, pages 14 and 15). The working class PUL community was disillusioned by what they felt was a lack of responsiveness from their elected officials ('Mural Artist', 2023). Sectarian riots occurred in June and July of that year. While the riots ended in July, the murals remain intact as a reminder, according

to the artist, that the loyalists will not be left out of the political process. The artist believes these murals, much like the murals he made in the 1980s in response to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, gave a voice to his community's dissent ('Mural Artist', 2023). The history of murals within the PUL community often follows this model in which the working class feels neglected by the political process, and therefore they turn to mural production (Crowley 2022, 92). Crowley notes that the public response to the 2011 murals at the time was 'marked by outrage and condemnation'; however, 'they are hardly atypical of the general pattern of what has been developing in recent years' noting that there are a number of images of gunmen that have emerged away from the more tourist-centred areas of the city (Crowley 2015, 73).

The 2011 images, which both contain balaclava-clad gunmen, dominate the main thoroughfare through East Belfast. The image of larger-than-life gunmen who seem to prepare to shoot around the corner of the gable wall on which they are painted are especially effective in their menace (Fig. 25, page 14). Johnston notes that 'narrative and place are important elements of these works as they seek to project a story of resistance. Hence, gunmen are painted in military uniforms and as such are visually described as soldiers – not terrorists' (Baker 2015, 181). About images such as these, Bill Rolston, remarks that:

> there's a huge debate that you come across now and again about whether these murals are art or whether they're propaganda. And I have to say that my response to that is to say they're both. Lots of art is propaganda and lots of propaganda is artistic…. Whatever you can say about these murals, you cannot accuse them of being apathetic. These are politically strong statements. These are communities

> saying, "look, this is what we've gone through, this is what we believe, this is what we want." So, they are very very powerful images. (Vaughn 2012)

As examples of public art, they are powerful, and they speak to the anger and the resentment that was felt by the community at the time. They also imply the continued threat of violence, though it is unclear if that sentiment is shared by much of the community who sees them. To international viewers and even some locals, these images might still seem threatening (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). However, for decades it has been clear that these working-class communities, especially in areas that have felt marginalized with few employment opportunities and wide-spread social issues, have turned to aggressive imagery as a rallying point and a way to instil pride. Vannais writes, 'while many (but not all) might argue against the value of identification with more militant images, it would be difficult to argue with the notion of promoting community pride in such disadvantaged areas' (Vannais 2000, 21). While it is possible that the members of the PUL community who see these murals daily may still identify with them or feel a sense of cultural pride as they view the murals, it is difficult to gauge their current local impact. About the community response to the murals, the artist of the two murals states, 'you would get people to talk to you [about the murals], but you wouldn't get the truth' reinforcing the idea that the images were intended to speak for the working-class PUL community who are the ones who travel the road daily ('Mural Artist', 2023).

An unwillingness to provide honest and critical feedback about political murals can be found in either the vague or standardized sectarian responses documented in Katharine Keenan's street-intercept surveys, as well as Serena Clark's photo elicitation project

(Keenan 2022, 194; Clark, 2017). Public perception may also change depending on the context and the current political climate. Though these greyscale murals feature prominently in news articles about paramilitaries, crime, and negative statistics of East Belfast, people shopping along Newtownards Road may not even notice the UVF gunmen during times of relative peace (Keenan 2022, 194). In fact, in the spring of 2023, one of the paintings was replaced by digitally printed boards emblazoned with a copy of the same image (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). The only person interviewed for this research who noticed the difference between the painted mural and the printed boards was the artist of the original mural who had been consulted about the change ('Mural Artist', 2023; Bonner, 2024; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards*, 2024) (Fig. 26, page 15). Interestingly, if the importance of temporality is considered, the image that was recently replaced with identical boards may no longer serve as an effective piece of public art. Though public art does not always have to be uplifting, just as cultural touchstones do not always illicit positive responses, it does require a relationship with the viewer. If the community no longer notices this mural, it may be time for it to undergo a more substantial change. However, the fact that the mural was refurbished with a more permanent material demonstrates that those in power in the area are not ready to move on from the message of the original scene.

Community input is an essential element of public art. Whether the community is directly involved in the production of a mural, like the *Belfast Luminaries* image, or the mural reflects the fears and anxieties of the community, like the gunmen images along Newtownards Road, the murals act as a mirror that reflect the ideas of a community back to its audience. CNR artist 'Paddy' remarks 'you can gauge how far the community has

moved by the public art that surrounds them' (Cartiere and Zebracki 2016, 55). This is similar to statements made by the late David Ervine and his muralist son, Mark, both of whom refer to murals as the 'town crier' (Vaughn, 2012; Ervine, 2022). The number of murals around Belfast, the variety of their subjects, and the speed with which they are created, removed, changed, and updated reveals the rapidly changing attitudes of the community as they continue to process the trauma of conflict. As many public artists working today began their professional experience creating murals with community groups, they often have a finger on the pulse of their audience and are ready to respond (Ervine, 2022; Seedhead Arts, 2022; 'Mural Artist', 2023; Bonner, 2024).

Conclusion

The definitions of the term 'public art' are numerous. On the publicart.ie website, a comprehensive resource for artists and those who wish to commission public art on the island of Ireland, an entire page is dedicated to the issue of the definitions. There are twenty-two different definitions listed, all of which were created by respected artists and scholars, and all definitions are accepted within the field (publicart.ie, 2024). Included are statements as broad as Connemara artist Dorothy Cross's statement, 'I never know why everything gets broken down into categories… art is art!' (publicart.ie, 2024). The Dublin-based artist, Seamus Nolan offers a more complex view stating that:

> Public art operates in the terrain between the private and the political, the term public may apply to any process or forum of mediation between the individuals and the social structure in which the individual exists. A negotiation between the articulation of personal and collective identity, art which engages with the notion

> of the public might begin to question or activate the subject and the subjective response to these relative notions of publicness, history, community, identity and meaning. (publicart.ie, 2024)

Belfast artist Dan Shipsides recognises that the term public art is somewhat in flux and comments:

> as both art and public are incredibly contested and fluid terms it seems better to un/define and explore them through practical doing. However, public as a relationship (of more than one previously unrelated person) and art as an activity (of imaginative creative processes) seem to form the basis of my understanding. (publicart.ie, 2024)

Each artist, art historian, or critic adds a slightly different perspective. When seeking out the appropriate definitions of public art for this research, at every point, the intention of the artist has been the guiding factor. As such, the possibilities of public art must be narrowed somewhat from an 'art is art' perspective. This research seeks to be inclusive of a broad variety of styles, subjects, and locations while also recognising that there are differences between the artists creating work in the public sphere and artists who intend their work for a private or gallery space:

> Part of what makes public art practice so difficult to define is that it encompasses a vast umbrella of practices and forms: from permanent sculptures to temporary artworks; political activism; socially-engaged practices; monuments; memorials; community-based projects; off-site museum and gallery programmes; earthworks

> and land art; site-specific work; street furniture, urban design, and architectural decoration have all been classified under public art. Some argue that categorising public art is misleading – public art is just art. (Shaffrey 2010, 9)

Shaffrey, though making the statement that 'public art is just art' also notes that there are certainly differences between artists who engage in art created for the public and those who are solely focused on a studio practice. This research has shown that the artists working in Belfast's mural tradition would categorise themselves as engaging in a different artistic endeavour than artists who create work for galleries or individual patrons. The muralists create work for a large audience and consider their community's needs and interests in the creation of their murals. Artists on each side of the sectarian divide concern themselves with the mural's audience, both in their consideration of how an image will be received as well as how their community may see their own values reflected in an image. They also seek out opportunities for their work to be seen by a larger, or secondary, audience with their understanding of how murals may be used as a backdrop by local and international media (Keenan 2022, 108; Goalwin, 2013). Additionally, artists seek out locations that are symbolic and highly trafficked to make sure their imagery impacts the largest audience possible.

Mural artists in the city also consider the possibility that their images may serve as an educational tool for their constituency. Using historical themes, each side of the sectarian divide links themselves to their own community's history, with CNR murals often relying on images associated with oppression or marginalisation and PUL murals looking to solidify their connection to the British through their sacrifices in service to the Crown.

The expression of ideas through public art, in the words of Serena Clark, 'dignifies human experience by providing a platform for voice to be heard' (Clark 2019, 260). As noted by every mural painter interviewed for this research, it is the desire to be heard that influences artists' and patrons' choices for public art projects in Belfast. Each artist discussed the need to learn parts of history that were not taught in schools; each actively seek connections to the past to help them chart a path forward for their community (Kelly, 2023; Molloy, 2023; 'Mural Artist', 2023).

For success in public art, this chapter turned to Lucy Lippard's emphasis on the relationships that are created between artist, audience, and environment. Lippard's ideas are reinforced by artists and audience alike, and her emphasis on relationship can be found in the statement by Suzanne Lacy:

> The first mandate for attributing meaning to a work of public art is to recognize that meaning-making is a shared activity between artist and observer. To the degree that participation takes place, experience will be evoked. When art arrives at its public site ready for a fresh and unexpected encounter it posits the relationship among the artists, the observer, and the temporal community that occurs via the artwork as the primary source of energy. (Raven 1989, 299)

Lacy, an artist at the forefront of public art and public art criticism in the 1980s and early 1990s, notes that public art is part of a 'shared activity,' again, noting that the relationship between the artist and viewer is critical to the success of an artwork. Lacy's text validates the three essential elements of success for public art, namely emphasising site (or place), observer (or audience), and temporality. Though this chapter has focused on just a few

extant political murals as examples of successful public art, many murals that are currently on view in the city also fit these criteria. Noted earlier, public art should not be charged with the responsibility solve larger societal problems (Senie and Webster 1989, 296). Serena Clark notes that 'art can also help communities critique the past and the present, the government and themselves; they [murals] offer a way to express, collaborate and remember and can help communities begin to rebuild selves and society' (Clark 2019, 260). Though she continues with a call to 'ensure such mediums do not fuel conflict or violence,' it can be argued that the murals in Belfast, their ephemerality, reflections of the concerns of the community, and role as 'town crier' can allow their audiences a way to visualise the process of peace (Clark 2019, 260).

Chapter Three: Belfast's Artists: On the Outside

Similar to the issues of nomenclature and the definition of 'public art' presented in Chapter Two, the terms associated with artists who work outside of the traditional art systems have been the subject of a continuous debate, or what is cynically called 'term warfare', by scholars who research the topic (Fine 2004, 26; Wojcik 2016, 6). As Fine states, 'examining the range of labels that have been proposed for this creative domain, some suggest that agreement on a label is impossible. From this perspective the ongoing term warfare seems silly' (Fine 2004, 26). Citing the 1942 book, *They Taught Themselves* by New York art dealer Sidney Janis, Fine notes that the debate about what to call artists who work and received their art education outside of the mainstream art establishment goes back many decades (Fine 2004, 288).

Though Fine may consider the ongoing debate about categories for these artists to be 'silly', others disagree, and consider it essential to define the vocabulary so that the artists may be studied in the same scholarly manner afforded traditional artists (Fine 2004, 26). Joan Benedetti's article 'Words, Words, Words: Folk Art Terminology – Why it (Still) Matters', discusses the importance of the continued dialogue about terms that are 'both fluid and controversial' (Benedetti 2000, 14). She argues that the terminology used for art and artists must have literary warrant. They should 'be found in publications likely to be used by scholars working in the associated disciplines', and she encourages the use of 'terms whose form and meanings have a certain level of scholarly acceptance' (Benedetti 2000, 14). Benedetti also warns art professionals that:

> application of any art world terminology to objects produced outside of the art world tends to co-opt the objects thus named, making them part of the Euro-Western art market culture and distorting rather than aiding in our understanding of them or their makers. (Benedetti 2000, 17)

Therefore, great care must be taken to ensure that artists' intentions and experiences are considered so that art terms are not forced upon them. For this research, the language that applies to mural artists will be examined carefully, though, like in previous chapters, the text will focus the conversation on the experiences of the artists and the characteristics of the artwork itself. Though the muralists in Belfast work in a singular medium and focus on public art, they are artists with varied art backgrounds, unique biographies, and differing artistic intentions. As such, the mural artists in the Belfast political mural tradition are not easily categorised. Whether the muralists were exposed to an artistic practice while incarcerated, learned the mural trade through community programmes, or began their artistic lives as graffiti artists and anti-social behaviour, the artists who have shaped the mural tradition share the characteristic that they work and were trained outside of conventional art systems.

In her 1983 article 'Loyalist Wall Painters', Belinda Loftus draws links between political muralists and academic artists like John Luke. Similarly, the connections between academically trained artists and political mural painters in the mid-twentieth century during the revival of mural painting were outlined in Chapter One of this thesis. However, though there are links between political muralists and academic painters, the earliest painters from the political mural tradition were working-class men without artistic training, like John

McLean, the shipyard worker who painted the first PUL mural in 1908 (Loftus 1983, 11). Of the early to mid-twentieth century artists who were connected to the academic art world, Loftus notes that 'the links with fine art traditions, personnel and aspirations of loyalist wall paintings do much to contradict their [murals'] definition as sectarian graffiti or folk art. The timelessness implied by those definitions is also repudiated by the fairly clear history of the murals' (Loftus 1983, 11). Loftus argues that the works are not, in fact, folk art or graffiti because of their associations with academic systems. However, Loftus's writing on the subject is from 1983 and is focused on a specific period in the early history of only 'loyalist' wall paintings. The mural artists who are the subject of Loftus's 1983 research were not trained in the traditional academic sense; the artists were working-class tradespeople, sign painters, or coach painters (Loftus 1983, 11). There are certainly links amongst political muralists and academic painters working the early to mid-twentieth century, however, most of the painters who continued the tradition throughout the twentieth century, and especially after the 1970s, were not associated with academic art systems (Rolston, 1991; Loftus, 1990).

Loftus does note that artists who worked during the late 1970s and early 1980s were 'untrained teenagers or young men' (Loftus 1983, 12). Recognizing the shift away from any connection to academic art systems by the 1970s, the author unambiguously amends her writing on the subject in her 1990 book *Mirrors: William III and Mother Ireland* stating, 'yet these murals are unique, for nowhere else has [*sic*] political wall paintings [been] made by successive generations of untrained artists' (Loftus 1990, 16). Loftus's use of the word 'untrained' has a clear definition. She indicates that the artists in question were not educated in traditional art institutions. They had no experience with art academia,

the history of the Western artistic canon, or instruction in the fundamental elements and principles of art. They often replicated imagery rather than creating their own artistic designs, and they used materials that were found in or collected by their communities.

In Rolston's account of CNR muralists working to establish a mural tradition in their community in the 1980s, the author notes that very few of the artists painting during this period had formal art training (Rolston, 1991). Though the Derry artist Joe Coyle did have some art background, the overwhelming majority of young men working on murals in Belfast were untrained or self-taught (Rolston 1991, 99). As examples, Rolston offers information about prolific CNR artist, Kes, stating, 'like most mural painters, he had no art training, his sole experience being small-scale drawing at school' (Rolston 1991, 97). Another CNR artist, Digger, whose work could be found in the Ardoyne and Beechmount areas as well as in Divis Flats was also not trained in the traditional sense, though he had some graphic design experience from his work on political magazines (Rolston 1991, 98). Rolston attributes part of the success of the murals to the self-taught nature of the artists, stating, 'the lack of training had its advantages. A professional artist could well have been daunted by the scale of the paintings and the lack of tools and time to do the job, but the young amateurs showed remarkable ingenuity in getting around any obstacles' (Rolston 1991, 99).

Though it is difficult to categorise the political muralists under a single art label, there are shared characteristics of the artists that separate them from the mainstream art world. The primary connections between political muralists are their experience with a non-traditional art education as well as their shared interest in maintaining their authenticity and status within their communities. In Belfast, historically, there have been

three main avenues for a young person to begin a career in political mural making: introduction to arts, handicrafts, and mural making in prison; fostering of artistic skill through assisting practiced muralists on the street or in community programmes; and transition from graffiti artist to large-scale mural artist (Keenan 2022, 127-128). For the political mural artists working in the city today, a formal art education was not necessary, nor was it encouraged (Gallagher, 2023). Though there are street artists working on large-scale paintings in Belfast who have degrees in some form of visual communication from a university, the political muralists, and artists who create 'cultural' murals are not members of this group. Maintaining their 'outsider' status is essential for the muralists to preserve a level of authenticity, and a separation from official art institutions proves necessary.

For this chapter, several of the most prolific mural artists currently working in the city have been chosen as examples of painters who work outside of traditional art institutions to transform the Belfast urban landscape. The artists discussed are all self-taught, or received their art education in a non-traditional environment, like the prison system, through community engagement, or through the graffiti movement. Each artist has devoted their life to the practice of public art without actively seeking gallery representation or pursuing a private studio or retail art practice. They have referred to themselves as activists, outsiders, graffiti artists, street artists, and mural artists. Most are active within their communities or in cross-community projects, and they create art as a trade or form of activism, or occasionally as an act of personal artistic expression. Their contribution to the urban landscape of Belfast has come without the support of fine art institutions or training, though their impact can be felt around the city as well as amongst contemporary artists working today. This chapter will discuss the training, artistic practice,

and preservation of authenticity of these artists and will demonstrate how the artists should not be dismissed as propagandists. Rather, the muralists who have made their mark on the walls of Belfast and influenced the creative economy of the city can be classified using a variety of scholarly terms associated with the arts of people working outside of traditional academic systems: outsider artist, folk artist, and self-taught artist.

Outsider Artists and Prison Arts Programming

The term 'outsider art' has been hotly contested since its first use by Roger Cardinal in 1972. Cardinal coined the term as an English equivalent of the French 'Art Brut' championed by Jean Dubuffet (*Raw Vision*, n.d.). Art Brut can be loosely defined as 'creation in its most direct and uninhibited form. Not only [are] the works unique and original but their creators [are] seen to exist outside established culture and society' (*Raw Vision*, n.d.). For Cardinal, the term outsider art is problematic even though it was used as the title of his 1972 monograph. In a recently published foreword of his seminal text, the author emphasises, 'be it noted that the coinage "Outsider Art" appears only on the cover and title page of my book and is nowhere mentioned in the text proper!' (Cardinal 2022, v). Since the publication of *Outsider Art*, however, the term has been misunderstood, appropriated, and redefined. The term, even in its first decade of use, had a pejorative connotation and caused confusion among scholars and artists alike. Peter Haining, an artist and curator writing for *Circa* in 2001, states bluntly:

> Cardinal's generation has perpetuated a demeaning and paternalistic language that hinges on the perceived standard of the professional artist's ability; anything less is "naïve" and "childlike" … Ever since, [Cardinal's 1972 publication] the term has

> caused confusion, opening the debate about what constitutes Outsider Art and what then might art by social and cultural outsiders be. (Haining 2001, 19)

In the 2022 introduction noted above, Roger Cardinal seems to address this issue*,* stating:

> Outsider Art would, I thought, give the wrong impression, suggesting some form of social or psychological retreat from normal life. Indeed, those who have since that time objected to the term usually assume that it refers to art made by people who are social underdogs, unaccepted by the community. I try to tell them that the Outsider artist operates outside the standard practices and styles recognized by the establishment: they are not striving to conform, but to pursue an individual vision. (Cardinal 2022, v)

It seems, then, that it is the interpretation of the term outsider and its subsequent use, rather than the author's intention, that is at issue. However, fifty years after Cardinal's first use of the term, outsider art has staying power, though an established and universally accepted definition is still difficult to find.

Daniel Wojcik points out that 'definitions are unstable and contested', and there are geographic factors that also must be considered when defining outsider art/outsider artist (Wojcik 2016, 6). Wojcik takes care in explaining these factors:

> In the European context, outsider art is equated with *art brut*, a term that refers to works created by people with no artistic training, who are somehow disconnected from conventional culture and outside the art world, such as the mentally ill, trance mediums, self-taught isolates, and societal outcasts. In the States, by contrast,

> dealers and critics often use the term *outsider art* loosely, in reference to a melange of non-mainstream works created by a varied demographic: untrained artists, children, inmates, contemporary folk artists, naïve artists, artisans from so-called Third World and developing nations, and members of specific ethnic groups. (Wojcik 2016, 6)

Wojcik is quoted here at length to demonstrate that even recently, the term has been debated, and it continues to have both a meaning with a history and some scholarly acceptance, as well as connotations that may lead to a pejorative response. The use of the term outsider art can be problematic, and certain inferences are especially complicated when the term is used in reference to the art of the mentally ill, as it often is when used in the European context. The main dilemma presented when the term outsider artist is used to describe the Belfast muralists, is the assumption that outsider artists are often linked with people who are marginalized because of disabilities. Wojcik's assemblage of outsider artist types is an extensive list that groups together both social outcasts as well as casual amateur painters. He includes, 'art by self-taught, the socially marginalised, and the religiously inspired, as well as that by memory painters, hobos, Holocaust survivors, Vietnam War veterans, refugees, prisoners, alleged UFO abductees, people with autism, and other individuals considered to be non-traditional, untrained, undiscovered, or non-mainstream. (Wojcik 2016, 19). For Wojcik, it seems as if any artist working outside mainstream art institutions may fall within one of these categories. Just as a definition of public art was chosen for Chapter Two of this thesis, a choice must be made about which definition of outsider art this text will use. Returning to Cardinal's language, as well as Wojcik's and

others recent writings on the topic, a more inclusive grouping of artists emerges in the study of outsider art. The guiding characterisations of outsider art/artists for this chapter will be Wojcik's American definition quoted above, 'a melange of non-mainstream works created by a varied demographic', as well as Cardinal's recent comment:

> All in all, I am content to consider the wide range of artworks that come my way, and which I regard as falling within a much looser category. They include child art, graffiti art, borderline art, prison art, autodidact art, workshop art produced within therapeutic guidelines, and doodles and curios of all kinds (even including non-European tribal art – perhaps). These I would prefer to call the 'Marginal Arts', but I stand back from brandishing that as a label, as well as from trying to determine what 'marginal' really entails. In the end, we can proceed quite well on the assumption that we agree on the extent and shape of the general territory. (Cardinal 2022, vii)

In Cardinal's 1972 text, as well as his recently published forward to that book, the art of prisoners or others facing a form of incarceration is among the many types of art that he links with the characteristics of outsider art or Art Brut. Regarding art made by prisoners, Cardinal states, 'there is no *a priori* reason why in this area there should not emerge some authentic examples of Art Brut, given the conditions that may be assumed to prevail: internment, enforced leisure, isolation, anti-social attitudes' (Cardinal 2022, 36). In many texts, artists who begin creating art while incarcerated are listed within the variety of artists who may be considered outsider (Cardinal 2022; Wojcik 2016; Reynolds-White Hawk 2012; Benedetti 2000).

Artwork created while incarcerated is logically included in the study of outsider art because of the artist's isolation, though scholars also often link prison art to the artwork of those living with mental illness. Even though Joan Benedetti calls the term outsider art 'problematic at best', she notes that 'works called outsider are certainly unconventional, outside the mainstream…. Sometimes they turn out to be the work of people who have been institutionalized either in prison or in mental institutions, about as outside (or maybe we should say as *inside*) as you can get' (Benedetti 2000, 16). The connection of the mentally ill and the incarcerated is an outdated perception, however, and it is especially incongruous with the study of the artwork created by political prisoners from both sides of the sectarian divide during The Troubles. One can study artwork created in prisons, along with the art education systems that exist within many prisons, without automatically linking the individuals to mental illness or other forms of institutionalisation (Littman and Sliva 2020; Szekely 1982).

In an early study of prison arts, George Szekely notes that 'one cannot generalise about prison artists, for their crimes, backgrounds, and interests are widely varied' (Szekely 1982, 36). For those imprisoned for illegal paramilitary activity during The Troubles, connecting their confinement to that of the confinement in a mental institution is especially inappropriate. Art created by these prisoners was not an expression of an altered mental state. Rather, educational programmes, including arts activities, established by groups within the republican and loyalist community of prisoners were intended to improve their 'physical, psychological, and political wellbeing' (Hutchinson 2011, 2):

> In 1996 the Prison Arts Foundation (PAF) was founded with the aim of providing access to the arts for all prisoners, ex-prisoners, young offenders and ex-young offenders in Northern Ireland. During the latter years of the Maze and Kong Kesh Prison, the PAF promoted access to the arts by organizing professional artists residencies and workshops in the H-Blocks. (*Art at the Maze and Long Kesh Prison*, 2020)

The founding of the PAF in 1996 codified a longstanding tradition of passing the time while incarcerated by creating art and handicrafts. Community Arts worker, Mike Moloney, notes, 'these activities, be they art or craft, have the great virtue for the prisoner of passing the time, and are also a conduit back into education for a majority of prisoners whose first experience of education was usually not successful and not happy' (Moloney 2009, 3). Regarding the act of creating art in prison on the island of Ireland, newspaper publisher and former Sinn Féin councillor Máirtin Ó Muilleoir notes:

> the tradition of prison art was as old as the tradition of resisting colonial rule…. The prison handkerchiefs produced by the first political prisoners of the late sixties and early seventies were acts of propaganda. They told a story of defiance and suffering, one which wasn't being told through the 'official media', while bridging the gulf of separation imposed by the prison wall. (Ó Muilleoir 2009, 2)

Within the CNR community, both in Belfast and abroad, the artists of the handicrafts and the pieces of art they created were revered, and the objects were auctioned or sold 'with proceeds going to charities for the prisoners' wives and families' (Ó Muilleoir, 2009; Moloney, 2009). The artists adorned their prison walls with murals dedicated to their cause

and passed art materials and illustrated books from person to person within the confinement (Kelly, 2018; Conway 2010, 167; Rolston, 2013).

Similarly, loyalist prisoners during The Troubles organised the creation of art and handicrafts as well as mural painting on the interior walls of the prison. Though there was no formal education system in prisons in the 1970s, 'both loyalist and republican prisons had intricate self-education regimes which involved military and weapons instruction and history classes as well as political development' (Rolston 2013, 157-158). These regimes often included art production. Former member of the Ulster Volunteer Force and loyalist prisoner, Billy Hutchinson, offers the PUL point of view on the arts created by prisoners from his community. He notes that the tradition of art instruction and creation by the incarcerated loyalist prisoners began with the imprisonment of Gusty Spence in 1966. For the loyalist prison population's emphasis on art, Hutchinson credits Spence, noting:

> Spence's notion of cultural expression through art was rooted in the work of the famous Shankill Road artist William Conor…. Consequently, he had murals painted on the cubicle walls inside the huts in each of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF)/Red Hand Commando (RHC) compounds, as a matter of pride in our heritage, not just decoration. These murals were designed to represent our past, present and future, as well as our political expression about our country. (Hutchinson 2011, 2)

Art instruction for the prisoners was part of an overall educational system implemented by Spence, in which the men were 'encouraged to integrate the military training of drilling, lectures, and so on, with participation in some form of handicrafts' (Hutchinson 2011, 2;

Rolston, 2013). Later, Dominic Henry petitioned the Northern Ireland Office to formalise these educational systems and allow all the prisoners to study numerous subjects including the history of art. In their handicraft classes, similar to the republican prisoners, the men created leatherwork, woodworking, and drawings and paintings on leather, handkerchiefs, and glass. Loyalist prisoners would not have any art experience while working in the shipyard or in other working-class jobs on the outside. Their art knowledge came from their time in prison, as 'the lessons and skills would be passed on as more and more enter the prison' (Chieftain Productions Museum of Loyalism, 2022). Hutchinson credits this art programming for opening 'a creative vista' that informed his community work outside of the prison and encouraged him to 'engage Community Artists to work with residents to identify social problems and to describe the solutions' (Hutchinson 2011, 3).

Though the symbolism of the prison art of the two sides of the sectarian divide is different, the objects they created while incarcerated are comparable. Each group made leatherworks and small wood carvings as well as drawings and paintings on a variety of materials (eileenhickeymuseum.com, n.d.; Museum of Loyalism, n.d.; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). Both groups of prisoners similarly used art to assert their agency within their cramped spaces by creating murals dedicated to their respective causes. Rolston notes that the murals created in Long Kesh prison were 'an attempt by politically motivated prisoners to win back the space in which they are confined, to control it, to aspire to creating a liberated zone in the most inhospitable of environments' (Rolston 2013, 156). The murals created inside the prison walls as well as the arts and crafts were valued at the time of their creation, and they continue to draw the attention of collectors and ardent activists (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; Chieftain Productions Museum of Loyalism,

2022). Erin Hinson, whose scholarly work focuses on loyalist prison-made art writes, 'over the last ten years there has been renewed interest in collecting and displaying prison artworks and crafts' (Hinson 2023, 38). Interest is evident for prison arts in the CNR community as well, as artists display their work with pride, and each side of the sectarian divide continues to display prison handicrafts from the conflict in history museums in Belfast, with objects on display at the Ulster Museum as well as at least two museums with exhibitions dedicated to the objects: The Museum of Loyalism in East Belfast and The Eileen Hickey Irish Republican History Museum (Figs. 27a, 27b, 28a, and 28b, page 16).

Visual arts were both a self-improvement tactic and an assertion of a political agenda for prisoners on both sides, and art making in prison fundamentally changed the trajectory of some of the prisoners who displayed inherent talent while they were incarcerated (Kelly, 2023). The art culture of prisoners during their incarceration influenced the work they created when they were released. For example, the murals created by both groups 'mirrored the equivalent murals in loyalist and republican areas outside of prison' (Rolston 2013, 165). Since murals, and visual art more generally, were such an important part of the lives of political prisoners, it is logical, then, that murals became an accepted way of supporting their side of the sectarian divide after the prisoners were released. Republican mural artists Gerard Kelly and Danny Devenny both turned to mural making after their release from prison because they saw the practice as the way they could be most beneficial to the republican cause (Kelly, 2018; beyond the pale, n.d.). As Devenny considers his contribution to mural arts and the fight for Irish unification, he says 'remembering that period I can't help but recall the quote from Bobby Sands: "Everyone has a role to play"' (beyond the pale, n.d.). Kelly and Devenny, two of Belfast's most

experienced CNR muralists, can be categorised as outsider artists, using the definitions put forward by Cardinal and Wojcik, because their art making experiences began with their incarceration during The Troubles.

Kelly was imprisoned after being captured and convicted in 1981 for transporting a 250-pound bomb in the boot of his car (Kelly 2018, 31). His first drawings in prison were small spiders made for his young daughter along with copies of cartoons from *The Sun* and *The Star* magazines. Kelly asserts that he began to draw because of his love for his daughter (Kelly 2018, 36). During this early period in his incarceration, Kelly did not have art materials, rather, he borrowed them from other inmates (*Northern Visions,* n.d.). The isolation of imprisonment was difficult for Kelly, and therefore, he turned to art:

> I was doing art to occupy my mind, to keep me from thinking, "Gerard, your wife and son and daughter are outside. And your son and daughter are going to grow up without her father." I was trying to blank all that out. Now, you can go into the cell and stare at a blank wall and feel sorry for yourself or you can get up and go and occupy your mind. Art was a way to do that. I think that art kept me sane. (Kelly 2018, 45)

Prolific muralist, Danny Devenny, joined the IRA at age 16 and was arrested three years later for an attempted bank robbery. During the altercation, he was shot three times, which altered his role within the organization. Recalling the aftermath, the artist notes:

> at the hospital, I was guarded by two young British soldiers. Even then, I loved drawing, and I would do pictures of Marc Bolan, Michael Jackson, George Best. The soldiers would ask me to draw Tommy guns for them. In return, they played

> Pink Floyd outside, loudly, so I could hear. I was sent from the hospital to Long Kesh [the Maze] prison for four years. It was January 1973. We weren't allowed drawing materials, so we smuggled them in, and drew on handkerchiefs - political subjects - then smuggled them out again. As I'd been shot, I couldn't play football, so I drew to pass the time, and became like the prison artist. (Cole 2009, 1)

Devenny honed his skills in prison, and after his release, he began working for Sinn Féin doing 'agitprop' along with posters and painted boards (Cole, 2009). His first mural was created in 1976 inside Long Kesh prison within the huts used for education by republican prisoners (Conway 2010, 167). Painting images of prominent Irish figures, along with those of Ho Chi Min and Che Guevara, Devenny linked the republican struggle to international themes even in his earliest murals painted inside the prison (Northern Visions, 2013). The artist gives differing accounts for the date of his first mural outside of the prison walls. Devenny recalls that either in 1991 or 1995 he created an image about the harm done by plastic bullets. However, he also discusses a mural with an image of a firing party at the funeral of Bobby Sands painted on the Sinn Féin offices in the Short Strand (beyond the pale, n.d.; Cole 2009, 1; Conway 2010, 167).

As Devenny became more practiced at his craft, he and his painting partner Marty Lyons embarked upon what Crowley calls a 'new realism' in their artwork (Crowley 2022, 111). This focus on naturalism may belie what people envision when they consider outsider art. As Peter Haining notes, 'the genre, Art Brut/Outsider Art has become fixed with set criteria that classify it, and since its inception has become an integral part of modernism, so much so that its uninhibited freedom of expression has directly influenced

many modern masters and helped establish an international style' (Haining 2001, 21). Critical of the use of the term outsider art, Haining argues, 'to say that all art by social and cultural outsiders is outsider art is like saying all plein-air landscape painting is impressionism… The term Outsider Art is a misnomer, and its usage has confused the way we view the art made by people without tutelage or contact with the art world and its operatives' (Haining 2001, 23). However, in the case of Belfast's muralists, and especially the artists who began their art practice in prison, it is the *biography* of the artist that connects them to the world of outsider art, not the art object itself. In reference to outsider art as an artistic style, Lyle Rexler notes, 'it does not refer to the art but to the status of the people who make it. Its "members" share almost no assumptions about art and are not connected, in terms of practice, to an art world of dealers and critics' (Rexler 2005, 13). Gary Fine, in his study of self-taught artists and authenticity concurs with Rexler, noting that 'artists are categorised by means of the definition of their identities as authentic in the production of objects, unburdened by assumptions of strategic careerism or lofty intellectualising. In this, in their *outsider* role, separate from images of a corrupt elite' (Fine 2003, 155). It is the lived experience that has influenced the artistic production of Devenny as well as many other muralists who began painting during The Troubles.

While Devenny's technical skill and artistic style have evolved, and he has achieved some international notoriety by working on high profile projects, it is his biography that places him in the 'outsider' category, and he has tried to maintain his outsider status by always returning to activist mural-making (*Field Notes International Wall,* 2024; Devenny, 2024; Devenny and Rolston, 2024). Though the artist has worked with film and theatre producers and was hired to paint a high-profile portrait of former Belfast Lord Mayor Niall

Ó Donnghaile, Devenny often follows such projects with statements that affirm his distance from those in power. After painting the Lord Mayor's portrait, the artist was dismissive of the project, claiming 'it was a complete bore…. With murals, you have so much freedom. It's big, broad strokes, plus you get to chat to everyone as they drop by. I won't be giving up the day job anytime soon' (Bradley, 2012).

Though Kelly and Devenny began creating art in earnest while imprisoned, one may also consider the pair outsider artists because of the residual trauma that clearly still impacts their lived experience and artistic production. Trauma and outsider art is the subject of much of Wojcik's research, and he notes,

> the behavioural approach of folklore studies contextualizes individual suffering and trauma, and the ways that people try to cope with problems, adjust to stressful situations, and express meaning in their lives through creativity…. individuals use the creative process to confront suffering, loss, and traumatic life events, and I explore the potentially therapeutic aspects of their artistic behaviour. (Wojcik 2008, 180)

Wojcik considers the 'persistent theme of personal trauma' in the artists whose life he chronicles and 'explores how experiences of tragedy and suffering have sometimes sparked the art-making process and triggered a creative transformation among some individuals' (Wojcik 2016, 29). Serena Clark also considers the importance of acknowledging trauma in the study of the art of post-conflict societies; 'people that have survived the trauma of conflict can use art to express and give shape to their suffering and experiences that are too horrific for words' (Clark 2019, 260).

Residual or generational trauma is a part of daily life for many people who lived through the conflict in Belfast, and this is certainly the case for those who experienced incarceration, like the artists Gerard Kelly and Danny Devenny. As Kelly reflects on his time in prison, he says, 'but how do you draw the pain? How do you draw the trauma that your mind's going through? And the turmoil you are fighting each and every day to stay strong? How do you paint that?' (Kelly 2018, 45). In addition to his own personal struggles, he was impacted by murders in his neighbourhood, the Springhill area of Belfast, and considers that he may have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder due to the ever-present violence as well as his incarceration (Kelly 2018, 61; Kelly, 2023). Recalling a particularly brutal evening in Springhill, the artist says, 'when you experience a shock like that, you do not have time to deal with it. It is only afterwards you start to deal with the trauma and try to get yourself back to what you were previously. For years I was like that — trying to get rid of the trauma of that night' (Kelly 2018, 21). Kelly, pointing to the street outside of his home, reflects:

> eleven people were killed out there. In that immediate area here. Five people were murdered by the British Army down the street. I was there, I may have been shot there. David McCaffery hit eleven times on the ground. I lived it, I seen it, and I know what our people went through. So, when I paint murals, I take that into account. (Kelly, 2023)

Though Devenny is less direct about the impact of his traumatic experiences, the artist does recall 'the important thing in the struggle has been the courage and achievements of some of those individuals and units of the IRA coming up against a huge war machine.

How could people manage any of what they went through? Beatings? Torture? Hunger strikes? Long Kesh?' (Conway 2010, 171). It is significant that in this list of traumas that members of his community survived, Long Kesh, the place where he was imprisoned, is included. The artist refers to the making of murals as a 'godsend' to him, one that gave him a sense of purpose within the movement (beyond the pale, n.d.). When discussing his early years as a muralist, Devenny often references the impact that the death of Pat Finucane as well as that of a young painter friend had on involvement in the republican movement as well as his artistic practice:

> what there was, was threats and in the case of 16-year-old Michael McCartan in 1980, murder. Shot dead by the RUC for carrying a tin of white paint and a brush to scrawl his support for the IRA on a gable wall. Pat Finucane and Des Wilson organised a public meeting to expose the atrocity. Pat was targeted and murdered for his passion to work in pursuit of justice and his determination to expose the corrupt nature of the state. We were honoured to produce murals in his memory. (beyond the pale, n.d.)

While it may be an overreach to state that mural painting was specifically a trauma response for Kelly and Devenny, the impact of their incarceration, the violence of the era, along with the deaths of friends and family members drove them to continue to participate in the republican movement by creating large scale public works of art (Kelly 2018; Kelly 2023; beyond the pale books, n.d.). Trauma response and management of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder continues to be a source of mural production in Belfast. Cross-cultural organisations and post-conflict trauma centres, like Wave Trauma, incorporate mural

production into many of their programmes, and they commission mural artists to collaborate with members of the community to help process traumatic events; a community art programming focus that will be covered in Chapter Four of this thesis.

The field of outsider art is firmly established within art criticism, but debates over the meaning of the term continue. Though Haining and others have expressed the problems with the use of the term, outsider art has stayed in the scholarly lexicon. Whether Belfast's mural artists choose this term as an identifier, or it is thrust upon them by the art establishment, the fact remains that the artists who have made the most lasting impression on the city of Belfast are indeed outsiders, and many of them fit firmly within the definitions of the term set forth by Cardinal, the first person to coin the phrase, as well as those writing in the field more recently. Just as Wojcik and Cardinal note that the term may encompass any number of artists who are outside the mainstream, Dyani Reynolds-White Hawk states, outsider artists may have 'any variety of other combinations that socially set them apart from the median', and she continues, 'the artist's primary attribute is defined as a lack of formal training or credentials' (Reynolds-White Hawk 2012, 48). The key characteristics for artists working on murals in Belfast is that they are set apart from the training and support of traditional fine arts institutions.

Folk Artists and Community Arts Education

As noted in the first chapter of this thesis, Loftus is the first art historian to mention the term 'folk' in relation to the political murals, stating 'if you ask anyone with an interest in art what they think of loyalist wall-paintings, their response will generally be to describe them either as mindless sectarian graffiti or as folk imagery, suitable for preservation with

an Arts Council grant. Both definitions implicitly separate the paintings from the world of fine art' (Loftus 1983, 10). Though she does not elaborate on her definition of folk imagery, the point that these murals are set apart from the traditional fine art institutions is clear in her text. Loftus's article 'Loyalist Wall Painters' is from the early 1980s, when the terms folk art and outsider art were being debated in mainstream art criticism. Her use of the term folk seems to have a pejorative connotation, and her connection of the muralists, all of whom were self-taught or non-traditional artists, to academic painters serves the purpose of validating the murals as fine art rather than folk art (Loftus, 1983).

David Brody, whose writing expresses clear frustration at the process of labelling styles considers the term folk art to be somewhat unsettled, stating, 'the definition of folk art has struggled through a number of semiotic shifts… the category of "folk" belies a straightforward definition' (Brody 2003, 257, 258). Several authors express similar dissatisfaction with the variety of definitions available for the term, and much of their texts are dedicated to the history of the term and their choice of definition of the term folk art rather than the evaluation of artwork or artists (Benedetti, 2000; Delacruz, 1999; Brody, 2003). Though differences of definition create more dialogue about folk art, or as Elizabeth Delacruz offers, 'contradictory descriptions of folk art invite classroom inquiries about the nature of art', it is necessary to find points of common ground (Delacruz 1999, 34). She chooses the following as a generally accepted definition:

> folk art will be described as widely varied artforms created by self-trained artists who, often with ordinary and recycled materials found in their own environs, and working mostly outside of the art establishment, create, primarily for themselves

> and for members of their immediate social groups, stylistic narratives and visions of the struggles and aspirations of daily or spiritual life. (Delacruz 1999, 24)

To return to Wojcik's research, the author concurs with Delacruz's connection of folk art to immediate social groups, and writes that folk art is 'rooted in collective aesthetics and in the traditions of a particular community or subculture' (Wojcik 2016, 9). The emphasis that folk art is an expression of the unique ideals of a group is one that finds acceptance with other authors as well. Delacruz cites folklorist Henry Glassie who suggests that folk art is an expression of a particular community and describes folk art as 'human creativity in social context…. folk art is communal and local, conservative and participatory, conceptual and multifunctional' (Glassie cited in Delacruz 1999, 24). Though the association of folk art with craft or 'utilitarian objects, such as quilts, baskets, pottery and other useful objects' continues, folk art is now a more inclusive term that includes a broader collection of material culture (Harris 1998, 25; Benedetti 2000, 19). The distinction that differentiates folk art from its associated artforms - outsider, marginal, naïve, and self-taught - is 'not how it appears, but how and why it is made, by whom, and how it is understood by others' (Delacruz 2000, 81).

Simon Bronner argues for a more inclusive approach to the study of folk art, noting that an art object cannot be accurately studied if it is removed from its original environment and primary intent. He advocates for 'a more comprehensive concept that focuses on individual folk *artists* and their specific *audiences'* (Bronner 1981, 66). Though some of Bronner's text is dated, the emphasis on artists and their audiences rather than the art object is one that is especially useful for folk art created in the public sphere, such as Belfast's

murals. Just as Bronner suggests, at each point in this research, an effort has been made to return to the ideas and actions of the artists. In the study of Belfast's murals as folk art, a focus on the artists' words and actions, their training, and their dissemination of artistic expertise will be essential.

Within their communities, political muralists are known and valued, and they still command respect (Kelly, 2023; 'Mural Artist', 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; *Field Notes International Wall,* 2024). When the CNR community hears that Danny Devenny and Marty Lyons are painting on the International Wall, dozens of people will come to witness and learn the trade (Kelly, 2023; *Field Notes International Wall,* 2024). In the very recent Palestinian support mural series on the International Wall along the Falls Road, community members have been invited to participate in the mural production. As noted in Chapter Two, Rolston comments that 'around twenty-five people have been working on it, however, only three of these people are muralists. The rest are people who have just turned up to help' (Corscadden, 2024). Each day, new community members visited the International Wall and offered to help (*Field Notes International Wall,* 2024). The ending result was more than a just series of murals produced by a few artists. Rather, the paintings became a collective protest of the ongoing war in Gaza. To return to Delacruz and Grassie's language, these images are both expressions of the collective as well as the participatory. The murals are examples of how 'contemporary folk artists deal with current social issues, as well as with universal questions about life and death; they create unique visions of communal culture' (Delacruz 1999, 35).

Participatory practices are essential for the continuation of a folk tradition. In Belfast, participation often takes the shape of community workshops. For a recent pair of

cultural murals in East Belfast, the artist Dee Craig, whose paramilitary murals have been discussed previously in this text, worked extensively with the community (Figs. 29 and 30, page 17). Though Craig creates some of his murals in his studio alone, for this high-profile undertaking, the community was thoroughly integrated into the process. The murals were commissioned by East Belfast Enterprise and installed on the City East Building, a large structure at the entrance to East Belfast. In celebrations of the murals, the emphasis on community engagement is evident; 'the mural design has been developed during a series of more than 30 workshops in which the groups discussed themes to reflect the lives of those living in East Belfast' (Community NI, 2023). To spread the community engagement as widely through East Belfast as possible, the workshops were held at a variety of locations. Members of churches, football clubs, schools, and civic organisations, as well as political representatives from the Alliance Party, Ulster Unionist Party, and Democratic Unionist Party, all had a role in the creation of this pair of murals (East Belfast Enterprise, n.d.). The project involved people of all ages, transmitting the artistic process to a diverse constituency (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). While this endeavour may also fall under the category of a large-scale community arts scheme, the distinction between community art and folk art is negligible in many of Belfast's mural projects. In this case, Craig acted as the primary folk artist, one whose style and process is recognisable and unique to his community.

The subject matter for the mural pair is also specifically characteristic of the area. Celebrating East Belfast's past as a working-class neighbourhood and its future as a hub for innovation, two distinct images were designed by the artist in collaboration with the East Belfast Enterprise (East Belfast Enterprise, n.d.; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023).

Because of its proximity to the Belfast shipyard, East Belfast has historically been a working-class, predominately PUL community. Craig takes great pride in the working-class history of his community, and it was his choice to highlight working-class ideals with an image of a rag and bone man surrounded by text listing other historic working-class trades (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). Like other loyalists, the artist often looks to the past for symbols of former glory to be included in his murals. Whether images of the working class, former military campaigns, or cultural heroes, Craig includes characters and symbols that will speak directly to the PUL members of the East Belfast community to remind them of their cultural 'birth rite' ('Mural Artist', 2023: *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). It is important to note that historically many of these professions were exclusive to the PUL community with Catholics being barred from working in certain industries, therefore, with an emphasis on those trades, this image could be considered a sectarian signal. Focusing on the working-class and pride in the past is a communal act for the participants in Craig's mural projects, and he serves as the facilitator who transmits artistic knowledge to those who share his identity, making these murals very large-scale examples of folk art as they represent the collective and were made through a participatory process.

As Delacruz notes, the work of folk artists is significant because of their ability to visualise 'communal culture' (Delacruz 1999, 35). They illustrate the concerns of a community at a specific moment in time, and in many cases, murals are used to document collective grief or commemoration. One example of a mural that remains in situ as a symbol for the CNR community's collective grief about the Great Hunger is *An tOcras Mór* on the New Lodge Road in Belfast (Fig. 31, page 17). The mural was completed along

with a series of murals dedicated to the 150-year anniversary of the beginning of the potato blight in Ireland. In keeping with the mural tradition of image appropriation, the artists relied on academic models, using Millet's *The Gleaners,* and an illustration from an 1849 edition of *Illustrated London News* titled *Searching for Potatoes in a Stubble Field* (*Illustrated London News,* 1849) (Figs. 31a and 31b, page 18). *Illustrated London News* images were used by many artists who created murals dedicated to the subject of the Great Hunger, as those were the primary visual resources from the period of the late 1840s (Extramural Activity, 2014). As discussed in Chapter Two, this mural has become iconic in the community. Located in New Lodge, an area that has recently seen a flurry of mural activity in which several sectarian murals were changed or restored, this painting has not been touched. *An tOcras Mór*, along with others made in 1995 for the anniversary, uses mutually understood symbols of the CNR community; utilising the font that had come to be associated with Celtic symbolism and history, as well as a simplified version of Celtic knotwork or ribbon interlacing made popular by muralists copying Jim Fitzpatrick's illustrations in the 1980s. Though the painting was a collective effort that traditionally would not include artists' names, this mural is unique in that it is signed by five artists, one of whom, Jonny McKerr, is still active in the political mural and Street Art scene today. McKerr is an example of an artist who first began painting on walls as a part of the communal CNR mural tradition, and then shifted to aerosol based urban Street Art. His work includes both graffiti style imagery as well as cultural paintings created for both sides of the sectarian divide.

One aspect of Delacruz's definition of folk art that is particularly relevant to the early years of mural production within both CNR and PUL communities is the importance

of recycled materials in the creation of the mural. At Féile an Phobail, 'Irelands Biggest Community Arts Festival', in August 2022 Danny Devenny remarked, 'you did need paint, but really, whatever paint was available would do' (beyond the pale books, n.d.). Whatever paint was available became the colour scheme for the next project. We would mostly watch for people in the street painting their houses' (beyond the pale books, n.d.). Gerard Kelly echoed this statement in an interview when he discussed how the collection of paints from the neighbourhood would often determine the colour palette of the mural (Kelly, 2023; Kelly, 2018). Describing this process, Kelly adds:

> with most of the murals between 1986 until about 1992, most of the paint that we got was from the houses in the immediate area of Springhill and the colours were dictated by the colours of people's living-rooms, bedrooms, and bathrooms. I sent the kids of the area 'round the houses: Tell them, "Mo Chara said. Ask them have they any paint, anything at all, it doesn't matter what colour." If I saw anyone coming up the street, I'd stop them and ask, "Do you have any paint?" And if I saw anybody carrying paint into the house, I would give them about a week to get the work done and then go down and ask, "Have you any of that paint you were painting with last week?" So, I started getting the colours: somebody had green, somebody had white, somebody had orange. And a bit of black, but we didn't really have enough black. Black paint is hard paint to get. Nobody throws out black paint or white paint — they throw greens and all the other colours out. When we ran out of black paint we had to use black tar, black bitumen tar that you use to seal a roof.

> The tar only worked for about three months then it started to turn grey. (Kelly 2018, 77)

Not only does the collection of paint from neighbours create a communal art project, but it also imprints the importance of the mural on the community. A child who recognises the colour of their bedroom on the wall containing a political mural is more likely to connect with that image. Several artists working today credit seeing the political muralists as children or teenagers, the muralists' work outdoors, and their willingness to allow the community to help with murals as inspiration for their own artistic practice (Doran, 2023; Gallagher, 2023; Seedhead Arts 'KVLR', 2023). Especially within the CNR community, even if the artists are self-taught, they do not work in isolation. They paint in public and are active participants in the city's cultural events. They are active on social media and encourage people to participate in their mural process. They try to keep the mural tradition alive by taking younger artists under their wings to teach them the tricks of the mural trade (Gallagher, 2023). The CNR artists who turned to their friends and neighbours to gather materials for the art objects and taught young people the craft of mural making cemented themselves as activists and voices of influence in the community.

Declan McGonagle considers that 'engaged or participatory art practice can be shown to be central rather than marginal to the meaning and value of art in the "story" of human society' (McGonagle 2007, 425). Passing the traditions of mural painting from one generation to the next in a somewhat public practice, communicating to the public about issues that are specific to their community, and including distinctive imagery and recognisable symbols of their identity, Belfast's artists have placed the artform of mural

painting within the category of folk art. In much of the mural production in the city, through workshops and painting in public, the artform is *culturally* or *communally taught* rather than self-taught. Concern for transmitting cultural traditions, symbolism, and values is paramount. Though mural making in other cities may not fit the characteristics of folk art discussed above, in Belfast, the creation of murals is communal, distinctly local, and uniquely participatory.

Self-Taught Artists and Graffiti Culture

Though efforts to differentiate these terms have been somewhat successful in creating subcategories, often the terms outsider, folk, and self-taught are still used interchangeably. Suzanne Harris notes that 'more recently, scholars and collectors have settled on the term *self-taught.* These artists are usually defined as being isolated from mainstream culture in an urban or rural pocket, without the formal academic training found in art schools' (Harris 1998, 26). Benedetti agrees and concludes that 'self-taught is a more inclusive term than outsider' (Benedetti 2000, 16). Though the author makes the distinction between folk artists, who are culturally taught, and artists who are self-taught. However, she and other writers continue to return to the term self-taught rather than outsider or folk art because self-taught seems the least objectionable and does not historically evoke pejorative associations. Self-taught gets at the heart of what type of artist is being discussed without offending anyone or linking the artist to a group that is marginalised because of a disability. The term self-taught communicates to the audience that the artist works outside of traditional art training institutions. As Harris notes, 'because the work appears under many labels (self-taught, folk, outsider, naïve), discussion often centres on definition rather than

the work itself' (Harris 1998, 26). This idea is echoed by Cardinal who encouraged less emphasis on the terms and more emphasis on the art objects and artists (Cardinal, 2022). By turning to the murals themselves, and especially the words of the muralists, we can study the characteristics of art of the self-taught public artist in Belfast.

Glen Molloy is an artist who fits squarely within the 'self-taught' definitions accepted by scholars. The artist first painted in the 1980s Belfast graffiti scene while also gaining prominence as a DJ. He has no formal art training. Rather, the artist learned by trial and error with some works being more formally successful than others. Molloy also works alone and is somewhat isolated from the fine art establishment. He is cynical about attention and mistrusts power structures within the art world. When asked if he is a self-taught artist, Molloy states:

> unless I can learn something myself, I can't do it; I can't be taught. I'll see something, struggle with it, then break it down and figure out a way I can do it. I'm not caught up in my own ego, I know if something I paint is bad! I'm under no illusions and not everything I do is good, but I'm still learning, and I haven't reached my full potential. (Molloy quoted in Anon., 2017)

Molloy also learned from studying graffiti magazines published in the 1990s, and he continues to hone his craft by creating self-funded images of pop culture heroes, often painted in the middle of the night and in isolation from other artists or community members (Molloy, 2023). He credits graffiti culture for the Street Art movement's success, saying, 'if it hadn't been for graffiti on the trains in New York, there wouldn't be no Street Art as we know it now' (Molloy, 2023). Molloy paints images all over the city, and he received

a quite a lot of media attention in the late 2010s, being labelled the 'Belfast Banksy' because of his anonymous images that were painted under the cover of darkness. However, in keeping with his interest in isolation and authenticity, the attention he received was not always welcome. The artist states, 'I am trying to steer away from the attention. I am trying to distance myself and let the art get the appreciation. I don't even want to share my work now. I think I fell into a trap that comes with the attention and lost the reason why I was doing art in the first place' (McGreevy, 2020).

Since he began his career in the graffiti subculture, though, as discussed in Chapter Two, the artist has recently turned to creating PUL cultural murals that may be considered sectarian because of their subject matter and location. Even with his recent successful cultural commissions, Molloy still has a graffiti artist's mentality when he considers power structures that fund art programming (Molloy, 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; Drummond, 2024). In the artist's words:

> people say street art is the illegitimate child of graffiti; if it hadn't been for the subways in New York, we wouldn't be having this conversation now. The mentality of graffiti artists is a bit like "if it wasn't for us, you wouldn't be here, and we don't think we've been given the credit and respect we deserve for what we've done". What they do is considered a crime even if it's beautiful. Street art is acceptable even if it's ugly or contentious or whatever. So, if you do street art, here's the red carpet, and if you do graffiti, here's the handcuffs. There's beauty and there's a beast. Graffiti in its rawest form is beastly, but it's still beautiful. There may be an element of fear and intimidation as well; you're dealing with people with degrees

> in fine art and studied everything under the sun. It's a war of egos. (Molloy quoted in Anon., 2017)

Molloy's misgivings about the art establishment, and his concern about Street Art and graffiti being taken over by 'people with degrees in fine art', confirm him as an artist who works outside of the mainstream (Anon., 2017). Fine notes, 'to be a self-taught artist is to be a creator: not only a creator of the works themselves, but also a creator of a justification for doing the work and a creator of a system of resources that permits artistic creation' (Fine 2004, 139). Without the support of connections in the mainstream art world to rely upon, or as Fine calls it 'a system of resources', Molloy and other self-taught artists must create their own systems in which they can continue to make art (Fine 2004, 139). For some artists, this means adjusting their style or painting imagery that they would not paint if they were given full artistic license.

Molloy transitioned from graffiti artist to Street Artist to PUL cultural mural painter. After a period of financial instability and isolation from other artists, Molloy began to accept commissions for high-profile PUL cultural murals such as the *Shankill Drummer* discussed in Chapter Two (Molloy, 2023; Drummond, 2024; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024). Though he has been known accept commissions to paint sectarian symbols like Iron Maiden's *Eddie*, a well-known symbol of loyalism that was the subject of murals during the height of The Troubles, Molloy maintains that he prefers to paint images that will be uplifting to his community (Molloy, 2023) (Fig. 32, page 19). His evolution from one type of imagery to another is not unusual, as many self-taught artists who paint in the graffiti scene, with community arts organisations, or within the Street Art movement often find

themselves being asked to paint sectarian murals (McGinn, 2022; Ervine, 2022; Irvine, 2010).

The artist pair Blaze FX, known for their community murals and school workshops as well as their sectarian and paramilitary murals, also began their art making experiences in Belfast's graffiti culture in the 1990s (Lisle, 2006). The artists are self-taught. They did not receive formal training; rather, in the graffiti scene, skills are learned by studying others and passed from artist to artist as they compete for wall space, attention, and increasingly creative styles (Molloy, 2023). The artists credit graffiti and the 'urban arts scene' for the escape from 'the oppressive traditions' of their upbringing (Keenan 2022, 127). In a 2006 article, Debbie Lisle links Blaze FX with Belfast's growing graffiti culture stating:

> local graffiti artists like Blaze FX (Glenn Black and Ken Maze) have been actively painting the walls of the city for more than a decade. Their work draws from existing graffiti networks in London and New York and also forges new links with cities like Dublin, Paris, Amsterdam, Glasgow, and Manchester…. In the end, artists like Blaze FX should be encouraged because they give expression to a Belfast that is young, urban, and diverse, rather than violent, sectarian, and divided. (Lisle 2006, 48)

Both Lisle and Katharine Keenan recognise that the pair are evolving from graffiti writers to artists creating career out of their craft, with Lisle stating that they 'should be encouraged' (Lisle 2006, 48). Keenan notes that 'the two are making a profession out of their art' and they 'maintain a high aesthetic standard' (Keenan 2022, 127).

Blaze FX can be credited with one of the most important pieces of graffiti in Belfast,

the iconic *Teenage Dreams* mural on Middlepath Street (Fig. 33, page 19) (Belfast City Council, n.d.)[9]. Street Art Cities cites the original 2004 *Teenage Dreams* graffiti as 'probably the most famous and significant piece of Street Art in Belfast' (streetartcities.com, n.d.). The site continues:

> for people who sit outside the traditional binary norms of the NI conflict this piece was seminal. In a city filled with murals of division and conflict, here was a wall that spoke of punk, the great F**k You (*sic*) to the divided establishment. A wall that spoke of teenage dreams and rebellion, painted illegally in tribute to a spokesperson for outsiders, taken before his time. (streetartcities.com, n.d.)

The 2004 *Teenage Dreams* mural was created overnight after the death of Radio 1 DJ John Peel, a supporter of The Undertones and especially their song 'Teenage Kicks' (streetartcities.com, n.d.; Turkington, 2022; Hanna, 2022). The painting of this image proved to be a critical moment for the graffiti and Street Art movements, as it was one of the first non-sectarian images painted on walls in East Belfast. Arts professionals and artists credit the sudden appearance of this mural as the starting point of a major anti-sectarian Street Art movement (Hanna, 2022; Turkington, 2022).

Blaze FX are prolific; the main thoroughfares in East Belfast, especially, have one of their murals on nearly every city block (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). The artists may have begun their careers as self-taught graffiti writers, but much of their recent

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[9] Some sources state Blaze FX completed both the original 2004 *Teenage Dreams* mural as well as the reinstalled mural from 2015.

community work is now considered a type of graffiti deterrent. They have completed dozens of cultural murals with warning messages about drugs and suicide, as well as other lessons about anti-social behaviour. Their school and community workshops have produced countless pieces of public art dedicated to positivity in the area (Blaze FX, n.d.; Belfast City Council n.d.; McGonagle, 2022; neighborhoodrenewal.eastsidepartnership.com, n.d.). After a review of 'graffiti hotspots', one such project was intended to directly affect the continued use of graffiti by covering the wall with a colourful mural designed by community members (McGonagle, 2022). The pair are deft at these types of projects, as they understand the importance of a sense of ownership and pride that is essential for a successful public art project. One of the artists, Glenn Black, comments:

> from the very outset, we wanted the local community to take ownership of this – it's for them, by them. It was really important that the finished product represented their input and ideas, so that it inspires a sense of ownership and pride in their local area, and hopefully creates something of a legacy artwork. Bright and vibrant murals and street art can really enhance the local streetscape; by working together we've created something that is very unique to this particular area of the city, and it was a real pleasure to work on this project, and work with the young people to help shape and guide their ideas. (Belfast City Council, n.d.)

Similar to Glen Molloy, when interviewed, Blaze FX emphasise their *artistic* contribution to the city. Noted in Keenan's review of their work, 'the pair shared a firm belief that to see the [political] murals as art – as opposed to mechanisms of intimidation – was a powerful experience, both for themselves and the youth with whom they work'

(Keenan 2022, 127). Their youth, though blighted by The Troubles, was also filled with public art. Their contributions to the cityscape, however, could be considered somewhat circuitous; they *create* paramilitary murals as well as *replace* them with community or cultural murals (Monaghan, 2015; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; Drummond, 2024; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024). Lisle considers Blaze FX to be a community graffiti group, and the pair have referred to their work with a variety of titles including 'Pioneers of Aerosol Painting' (Blaze FX, n.d.). Blaze FX created some of the most high-profile paramilitary images in Belfast, including the 2009 *Summer of 69* mural in Hopewell Crescent as well as the previously discussed 2022 'Freedom Corner' suite of monochromatic UDA murals which hold a prominent position on the Newtownards Road (Figs. 34 and 35a-d, page 20). Along with their cultural and community murals, their sectarian murals can be found around the city, primarily in areas controlled by the UDA.

As noted earlier, the process of categorisation is certainly an issue for scholars who study artists whose work lies outside the Western canon, or whose biographies do not follow a traditional path of artistic training. Just as the terms outsider and folk have been shown to work for some of Belfast's muralists, though not for all, the term self-taught also presents contradictions. As Harris notes, the way the term self-taught is used, especially in scholarly contexts, implies that the artist works on their craft in isolation, and indicates that an artist is outside of 'mainstream culture' (Harris 1998, 26).

While Glen Molloy does work alone, has a somewhat self-imposed isolation, and fits much of a self-taught artist, the emphasis on isolation is an issue for others working in the Belfast mural tradition. The prolific amount work that many artists do with the community contradicts the idea of the isolated self-taught artist. Some PUL artists do

prefer to remain anonymous, and they do not sign their political images. However, many still facilitate artist-led workshops for community members in preparation for cultural murals. Though group Blaze FX emerged from the graffiti tradition, one that encourages isolation or anti-social behaviour, more recently, they have become fixtures in East Belfast community art programming. Their work with school children to design and paint murals about positivity in the community, anti-drug messages, and images focused on mental health awareness belies the assumption that self-taught artists work in isolation (*Field Notes Newtownards Road* 2023; Scott, 2019). With some of their work, however, they desire a sense of anonymity. The duo has developed several easily identifiable styles they utilise for each type of project.[10] Paramilitary images are usually naturalistic and monochromatic, or have a very limited colour palette, while their cultural and community murals are vibrant and childlike in style with cartoonish figures and simple messages (Figs. 36a and 36b, page 21). The artists have developed this distinction to separate their paramilitary work from the murals that are created with community groups, so their sectarian imagery can maintain a sense of secrecy and does not directly influence their commercial or community art prospects. Just as Blaze FX is difficult to categorise, an artist like Glen Molloy, who completes many works under the cover of darkness, may also create a well-funded community mural that engages with the public on several occasions, like his *Shankill Drummer*. However, each of these artists continues to be outside of the mainstream of the art establishment, and they have acquired their skills in the somewhat

[10] This research has identified Blaze FX as the creators of the unsigned paramilitary images discussed through formal analysis of the objects, matching their styles with the styles of murals on the artists' website, and discussions with artists and community workers in East Belfast and the Shankill area.

isolated graffiti movement.

Again, to categorise these artists specifically under one classification is impossible, or, as Brody writes, 'the labelling of artistic categories is a messy business' (Brody 2003, 257). Outsider artist, folk artist, and self-taught artist are terms that each present both insight into the study of Belfast's muralists as well as incongruities which make the monikers flawed. Not every muralist would be considered an outsider artist, though some did begin their art careers creating prison art and trauma does impact their artistic production. Though murals reflect the ideas and interests of a particular community in Belfast, as is a characteristic of folk art, the term often implies art that is utilitarian rather than public. And, though most of Belfast's muralists did not attend a traditional art school or gained their knowledge of public imagery within the graffiti movement, to say that they all fit perfectly within the definition of self-taught artist is an overstatement.

Though this research seeks to use the language of art criticism to discuss the work of the artists who have transformed Belfast's walls, there continues to be a disconnect between that language and the work of the muralists. Rexler notes, 'most people interested in art and even many aficionados of outsider art cannot say precisely what outsider art is or distinguish it from its companion genres, "self-taught" art and "folk art"' (Rexler 2005, 6). These art categorisations are still contested, and they were developed and researched primarily to serve the art market rather than for the purposes of preservation or critical theory. The movement to research and value art from non-traditional artists is an international one, and 'the most profound development in the recent history of Outsider Art has been the global emergence of art fairs and events dedicated to the work of Outsiders, such as the Outsider Art Fairs in New York and Paris'

(www.outsiderartfair.com, n.d.). Therefore, outsider art, folk art, and the art of self-taught artists is often treated first as a commodity, which presents difficulty for the artists who engage in public art rather than art objects that can be sold. Fine notes, 'in practice, self-taught art is market-driven; the test of legitimacy is whether dealers show the work and collectors buy it' (Fine 2003, 168). The exploitation of these artists is one of the main sources of controversy in the field and part of what drives the interest in defining the language used for artists who may be marginalised. As Benedetti notes, 'that larcenous exploitation of both cultural groups and self-taught artists happens in direct relationship to the rise in market value of their art is obvious' (Benedetti 2000, 17).

There are some curators and arts professionals who are interested in including art from outsider, folk, or self-taught artists in their exhibitions, but a focus on the commodification of the objects continues. Artists, like Belfast's muralists, who create public art are even further separated from the mainstream because their work cannot be purchased. Curator Massimiliano Gioni, who often circumvents the term outsider in favour of the phrase 'less canonical work', includes the work in his exhibitions, stating, 'part of my enjoyment in including less canonical work in my shows has to do with actually disrupting those very definitions of what is inside, what is outside, what is art, and what is not art' (Cachia and Gioni 2017, 112). However, Gioni continues by linking his exhibition to sales at major auction houses 'one thing happening today is the paradoxical cycle of assimilation of outsider art. Maybe I am myself a part of this problem. I'm not naïve about it: some of my shows have probably caused a reassessing of outsider art. Even Christie's is auctioning works of outsider art these days' (Cachia and Gioni 2017, 119).

Though the artists discussed in this chapter glean inspiration from traditional art

movements and existing art objects, the artists themselves are situated firmly outside the fine art establishment and are far removed from the art market. As John Johnston notes, 'mural painters are deliberately cut adrift from mainstream arts discourse' (Baker 2015, 192). The reasons for the artists' marginalisation are varied. The processes of teaching and learning used by Belfast's political muralists differ from those taught in traditional art schools, and they are unlikely to choose to attend a formal school to study art (Gallagher, 2023). In keeping with folk art methods, these artists communicate the traditions of their craft within their own communities, and their work reflects the interests of those communities. On both sides of the sectarian divide in the city, muralists have come to mural making through a variety of paths and learned their trade in non-traditional ways. The Belfast murals have monetary value, especially within the growing tourism industry in the city. However, their value is not quantified in the same way an art object that can be purchased at an auction is quantified. Situated outside of the commodity culture of the traditional visual art world, their significance is in their cultural value and their influence on the creative economy of the city.

Artistic Process and Appropriation

One aspect of the study of Belfast's muralists that challenges our use of the terms outsider artist, folk artist, or self-taught artist is their use of recognisable symbols and representations. The appropriation of existing imagery has been an essential characteristic of Belfast's political mural tradition since its beginning in 1908 (Loftus 1983; Rolston 1991). Loftus notes that the early muralists copied 'Williamite' imagery that was prevalent in the city, stating that images of William III 'were made familiar to later generations of

Irish Williamites by their reproduction in various biographies of the monarch' (Loftus 1990, 20). Images of William III were engraved on glass, medallions, prints, and paintings, and these objects were originally created for aristocratic society. However, as images of the monarch became more prevalent, they 'slid rapidly down the social scale' and eventually informed the early PUL muralists' subject matter (Loftus 1990, 22). This appropriation of imagery continued through the century, though Loftus notes that muralists turned away from Williamite imagery during The Troubles, continuing, 'their painters generally lack the training or skill to produce a portrait of William III, and turn instead to more manageable displays of flags and heraldry' (Loftus 1990, 32). Though Loftus attributes the move away from images of King William to the lack of skill of the artists, some artists maintain that the move toward flags and emblems was intentional and was necessitated to differentiate PUL imagery from the growing number of CNR murals at the time ('Mural Artist', 2023).

Like the first PUL murals, early CNR murals also appropriated existing imagery, beginning with the photograph of Bobby Sands that has been replicated on numerous gable walls for decades. CNR muralists also turned to familiar Christian imagery, though Rolston notes that 'despite the proliferation of religious images in this geographical area, it is interesting that religion does not appear to have been the major influence on the images produced' (Rolston 1991, 81). Rather, the experience of seeing art imagery in their religious visual culture and the conflation of the sacrifices of contemporary political martyrs with familiar Catholic images of religious martyrdom influenced the artists' choices (Rolston 1991, 81). Loftus refers to this process as 'straightforward plagiarism and imitation', though in some cases the original artist gave permission for an image to be

used (Loftus 1982, 371).

Artists on both sides of the divide have developed their own styles and processes for mural painting, and these methods are unique to artists who work outside of the mainstream. The artists interviewed for this research did not have training in the tradition of drawing from either still life or the live model. Without learned knowledge of the fundamentals of art making, muralists often turned to pre-existing imagery created by trained artists for artistic inspiration. Tracing images from the books available while incarcerated was an early form of artistic expression and education for artists like Gerard Kelly and Danny Devenny (Saleeby-Mulligan, 2009; Kelly, 2018; Kelly, 2023). Some artists learned through trial and error using established printed imagery like replications of paintings, posters, or photographs, to recreate a likeness on a large wall painting. Most muralists learned to scale up their imagery through the use of a traditional grid technique; a process by which the artist places a grid on the original image to break the image into manageable sections. They then paint a larger grid onto the mural wall and transfer the image square by square onto the gridded wall. This process is shared by most of the older generation of political muralists and was learned by many in prison (Kelly 2018, 76). For artists who do not have formal art training, the grid technique allows them to borrow another artist's talent for the fundamental elements and principles of art. It is also an excellent way to appropriate an image that is already part of the visual language of the community, like the well-known picture image of King William III or the highly publicised images of the Hunger Strikers, for a large public art statement.

Since image appropriation is common amongst muralists, there are numerous paintings that could be used as examples from each decade of the century-long tradition.

Devenny has always engaged in this form of appropriation and calls the process artistic plagiarism, referring to himself as 'the Great Pretender' and 'human photocopier' (Northern Visions, 2013; Fitzpatrick, 2023; beyond the pale books, n.d.). As his artistic process is described in Keenan's text, Devenny uses 'composites taken from family photos, news clippings, stock images, and his imagination' which are digitally combined, printed, and copied onto a wall (Keenan 2022, 112). The artist, like most of the political muralists, use other artists' and photojournalists' imagery as source material combined with personal designs to create a large-scale image that will speak to the residents of the area. Keenan notes, 'even in a context in which the individual artist is afforded tremendous independence to put his own vision on the wall, these are collective products; many intentions are expressed through the image' (Keenan 2022, 113). As discussed in Chapter Two, the artists are aware of the importance of community input for each piece of public art. Using familiar images from the visual culture of the community and creating 'collective products' is a contributing factor for the mural's success (Keenan 2022, 113).

Prolific in the 1980s and 1990s, CNR artist Gerard Kelly's mural production has varied in style over the decades. However, historical and mythological subjects have held a prominent role in his oeuvre. In addition to numerous murals dedicated to Celtic mythology, the 1916 Easter Rising, and the history of the republican cause, he has painted images for elections as well as political propaganda. For most of Kelly's murals, he used existing imagery for the design. Beginning with the tracing and copying Jim Fitzpatrick's work in prison, replication and the scaling up of other artists' designs has always been part of Kelly's artistic process. About an early mural created by Kelly, the artist notes 'I painted a Gerry Adams mural for the election that was coming up. I took the design from a Sinn

Féin election poster. As I had learned in prison, I squared off the poster and squared off the wall, then more or less painted the mural by numbers' (Kelly 2018, 76).

After being introduced to Jim Fitzpatrick's *Book of Conquests* while incarcerated Kelly steered much of his artwork toward Celtic mythology. Fitzpatrick's illustrations were passed around the prison, copied and traced, and studied by many prisoners. Kelly was affected by Fitzpatrick's detailed images of Celtic heroes because he felt that the knowledge of myth and history had been stolen from his community (Kelly, 2023). He states, 'if people take something away from you, you want it' (White, 1996). The republican prisoners treated Fitzpatrick's stories as historical fact, though in Saleeby-Mulligan's research on Kelly, she notes, '*The Book of Conquests* can be considered a work of historical revisionism. Fitzpatrick presents a visual and written history of ancient Ireland that is nostalgic and highly idealistic. Like many cultural revivalists Fitzpatrick fails to present the subject matter of his work in its proper historical context' (Kelly, 2018; Saleeby-Mulligan 2006, 95). Though the book may not have been historically accurate, the dynamic illustrations, which included not only heroic images of men and women from Irish mythology but symbols and characteristics of the Celtic visual tradition, were formative for the republican prisoners. These images served as inspiration for numerous murals in the coming years (Fitzpatrick, 2023; Kelly, 2018; Kelly, 2023; Saleeby-Mulligan, 2006). The imagery and subjects found in Fitzpatrick's book became a point of reference for many CNR muralists. Kelly replicated Fitzpatrick's image of King Nuada in mural form on more than one occasion (Fig. 37, page 22). In response to this artistic plagiarism, Fitzpatrick says that he is honoured to have his work recreated in this way as long as the images are not used to encourage violence (Fitzpatrick, 2023).

Fitzpatrick's illustrations were not the only images appropriated by Kelly. In fact, much of Kelly's mural production was created by scaling up larger images, and therefore, it is difficult to attribute a particular aesthetic to his personal artistic style. Another artist whose work was replicated by Kelly is cartoonist, Brian Moore (Cormac), who, like Fitzpatrick, approved the use of his imagery for murals in CNR areas of Belfast. Kelly states:

> "Cormac" was Brian Moore, a great cartoonist with a great sense of humour. In jail he kept all the prisoners' morale up. You went straight to two pages in Republican News: the first was the war news, the second was Cormac… I knew Brian from Conway Mill. Danny Devenny, who was working for Republican News, had a studio there and I used to work in there with Danny and Marty Lyons. I learned from Danny, I learned from Marty — they are both great artists — and I dare say they learned from me. Brian was there less, because he had to have his time to go and do the cartoon every week. But he told me I could use any of his work for murals. (Kelly 2018, 95)

Permission to use another artist's existing artwork is not always sought out by muralists, or if permission is granted, the original artist may not be pleased with the final mural. The artist duo Blaze FX used a photograph titled *Belfast 1984* by the photographer Frankie Quinn for their *Summer of 69* mural in Hopewell Crescent in the Shankill area of West Belfast (Figs. 38, page 23; Fig. 34, page 20 respectively). In keeping with the tradition of political muralists' appropriation of academically trained artists' creative output, this mural directly borrows an image of two young boys from Quinn's photo, though the muralists

added the red, white, and blue colours of the PUL community as well as the established PUL symbols of the baton and drum in the hands of the boys.

Quinn's work is widely published, and he holds a Master of Fine Art in Photography from the University of Ulster. He is also the director of the Belfast Archive Project. In his youth, the photographer lived on Bryson Street in East Belfast, a part of the Short Strand CNR community. The young man and his family were forced out of their home during the beginning of The Troubles. The site of their former home is now the location of a section of the Bryson Street peace wall (Sensitive Visuals, 2023). The *Summer of 69* mural by the PUL artists Blaze FX, however, is located on wall in the Shankill area, a neighbourhood that is considered a PUL stronghold (*Field Notes Shankill,* 2024). The neighbourhood where the *Summer of 69* mural remains was the site of numerous loyalist paramilitary murals that were 'Re-imaged' after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in an effort to remove violent scenes from the walls.

For Quinn, the appropriation of his photograph for a PUL mural is infuriating. Though he was approached for permission to use the photo as inspiration for a mural, he was not informed that the drum, baton, and PUL colours would be included (Quinn, 2024). When the completed mural came to the photographer's attention, Quinn considered defacing the painting, though later decided against it. Instead, he has chosen to advocate for the true story about the two boys in the photo-turned-mural. They were young Catholic boys from the Short Strand, who were photographed by Quinn standing amid the rubble of the area in 1984. For the fortieth anniversary of the iconic photograph, Quinn participated in a documentary about the lives of the boys, now men, who still live in the area and are active in the community (Quinn, 2024). Though the original photograph was included in

exhibitions and catalogues as recently as 2010, and it is still listed on the photographer's website in a section dedicated to the Short Strand and its community, it cannot it be found on the Belfast photograph archive run by the artist (Frankie Quinn, n.d.; Belfast Archive Project, n.d.). While the original photograph dates to 1984, text added above the boys in the mural, 'Summer of 69', evokes memories of the riots of August 1969 that mark beginning of The Troubles. For many, the painted images of the boys, with drum and baton in hand, are seen as threatening to the CNR community (*Field Notes Shankill,* 2023). Though the mural appropriates the photograph, the two are received differently and have come to symbolise opposite sides of the sectarian divide.

Like most muralists, the PUL artist Dee Craig began his career appropriating existing imagery by using the grid technique. His first mural, created in the mid-1980s, was a painted enlargement of a poster of the Red Hand of Ulster with the words 'Ulster Says No' in reference to the 1985 Anglo Irish Agreement ('Mural Artist', 2023). The artist collects a wide variety of film stills, digital images, photos gathered from community members, posters, and images of earlier murals to create his compositions. He then produces a digital collage of the images and uses a traditional grid pattern to scale the work to fit the wall (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). Craig has developed a style for his murals that is easily identifiable, along with a process that is more durable than traditional mural painting. He no longer paints directly onto walls, preferring to paint on cloth instead. The artist learned this new mural making technique during a month-long artist-in-residence programme at Swarthmore College in the United States. Paul Downie, of the Community Arts Centre in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, trained both the artist and a group of students in the process which has now become a hallmark of Craig's work (Cleaves, 2013). In this

process, panels of parachute cloth are cut into four foot by four foot pieces, and the appropriated image is gridded and then transferred onto the fabric, square by square, in pencil (Fig. 39, page 23). The following painting process is similar to that of a paint-by-numbers, in which the image is divided into shapes, then using pixilation to his advantage, each of the shapes of the object is assigned a single colour. Though there is no blending of the colours, a sense of volume and perspective can often be achieved through the varying values used for the image (Fig. 40, page 24). The cloth is then affixed to the brick wall using an industrial strength adhesive. This method is longer-lasting than traditional paint on walls and allows for the process of painting to take place in multiple locations including the artist's studio, community centres, and schools ('Mural Artist', 2023; Eastside Partnership, 2017).

Though all of Craig's work is sourced from existing imagery, the design of each mural is created by the artist. His process is somewhat complicated, as the cloth squares are not painted *in situ*. Rather, they are painted one by one, and left on a rack to dry. This means that the artist's practiced hand and experience with measurements and image transfer is essential to ensure a final product whose sections align (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). An example of this process is his *Children in Crossfire* mural on Armitage Street (Fig. 41, page 24). The mural was funded by Belfast City Council's Good Relations Unit and Connswater Homes as a part of a larger effort to curb anti-social behaviour in the area, clean up graffiti, and create a safe community ('Mural Unveiled in East Belfast', 2019). For source material, the artist used a still from a documentary by Michael Blakstad about the impact of the violence of The Troubles, titled *Children in Crossfire* (Fig. 42, page 25). The location of this mural is the same site as where the

children were being filmed in the documentary (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). Locals in the area helped in the production of the image, and it is a source of pride for both the artist and community ('Mural Unveiled in East Belfast', 2019; 'Mural Artist', 2023). Though this is often considered one of the artist's 'cultural' murals, the still that was chosen from the documentary is from a brief section when this group of children were singing a song of support about the loyalist paramilitary the Ulster Defence Association. As has been discussed previously, in many cases, the cultural murals remain somewhat sectarian when their subjects are evaluated more closely.

The decision to use one image over another is sometimes left up to the artist. However, there are a growing number of community organisations that turn to mural commissions as part of their programming, and this complicates the process of designing a mural (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). The primary objective of a community engagement project, or one dictated by a paramilitary or political group, may be at odds with the intentions of the artist. As each of these artists have made careers working on public art, many have become deft at navigating these differing opinions. One of the benefits of appropriating existing imagery is that such illustrations often already have a connotation for the public. By painting images that are familiar to those who share the artist's identity, mural artists communicate understandable symbols and maintain their connection to the community to which they belong. For these murals to continue to be successful pieces of public art, the artist must maintain these relationships and preserve the impression that they are authentic representatives of their community's identity.

Artists' Authenticity

Artist Katy Beinart draws upon research by art historian Miwon Kwon in her assessment of public art initiated by local communities. Beinart's research focuses on the need for authenticity in public art projects, as well as the difference between the needs of a community and the needs of artists and an art-savvy audience. Her view is that artists must navigate between artistic license and, in her words, 'public art commissions [that] often recognize the need for a local community to catalyse their identity' (Beinart 2020, 161). For Belfast's political muralists, the key to maintaining outsider status, even as some of these artists have found international fame, is the continuous affirmation of their authenticity within their communities. As an authentic expression of their beliefs, some artists continue to act as activists who take up causes that they feel are allied with their own. The previously discussed Palestinian support mural series on the International Wall serves as a clear example of this. In an effort to maintain their connections to their communities, artists also act as 'gatekeepers' for public art programming to make certain that they have a say in art that is produced for their area (*Field Notes International Wall*, 2024; 'Mural Artist', 2023; Kelly, 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). The distinctions between political muralist, community artist, folk artist, graffiti writer, and activist are almost non-existent, as many of Belfast's public artists work within each category.

Though they stay connected to the power structures within their communities, these muralists must remain outside of the traditional art systems to retain their authenticity. As Colin Rhodes notes, 'direct engagement with the art-going public and, worse, the art market has always proved a dangerous activity for individuals named as outsiders' (Rhodes

2000, 16). Belfast's mural artists recognise that they must maintain their 'street credibility' so that their art may carry weight. This is a necessity if they plan to continue to serve their communities through public art production. For an artist like Glen Molloy, the act of painting and giving art to the people is the driving force behind his artistic output, not financial gain. Though recently he has taken large-scale commissions from community groups, Molloy is very critical of artists who will only paint for money (Molloy, 2023). He bristles at the Street Art community's territorial claim on walls that he would like to paint, calling Street Art organizers 'culture vultures' because of their appropriation of the mural tradition for capitalism (Molloy, 2023; *Field Notes Shankill*, 2024). This is a continued source of conflict within the large community of artists working in a relatively small city (Ervine, 2022; Molloy, 2023; Bonner, 2024). As Rhodes remarks about this universal phenomenon, 'professional ambition is regarded as anathema to the "authentic" artist outsider, yet in countless cases self-taught artists working outside folk and naïve art traditions conceive of an audience for their work' (Rhodes 2000, 17). Gary Alan Fine also notes that artists can be 'punished for [their] desire to be commercial' (Fine 2003, 167). In the case of artists who are less financially successful than others, this remains a point of contention. Since the tradition of mural painting in Belfast began with artists who were non-traditional, who painted with collected, borrowed, or stolen materials, and who painted because of a sincere belief in a cause, those who use the medium of mural art purely for financial gain or for personal artistic expression are considered inauthentic and even suspicious by some artists (Ervine, 2022; Molloy, 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024).

To retain their authenticity, mural artists must maintain their distance from the fine

art establishment as well as power structures that may be mistrusted by the artists' communities. Artists like Devenny and Kelly refer to themselves as activists in addition to artists because they want to continue the focus on a united Ireland. The term activist also lends the artists a sense of authenticity that is necessary for their art to be powerful. Devenny discounts his fame often, referring to himself as an 'accidental celebrity', and insists that the murals are about the community, not himself (Mac Donncha, 2010). The artist says:

> as a muralist, visitors sometimes treat you as a celebrity, probably because the murals are a focal point. But as muralists we're dealing with a lot less than so many other people have dealt with. People are in prison and the graveyards. We paint murals, Jack. Don't make more of it than it is. (Conway 2010, 171)

In *An Phoblacht* article praising one of the artist's 2010 murals, the author reinforces the idea that Devenny does not want emphasis on himself, writing, 'Danny D. rarely signs his work. He is content to let the image go its own way and the message with it. He says that, whatever his talents, they have "sailed me through life" and he is not interested in adulation as an artist' (Mac Donncha, 2010). To affirm his authenticity, the artist often reminds the community of his time in prison, and mentions his connections to Bobby Sands, a relationship that gains automatic respect for the artist (beyond the pale, n.d.; Conway, 2010). Devenny also continues to give credit to other artists and disregards his own contributions. In press for his most recent project, Painting for Palestine on the International Wall, Devenny deflects attention from himself and names the Palestinian artists who designed the murals that the Belfast community replicated on the wall

(Devenny, 2024; Devenny and Rolston, 2024). Just as he discounted his work on the portrait of the Lord Mayor of Belfast as 'a real bore', Devenny shies away from any suggestion that he may be part of the establishment or the cultural elite (beyond the pale, n.d.; Bradley, 2012).

In addition to artists' interest in retaining their authenticity, visitors seek out authentic experiences as they view Belfast's many painted walls. Conflict tourism and dark tourism are worldwide phenomena, and the art consumer's interest in authentic encounters is reflective of the need to connect to an experience different from their own. The article 'Why Elites Love Authentic Lowbrow Culture' investigates a shift in the interests of Western cultural elite from 'a narrow range of genres generally regarded as "highbrow" to lowbrow genres (i.e., genres that are seemingly less sophisticated or produced by or for members of low-status groups)' (Hahl et al 2017, 829). The authors posit that 'public appreciation for authentic lowbrow culture affords an effective way for certain elites to address feelings of authenticity-insecurity arising from "high status denigration"' (Hahl et al 2017, 828). Their research affirms the actions of Belfast's muralists as they seek to retain their authenticity, especially the artists' disinterest in the standards and values of the fine art establishment:

> lowbrow culture is generally perceived as authentic because lowbrow producers are assumed to be uninterested in impressing elite audiences and meeting their sophisticated standards; and insofar as the producer of lowbrow culture appears to actively seek to impress elite audiences, it will be perceived as less authentic…. The key issue when it comes to training is whether it appears to have been pursued

> with a view to implicit extrinsic rewards or in a "disinterested" manner, with a focus on developing one's craft toward realizing an internal vision; the latter should convey greater authenticity. (Hahl et al 2017, 832, 835)

Just as the language about the use of the terms outsider, folk, and self-taught has been built around the idea of art as a commodity, authors researching authenticity and artists focus on the issue of monetary gain and authentic art as well. While the quote above emphasises the importance of intrinsic rewards, Lingus confirms the need for artists to avoid the appearance of connections with the art mainstream, celebrity, and financial gain, and even questions the use of the term art:

> recognizing these works as art put this authenticity in danger. They would enter exhibitions, galleries, museums; amateurs would collect them; they would acquire monetary value and their makers fame; their makers would enter into the social stratum of cultural producers. All this could only put their authenticity in danger. (Lingis, 2008, 208)

The research of Lingis as well as that of Hahl, Zuckerman, and Kim, supports attitudes toward the art establishment discovered in the interviews completed for the research for this text. Glen Molloy appears to be incredibly supportive of his own community while demonstrating hostility toward the art professionals in Belfast. Devenny's public statements disregard his affiliations with power structures and affirm his connection to his community's struggle. Gerard Kelly even discounts the importance of the artist and comments that the future of mural painting is in pre-printed boards that will, in his view, most effectively communicate the goals of the republican movement (Kelly, 2023). In

addition to the muralists discussed in this chapter, academically trained artists who have been influenced by political murals, like Ciaran Gallagher and Paul Doran, also attempt to distance themselves from their academic training and are somewhat dismissive of the importance of their degrees in fine art (Doran, 2023; Gallagher, 2023). These artists are quick to credit the political muralists and the mural tradition as formative in their artistic practice (Doran, 2023; Gallagher, 2023). The creative influence of the political muralists on contemporary academic artists, like Gallagher and Doran, is a topic that will be thoroughly discussed in Chapter Four.

Conclusion - On the Outside

The characteristics that unite all the Belfast artists who are working in political and cultural mural painting today are that they were not trained in a traditional art educational environment, and they continue to make their work in public places to transform the city and address political and cultural challenges. The artists keep themselves removed from arts power structures precisely to maintain their authenticity and give more credence to their art. While definitions of the terms outsider artist, folk artist, or self-taught artist continue to be debated, the fact remains that these artists are somewhat removed from fine art education and traditional art institutions. They *are* art outsiders. Though on rare occasions an artist's work will be included in a fine art exhibition, like the addition of murals by Mark Ervine and Danny Devenny in the Golden Thread Gallery's publication *A Shout in the Street: Collective Histories of Northern Irish Art,* in general, these artists have been isolated from the mainstream and avant-garde galleries and museums. They are often ignored by fine art institutions and art criticism.

The curator of *A Shout in the Street,* Declan McGonagle, a career-long advocate for community arts, is an atypical example of a fine art insider who places cultural value on the political murals. Encouraging artists to engage not only with the community but in the public sphere, McGonagle champions artists to challenge those who wield power over art in communal spaces, stating, 'the fundamental mistake is to assume that the only route into public space is through the people who control it. I take the view that one of the crucial roles for art is to function *in* society' (emphasis his, McGonagle 1990, 43). He notes that in his own art education, traditional visual arts processes felt inadequate as a way to empower the artist to deal with the impact of The Troubles, and he sought to 'foreground and validate participation, engagement and commonality' in the arts (McGonagle 2007, 425). In his words:

> as an art student in Belfast in the 1970s, I, along with many others, found it very difficult, if not impossible, to address what was happening on the streets throughout Northern Ireland at the time. We found the sense of separation and the apparent inadequacy of the art process to be disempowering in the face of that reality. However, I now believe that this was, and is, a narrow and shallow reading of the nature and purpose of art, especially if considered over the longer term. Art was not then positioned nor understood, generally, as a means of negotiating reality, as a means of dialoguing and as a reciprocal rather than rhetorical process. Ideas of engagement were marginalized as Community Arts and engagement with political issues was held on the fringes of mainstream art practice and discourse. (McGonagle 2008, 15)

Just as McGonagle wrote in 2008, the mural artists who are such an integral part of their community's artistic experience have been 'held on the fringes' both by the actions of the art establishment as well as by their own desire to maintain authenticity (McGonagle 2008, 15). Though some muralists have been celebrated internationally in academic settings, the artists are usually heralded by the Irish diaspora as well as those who research post-conflict societies and peace efforts rather than the fine arts. Much of their recognition has come from international communities rather than the art communities in Belfast. Gerard Kelly was invited to represent Ireland in a mural sponsored by Pathfinder Press in New York. The artist says, 'there were eighty artists worldwide involved and each was invited to represent their own country's struggle. I was asked to represent Ireland which I considered a great honour' (Kelly 2018, 108). However, the drama of his past prevented him from entering the country. Danny Devenny and Mark Ervine received much international fanfare for their cross-cultural collaboration on a 2007 replication of Picasso's *Guernica,* a project that led to an unlikely friendship and influenced a generation of impressionable artists. However, this mural, and its artists, gained this acclaim for their *peace efforts*, not their artistic contributions to the city. Dee Craig, who is one of the most prolific PUL painters of his generation, has painted with hundreds of community members and school children over his career, and was an artist-in-residence at Swarthmore College in the United States. Though, his name is not included in published lists of Belfast's most influential artists.

Rarely are the political muralists included in state-sponsored or officially recognised art registries. In fact, the Troubles Archive, supported by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, created an artist registry that documents artists of all types whose artistic

practice is focused on The Troubles. From poets to musicians, painters to playwriters, the registry contains nearly 140 artists but no mural painters. Even muralists Danny Devenny and Mark Ervine, both of whom have become well-known internationally, are not included in the registry (www.troublesarchive.com, n.d.). There are a few visual artists on the list who have created art with the community in mind, or public art, but none would be considered mural painters or self-taught artists. Similarly, the Belfast City Council's website contains an entire section on public art with no fewer than nine subcategories for ways to explore public art in the city. There is no mention of the political murals on this site (Belfast City Council, n.d.). On the Street Art Cities site, a website and app dedicated to documenting and mapping Street Art globally, there are no political murals or even murals that might be considered 'cultural' by the Belfast public. If murals are made by political muralists from either side of the cultural divide, like Blaze FX, Dee Craig, John Stewart, Gerard Kelly, and Danny Devenny, their work is not included or their names are omitted (streetartcities.com, n.d.). In fact, though the Blaze FX *Teenage Dreams* mural discussed earlier as 'probably the most famous and significant piece of Street Art in Belfast' is celebrated on the Street Art Cities site, the artist is listed as 'Unknown' (streetartcities.com, n.d.).

Though these political mural painters have made a substantial impact on the creative culture of the city, they are continuously eliminated from conversations about fine art. In her research, Dyani Reynolds-White Hawk identifies common 'repetitive behaviours of the mainstream art world in dealing with marginalised groups… Through the identification of similar patterns of treatment, we are able to reach an educated understanding of mainstream value systems applied to groups considered "other"'

(Reynolds-White Hawk 2012, 47). Excluding muralists from artist registries is an identifiable 'pattern of treatment' that further adds to the artists' marginalisation. Lisle adds to this conversation, and notes:

> suggesting that the murals are not "proper" art is depoliticising: it sequesters "real" or "fine" art within the gallery, where it does not have to engage with or take responsibility for everyday political concerns. Moreover, suggesting that the murals are somehow illegitimate assumes that art in any form, from urban graffiti to a Monet oil painting, can be judged for how well it represents the world through a formal aesthetic language. The point, of course, is that art is never just about aesthetics; it is also about power. (Lisle 2006, 32)

These patterns of alienation have been in place for decades. During the time of Rolston's early research in the 1980s and 1990s, the characteristics of fine art and its difference from propaganda were emphasised in the curriculum of the College of Art and Design in Belfast (now the Belfast School of Art). Student artists were encouraged *not* to engage in propagandistic imagery in their studies and 'consideration of Northern Ireland society and politics is mostly avoided…. A sure way to get nowhere was to try to incorporate some of what was happening in one's own life outside into the work you were doing/wanted to do inside' (Rolston 1991, 53, 54).

In Belfast, a distinction is drawn between self-taught artists who engage with the public about critical and often divisive political issues and artists who were trained in the Western academic tradition. This key point is explained in Brody's assessment of folk art:

> folk art has developed close ties to other forms of art, including the categories of "outsider art," "visionary art", and "self-taught art". Each of these groupings shares a common link in that they defy the notion of "high art" that weighs heavily on so many art history classrooms like a load of formalist lead. (Brody 2003, 259)

In other words, these art styles, and the artists who create them, are often combined or conflated because of the institutions and traditions to which they *do not* belong rather than the characteristics that unite them. Sociologists Vera Zolberg and Joni Cherbo note 'outsider art implies insider art. Insider art implies a canon around which artistic products and their makers are evaluated, along with a body of work that represents those standards' (Zolberg and Cherbo quoted in Brody 2003, 259). Gary Fine offers a nuanced description of the artist who is not educated in the traditional sense and is outside of the mainstream art world:

> although the domain of self-taught art is ostensibly defined by the fact that the artists have not been formally trained, in practice self-taught art is known through the social position of the creators, and, thus, I label it Identity Art. By this I refer to the fact that it is the social location of the artists that links the works together, not the formal qualities of the work, social ties among artists, or the acceptance of a theory of artistic production. As used here, identity refers to the artist's image in the eyes of the art world – the location in social space – rather than self-image. These artists are defined as being outside of the art community. (Fine 2003, 155)

Fine's writing confirms Brody, Zolberg, and Cherbo's implication that, in addition to their lack of traditional training, *social class* differentiates these artists from their academic

counterparts. This is a distinction felt by many of the mural artists interviewed for this research, and class is the source of much of the conflict that can be found between mural artists and the burgeoning Street Art movement (Molloy, 2023; Ervine, 2022; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). In reference to 1983 commentary about the arts being a unifying force that transcend class in Ireland, Rolston notes:

> far from conveying the notion of art as classless, non-sectarian, and totally objective, this conclusion reveals the middle-class bias of the art establishment in Ireland. The keystone of the establishment's self-defined identity is the notion of artists as transcendent beings. In relation to the North, this ideology becomes a justification for ignoring what is happening in the real world, especially if it is happening to working-class people. (Rolston 1991, 51)

He continues to note that the history of 'pure [visual] art' in the region rarely engages with the conflict or with the socially relevant issues that impact the working-class (Rolston 1991, 51). Delacruz notes that the study of folk art comes from class-stratified societies in Europe, continuing, 'Holger Cahill, acting Director of the Museum of Modem Art in 1932, established a definition for folk art as an "expression of the common people, made by them and intended for their use"' (Delacruz 1999, 23). Many of the terms discussed in this chapter – outsider, folk, and self-taught – have roots in class distinctions.

The artists discussed in this chapter intentionally distance themselves from the academic systems, however, the institutions have a responsibility to recognise the value of the muralists' artistic output and acknowledge the impact these artists have on the city's creative culture. The mural artists are interested in representing the concerns and values

of their communities in a way that the traditional arts establishment does not. The most common phrase used by artists from each side of the political divide is 'my community', and each muralist is intent on serving those who share their identity. In general, muralists are speaking to a broader audience than their 'fine art' equivalents. As Máirtín Ó Muilleoir states below, murals are 'much-loved people's paintings':

> out on the streets, mural art drew its vibrancy and inspiration from the prison protests of the H-Blocks. Led by Danny Devenny, who receives the acclaim and mass audience for his work that other artists can only dream of the muralists transformed gable walls into vivid calls to action, documenting each stage of the prison struggle and spitting out the censor's gag. These much-loved people's paintings earned brickbats from the arts establishment. Indeed, one Belfast artist sneeringly assured the public that it wasn't art at all, but that spoke more of a political and class animus than of aesthetic misgivings over a badly proportioned depiction of a hunger striker. (Ó Muilleoir 2009, 4)

Though murals are not the only art produced during The Troubles, these images have become the primary artistic output synonymous with the conflict. As Rexler notes, 'the best outsider art could open doors to an understanding of art as a whole, even contemporary art, with very different, not to say opposed intentions' (Rexler 2005, 10). In Belfast, a city that understands the power of paint on walls, Rexler's comment is convincing. The artistic output of the *outsider* is the one whose role has been the most transformative for the public's understanding of the possibilities of public art. Murals made by folk artists, outsider artists, or self-taught artists are the artworks that have shifted the artistic trajectory

in the city, making Belfast a hub for Street Art.

Chapter Four: Belfast's Artistic Legacy

In Belfast, murals have long served as an essential part of the political visual display. Along with flags, painted kerbstones, bunting, and printed boards, historically, they have been used to define territory and reinforce sectarian identities. However, over one hundred years since the first political mural was created, painted walls now serve a multitude of functions in the city. They are used by community groups to engage youth and discourage antisocial behaviour. They are commissioned by small businesses as well as multinational corporations to serve as advertisements. Painted walls are funded by government agencies to revitalise neglected or derelict areas of the city. Every social movement in Belfast seems to commission a mural as a symbol of its ethos. Murals are produced to assist in creative placemaking and to create a colourful public gallery that is an essential element in the city's tourism industry. Belfast's mural culture is multi-faceted, and, while political murals are still a part of the visual landscape of the city and are the driving force behind much of the city's mural tourism, the act of painting on walls has grown to be much more than a sectarian endeavour. Belfast's mural culture is built on its century-long history of painted political walls, aided by government and community organization interventions, and nurtured by coalitions that utilise painted walls to shift the city's public narrative. The presence of the city's political murals has shaped Belfast's public spaces and influenced the artistic practice of the artists who live there. Mural production is now an indispensable part of the city's artistic persona and its creative economy.

The pace at which murals are created in Belfast is difficult to track, with new works being added or changed daily. The mural count was over one thousand in March 2024,

according to Extramural Activity, a website that documents and researches primarily political murals in the city (Extramural Activity, n.d.). This number neglects much of the city's Street Art, especially junction boxes and shutters, and the 2024 mural count predates Belfast's annual Street Art Festival, Hit the North, held in the late spring each year. In addition to dozens of community art projects and many paramilitary commissions, the main Street Art commissioning bodies, Seedhead Arts and Daisy Chain, Inc., facilitate well over 200 pieces of public art in Belfast each year (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). Street Art commissions join the sectarian political walls, murals associated with local issues, and those painted to ally communities with international protests to create one of the world's largest open air public art galleries.

Though traditionally, Belfast's categories of murals have been studied separately, now the lines of separation are decidedly blurred, leaving the binary lens through which public art in Belfast has been viewed as less relevant than before. Contemporary artists, many of whom do not have formal art training and have deftly navigated the complex system of commissioning bodies and community dynamics, serve as the common denominator between political murals, community art, and Street Art. PUL artists like Blaze FX and Dee Craig, who have worked with paramilitaries, are also prolific community muralists (Figs. 43 and 44, page 26). Ex-prisoner and CNR artist, Mickey Doherty, will complete a mural commemorating IRA volunteers and prison protesters in Ardoyne and also work with an integrated group of students at a community centre in the PUL Shankill area (Figs. 45 and 46, page 27). Jonny McKerr, who began his painting career with the iconic CNR *An tOcras Mór* mural in New Lodge, also created two PUL cultural murals in the loyalist stronghold Tiger's Bay as well as a PUL bonfire-themed community mural at

the site of the former mid-Donegall Road bonfire (Figs. 47, 48, and 49, pages 28 and 29). Many of these artists also engage in the city's Street Art scene, with some participating in Street Art festivals, and others using the Street Art style and medium to make their political murals more palatable to the community and tourists alike. Now, all these painted walls coexist, creating a rich tapestry of murals around the city along with a new narrative for public art in twenty-first century Belfast.

The current proliferation of murals has roots in the political mural tradition, and there are several factors that led to the large numbers of mural creation: 1. government efforts to replace political murals after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 2. support of mural production through community arts, 3. influence of high-profile political muralists on artists working today, and 4. the rise of the city's Street Art movement. Using individual artists and their work as examples, the following chapter will examine the artistic influence of political murals and evaluate these four factors that have influenced the evolution of Belfast's open-air gallery.

Lasting Impacts of the Building Peace through the Arts: Re-imaging Communities Programme

In 1999, Maeve Connolly, a researcher who studies the economies of art and media, recognised the public art project 'Resonate' as a part of Belfast's symbolic economy that sought to 'play a significant role in the re-presentation of the city' (Connolly 1999, 2). 'Resonate' artists were given a simple brief that asked them to 'choose a functioning environment within the city and to make a piece of work in that context' (Connolly 1999, 2). These government and private sector efforts to brighten up, 're-present', or revitalise

the city of Belfast are not new. The previously discussed community mural programme of the 1970s and early 1980s was just one of the many initiatives that sought to change the perception of the city by exerting artistic control over its built environment. After the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, several formal initiatives led by the Community Cohesion Unit, Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI), and Belfast City Council sought to alter the visual landscape of the city (Skinner and Jolliffe 2017, 220). Lesley Murray notes that 'the practices of public space in Belfast involve the negotiation of state policies on the city's visual landscape', and she considers the most 'significant attempt to reorder certain spaces' to be the Building Peace through the Arts: Re-imaging Communities Programme introduced in 2006 and implemented in 2007 (Cartiere and Zebracki 2016, 53).

This well-funded programme:

> was established in 2006 as an important element in the process of converting and transforming these visible signs of sectarianism and inter-community separation. The intention has been to encourage communities to reflect on and plan for ways of replacing divisive imagery with imagery that reflects communities in a more positive manner. (Independent Research Solutions 2009, vii)

Scholars are fairly unified on the faults of the programme, with some claiming the term Re-imaging is 'Orwellian-like', stating that the programme attempted to 'wipe the local collective memory' (Abdelmonem and Selim 2019, 192-193). Katharine Keenan criticises the processes of the programme as well as the permanence of the artwork that was produced (Keenan, 2022). Rolston says that the works have a 'blandness of the least common

denominator' and are products of 'top-down' processes (Rolston 2012, 460, 459) (Figs. 50 and 51, pages 29 and 30). He continues:

> part of the self-assertion and self-empowerment of these communities was the tradition of painting murals. Both sides displayed their political identities on the walls. This was a bottom-up movement whose products did not suit the agenda of the top-down policy makers. The aspiration of bringing 'artists to areas not usually associated with them' clearly indicates that the expectation is that the artists involved in re-imaging will be outsiders to the communities in which they work. (Rolston 2012, 457)

Keenan agrees with Rolston's criticism, noting that Belfast's political murals were historically a 'social process, wherein the networks and exchanges among the people connected by an image are much more important than any specific symbol represented therein' (Keenan 2022, 99). Keenan contends that the Re-imaging Communities Programme attempted to reproduce this exchange, though, in her opinion, unsuccessfully (Keenan 2022, 99). Murray goes further, calling the agenda of the programme itself 'a sectarian one, as "communities" here refers not to the streets or walls where the murals are located but the distinct "communities" to which they are attached' (Cartiere and Zebracki 2016, 53). Rolston is further critical of the programme and its employment of academic artists brought in from areas around Northern Ireland and Ireland stating:

> this "aesthetic evangelism" rests on a presumption that the local working-class communities of Belfast, loyalist and republican, had never experienced art nor

> produced artists. What these areas had was "mural painting", not art, some of which could be preserved but most of which was now anachronistic. (Rolston 2012, 457)

In Murray's chapter in *The Everyday Practice of Public Art*, she notes that well-known political muralists have 'unanimous opposition' to the programme because the communities were not afforded enough agency in the decisions about their own environment (Cartiere and Zebracki 2016, 55). Artists interviewed by Murray commented that the government programme was not needed because 'the murals were changing anyhow', and 'true re-imaging will happen once the community has moved on' ('Paddy' and 'Tom' quoted in Cartiere and Zebracki 2016, 55 and 57).

Research for this project confirmed animosity between artists who had a history of mural painting in the 1980s and 1990s, and the Re-imaging Communities Programme, their comments echoing the criticism levied by both Murray's interviewees as well as that of scholars (Ervine, 2022; Molloy, 2023). Keenan says the programme is 'particularly invested in a politics of erasure and minimisation', and she considers the Re-imaged murals an 'attempt to subvert existing social networks of production, in some cases edging out established artists, and in others creating ersatz networks of collaboration through artificial means' (Keenan 2022, 99, 107). Her interviews about the Re-imaging Programme, however, are limited to just a few established CNR artists and one PUL artist. These interviews did not include local artists who did participate in the programme, or the artists were interviewed early in the programme's existence before they became involved (Keenan, 2022).

Though some criticism of the programme, like Rolston's and others quoted above, is focused on artists from outside the communities who were brought in to facilitate the projects, the ACNI programme's support of artists did, in fact, extend to local painters as well, some of whom previously created political or paramilitary imagery. The earlier failures of public community arts programmes, like the community murals of the 1970s and early 1980s, were recognized by those who crafted urban renewal projects after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and the initiatives, like the Re-imaging Communities Programme, that followed were intentional about their inclusion of the local community, with what Hamayon-Alfaro calls a 'bottom up approach as a means to further public policies' (Hamayon-Alfaro 2011, 122, 128). As a result of the partnerships encouraged by the funding agencies, local muralists *were* included in the programme. The indigenous muralists' ability to navigate complex community dynamics was deemed necessary as they helped shepherd the communities through the changes to their environment (Latimer, 2011; Hamayon-Alfaro 2011, 132; 'Mural Artist', 2023).

PUL artist Dee Craig, whose work for the UVF has been discussed previously in this text, notes 'it's important that the likes of myself are involved with Re-imaging, because I put up the [political] murals in the first place' (Latimer, 2011). While Keenan notes that prolific CNR muralist Danny Devenny did not participate in the programme, both he and his colleague Michael Doherty were involved in at least one major mural project funded by the ACNI Re-imaging Communities Programme, as they completed three murals to accompany a ceramic work by Clare McComish in the CNR Ardoyne area of Belfast (Keenan, 2022; *Artwork Gets Presidential Viewing,* 2009). Craig, Devenny, and Doherty, among others, have remained some of the most prolific muralists in their

respective communities, and their artwork has varied from continued political imagery to cross-community public art projects to major corporate commissions. While some local artists were included sparingly, and primarily for their connections to the community rather than their artistic prowess, they were nevertheless involved in the programme.

The ACNI funding and targeted artistic programme facilitated some of the city's political mural artists' transition into community mural-making, and opened opportunities for large-scale international collaborations (Cleaves, 2013; 'Mural Artist', 2023). For example, the support of the Re-imaging Communities funding allowed Dee Craig to build an art career outside of his paramilitary images. In the sustained criticism of the Re-imaging Communities Programme, little consideration is given to the possibility of a positive artistic impact. While the programme was focused on the government's aim to 'regain territorial control' over the segregated areas of the city, nonetheless, lasting impacts of such a large-scale public art programme can be found in the way artists engage in public art in Belfast today (Cartiere and Zebracki 2016, 54).

An early evaluation of the Re-imaging Communities Programme noted that the benefits were primarily evident in the following areas: shared spaces, community relations, strengthening communities, building capacity, regeneration and improvement, building external relationships, inclusion of the marginalised, and finally, in 'opening up' the arts and raising the profile of artists (Independent Research Solutions 2009, ix-xii). The evaluation of the benefit for artists is worth quoting in full, as it offers a more complete account of how artists were impacted by their work with the programme:

> not only has the Re-imaging Communities Programme been beneficial in terms of employment for many artists - 152 have been reported as being involved in 51 of the projects - it has also given them a link to communities and raised their profile in art circles. The communities expressed their satisfaction with how the artists engaged within them in discussing and planning the imagery, and with the creation of the final artwork. In addition, some communities have retained a degree of contact with the artists involved, with the intention of carrying out further work. The artists have had a pivotal role in helping communities in their design of the new imagery; and the particular skill and insights of the artists has helped all involved to generate a more complex awareness and perception of the role of art within societies. (Independent Research Solutions 2009, xii)

The funding allocated for public art projects by the ACNI helped foster a culture of paying artists, demonstrating that the benefits of public art programming are worth the cost. The programme also connected artists with members of the community who would continue to hire them for future projects (Reynolds, 2023). Academically trained artists who were brought in from outside of the housing estates, as well as local self-taught artists (or 'indigenous artists' as they are called by Rolston), gained artistic knowledge, funding, and community engagement experience from this programme (Independent Research Solutions 2009, xii; Rolston, 2012; Reynolds, 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards*, 2023). Hamayon-Alfaro concurs that the programme was beneficial to artists and arts organisations, stating, 'with respect to the arts, the programme contributed to raising the profile of artists and community arts organisations in Northern Ireland' (Hamayon-Alfaro

2011, 132). Positive impacts are also evidenced by the 2009 and 2016 evaluations of the programme, as well as by comments from the affiliated artists, who not only valued the artistic experience but considered the collaboration with a community other than their own to be an important part of their personal and artistic growth setting them on a successful career path. Belfast City Council agenda items also demonstrate that, while not all Re-imaging projects were successful in their efforts to 'secure local agreement' on either the art objects or the process by which they would be completed, in general, 'further experience from the projects was welcomed by the participants' (Belfast City Council, 2009).

Involvement with the Re-imaging Communities Programme helped to launch the career of academic artist Ed Reynolds, who went from being a painter of signs for businesses to a successful artist with solo gallery exhibitions after his experience with the ACNI. Reynolds, who is originally from Dublin and painted several murals in the Shankill area for the programme, has continued to take public art commissions from both CNR and PUL communities. He says that the experience with Re-imaging encouraged him to be more politically neutral, adding:

> I was asked to go in and paint over murals in loyalist heartland of Belfast. And I'm like, oh, man… I got over my anxiety very first evening. At the first workshop, I got a handshake offered by one of the facilitators, and… everything just relaxed and settled after that. And I was like, okay, this this is going to work. So, I soon found out that by empowering people, because a lot of the work, a lot of the work that I did was facilitating workshops, which was a much bigger part than what the mural was. It was the process of engagement, you know, working with school kids,

> working with, you know, residents, working with whoever from the area. (Reynolds, 2023)

Reynolds does not have a PUL upbringing, but he considers it a privilege that he continues to be asked to complete cultural murals in the PUL housing estates (Reynolds, 2023). In addition to his work in the Shankill, Reynolds was also commissioned to create a multi-panelled mural celebrating cultural figures in the fiercely loyalist Sandy Row area. This was a commission that was not part of Re-imaging, as it did not cover any older offending imagery. It was commissioned by Belfast City Council alongside Sandy Row Community Forum and Sandy Row Residents' Association (BBC News, 2012). However, it demonstrates that the Re-imaging Programme's goals for capacity building, exposing more people to the arts, and raising the profile of artists were successful, as the artists gained prominence and other organisations began to seek them out for further commissions (Fig. 52, page 30)

Artists like Reynolds received criticism by the older generation of painters, who 'suggest that "Re-imaging" artists are considered to be taking advantage of a situation they previously chose to ignore' (Cartiere and Zebracki 2016, 57). It is true that opportunities within the Re-imaging Communities Programme are what drew Reynolds to mural-painting in Belfast; however, this does not mean that his work with the community was not positively impactful on both the artist and those with whom he worked. Though Rolston and others are critical of some artists who engaged with the programme, with Rolston calling them 'external artists' who were not rooted in the area, many artists, including Ed Reynolds, returned for successive public art projects and retained positive relationships

with the local constituents (Rolston 2012, 458; BBC News, 2012; Reynolds, 2023). Reynolds continues to live in the region. While his mural commissions are fewer in recent years, in favour of easel painting, his artistic practice is still influenced by his early public art experiences, with much of his painting taking place *en plein air* at sites in Belfast.

Interestingly, many of Reynolds's public art created for the Re-imaging Communities Programme are categorised as PUL murals, even though many of their subjects are decidedly neutral, and the artist is from the Republic of Ireland (Extramural Activity, n.d.; Reynolds, 2023). In his *Human Rights* mural, the depictions of figures advocating for basic rights like work, education, housing, and mental health access, are joined by an Eleanor Roosevelt quote advocating for equality, justice, and dignity (Fig. 51, page 30). However, because of the PUL location, and the community members with whom he worked, databases of murals categorise such artwork as PUL, rather than as unaffiliated, demonstrating that, though subjects may change and efforts are made to create non-offensive imagery, the emphasis on a divisive narrative continues to permeate the study of Belfast's murals (Extramural Activity, n.d.).

Including neutral images in a space known for sectarianism, Reynolds challenges the focus on the binary that exists in the city. His *Human Rights* mural joins sectarian images such as Blaze FX's *Summer of 69* mural, discussed previously, and a small mural of two balaclava-clad men aiming rifles at the viewer dedicated to Ulster Young Militants 2nd Battalion C. 13 Shankill Road (Figs. 53 and 54, page 31). Reynolds's mural was painted in the same year as *Summer of 69,* and the artist remembers seeing Blaze FX at work (Reynolds, 2023). To return to Jarman's ideas presented in Chapter Two, 'all murals create a new type of space, they redefine mundane public space as politicised place and can

thereby help to reclaim it for the community' (Buckley 1998, 86). Art's 'relationship' to its context and community is, in Lippard's words, 'at the heart of any public art that's worth its turf' (Raven 1989, 210). The conversation between images in close proximity to each other can facilitate a deeper understanding of the complexities of the environment. In a space like the Hopewell Crescent/Shankill Parade area, the multiplicity of images challenges the binary narrative of the city. If one extends McCormick and Jarman's assertion that a sectarian mural can situate a wall within 'a universe of political conflict', it is possible that the placement of non-sectarian murals in their company can serve to disrupt the impact of the more aggressive symbolism (McCormick and Jarman 2005, 50; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024).

Though Reynolds's Re-imaging works avoid specifically sectarian symbols, some of the Re-imaging projects were slightly more lenient regarding the replacement of offending murals with symbols associated with sectarianism. Ross Wilson is another academically trained artist who was engaged to by the Re-imaging Programme to redesign an 'iconic' Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) paramilitary mural that served as the entrance to the PUL area called Sandy Row (Fig. 55, page 32) (BBC News, *King Billy,* 2012). Wilson might be categorised by Rolston as an 'external' artist, though he has many artworks around Belfast, was educated at the University of Ulster, and says he had a 'yearning to return' to Belfast after earning a master's degree at the Chelsea School of Art in London (Little, 2016). The artist even painted political murals in his youth in Glengormley. However, he is a successful academically trained artist, not an 'indigenous' mural painter, which separates Wilson from the local artists discussed by Rolston, Keenan, and Murray (Rolston, 2012; Keenan, 2022; Cartiere and Zebracki, 2016).

Wilson worked with the Sandy Row community to find an image that would be acceptable and settled on a depiction of the historic wigged portrait of King William of Orange, an image that is familiar to the PUL community. In an article celebrating the change from the UFF mural to Wilson's design, a community representative from Sandy Row, Garnett Busby, implies that one of the reasons the locals agreed to the artistic change of their prior foreboding UFF mural is that they were promised an artist of merit would complete the work, calling Wilson's contribution to the area a 'significant art piece' that would encourage passers-by to engage in commerce in the area (BBC News, *Sandy Row*, 2012). Just like Ed Reynolds, Wilson has returned to the PUL area for additional murals and sculptures since his first Re-imaging project. The artist says, 'my view of Re-imaging things is not to neutralise a community, but rather help a community articulate what it truly is, and I know some agencies don't like that' (Little, 2016). Of his work in Sandy Row, he calls himself, 'something of a translator, helping to translate things in an accurate way that had been mistranslated inaccurately before' (Little, 2016).

Giving communities the opportunity to 'translate' a new visual identity or create new symbolism was a goal of the ACNI Re-imaging Programme. Conor Shields, of the ACNI, says 'the reason that we want to Re-image some of the murals is to allow communities to explore their own identity without having an identity foisted upon them, to give them back the opportunity to actually dictate who they are and how they're represented' (Vaughn, 2012). This is echoed in quotes from mural artists, especially from the PUL community, who worked in the programme, as well as comments from cross-community activists (Coll, 2008; 'Mural Artist', 2023; Vaughn, 2012).

Though the criticism of the programme contends that it was a top-down effort, artists and arts administrators who were involved note the *community* was the driving force in changing in the murals' subject matter, and the public calls for artists often came from small local arts organisations. Noirin McKinney, ACNI's director of arts development, says 'some of them [political murals] have come down, while some have been replaced with sculptures or landscaping. It's really up to the community' (Sharp, 2011). Artist Dee Craig notes, 'we held public meetings to ask the community what they wanted on the new wall. Most were happy to drop the paramilitary stuff' (Coll, 2008). PUL artist John Keery also comments that the interest in new mural subjects came from the community itself, and that people were turning to historical events, like the First World War, because they wanted to 'keep the memory of these people in the community's mind' (Vaughn, 2012). Keery adds, 'these murals show us where we come from but take guns out of the equation' (Coll, 2008). Former Red Hand Commando member, Jim Wilson, who worked as a cross-community activist, said 'it's not about whitewashing out the history of the UVF or the UDA or even the IRA for that matter. It's about celebrating all aspects of our history, including The Troubles. We're just taking the edge off some' (Latimer, 2011). Though members of the respective communities were actively involved in the process of art choice and production in many of these Re-imaging projects, as with most large-scale government art programmes, the process was one that also included consultants and administrators, with many individuals having input about the final outcome of the artwork (Wallace Consulting, 2016). It is the decision by consensus, along with the layers of bureaucracy, that may lead to the watered-down imagery to which Rolston and others have objected (Rolston, 2012).

Some critiques of the programme also came from the community members themselves, with one Shankill area woman saying, 'Re-imaging is a middle-class illusion of peace. We aren't holding hands yet'; though, these negative comments tend to focus on the impact of the programme on the peace process rather than the artistic experience (Latimer, 2011). One local arts administrator, who did not work with the programme, called the artwork 'insipid', and continued that he would not 'touch it with a barge pole' (Turkington, 2022). No matter how genuine the efforts of the ACNI, and those with whom they worked on these projects, not everyone could be satiated. However, arts that 'are no longer viewed purely in terms of their of their aesthetic value but also in terms of their social impact' carry a very heavy load if they are to satisfy both goals (Hamayon-Alfaro 2011, 126).

Some of the Re-imaging community engagement processes lasted for longer than a year as communities, artists, and funders negotiated the removal of offending murals. While animosity can still be found between those in positions of power, and the members of the mostly working-class neighbourhoods in which the artwork is found, there were significant efforts to afford agency to these communities (BBC News, 2012; Latimer, 2011). However, as Jack Farrar notes in his essay on peacebuilding and the arts, 'in the face of prevailing narratives that seek to marginalise their experiences, communities are reluctant to abandon their old symbols and beliefs. These symbols, after all, were relied upon for psychological support in the darkest days of the conflict' (Farrar, 2023).

Keenan argues that the Re-imaging efforts tended to override existing public art systems:

> there were already robust processes at work by which mural change was happening, processes that were deeply embedded in community-based networks of production – not all of them politically aligned or religiously divided – that bypassed the disciplinary structures of the government program. (Keenan 2022, 131)

While this is one way to consider the process by which these images were created, later evaluations of the programme, and a bit more hindsight bring about the possibility that Re-imaging acted as a catalyst for a continued interest in public art. Though not everyone could be appeased with the changes created through Re-imaging, the numbers of community members involved in the programme are extraordinary. According to the 2009 evaluation, the Re-imaging Communities Programme, even in its early stages, had a positive impact on introducing marginalised communities to the power of the visual arts, laying the groundwork for community art programming that continues to thrive around the city. The 2009 Independent Research Solutions document adds:

> the participation rate for 51 of the projects completed to date gives figures of 6,893 people having been involved in the workshops. In addition, across the some 61 projects, reports have suggested that almost 2000 other people were involved including artists, consultants, administration staff, group members, volunteers and others. This has meant that the importance and worth of artistic experience and activity has been encouraged and developed, with an appreciation of the potential power of art to unite people, and to represent their various identities in non-contentious ways. The more general outcome has been that the projects have

> contributed to the successful development of a wider audience for, and increased participation in, the arts. (Independent Research Solutions 2009, xii)

Significantly, this early review notes 'the importance and worth of artistic experience', and it is this benefit specifically that created a shift in the attitude toward the worth of public art in the housing estates (Independent Research Solutions 2009, xii). As Hamayon-Alfaro notes, the artists serve as 'catalysts, helping communities to articulate their aspirations creatively' (Hamayon-Alfaro 2011, 132). The process was certainly not perfect, but it did inspire the creation of more artwork along with a boom in community arts programming that has continued to the present.

The artistic products of these collaborations have been subject to criticism from a variety of sources, with the subject matter, permanence of the artwork, and execution all receiving some forms of condemnation (Rolston, 2012; Crowley, 2011; Keener, 2022; Ervine, 2022; Turkington, 2022; *Field Notes Shankill*, 2023). Since public art, and especially wall painting, in the city has always been political, any artwork that does not contain political content is often viewed as bland or toothless. David Hyndman, Founder and Director of Beat Carnival, a community arts organization that facilitates carnival arts in the city, comments on the lack of meaningful content in artwork commissioned by the ACNI:

> the Arts Council unfortunately turned its back basically on any forms of art that contain politics. It found it very hard to deal with big political issues, and indeed, artists themselves found it very difficult to deal with issues. They would be seen as being divisive or disruptive or taking sides. (Northern Visions, 2011)

However, Declan McGonagle separates the actions of artists who work in the public sphere from gallery artists, stating, 'an artist who intends his/her work to have a social purpose, to function in the social environment is not at all engaged in the same thing as someone who is concerned with the aesthetic articulation of a physical environment' (McGonagle 1990, 43). He continues, 'just because a range of people work in a non-gallery context, indoor or outdoor, does not mean that their work has the same function or aspiration' (McGonagle 1990, 43). An advocate for the importance of community arts, McGonagle seems to encourage the arts establishment to refrain from expecting community or social arts to serve the same purpose as traditional fine arts found in a gallery. He encourages artists and arts administrators to 'decide if we are simply involved in entertainment or something else altogether' (McGonagle 1990, 43). While the critic is writing well before the Re-imaging Programme, his point is still relevant.

For those who managed the Re-imaging programme, and for many artists who continue to create public art projects in the city, the process, a sense of agency, and 'collective ownership' are each as important as the aesthetic qualities of the art product that is created (Hamayon-Alfaro 2011, 123). As Keenan points out, though the final product may receive criticism, the commitment to process, or 'social engagement', within the government programme was paramount, as the programme itself was intended to facilitate peacebuilding within the communities (Keenan 2022, 137). In all community arts efforts, though, the question of which is more important, process or product, remains. It is clear from the emphasis on community relations found in the Re-imaging Communities documents that, though the programme sought to remove signs of sectarianism, and especially paramilitarism, the measures for success were focused on the process by which

the images were made along with the community relationships that were positively impacted (Wallace Consulting, 2016).

Though there is evidence that local control and employment of indigenous artists continues to be a significant aspect of mural production in Belfast, writing in 2012, Rolston predicted that the government involvement and especially the funding of the Re-imaging Communities Programme would be a threat to the city's political mural tradition:

> there may continue to be murals in working-class areas, but they will not be working-class murals. If that occurs, peace and funding may end up succeeding where war and marginalisation did not, in killing the political mural phenomenon. It will not be death by obliteration, but rather death by funding. (Rolston 2012, 461)

This is a rather bleak assertion that the political mural tradition would be destroyed by the insertion of government funding agencies into what was previously an organic, community-based artform. The Oxford art historian Martin Kemp also expressed concern about the removal of the offending images, commenting in 2011, 'my instinct as a historian is that these are some of the most important public images of our time. People should see what they can do to preserve them. Someone should look seriously at them with a view to which ones should be kept and how' (Sharp, 2011). If the mural tradition is respected, however, the changing of murals should also be valued. As has been clear for the history of Belfast's painted wall tradition, the images act as an indication of the interests of the community. Walls continue to be painted with political murals and apolitical ones. The final evaluation of the programme, along with the continued creation of hundreds of murals

since the programme ended, the proliferation of community murals, and the rise of Street Art, challenges Rolston's negative prediction about the death of the mural tradition.

A final evaluation of the Re-imaging Communities Programme was conducted in 2016, and the impact on artists was explored through artist surveys which concluded:

> many artists stated that they had formed good working relationships with local groups and improved their understanding and appreciation of the value of community development. Others felt that they had broadened their expertise, strengthened their facilitation skills and become more employable as a result of their role. They also reported that the experience opened their eyes to the value of community led engagement when developing public art projects. Some artists were impressed by the positivity, dedication and civic pride generated by local volunteers who were committed to improving their areas. (Wallace Consulting 2016, 32)

Additionally, in the 2016 artists' exit survey, 100% of the artist participants stated that they felt the project helped them develop as artists (Wallace Consulting 2016, 32). Though most of the artists did not feel that the timeline to complete their project was adequate, in general, the surveys garnered positive responses from artists (Wallace Consulting, 2016, 30-32). The same report also included survey results of the residents of the areas impacted by the programme. While much of the survey content was focused on the impact the programme had on cross-community relations, there were positive responses to the artwork itself with 'almost three-quarters of respondents stat[ing] that public art, such as that conducted under BPttA [Building Peace through the Arts: Re-Imaging Communities Programme], has a role in physical regeneration', and 'seventy-two percent would support more projects of this

nature in their area' (Wallace Consulting 2016, 73, 74). Positive public opinion about the artwork and collaborations with artists documented in the final report joins an overall shift in attitude about public art, and especially murals, amongst community organisations, artists, and the public.

After Re-imaging, though, there has been a change in the way some mural artists think of themselves and their work as they create art in the public sphere. Political muralists who developed close relationships with those in power positions and deftly navigated the funding agencies began to serve as public art gatekeepers and liaisons between local communities and arts patrons. They gained respect in their communities and their attitude about the mural tradition began to evolve ('Mural Artist', 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards*, 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards*, 2024). Alison Bain considers several factors for the evolution of an artist's self-worth that are relevant to Belfast's mural artists as they professionalise their artistic process and find meaning through their work. Bain notes that artists find a sense of self:

> by the activities and process of work; by the end products of work; by the prestige associated with the work of a particular occupation; by the prestige of the social context within which work occurs; and by the position that work is allocated relative to other pastimes. (Bain 2005, 27)

The support, publicity, community response, connections to power structures, and most importantly, the payment that artists received from their work with the Re-imaging Communities Programme, shifted artists' perspectives, and some began to consider themselves a part of the art profession, rather than as activists who also engaged in public

art. This shift is acknowledged by those who work with community groups that facilitate public art in the city. As Billy Drummond, the site manager of Alternatives Restorative Justice in the Shankill notes:

> because of Re-imaging, which is good, they [artists] don't look at you unless they're getting big money for doing commissions. Right. So, it's almost in one way it's good because you've got high quality artwork and another hand, it's sort of created a wee bit of a new issue. (Drummond, 2024)

The 'new issue' to which Drummond refers is that artists continued to value their time and demand professional payment for their work, after their experience with Re-imaging. No longer are they taking '300 quid' for a mural (Drummond, 2024). As the professionalisation of public artists continues in the city, Drummond notes that some artists who have made names for themselves as mural artists have become more discerning with their commissions and will not respond to his inquiries (Drummond, 2024). Additionally, some political muralists with whom Drummond worked in the past are now out of the price range of his organisation, though these artists continue to paint for paramilitaries and other well-funded municipal projects (Drummond, 2024; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). This has led to organisations like Alternatives Restorative Justice to turn to younger artists who did not benefit from the influx of funds through the Re-imaging programme, as well as artists, like Glen Molloy, who have come to prominence through the city's graffiti movement (Drummond, 2024). The impact, therefore, on mural production was not that it died out, as Rolston predicted in 2012. Rather, the organisations have begun to spread commissions to a new generation of artists.

With the Re-imaging Communities Programme being called both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' by scholars, the reality may lie somewhere in the middle (Rolston, 2012; Hamayon-Alfaro, 2011). The funding, and many of the larger decisions were made by the ACNI and its affiliated local community organisations. However, there was a sincere effort by the ACNI as well as by the participating artists to ensure the communities felt a sense of agency in the projects. Even critics usually focused on the fine art world took notice of this type of public art programming and recognised its significance to the current contemporary art scene, with art critic Declan Long, at the very start of the focused Re-imaging programme, noting:

> many of the most significant contemporary art practices from Northern Ireland during the course of the last decade have been those concerned with ambivalently addressing the fraught aftermath of "the conflict", and, more particularly, with assessing how public space (so long subjected to sectarian demarcation and disturbance, so extensively regulated and observed by security forces, so restrictively coded in the cultural imaginary by the ongoing manipulations of media imagery) might now be represented or engaged with in the newly challenging context of official "progress" and "regeneration". (Long 2008, 45)

The legacy of the Re-imaging Communities Programme is complex, and time has not been kind to some of the semi-permanent objects (Fig. 56 and 56a, page 33). For example, 2015's *The Women's Quilt,* a digitally printed compilation of images created by the Lower Shankill Women's Group with direction from artist Lesley Cherry, certainly prioritised process over product. The plastic material on which the artwork is printed has begun to

pucker and split. This image, like many of the painted or printed Re-imaging art objects, is in dire need of conservation or replacement (*Field Notes Shankill,* 2023; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). Writing in 2017, Maria T. Simone-Charteris notes, 'it is still too early to measure the success of this initiative' (Skinner and Jolliffe 2017, 221). As recently as 2022, there has been some recognition of the possible positive outcomes of the programme. Adam Turkington, the arts administrator who oversees many of the Street Art commissions in the city recognises that the community had to begin somewhere and 'make compromises' that are not necessarily relevant any longer. He notes, 'I could make a defense for Re-imaging in the way that I could make a defense for the Good Friday Agreement in that like there was a necessity about compromise that we have now outlived' (Turkington, 2023). Keenan, though critical of the objects themselves as well as the programme's circumventing of traditional mural production systems, notes that Re-imaging 'may ultimately produce valuable experiences for the communities involved in the consultative processes required by Re-imaging, [but] it does so without sensitivity to the ways in which murals are already changing, and cross-community ties are emerging' (Keenan 2022, 132).

While some may view the Re-imaging processes and artworks as unsuccessful, watered-down, or 'insipid', the impact of the extensive investment in public artwork should not be discounted (Turkington, 2022). Cameron Cartiere notes that we often ask too much of our public art and 'spend so much time of the failings of public art and so little time learning from the successes' (Cartiere and Schrag 2023, 19). There are successes to be found in the legacy of the Re-imaging Communities Programme. Communities are still benefitting from the connections forged between funding agencies, artists, and community

organisers. Additionally, the professionalisation of artists across the city continues to impact the way that public art is commissioned, as political muralists who learned how to manage government funding agencies now find themselves receiving large-scale commissions locally and around the world ('Mural Artist', 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards*, 2024; McGonagle, 2024). The process by which many of the Re-imaging projects were designed and produced was one that was well-funded, followed established public art protocols, and encouraged local community involvement, setting the standard for the future of community arts programming in the city.

By the Community for the Community

Overwhelmingly, the most common phrase used by artists interviewed for this research is 'my community' (Cole, 2009; Kelly, 2018; Kelly, 2023; Ervine, 2023; 'Mural Artist'; Molloy, 2023). For these artists, the term community is specific to their sectarian identities, but they also use the term to reference the working-class, underrepresented, members of their side of the sectarian divide. The meaning of 'community' becomes somewhat muddled when considering the impact of community arts on Belfast's visual culture. For artists who are working in the public sphere, political muralists and contemporary street artists, the term 'community arts' often refers to cross-community artworks, or art objects that are created as a part of a collaboration with youth groups or civic organisations. These objects rarely express the artist's personal agenda or their individual style and are reminiscent of the community collaborations that were created under the Re-imaging Communities Programme. Rather than creating an individualised artwork, the artists serve

as facilitators, arts educators, and possibly a catalyst for their collaborators' future interest in the creative arts.

While Sophie Hope notes that as early as the mid-1980s, the term 'community art' was a 'dirty word' amongst artists in the United Kingdom and was avoided because of the assumption that the artists were 'just a bad mural artist' Belfast's community arts collaborations provide opportunities for young and established artists (artist Loraine Leeson quoted in Cartiere and Schrag 2023, 172). Many political muralists and street artists have incorporated community arts into their artistic practice. Artists working in the public realm often begin their careers creating art programming with not-for-profit community organisations that are funded through either the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Belfast City Council, or local civic groups with the support of the Northern Ireland Executive. Many of the established contemporary street artists working in the city today, along with academic artists who engage in studio practices, began their art-making careers as 'community artists', or as unofficial apprentices of political muralists on cross-community projects (Seedhead Arts 'Friz', 2022; Seadhead Arts 'KVLR', 2023; Gallagher, 2023; McGinn, 2022). Prolific street artist, Eoin McGinn, notes, 'there's steps to like an artist's career. You start off with community work where you're just passing on the skills to kids…. you can evolve and progress and whatnot and then people start commissioning you to take on like a bigger project' (McGinn, 2022). While some artists engage in community art programming because of a firmly held belief in the mission of an organisation, often, these community projects often serve as 'pot-boilers', or commissions that provide smaller but consistent funding between larger mural commissions that may give the artist an opportunity to express their personal style (Seedhead Arts 'Friz', 2022).

Connor Shields, who served as the programme director of the New Belfast Community Arts Initiative[11] during the height of the Re-imaging of the city, calls 'community art':

> a process of harnessing the transformative power of original artistic expression and of producing a range of outcomes that are not just artistic – they could be social, cultural, educational, or environmental…. It can build the capacity in those areas to not only to make art, but to enjoy art. The key element is about making and enjoying art in a collective experience. (Niassembly.gov.uk, 2009)

In 2004, Heather Floyd, previous director of the Belfast Community Arts Forum, wrote about the importance of the role of the artist in arts education at a community level (Floyd, 2004). Her writing followed a surge in community arts across a variety of media in the late 1990s, with advocates of local organisations engaging in public protests demanding more funding for community arts from ACNI (Northern Visions, 2011). Floyd recognised that, while not all visual arts had deep connections to Belfast's residents, 'murals were, for a long time, the most visible and tangible evidence of marginalised communities engaging with the arts' (Floyd 2004, 43). The late 1990s community arts boom laid the groundwork for the Re-imaging Communities Programme, which engaged community groups and artists, including political muralists, across the city in years-long artistic collaborations, as discussed above. Since Re-imaging ended in 2016, though the ACNI budget has

[11] The New Belfast Community Arts Initiative merged with Community Arts Forum in 2011 and became Community Arts Partnership.

experienced cuts in recent years, the organisation has been urged to diversify their spending to include many smaller community arts groups, with nearly 450 awards totalling almost £15,000,000 being granted in the 2022-2023 fiscal year (Arts Council of Northern Ireland *Government's Lack of Investment in the Arts,* 2023; Arts Council of Northern Ireland *Annual Review,* 2023). While a significant portion of ACNI funding continues to be diverted to well-established organisations like Lyric Theatre, Ulster Orchestra Society, and Northern Ireland Opera, there are a variety of smaller community arts organisations that are listed in the annual awards (Art Council of Northern Ireland *Annual Funding Programme Awards,* 2024).

There is also an effort to intentionally include working-class communities in arts experiences that receive funding from the ACNI and Northern Ireland Executive, with the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure filing inquiries into how funding impacts those communities (Niassembly.gov.uk, 2016). The inquiry states:

> the Committee does not believe that access to the arts and culture should be diluted for working-class communities. The arts should be a part of the everyday lives of all those who live here. However, the Committee also acknowledges that people cannot and should not be forced to engage with the arts and culture. (Niassembly.gov.uk, 2016)

Organisations who receive such funding from the Executive were expected to respond with details about how their organisation supported arts for working class communities. Though many community arts organisations in Belfast engage in such diverse activities as parade and carnival arts, circus activities, and theatrical events, mural production continues to be

the most visible expression of community arts programming, with paintings being created by visual arts organisations, cross-community youth groups, sport and social clubs, as well as schools and religious groups. New murals are unveiled at an extraordinary pace.

The goals of those who administer and fund such community arts can be found in Shields's statement above. Put simply, art can be used for more than aesthetic purposes, and participating in the making of art builds capacity; making and enjoying art creates more people who make and enjoy art. Hamayon-Alfaro discusses some of the positive aspects of community arts in Northern Ireland:

> with their emphasis on community participation, access, and collective ownership, community arts in Northern Ireland appeared to be well-poised to help deliver public policies. Locally rooted, they could act as a link between different levels and different sections of society, generate interaction, and create much needed social glue. (Hamayon-Alfaro 2011, 123)

Heather Floyd, emphasises 'active participation' in community arts programming, noting 'authorship is important… The community group should own the work of art; it should not belong to the artist or the playwright concerned' (Niassembly.gov.uk, 2009). Katharine Keenan researched the wide range of community arts fully in her 2022 book, *Belfast Imaginary: Art and Urban Reinvention*. She calls many of the city's community arts programmes 'third way art', adding that this type of 'urban regeneration describes an integrated project of social and economic development, peacebuilding and community work, and a revival of local arts and culture' (Keenan 2022, 9). Keenan adds, 'what third way art is meant to produce, then, is a "cultural experience" that represents a model of a

shared, peaceful society, in a single Northern Irish imagined community' (Keenan 2022, 11). For Lesley Murray, community art relies on negotiations, and those interactions have the potential to shape identity and 'notions of community' (Cartiere and Zebracki 2016, 57). She continues:

> It is clear that public art is negotiated between communities and the state. The question remains, however, concerning the extent to which these negotiations shape wider notions of community and create openness. (Cartiere and Zebracki 2016, 57)

Keenan's research, along with the comments by Shields, Hamayon-Alfaro, Floyd, and Murray, bring to the fore the burden that is often placed on community arts. In a post-conflict society, there is an expectation that artmaking can solve all manner of social problems. In Belfast particularly, the emphasis placed on *process* by the Re-imaging Communities Programme, along with the funding offered specifically for cross-community or peacebuilding art efforts continues to inform the way community art is made.

With such demands placed on artwork created in the public sphere, it is important to return to the characteristics of successful public art outlined in Chapter Two of this thesis, namely Lucy Lippard's suggestion that art must be sensitive to 'the relationship between art and environment, art and context, artist and audience' (Raven 1989, 210). Implied in Lippard's public art philosophy is the importance of an artist and commissioning body's sensitivity to process. The inclusion of community members in decision making as well as art production remains paramount, especially in locations where art objects have a history of division or antagonistic symbolism. Both Shields and Hamayon-Alfaro also note the importance of the 'collective' with references to the collective experience and

collective ownership of the art process and object. However, in the focus on the collective, artists often find themselves searching for a way to establish and express their own artistic identity. Katy Radford points out:

> artistic integrity and creativity can be sacrificed as part of the trade-off as particular artists acquire favoured status within communities for their compliance with community memory-making rather than those who bring alternative visions that might challenge those of the community leadership or the funders' expectations. (Skinner and Jolliffe 2017, 269)

Artist Eoin McGinn, who paints under the Street Art name 'Emic', is widely praised for this work with communities in the area (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024; Bonner, 2024; Drummond, 2024). The artist's perception of this negotiation between artistic integrity and collective experience and ownership demonstrates just how carefully artists must navigate community art commissions:

> with public art, the process is really important because there's like, I guess there's like an essence or a choice that the artist has to find, like from within the information that being given for, for a project. So, you're like as an artist, you're kind of like kind of like a problem solver… how do I take all these ideas that people have and make like a succinct image that's going to, like, enhance the area? (McGinn, 2022)

McGinn's comments harken to similar ideas noted by Re-imaging artist Ross Wilson who considered himself somewhat of a 'translator' of ideas from community members (Little, 2016). Other artists interviewed for this research concur that the process, though it always

requires compromise, is one of the fulfilling aspects of working in public or community arts (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024; Constance, 2023; *We Speak Wall,* 2022; Reynolds, 2023). As Belfast continues to re-evaluate its ideals after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, ensuring that the city's public artwork experiences engage the collective is essential. The results of the emphasis on the collective are programmes that are more community-focused and evaluated on more than their aesthetic contributions to the city's urban landscape (Hamayon-Alfaro 2011, 126).

After the Re-imaging Communities Programme concluded, artists continued to collaborate with community groups. As Keenan points out, community arts programming can lead to a 'revival of local arts' (Keenan 2022, 9). In Belfast, 'local arts' include mural painting, and community organisations have been central to the continuation of the practice. Often artists are brought in to create a piece of art that addresses various social issues: antisocial behaviour, suicide, drug use, or simply brightening up the place. The artists who engage in these practices range from local political muralists to international street artists. In many cases, this type of community work is the way an artist will learn how to 'scale up' their smaller designs (McGinn, 2022; Constance, 2023). Local organisations recognise the power of a public art object, but, more importantly, the power that the act of artmaking has on their communities (Drummond, 2024). If social impact is the driving factor, then public art, and therefore murals, will continue to gain prominence in community-based artistic production of the city.

However, there are conflicting opinions about the purpose of arts as a social tool. As David Boyd, the Director of Beat Carnival, comments:

> I'm quite against arts just being seen as a tool in the social work toolbox, rattles around, and you bring it out when you want a job done. It includes that because it does do social work very well. I think one of the things that arts brings is the transformative process. It's not just about managing situations. (Northern Visions, 2011).

Concerns about the use of public art as primarily a social tool come from the Street Art movement as well. Those who facilitate major Street Art commissions around the city are eager for a time when artists have the freedom to create art for art's sake on the walls of Belfast (Turkington, 2023).

For community workers like Billy Drummond, though, an engaging community-based process is the dominant factor for success as he oversees public art programming for Alternatives Restorative Justice in the Shankill area (Drummond, 2024). Alternatives Restorative Justice is not primarily an arts organisation, though much of their outward-facing programme includes public artwork. Though Drummond is not an art professional, he has overseen many public art projects in the Shankill area over the last two decades. Alternatives Restorative Justice was formed as 'a government accredited restorative justice programme that aims to promote and develop non-violent community responses to the issues of low-level crime and antisocial behaviour in areas across Northern Ireland' (Alternatives Restorative Justice, n.d.). This organisation has engaged with public art for much of its history, drawing upon the Shankill area's history of political murals as a touchstone for the community (Northern Visions, 2010; Drummond, 2024). Through Alternatives Restorative Justice, Drummond advocates for mural painting as a way to

engage the public, to heal social wounds, as well as honouring and continuing the historic tradition of mural painting. He values these public art objects, along with the history of political murals, and says his community is 'a culture that's used to murals so we can change that narrative' (Drummond, 2024). Drummond hires a variety of artists, political muralists, street artists, international artists, and former graffiti artists to provide artistic programming for the Shankill.

After the signing of the peace agreement, Shankill Alternatives' programming began to emphasise the possibilities of positive art experiences within their community (Northern Visions, 2010). Initially, these experiences sought to engage many different groups to highlight the importance of the area's working-class skilled labour. Alongside the Re-imaging of the area, Drummond oversaw programmes that researched the Shankill's industrial history and incorporated references to that history into large-scale public artworks. He notes that the young people who were involved in this experience not only had an opportunity to create a piece of art, but they also learned about the trade skills of their forefathers and gained a sense of pride in the process (Drummond, 2024; Northern Visions, 2010).

Drummond often emphasises the collective experience when making choices about public art commissions, just as many who facilitate community arts programming do. The goals for his projects are multi-faceted. Drummond hopes for a positive artistic outcome but focuses primarily on the needs of his community (Drummond, 2024). In one such collaboration, Drummond commissioned Blaze FX, who have created political murals for the UDA as well as community art, to create a mural dedicated to an anti-racism campaign amongst loyalists. The artists engaged young people in a workshop in which the students

talked about important themes in their community and learned how to paint in a graffiti style. Gary Dougan, a teenager at the time, was introduced to mural painting by Blaze FX during this collaboration. Though he had not considered art as a career path, the young man was inspired by the experience and soon became a full-time student in an art school (Northern Visions, 2010). He eventually reached his goal of learning more about Street Art by studying abroad in the United States (McLaughlin, 2012). Dougan's story is not unique, as many of the artists working today credit public art experiences in their youth as influential to their art practices, a topic that will be covered further in depth in the following section of this chapter.

Deanna Grant-Smith and Tony Matthews note the importance of connection within an artistic process that engages the collective; community members can find their own validation by recognising themselves in public art. The authors continue 'this can occur at a conceptual level where residents may see people like them or to which they positively relate' (Grant-Smith and Matthews 2015, 144). For young people who work with artists on community art projects, seeing someone like them – local and working class – engaging in the arts as a career can have a significant impact. If the goals of such community projects are also focused on peacebuilding, there is evidence that having artists who work across community lines can also soften the strict sectarian identities (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024; Vaughn, 2012; Ervine, 2022; Doran, 2023; *We Speak Wall,* 2022; Reynolds, 2023; Constance, 2023).

With the lingering impacts of the Re-imaging Communities Programme, community groups continue to prioritise cross-community relations with public art. In many cases, if the participants are from one side of the sectarian divide, the artist may be

from the other. Artists note that they have felt welcome in areas that are traditionally home to sectarian images (Constance, 2023; *We Speak Wall*, 2022). Nuala Convery, the street artist known as Wee Nuls states, 'with a name like Nuala, which is a very Irish name, are people going to like treat me weirdly? And it's literally not like that at all. I've had so much work in Protestant communities, and I've never been treated with anything but absolute respect and openness' (*We Speak Wall*, 2022). Street artist, Hannah Constance, or HMC, agrees that her work in Protestant schools has helped to bridge the divide between the young people with whom she works saying that the students whose upbringing is different than her own consider her 'a really cool person' because she is part of the graffiti and Street Art movement (Constance, 2023). Working with an artist who young people respect and find engaging has proven to challenge ideas about sectarianism (Constance, 2023).

PUL artist Dee Craig offers that in a recent major commission for a pair of murals for the City East Building, discussed previously in Chapter Three, he found himself working with community groups in the CNR Short Strand neighbourhood. As has been discussed in previous chapters, this artist began his career as a paramilitary painter, and he continues to create works that would be considered sectarian by any definition of the word. However, he also engages with cross-community arts programming, and recognises the importance of these efforts in a rapidly changing East Belfast (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). In his recent City East Building mural project, to 'pay homage to the east's strong industrial heritage as well as its future potential', the artist and commissioners chose two images for the dual murals: a rag and bone man to represent the area's working-class history and a young local entrepreneur representing the opportunities of the future (Cartmill, 2024) (Figs. 57 and 58, page 34). The artist sourced the rag and bone man image

from photo archives, but the image of a young entrepreneur is a local woman, Abbie Lawlor, who is the founder of AHL Apparel and a participant in the East Belfast Enterprise's programming that provides mentoring for small businesses (Cartmill, 2024; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024).

These murals followed the community art best practices by centring the focus on the collective, and the artist notes that any project where he is asked to interpret the interests of the community may have six or more planning sessions before any paint is touched ('Mural Artist', 2023). Though Craig designed and facilitated these images, they certainly belong to the community members who helped create them, and the numerous discussions about the subject matter helped the community find imagery that would be a source of pride (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). The City East murals, commissioned by the East Belfast Partnership, were created in Craig's signature parachute cloth process, which allows him to bring materials to a specific community group's location. The portability of materials opens participation to people of all ages, even if they are unable to climb a ladder safely or lack mobility. Craig is an example of an artist for whom age and experience has given perspective about cross-community work. The artist notes that, though he is unlikely to seek out a collaboration with a CNR political muralist, he had very positive interactions with CNR community members in the Short Strand (*Field Notes Newtownards*, 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). He has deftly navigated the changing tides of mural production, learning to assuredly manage personalities, power structures, and differing opinions.

Similarly, artist Michael 'Mickey' Doherty, from the CRN Ardoyne area, has found that collaboration with community groups across the sectarian divide can be positive and

can contribute compelling additions to Belfast's busy painting landscape. Doherty was sentenced to 16 years for IRA activities and spent time as a political prisoner in Long Kesh before the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (Irlnet.com, 2024). The artist is one of the most prolific CNR mural painters currently working today. Nearly every CNR area has a Doherty mural with subjects ranging from sports icons to celebrations of NHS workers to scenes commemorating republican heroes (Extramural Activity, n.d.; *Field Notes Market,* 2023; *Field Notes International Wall*, 2024). After his release from prison, Doherty began his painting career with Danny Devenny and Marty Lyons, though the artist developed his own easily recognisable style with a distinct, dynamic brushwork used for drapery.

In 2024, Doherty was hired by R-CITY, a community organisation in the Shankill that provides integrated programming for young people; their participants come from both the PUL Shankill area as well as nearby CNR Ardoyne (Fig. 59 and 59a, pages 34 and 35). The group's focus is not on arts programming; however, they are responsible for several murals along the peace wall. The mission of the organisation is geared toward many of the same issues emphasised by other youth organisations in the city; namely, they seek to 'develop leadership skills and opportunities for young people into a wide reaching and multifaceted initiative that remains fully committed to young people living in areas facing issues of conflict, mental health, gang culture, educational disadvantage and lack of aspirations' (RCITY Belfast, n.d.). The organisation is:

> built on the ethos of instilling and developing respect for others irregardless (*sic*) of religious or cultural background. At the core of the work, staff and volunteers strive to provide the space for participants to develop their understanding and

> appreciation of others, build relationships and self-awareness, whilst challenging negative attitudes. From there we work to encourage young people to develop their talents, strengths and nurture their journey along their chosen progression route. (R-CITY Belfast, n.d.)

The collaborative R-CITY mural is divided in two parts: a monochrome section on the left, and a brilliantly coloured painting on the right. The grayscale scene on the left contains pops of bright orange meant to represent flames during well-documented riots, and the violent event is revealed as figures painted curtains to the side. This riotous scene is one that would be familiar to those who follow Belfast political developments in the media, though it is possibly a reference to a specific recent series of riots that occurred on Lanark Way, near the mural's location (Extramural Activity *Times Change,* 2024). Though the left side is intended to represent the past, the tableau includes the depiction of a PUL mural, *Prepared for Peace Ready for War,* that is still *in situ* in the Mount Vernon area, and was most recently refurbished in 2022[12] (Clinton, 2024; Extramural Activity *Times Change,* 2024). The 'past' section of the mural also includes scenes Doherty has used in earlier paintings; specifically, a depiction of a woman on her knees banging a bin lid as a warning. Doherty previously painted this image directly onto bin lids created to commemorate internment and the Hunger Strike (Doherty, 2017). In keeping with the tradition of appropriating other artists' imagery, this bin lid figure is likely sourced from a

[12] In December 2024, this mural was damaged by winds associated with Storm Darragh. The top section of the mural collapsed making the text illegible (Fitzmaurice, 2024). To date, no announcement has been made regarding the future of the damaged mural.

photograph by Stephen S.T. Bradley, whose series of photojournalism about The Troubles is publicly available on his website (Bradley, S. 2020) (Fig. 60, page 35).

On the right side of the mural, the students and Doherty designed a colourful illustration of the positive aspects of their community. Within the large letters, R-CITY, the students and artist included symbols of contemporary Belfast that are often associated with tourism: the Black Taxi, Harland and Wolfe cranes, large public sculptures, and the Albert Clock Tower. Also included is a portrait of Nelson Mandela with his quote 'times change, we need to change as well' along with symbols associated with specific programming at R-CITY (*Field Notes Shankill,* 2024). Through the representations of the community group's programmes, alongside symbols that are intended to illicit positive responses, the community group expects that this mural will demonstrate that they are ready to put the past behind them (Clinton, 2024).

The design of the R-CITY mural is not unique to the city, however. With the past represented in black and white and the future represented in colour, the 2024 mural is reminiscent of a 2013 creation by another PUL artist, John Stewart, along the Newtownards Road in East Belfast (Fig. 61, page 36). Stewart has a history of painting paramilitary imagery for the UDA, though he now engages primarily in a studio practice, selling artwork with traditional PUL working-class symbolism painted in a style reminiscent of early twentieth century expressionism. Stewart's Newtownards Road mural was designed and painted during the height of the Re-imaging of East Belfast, and, though it is formally somewhat more successful than Stewart's paramilitary murals, the image has been continually defaced (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; Extramural Activity, 2013). The two murals by Doherty and Stewart created more than a decade apart, demonstrate that

community members continue to try to visually turn the page on the perception of Belfast as a city of violence and sectarianism. As Feargal Cochrane notes, 'it is easier to see sectarianism when it is written down or drawn on a wall than it is to capture the slow and often invisible processes linked to anti-sectarian work' (Cochrane, 2015, 56). In the case of the R-CITY collaborative mural, the young artists and Doherty captured both elements of Cochrane's argument by engaging in the 'invisible' anti-sectarian work in their integrated community group as well as drawing (or painting) their goals of anti-sectarianism on a wall.

The R-CITY mural has yet to receive the same vandalism that Stewart's mural received (*Field Notes Shankill,* 2024). While the R-CITY image is still new, the public reception of it has been thus far positive (Clinton, 2024). Rebecca Paul, a staff member at R-CITY, says:

> the young people can't believe how well their ideas have come to life in this mural. From first linking up with artist Micky Doherty to now having this great mural has inspired them to think more positively about art and the impact it can have in spaces more known for negative press. (Clinton, 2024)

From Paul's quote, it is clear that the young people are concerned about the negative press their area receives, and they wanted to counteract that with a legible story. Even if the symbols the mural designates as 'past' are either current (the PUL mural), or very recent past (the 2022 Lanark Way Riots), the students who collaborated on this project wanted to send a clear message that *they* are ready to be seen in a different light.

As Grant-Smith and Matthews note 'public art can exert significant influence within communities and may provide positive expressions that galvanise actors or negative expressions that may be contested. Harnessing community involvement in the creation of public art can therefore be understood as a process of activating citizenship' (Grant-Smith and Matthews 2015, 144). Especially after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, utilising public art to 'provide positive expressions' or activate citizenship is especially powerful in Belfast. The 2024 R-CITY mural demonstrates that, twenty-six years after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, public art, and especially mural painting, continues to be a tool for creating positive expressions for community groups in the city.

As can be expected, there has been criticism of Belfast's community programmes that utilise visual art, and especially mural making, just as there was criticism of the community murals of the 1970s and of the Re-Imaging Communities Programme. In 2013-14 a United Kingdom arts organisation called Situations, included the phrase 'share ownership freely but authorship wisely' in their list of twelve *New Rules for Public Art* (Situations, 2020). Their statement 'public art is of the people and made with the people but not always by the people' seems like a call to include the community in the planning of a public art commission but not in its execution (Situations, 2020). Rarely is a mural that was created by a community group like R-CITY studied for its artistic impact, and as noted earlier in Chapter Three, the artists involved are often excluded from the traditional art world culture as well as its official artist registries. Community murals, like the one created by Doherty and R-CITY, may be questioned for both their artistic contributions to art in the public realm as well as their cross-community achievements (Mark-Fitzgerald, 2024). In artwork such as this, artists do not sign the piece, rather the signage is reserved

for the community organisation and its funders. However, these projects often introduce young people to artmaking, and, in Belfast, the images are a source of local pride and drivers of mural tourism.

Younger artists in the city, especially those who are active in the Street Art movement, are open to the wide range of public art possibilities as they seek to create a career in the arts, and have their work be seen by a large audience. Though they may hope for a career path that leads to greater artistic freedom, at least in the early stages of their development, many welcome work with community art schemes. Artists working in community programming also recognise the importance of bringing art to spaces and people who may feel like they are not a part of the fine art establishment. Regarding the virtues of a public art practice for herself and the public, Nuala Convery, says, 'you can just walk down the street, and you don't have to go into an art gallery and feel like weird that you don't you don't belong in this environment…. I always wanted my art to be accessible to people. And I think Street Art is probably one of the most accessible arts that you can get' (*We Speak Wall,* 2022). Scottish artist, KMG, who has completed several major murals in Belfast agrees in the power of art in public spaces. She believes firmly in the democratic aspect of Street Art, noting that she prefers 'putting art in the street where everyone can experience it, rather than having to go into a gallery; a lot of people still feel uncomfortable going into art galleries' (Seedhead Arts 'KMG', 2024). Accessibility of public art in the city along with the widely utilised practice of creating murals with local artists, many of whom share a working-class background with the participants, prove to be influential on the creative economy of the city. Community arts introduce participants to the possibilities of a career in the arts as artists transfer skills and model public art practices.

These interactions may not receive attention from the traditional art institutions but passing on mural painting as a trade through community arts organisations, and watching artists paint in public has led to a 'revival of local arts' in the city (Keenan 2022, 9).

Learning from the Mural Masters

> I guess my interest in, you know, sort of mural work and graffiti and things like that came from looking at the stuff that you grew up with, like that was all around you. So, you know, like mostly sort of, you know, political murals and things. And just as a kid looking at the scale of them and just being in awe of like, that's amazing. Not really understanding what… it meant really. Um, I remember… when I was really small, like maybe a primary school kid, like walking, walking along and seeing, like, Danny Devenny painting. Oh, wow. Bobby Sands. And I had no idea what it was, but he was up ladders like and just painting this big face. And I was going, holy shit, that's amazing look. (Seedhead Arts 'KVLR', 2023)

Belfast's political muralists and their public art practices have served as the inspiration for a new generation of artists who have chosen to engage in mural painting out of respect for the traditional artform, while bringing their artwork to the largest audience possible. The burst of mural production under the Re-imaging Communities Programme, and the community murals that followed, joined an already well-established social process of painting in public with community involvement. As Kevin Largey, the street artist better known as KVLR, points out in the quote above, having the opportunity to see an artist at work in one's own neighbourhood can be transformational. For many young people who

may not consider art galleries or museums a significant part of their own cultural traditions, having a painting on nearly every wall is formative. It is difficult to overstate the significance of viewing artists painting publicly during one's adolescence, and artists interviewed for this research agree that the political murals informed their artistic path. There are several artists working in Belfast today who credit the city's political muralists as their inspiration, noting that the political muralists took them on as apprentices, helped the younger artist as they developed technical painting skills, and introduced them to the social responsibility an artist has when painting for a large audience (Ervine, 2022; Doran, 2023; Gallagher, 2023; Molloy, 2023; 'Mural Artist', 2023; Seedhead Arts 'KVLR', 2023).

Two artists in particular, Danny Devenny and Mark Ervine, can be credited with inspiring young people to seek a career in art through their widely publicised public art collaborations. The pair became symbols of bridging the divide between republicans and loyalists when they developed a friendship after a somewhat chance encounter (Vaughn, 2012; Ervine, 2022; Northern Visions, 2013). Devenny met Mark Ervine's father, David Ervine, the former UVF member, loyalist prisoner, and PUP leader and the artist found that the two had many commonalities. When Devenny was asked to be a part of a photography exhibition in Belfast City Hall as a representative of the CNR muralist tradition, he says he suggested David Ervine's son, Mark, a prolific PUL muralist, to serve as a loyalist counterpart (Northern Visions, 2013). As they waited for their photographs to be taken, the two struck up a conversation and eventually a sincere friendship (Vaughn, 2012; Northern Visions, 2013; Ervine, 2022).

At the time of their first collaboration, mural changes were in the air in the city. The first Re-imaging programming was being implemented, and the tone of many

additional murals had begun to reflect the changing tides after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. The pair decided to paint an image together on the International Wall along the Falls Road. This wall is repainted quite often, and usually reflects CNR solidarity with international groups who are experiencing some form of oppression, examples of which have already been discussed in this text (*Field Notes International Wall*, 2024). Painting on the Falls Road would present a risk for Ervine, as he would be publicly working in a CNR neighbourhood on a site that has been historically painted by republican painters like Devenny. Devenny praised Ervine's courage, noting 'bear in mind that he was coming on to the Falls Road as a loyalist, and [with] a father a very public loyalist figure, to paint. I thought it was also very courageous of him, and it was so warm to see the reaction he got from in our community' (Northern Visions, 2013). Of the friendship between the pair, Ervine says 'our love of art was a great common denominator between the two of us. We both believe that we have something to offer our people, and we're not that different from each other' (Vaughn, 2012).

As the two artists began talks about their first collaboration, like political muralists in their respective mural traditions, they turned to the appropriation of an image that would be well-known and easy for the public to understand. They chose to copy Picasso's famous anti-war mural, *Guernica*, originally painted in 1937 as a response to a Nazi bombing campaign of the Basque town Guernica in northern Spain (Fig. 62, page 37). Devenny and Ervine embarked upon this painting on their own, without permissions or official government funding. It was funded by a business owner and was not part of concurrent Re-imaging programme. However, just as the first political murals were created when mural painting was in the news and a major part of the public dialogue, Belfast's *Guernica*

was painted at a time when public art as public service was a prominent talking point in the region (Belfast City Council, 2009; Independent Research Solutions, 2009; Rolston, 2012; Crowley, 2011).

Because Ervine and Devenny represented the opposing sides of sectarianism, the collaboration between the two artists became an international symbol of public art's ability to facilitate the ongoing peace efforts. The mural is still considered by local artists as a significant point in the history of public art in the city because it was a cross-community image created by two local, self-taught, well-known artists (Doran, 2023; Gallagher, 2023). Additionally, the artists allowed young people, passers-by, and tourists to help them create the work (Northern Visions, 2013). These encounters will prove to be transformative for some young artists who first picked up a paint brush with Devenny and Ervine (Gallagher, 2023). The collaboration also shifted the narrative for the two artists' careers, as they had been previously associated only with murals within their own communities. They became known as a 'cross-community' painters after their work and well-documented friendship became publicised (Vaughn, 2012; Ervine, 2022; Doran, 2023; Gallagher, 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023). The primary benefit of their collaboration is celebrated for its impact on peacebuilding and shared space, with numerous comments such as 'muralists like Danny Devenny and Mark Ervine have made huge strides towards a shared identity in Northern Ireland' (BBC, 2018). However, the publication of their work together, and the invitation to the community to participate in the painting process also significantly impacted the future of mural making in the city (Gallagher, 2023; Doran, 2023).

Even if young people did not actively paint with some of the political muralists, they recall seeing news stories about murals and watching the political murals being

painted. Hannah Constance, a street artist known as HMC, says that she noticed formal issues with political murals when she saw them being painted in her youth. However, the artist also notes that each time she saw a mural being changed, the technique improved: 'and it's interesting to see when they change it every couple of years, they'll change it and they'll put something else up on the wall, and it just gets a little bit better every time' (Constance, 2023). Just like Constance, many artists currently working in the city today claim to have been influenced by the presence of the political murals, and especially the opportunity to see murals in process. As was discussed in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, artists from both sides of the sectarian divide have included the public, whether community groups, passers-by, or even tourists, in the act of painting murals. The following discussion of two artists, Ciaran Gallagher and Paul Doran, will demonstrate the depths of the political mural influence, as both artists were shaped by their encounters with Devenny and Ervine and the city's political mural tradition.

Ciaran Gallagher began his life as an artist experimenting with biomorphic automatism. Interested in expressions of the unconscious, he created small scale imagery in the style of the Surrealists. The artist sought something more fulfilling after becoming frustrated with what he calls his 'psychedelic doodles' (Gallagher, 2023). In his early 20s, he encountered a group of well-known CNR muralists, Danny Devenny, Mickey Doherty, and Marty Lyons, who were collaborating with Mark Ervine along the Falls Road. Gallagher asked the group if he could 'chance his arm' with them as they painted (Gallagher, 2023). Inviting young people to participate in mural painting is a common occurrence, especially as artists paint on the International Wall (*Field Notes International Wall,* 2024). Gallagher says the men did not expect much of him, but after proving himself,

they hired him to work with their collective of self-taught/outsider artists on other mural projects (Gallagher, 2023). From that point, as Gallagher says, his 'trajectory changed' (Gallagher, 2023). Devenny remembers the encounter with Gallagher, as he recalled the variety of people who asked to help as he and Ervine painted on the International Wall, noting, 'we ended up having people who just happened to be in Belfast as tourists from Spain, Japan, America, and even a kid, and a wee friend of ours [Gallagher]. Now he's become part of the wee team. From the Antrim Road [he] just wandered back. Can we give a hand?' (Northern Visions, 2013). Working with the muralists introduced Gallagher painting on a large scale along with painting figurative imagery. After working with them on several projects, Gallagher says he was 'hooked' on murals (Gallagher, 2023).

The young artist was also hooked on their lifestyle. Both Devenny and Doherty were former IRA prisoners. Gallagher found the older artists' life experiences fascinating and enjoyed their banter and company the men kept (Gallagher, 2023). Sinn Fein politicians, former IRA prisoners, and activists who had been heavily involved in The Troubles were known to drop by a mural opening and stay for a drink afterwards. These encounters with Irish nationalists encouraged Gallagher to study the history of Irish art and incorporate some of those themes into his own work. In his efforts to learn as much as possible, the artist began to consider attending art college, though the political muralists discouraged this (Gallagher, 2023). However, when he did attend art school at University of Ulster, his experience working on murals gave him the confidence to have a pragmatic approach to making art and encouraged him to 'think large' from the beginning. The artist says his 'peers who were kind of… timidly trying to work out what they should put on canvas', and Gallagher was going big, using the trade secrets of the muralists to guide him

(Gallagher, 2023). Graduating in 2011 with a degree in Fine Art Painting, the artist returned to murals as his main artistic output (*Field Notes RUA,* 2023).

The artist's style shows an interest in narrative and figure drawing; both characteristics that were nurtured during his time painting with political muralists rather than during his time at art college. Though he has developed a personal distinctive style, his imagery harkens to the history of figures in political murals that were ubiquitous in his childhood (*Field Notes RUA,* 2023). While some of the artist's work celebrates cultural figures like musicians and publicans, other murals feature satire through their inclusion of symbols of sectarianism. Gunmen, men in balaclavas, the bombing of the Europa, the 'most bombed hotel in Europe', are combined with cultural symbols associated with each side of the sectarian divide. Orangemen, the Harland and Wolfe cranes, and an Irish language sign are all symbols that might be found in PUL or CNR murals in the city's housing estates. In Gallagher's murals, however, the symbols are combined with contemporary political figures, inside jokes, nods to the history of art, and joyful cultural figures to create a raucous and dynamic piece of visual satire (*Field Notes RUA,* 2023; McDowell, n.d.) (Fig. 63, page 38).

The real influence the muralists had on Gallagher's work, however, was not just the size of the artwork he created. They showed him what it meant to have a massive audience for a piece of art, and the audience is what became most important to Gallagher. His artistic output continues to be influenced by his time with the muralists, and he primarily creates murals rather than small scale images for a gallery, because of his respect for the history of murals in the city as well as having an audience he can reach with large-scale outdoor images. His artwork continues to tackle political subjects, occasionally

critical of contemporary political figures, an act that often gains media attention. Learning from the political muralists' emphasis on a secondary audience for their mural work, Gallagher notes that his political murals continue to have a life in the media after the initial encounter with an audience (BBC, 2022). The artist's ability to respond swiftly to the current political climate mirrors the artistic production of the political muralists with whom he worked. For example, in August of 2022, as the United Kingdom found itself embroiled in a dramatic leadership battle, Gallagher painted several images in response to the struggle and rushed to complete them before the primary contenders made their way to Northern Ireland. In one image, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak come to blows in a boxing arena. In a rapid response to the swiftly evolving campaign, Gallagher modified the murals to reflect the outcomes of each change of power (Fig. 64, page 38). As the artist points out, the event is over, the speech has been completed, but the mural still stands, and media outlets use it (Gallagher, 2023). This series of murals became symbolic of the chaos of the leadership and was broadcast around the world in print and online (BBC, 2022; Young, 2022).

The phenomenon of the impact that reproduced mural images have on an indirect audience has shaped the way Northern Ireland is seen in the world, as Kathryn Conrad notes:

> effectively fetishizing a violent vision of Northern Ireland in both the local and international imagery and thus shaping not only Northern Irish politics and culture but the economical and political relationship between Northern Ireland and the rest of the world. (Conrad 2007, 85)

Gallagher, and other artists of his generation are reclaiming this narrative and allowing for the city to be portrayed in the press with more nuance. While his images may have political subjects, they also include references to popular culture and the history of art. The murals are not personal expressions of the artist's politics. Rather, they are, in essence, satire influenced by the great British visual satirist William Hogarth, an 18th century artist who has served as inspiration for Gallagher (*Field Notes RUA,* 2023).

Gallagher made cultural and political murals without engaging with the traditional art world until 2020. With some of his large-scale mural commissions falling prey to the Covid-19 pandemic, he decided to try his hand at something a little smaller, creating *Mateusz*, an acrylic on canvas painting of a chef (Fig. 65, page 39). He entered the image into the Royal Ulster Academy's annual exhibition and won a silver medal. In 2024, his submission of a portrait of Tony Dunlop, a boxing trainer in North Belfast, won the RUA exhibition's gold medal (Fig. 66, page 39). After receiving accolades and awards from the RUA, Gallagher was elected to the Academy and now teaches anatomy and life drawing lessons for the institution (Gallagher, 2023; *Field Notes RUA,* 2023).

Though he has a degree in fine art and is a member of the Royal Ulster Academy, Gallagher takes umbrage with the moniker 'academic artist' (Gallagher, 2023). He, like many other academically trained artists interviewed for this research, notes that he did not learn the skills necessary for mural-painting while in art school. Rather, it was the political muralists who taught the artist about scaling up, narrative, and figure drawing. Working with this group of self-taught artists encouraged him to celebrate Belfast's working class in his choice of subject matter and gave him an essential education in the power of public art (*Field Notes RUA*, 2023).

Just as Gallagher credits his work with Devenny and other muralists as formative in his artistic practice, when artist Paul Doran began to consider a career in art, he also sought out political and cultural muralists from whom he could gain valuable experience. The artist, born in 1987, fondly remembers political murals along the Falls Road in his youth saying, 'there's been a wealth of life and art on gable walls' (Doran, 2023). Always drawn to the visual arts, Doran says, 'I've always been aware of the fact that I grew up seeing visual art in the environment around me' (Doran, 2023). He also recalls participating in mural production in the Lower Falls Road area when he was quite young. Doran specifically cites the well-publicised *Guernica* collaboration between Devenny and Ervine as the spark that made him consider mural painting, or a career in the arts more generally (Doran, 2023). Of the unlikely friendship between Devenny and Ervine, Doran says 'art chose them and saved them. And the decision of them working together was a brave move' (Doran, 2023). It is this bravery that makes Doran hopeful for the future of mural painting in the city.

The artist's adoration of the older generation of mural artists is worth quoting in full, as it makes clear the respect the younger artist has for Devenny and Ervine:

> I was always aware of them and inspired. So, I want to suggest how inspirational it was when I witnessed them working together, even if it was just on the news. It was really symbolic for me because I was quite shocked as well. And that's impact that's important was. [I] was just delighted to see them because I knew the stigma around mural artists, and a lot of it is linked to real conflict. So, when Danny and Mark spoke to the general community, because they were being filmed, and it was on

> maybe potentially BBC, and it was maybe the project *Guernica* that they collaborated on the International Wall, it left a major mark on me where I saw hope, and I could see that there was a future, and we were healing fast. (Doran, 2023)

Like many, Doran notes that learning about Devenny and Ervine's *Guernica* project was a formative moment for him. Not only did it show him that collaboration was possible between the two sides of the sectarian divide, but it also proved that art, and specifically public art, was the way to advertise that possibility of a more hopeful future for the region (Doran, 2023).

Since first approaching the elder artist as he was painting a mural, Doran has worked with Mark Ervine repeatedly as an unofficial apprentice, learning mural trade secrets, just as Gallagher learned from Devenny and others (McDaid, 2020; Doran, 2023). With Ervine, Doran painted a mural in an area known as 'no man's land', the area between the gates of the peace wall that separates the CNR area of Falls Road and the PUL Shankill area (McDaid, 2020; Ervine, 2022; Doran, 2023). Though the artists note that this collaboration in no man's land may seem like it is related to the peace process, the topics they chose to paint were neither loyalist nor republican (Ervine, 2022; Doran, 2023; McDaid, 2020). Rather, they painted subjects that were more broadly socio-political, specifically, they painted a grim image of two children in chains being led by a masked man, highlighting the issue of human-trafficking (Ervine, 2018; Ervine 2022; Doran, 2023) (Fig. 67, page 40).

After working on several murals with Ervine, Doran recently enlisted the elder artist's help for a project intended to highlight the importance of mental health. The mural

was created as a part of a larger art-based community project, *Minding Minds Together*, a collaboration between WAVE trauma, Ross's Auction House, and Queen's University Medical Students (Fig. 68, page 40). This type of multi-organisation collaborative community art is common in Belfast, where mural painting is the natural addition to many initiatives that focus on social issues. Painted by Doran, Niall Conlon, and Mark Ervine, the mural was created during the week leading up to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement 25th anniversary celebrations in April 2023. The three artists worked together to design a mural that would be striking and easily read by the public. They painted a large-scale pink brain with a rendering of Rodin's *The Thinker* superimposed atop a pink field. Painted on the Cuper Way peace wall, the image is easy to read and understand, an important criterion for public art according to Ervine (Ervine, 2022).

Ervine is especially critical of contemporary artists who create public art that consists of illegible symbols not easily understood by a general working-class public (Ervine, 2022). His inclusion of Rodin's recognisable image is one that he has recycled from previous mural efforts (Wibble, 2018). The finished mural combines Ervine's traditional mural style with the abstraction favoured by Doran and Conlon, but the symbolism clearly illustrates the concerns of the people of the city and is intended for both local and international audiences. Doran, who was the driving force behind this collaboration, expressed his interest in bringing mental health issues to the forefront in public dialogue (Doran, 2023). As the artists completed the work, passers-by were encouraged to make their own mark on the mural, to give the community a sense of ownership of the piece (Doran, 2023). Because this mural was painted directly on the peace wall, a wall that serves as an experimental art space for many street artists and graffiti

writers, it lasted just a few weeks. Now, the remnants of the image can be found behind the graffiti writer's tag (Fig. 68a, page 41).

Ervine and Doran are from different generations. They come from different sides of the political divide. They argue fiercely about politics and contemporary moral problems (Doran, 2023). However, when Doran began to find success in his studio art career, with solo gallery exhibitions and high-profile clients, he sought to return to the process of mural-making with Ervine. The goal was to both pay homage to the artform as well as elevate the profile of the older artist in the eyes of the traditional art establishment. Doran believes the mural medium is important to the city's artistic heritage and that local artists should pay their respects to mural painting at some point in their artistic careers (Doran, 2023).

Returning to mural-making, Doran sought not only to lift the historic practice and the mural masters of the city, but also to engage with a different audience, one that may be hesitant to enter an art gallery. This audience may be influenced by the presence of artists working publicly just as Doran was as a young man (Doran, 2023). The characteristics of successful public art discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis include the emphasis on audience and a consideration of the way a non-art audience may perceive art placed in their environment. As Mary Jane Jacob notes in 'An Unfashionable Audience':

> But what if the audience for art (who they are and what their relationship with the work might be) were considered as the goal at the centre of art production, at the point of conception, as opposed to the modernist Western aim of self-expression?

> And what if the location of the art in the world was determined by trying to reach and engage that audience most effectively? (Lacy 1995, 50)

Much of Doran's studio practice is rooted in inward-looking abstraction. The artist calls his artwork, 'a personalised abstraction of contemporary life, painted on canvas, in an attempt to capture the physical and non-physical phenomena associated with urban life and human subliminal perceptions and experiences of a city' (Gallery 1608, n.d.). His studio works are intended for the fine art establishment with paintings priced near £5000, more than the payment many artists earn for a large mural commission (Gallery 1608, n.d.; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). Doran's interest in abstraction as an expression of subliminal perceptions is at odds with Ervine's mural practice and anachronistic to Ervine's view that successful public art should be easily recognisable by a working-class audience (Ervine, 2022). However, Doran seems to honour this difference in artistic intent, and he often defers to the older artist in their mural collaborations, evidenced by the symbolism and style of the *Minding Minds Together* mural on the Cupar Way peace wall (Doran, 2023). By stepping outside of the studio and engaging with people as they pass by, the artist reaffirms his commitment to the historic mural tradition. Doran's collaboration with Ervine, and his interest in creating public art, demonstrates the respect the young artist has for the tradition of public art in Belfast as well as his continued focus on engaging a non-art audience rather than solely focus on his own self-expression (Lacy, 1995).

Paul Doran and Ciaran Gallagher are not the only artists who credit the mural tradition as artistic inspiration, and Danny Devenny and Mark Ervine are certainly not the

only older muralists who have provided that inspiration. Political muralists Marty Lyons, Mickey Doherty, Blaze FX, and Dee Craig all continue to work with young people in school workshops and community centres as they seek to inspire the next generation of artists. It was Devenny and Ervine, however, who became the symbols of a post-agreement Belfast, demonstrating that through public art, the two sides could be brought together. Kevin Largey, quoted earlier at length about political muralists' influence, considers his own collaboration with Mark Ervine as a significant marker in his career creating public art (Seedhead Arts 'KVLR', 2023). Glen Molloy, notes that his early public work was 'a direct response to the political stuff', but Molloy approached both Mark Ervine and Dee Craig for advice as he began to paint murals in earnest (Molloy, 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023).

As Bill Rolston notes, 'muralists are organic to their communities' (Rolston 2003, 12). Because of the process of mentoring younger artists and engaging in community programming, these public artists are the guardians of the city's mural tradition, encouraging the next generation of muralists. The impact Devenny and Ervine had on the next generation of artists is hard to overstate, as the pair are referenced consistently in artist interviews (Doran, 2023; Gallagher, 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; Molloy, 2023; Northern Visions 2013; Drummond, 2024; Bonner, 2024). Their influence, and especially their mentorship of younger artists, is in keeping with the characteristics of folk art and its emphasis on community engagement laid out in Chapter Three of this text. Devenny and Ervine, and the artists they have inspired, create works that deal with current events and emphasise participatory practices as integral to the artistic process (Delacruz 1999, 35; Ervine, 2022). As Delacruz notes, folk artists visualise 'communal culture' (Delacruz

1999, 35). For Devenny and Ervine, encouraging participation from the community and younger artists ensures that their product will be as 'organic to their communities' as the artists themselves (Rolston 2003, 12).

The publicity Devenny and Ervine received inspired not only a new generation of painters like Gallagher, Doran, Largey, and Molloy, but art advocates and civil servants as well. Bernard Conlon, who was serving as the communications officer for North Belfast Partnership during the time of the Re-imaging Programme, sought out the two artists to collaborate again in support of Urban II, a European Union funded regeneration programme in North Belfast. Urban II had two primary goals:

> first, to promote the formulation and implementation of particularly innovative strategies for sustainable economic and social regeneration of small and medium sized towns and cities or of distressed urban neighbourhoods in larger cities; Second, to enhance and exchange knowledge and experience in relation to sustainable urban regeneration and development in the Community. (Rogerson and Sadler, 2009)

While neither of these goals focus on the arts, Conlon, who was responsible for some of the programme's administration, witnessed the success of Devenny and Ervine's mural collaborations, and he thought that a public art piece had a role in the regeneration scheme, noting that he hoped to:

> move the Belfast mural tradition on a little bit, and also to give opportunities for mural painters like Danny Devenny and Mark Ervine. Because, you know, in the future we all face, we have to, you know, create opportunities for cultural, artistic

> and economic activity. And who knows, maybe in five, ten years' time, the Belfast mural tradition will be part of a creative industry. (Northern Visions, 2013)

Conlon's words from 2013 were somewhat prophetic, as the city is now home to one of the most vibrant Street Art scenes in the world – a transformation of the mural tradition – with numerous aerosol artists, in addition to studio painters like Gallagher and Doran, making a career as mural painters in Belfast's 'creative industry'. Many of these artists credit the public act of mural painting, and the city's history of mural production as inspiration for their artistic practice. Whether they are inviting a young person to add their touch to a political mural on the International Wall, creating a mural with students in a government-funded cross-community programme, or taking on an eager young artist as an apprentice, the older generation of political muralists have served as the art instructors for a new generation of artists; thus, ensuring the continuation of the mural tradition.

A Painted City

For nearly a century, painted walls represented conflict and division in the city of Belfast. In the twenty-five years since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, however, the city has undergone dramatic changes to its built environment. Some of those changes came through organised and well-funded programming, like the Re-imaging Communities Programme, while other changes were from grassroots community arts projects in which individuals took the initiative to invest in Belfast's urban landscape. At the heart of many of these changes, though, are the city's political murals, and questions remain about the fate of these objects. The impacts of murals on identity and the peace process have been widely studied, but the question of what should be done with murals that visualise sectarianism,

paramilitaries, and aggression has yet to be answered. Are they offensive and should they therefore be forcibly removed? Are they an important part of the city's history that provide context to the current political climate? As noted in the Introduction, even the lengthy study conducted by the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture, and Tradition has not given conclusive direction about the political murals:

> The Commission recommends that the Northern Ireland Executive develop an accredited arts, education and training initiative in relation to murals. Drawing on local and international expertise, this initiative would combine skills development with social and cultural history, community participation and artistic awareness through the creation and display of murals. It would facilitate and enable communities to erect positive images that reflect the identity, culture and traditions of their neighbourhoods. The Northern Ireland Executive might consider giving consideration to the long-term funding of such an initiative. (Northern Ireland Executive Office 2021, 136)

Recommending education, training, community participation, the Commission's Final Report does not seem to advise any actions that have not already been implemented either by the Re-imaging Communities Programme or community arts activism in the last two decades. When this costly report was published, there was immediate criticism of the lack of actionable items in the document, with one news article noting that the report 'does not contain an action plan, meaning it is unlikely the proposals will be implemented soon' (McCormack, 2021). As recently as April 2024, though, Alliance Party MLAs, Paula Bradshaw and Connie Egan, have supported legislation that would require the forced

removal of any murals with sectarian associations, and demanded government oversight over any display that contains symbols of the historic division (Kura, 2024). Artists, scholars, and community members alike express concern about ultimatums such as these, with one muralist noting that it is 'best left for time and circumstance to remove such images' ('Mural Artist', 2024).

During the early days of the Re-imaging Communities Programme, David Ervine was asked about the fate of political murals in the city. His response was:

> I'm torn. Part of me says keep them and part of me says allow them to change. And of course, if they change too much, they'll still be murals. But what will they mean? Will they be Mickey Mouse? Well, maybe that will tell a story about what's happening in this community as well. (Vaughn, 2012).

David Ervine's son, Mark, says 'I am not in total agreement with the Re-imaging we are doing because we have an opportunity to use some of these paramilitary images, not to glorify or romanticise it, but to make sure we don't forget where we have come from, so we don't go back' (Ervine, 2015). Mark Ervine considers the Belfast mural movement in a larger global context, linking it to the political murals in Mexico among other areas, saying, 'when I look at where I come from, with the culture and the history, I can't help but think, why shouldn't Belfast be a part of that movement?' (Ervine quoted in Anon., 2010). Ervine is advocating for a historical approach to the preservation of murals, one that recognises the mural tradition for its artistic contributions as well as its political influence (Ervine, 2022).

Since these aggressive murals have become tourist destinations in the wake of the peace agreement, scholar Tony Crowley warns of the economic impact that Re-imaging the political murals may have, commenting 'if tourism dries up for that reason, the state may well have helped kill the (sectarian, antagonistic and offensive) goose that provided if not quite the golden egg, then at least one source of revenue in some of the poorest areas of Northern Ireland' (Crowley 2011, 31). While government and community art programming in the last two decades has sought to eliminate this type of aggressive imagery, and street artists have overwhelmed the region with painted walls, political murals continue to appear, especially during times of tension (Kula, 2022).

Advocating for close attention to be paid to the desires of community members, Heather Floyd notes that murals 'reflect a society and community adapting to a changing external environment. Murals have always been, in Northern Ireland, a window with a clear view to what was happening in that community' (Floyd 2004, 43). Similarly, Jack Farrar provides a thoughtful roadmap for the future of these objects:

> It is crucial to approach the delicate mural question with nuance. Some works of public art portray outright depictions of sectarian violence and hatred, are deeply offensive, and repeatedly provoke trauma for victims. In such instances, adopting an absolutist stance of uncritical conservation would likely be a bulwark against progress. Nevertheless, we should exercise caution when removing them, recognising that murals often accommodate complex community narratives that rest beneath their surface symbolism. The long tradition of murals in Northern Ireland is a story enmeshed in the memory, hurt, and healing of the people living

> here. Any future development ought to be nurtured within the working-class communities where the murals are painted, rather than imposed upon them through a top-down process of intervention. (Farrar, 2023)

Though Farrar and others have been critical of what they call a 'top down' process, the fact remains that the large-scale government programming has placed a premium on the input from the working-class communities as decisions about the future of murals are made. The multiplicity of programming that has facilitated visual change in the city, whether from the top-down or bottom up, can be evaluated as evidence of Patricia Phillips's statement noted in Chapter Two: 'public life must also accommodate the actions of progress…. Public art and public life are not fixed' (Phillips 1989, 332). Murals have continued to be dynamic, not static. What has remained consistent, however, is that murals reflect the changing interests of the communities in which they are painted.

If the mural tradition remains true to its history, then the images will continue to change and reflect the interests of the community, no matter whether the process is top down or bottom up. At times of fear and uncertainty, paramilitary images will likely emerge as a show of strength (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; Kura, 2022) (Fig. 69, page 41). In times of concern about social issues, like drug use and suicide, muralists will turn to those topics for their subject matter (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023) (Fig. 70, page 42). Artists will continue to act as translators who project their community's history, thoughts, fears, joys, and triumphs onto the painted surface. As one loyalist mural artist says, in Belfast, 'murals [are] speaking for hundreds or thousands of people' ('Mural Artist', 2023).

Artists, activists, and community members will continue to take to the walls as they turn to the local artform for expression.

As the city enters a period of artistic pluralism on its walls, a rich Street Art movement that owes much of its origins and success to the city's political mural tradition has emerged. Many street artists were inspired to paint walls because of the powerful images they saw in their youth. Some also learned to 'scale up' and emphasise visual narrative from political muralists. They were also undoubtedly influenced by the flurry of public mural painting during the Re-imaging Communities Programme. Consequently, the Street Art movement has emerged as a powerful extension of the history of painted walls in Belfast. By producing murals in community workshops as well as international art festivals, the city's contemporary street artists have shifted the institution of political mural painting to a new and dynamic artistic practice. As the Street Art movement makes inroads to the traditionally segregated areas of the city, it lives side by side with sectarian imagery, creating a dynamic visual dialogue between Belfast's past and present.

Even though some artists and arts professionals may bristle when being compared to the political mural painters of the city, many reference the presence of political murals in their adolescence as an influence on their work (Turkington, 2022; Molloy, 2023; *We Speak Wall,* 2022; Seedhead Arts 'KVLR', 2023). In a recent interview about the power of the Street Art movement and its artistic inspiration, Adam Turkington stated the goals of the Street Art movement clearly: 'let's reclaim the language of conflict' (Seedhead Arts 'KVLR', 2023). Turkington is an art advocate who has built a career on supporting the Street Art scene in the city. He currently serves dual roles at Seedhead Arts and Daisy Chain, Inc., both of which facilitate major public painting projects and events. Through

these two organisations, he acts as a creative producer for many of the city's public art projects and seeks to provide the community quality art to combat the political murals (Turkington, 2022; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). Turkington, who was an adolescent and teen during the height of period of conflict in the city, is often the voice of the city's Street Art movement, and notes:

> It's Belfast. Whenever somebody puts something on a wall, people understand innately, in a visceral way, how important that is, how it impacts your life. Because they've had shit shouted at them from walls their whole lives. So, when you put something pretty on a wall, it makes them feel better. (McCormick and O'Rawe, 2024)

Street artists rely on the community's familiarity with the medium for the success of their work, and they credit viewing murals as children as informative for their practice. Artists working in the public realm continue to find inspiration as the carry on the tradition of painting walls in response to current events. The street artist, Kevin Largey (KVLR), whose adolescence was spent in an interface area during The Troubles has worked closely with Turkington supporting the Street Art scene and makes direct links between the challenging content of political murals and the rise of Street Art in the city:

> it was always socially acceptable that to have like a, you know, a terrorist or, you know, some, some kind of fucking mad shit painted on the end of your street… So, when people are painting nice things around the place and, it's just like, 'that's class'…. So, it's strangely it's not a big transition for the city, but in a way it is

> because, you know, like more, more positive sort of messages are going out there and, you know, it's sort of brightening the place up. (Seedhead Arts 'KVLR', 2023)

In remarks specifically about Belfast's burgeoning Street Art scene and its ties to the history of murals in the region, Turkington states, 'Northern Ireland has a rich cultural heritage for mural art, and this really appeals to creatives who want to develop their skills while gaining inspiration from like-minded artists in a supportive space' (Campbell, 2023). The success of the Street Art movement relies on the links to the mural history of the city while also providing, not only a new visual narrative, but also new support systems for artists and creatives.

Declan McGonagle, whose advocacy of community involvement in public art has been cited previously in this text, argues that 'new models of art and institutional practice are needed in the present, which foreground and validate participation, engagement and commonality – the reconnection of artist and community within social space' (McGonagle 2007, 425). McGonagle continues:

> the sustained marginality of community arts practice was because of something the sector had never actually addressed – that value and power in our culture are derived from and conferred by access to means of distribution not means of production. (McGonagle 2007, 426)

By 'means of distribution', the author refers to the 'cultural mechanisms in society', like galleries, theatres, and museums, that are home to art experiences and, more importantly, to artistic validation (McGonagle 2007, 426). Capturing this 'means of distribution' and raising the profile of artists who work in the public realm, is a goal of the arts administrators

who manage Daisy Chain, Inc. and Seedhead Arts as they provide support for the Belfast Street Art movement (Reid, 2023; Turkington, 2023).

Seedhead Arts was founded by Turkington as an entity that would 'help change Belfast, NI and the world through Street Art, Cabaret, Magic, Philosophy, Politics, Training, shouting about stuff & whatever else creative stuff you got' (Seedhead Arts, *Seedhead Arts,* 2023). The organisation facilitates Street Art tours, festivals, and community-building events in addition to managing Street Art commissions all around the city. It is a small and nimble organisation that takes on challenging topics and supports artists with difficult projects, advocating for artistic freedom and acting as a liaison between artist and patron (Turkington, 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024).

Daisy Chain, Inc. is a slightly more formal group that serves as a 'creative consultancy reimagining spaces through people and culture' (Daisy Chain, 2024). The team offers consultation on creative placemaking, cultural research, arts workshops, urban regeneration, and cultural events (Daisy Chain, 2024). With clients ranging from housing authorities to business districts and Belfast City Council, Daisy Chain seeks to centre artists in the conversation about Belfast's new narrative. Both organisations understand that Street Art is more than a community art endeavour or a means of self-expression; they grasp that the act of painting in public can also 'support a sense of neighbourhood history, culture and identity and helps drive economic vitality' (Brennan 2019, 34).

Support from the artistic community is a part of the culture of making art in Belfast. Street artists forge bonds at festivals and paint jams. The city's tradition of passing on painting skills is alive and well as artists receive advice and instruction from more experienced artists early in their Street Art career (Constance, 2023; Hanna, 2022;

Seedhead Arts 'KVLR', 2023; Seedhead Arts, 'Friz', 2023; Bonner, 2024). However, building on the professionalisation of public artists established by the Re-imaging Communities Programme, the leadership team behind Daisy Chain, Inc. and Seedhead Arts recognise that artists need financial support as well. Gemma Reid, a freelance arts and heritage practitioner, serves with Turkington as two of the leaders of Daisy Chain, Inc. Both claim that their markers for success for the organization are closely tied to the money given to artists for commissions (Turkington, 2023; Reid, 2023). Reid states, 'we are the mediators between a client and artist… providing opportunities for artists and also convincing the clients of the worth of involving artists' (Reid, 2023).

Advocating for the value of artists includes finding funding sources that will allow for artistic expression. Public artists have always had to walk a fine line between the artist's vision, the cost, and the desires of the funding source. Whether the funder is an illegal paramilitary, a government agency, a non-profit foundation, or a private company, patrons will always have a say in public art. The cost of large-scale projects often prohibits personal artistic expression, and art that is in the public realm is often organised by numerous stakeholders whose opinions may differ. Miwon Kwon notes the challenges of these collaborations between powerful agents in a community stating 'seeing art as dangerous is an acknowledgement of its power. Public art in particular is powerful, because it stands for the "powers that be"' (Kwon 2002, 14). In Belfast, murals commissioned by powerful paramilitaries as well as those commissioned by government or corporate sponsors can often reflect the agenda of each, which may be at odds with the needs of the community. Historically, it has been the artist's responsibility to bring these two entities together, either through community painting workshops or negotiations with

those in positions of power (McGinn, 2022; 'Mural Artist', 2023). However, with organisations like Daisy Chain, Inc. and Seedhead Arts, artists find that having an advocate to negotiate on their behalf allows for greater control over their artistic vision (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024).

Daisy Chain, Inc. and Seedhead Arts have added to the already dense outdoor gallery with hundreds of commissions in the last decade. Through this support, artists find that Belfast offers a career in the arts that may not be possible in other cities. The artform is ubiquitous in the city with nearly every business shutter, junction box, and many walls adorned with a local artists' designs. The city is home to hundreds of examples of Street Art along with dozens of artists working full-time in the medium, both extraordinary numbers for a city of Belfast's size.

In his support of Street Art and its positive impacts on art education and career opportunities, James Daichendt notes:

> the paradigm for success in the art world includes receiving a BFA, MFA, and then – if you're lucky – getting a gallery to pay attention to you by arranging a show of your work once every 2 years. The Street Art movement has challenged many of these assumptions regarding the "right" or "proper" method for becoming an artist. (Daichendt 2013, 10)

Daichendt continues, 'the large numbers of street artists that are getting their messages out, achieving success, or even just surviving are modelling creative traits for others…. Thus, the community aspects of Street Art can be like the classroom' (Daichendt 2013, 12). Most street artists who received art specific training at university confirm that their academic

experience did not prepare them for Street Art (McGinn, 2022; Gallagher, 2023; Constance, 2023; Convery, 2023; Seedhead Arts 'Friz', 2022). Rather, artists believe the 'best education is doing' (McGinn, 2022). According to John Johnston, who has referred to Street Art as 'public pedagogy', artists working in public painting projects, especially those working with young people in community projects, 'can be seen as critical public pedagogues: they apply their knowledge and expertise to redress larger economic, racial and socio-political problems' and 'function as a communicator who places dialogue at the centre of their practice' (Baker 2015, 182-183). Jonathan Hodge, who was instrumental in several major Street Art commissions in the Shankill area, says that Street Art 'demonstrates to children and young people that a career in the creative industries is a viable opportunity, particularly as this is a major area of growth within the local economy' (linkedin.com, 2023).

The economic growth associated with public art is well-documented. Even in times of great strife, governments have found value in commissioning artwork as 'a catalyst for economic growth and community development' (Iliev, Wetterau and Kraus 2024, 36). The evidence is clear that the inclusion of art programming in derelict spaces and unused areas can lead to increased foot traffic, a rise in tourism, and benefits for small businesses (Iliev, Wetterau and Kraus 2024, 40; Belfast City Council, n.d.; Skinner and Jolliffe, 2017). Belfast's familiarity with painted walls adds to the ease with which these types of projects can be produced. Street artist Eoin McGinn notes:

> Belfast is a good place to be a street artist because people have been surrounded by images on walls like their whole lifetime…. wall painting is just ingrained and

> people in Belfast so, like, it's really easy to paint walls… make a phone call and get permission for a wall like that. And there's nothing really the city council are going to do to stop, you know, there's no planning commission players or anything like that. (McGinn, 2022).

Belfast City Council may not control every wall, but they do have the power to either encourage or discourage wall painting around the city. Presently, the Council's decision has been to use Street Art, and the community's understanding of mural painting, to their advantage. Street Art projects are part of many city-funded initiatives (Belfast City Council, n.d.). Whether the goal is to brighten up a street, draw attention to Belfast's history, or advertise commercial districts around the city, Belfast City Council has proven to be one of the Street Art movement's most noteworthy supporters.

While there are no mentions of political murals or that type of mural tourism on the City Council's public-facing website, the site does have a page dedicated to public art with multiple links for Street Art maps, tours, and information about the 'City as a Gallery' (Belfast City Council, n.d.). The Council turns to tourism guides like Lonely Planet as they celebrate the city's urban landscape, quoting, '[Belfast's] Street Art would rival that of anywhere else in the world. The creativity and arts sectors have transformed the city over the last two decades' (Lonely Planet quoted in Belfast City Council, n.d.). The support of the Street Art movement by Belfast City Council has recently extended to the approval of legal graffiti walls in an effort to both curb graffiti around the city, as well as to encourage street artists to practice their craft (Purdy, 2023; Constance, 2023). Artists have long been linked to economic and community development; indeed, recognising the economic and

aesthetic benefits of Street Art, Belfast City Council, along with business improvement districts like Belfast One BID and Linen Quarter BID, collaborate with commercial industries and support the Street Art movement as they seek to drive tourism and economic growth (Grodach 2010, 475; Belfast One, 2016; Linen Quarter BID, n.d.; Seedhead Arts, 2024). In Belfast, through partnerships with City Council and business districts, artists are poised to help transform areas of the city that may have issues with urban blight and antisocial behaviours (Turkington, 2023).

Two noteworthy Street Art programmes that have been fully endorsed by Belfast City Council are the Belfast Canvas and Belfast Entries projects. The smaller of the two, Belfast Canvas, is a partnership between Destination CQ (Cathedral Quarter) and Belfast One Business Improvement District. The programme:

> transformed utility cabinets owned by the Department for Communities and Virgin Media telecommunications boxes. Before decorating the cabinets, artists collaborated with community groups and university students. The project aims to improve the look and feel of the city centre and give people a sense of ownership, while supporting up-and-coming artists. (Belfast City Council, n.d.)

The 'up-and-coming' artists employed for this public painting project are often trained by more established street artists, continuing the city's tradition of passing painting skills from one generation to the next (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024) (Fig. 71 and 72, pages 42 and 43). However, established artists, like Jo Pearson, whose primary practice is printmaking, not aerosol or Street Art, have begun to turn to this programme as they choose to add the city's tradition of wall painting to their artistic practice (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024;

Pearson, 2024). This small-scale programme allows for experimentation and exploration of the world of public art and has encouraged young artists to challenge themselves to scale up their designs while also offering opportunities for paid work, demonstrating to the public that artwork is worth the investment.

In addition to the Belfast Canvas project, the Council has also funded Belfast Entries, a project designed to bring the city's historic narrow entries into use by employing street artists as well as other arts professionals to redesign the spaces as hubs for commerce and community. Armed with deeply researched briefs provided by the arts professionals at Daisy Chain, Inc., the Belfast Entries project relied heavily on street artists for the unique designs (Reid, 2023; Bonner, 2024). For most of the entries, large public wall paintings serve as the backdrop for other artists' installations (Reid, 2023; Bonner, 2024) (Fig. 73 and 74, pages 44 and 45). The spaces encourage foot traffic and direct locals and tourists to small businesses, restaurants, and pubs found within the alleyways. With a nod to the traditional use of the entries as sites of dynamic conversation and debate along with links to the city's industrial past, the entries are a source of pride for both the council members who supported the project, as well as for the arts professionals who facilitated the programme (Belfast City Council *City as Gallery,* 2020; Reid, 2023). This project has been very well-received and 'won the Public – Private Partnership category at the all-Ireland Urban Land Institute and CBRE Excellence in Placemaking Awards 2021' (Belfast City Council, n.d.). The finished product demonstrates that it is possible for a 'top down' public art effort to satisfy the community needs as well as the interests of those in positions of power.

However, as with any 'top down' art endeavour, whether the patronage is government funded or one that is organised by a business district or corporate entity, Senie and Webster point out that:

> it is reasonable to view corporate support for art with some scepticism. Corporations are in the business of making money and spend it only when they perceive it to be in their best economic interests…. This does not necessarily mean that the resulting art is not also a true public amenity. However, the responsibility remains with the viewer to filter out auxiliary messages, to judge the art on its own terms, and to consider its appropriateness to the site. (Senie and Webster 1998, 103)

There are numerous examples of this type of corporate, government, and creative agency collaboration in Belfast, as many projects often include several stakeholders. Street artists have learned to deftly manage these parameters, recognising that they can continue to make their mark on the city if they work with the official channels. In many cases, Seedhead Arts or Daisy Chain, Inc. act as the mediator between artists and patron, setting expectations in advance for all parties involved (Reid, 2023; Turkington, 2023). With the support of funding agencies and the advocates at Daisy Chain, Inc. and Seedhead Arts, artists have begun to use their platform to build community, engage in creative placemaking, and transform public spaces into art hubs that transcend the traditional binary sectarian divide (Reid, 2023; Belfast City Council, n.d.; Turkington, 2022; Seedhead Arts 'KVLR', 2023).

Recently, Belfast One Business Improvement District, which serves the city centre, collaborated with McQuillan Companies to replace hording along Garfield Street, an area that has seen rampant graffiti and issues with dereliction (Belfast One, 2024). They engaged Seedhead Arts to host a mini paint jam, a festive event in which several artists come together to paint at the same time. The artists had freedom of expression on their individual imagery; however, because this was funded by Belfast One, the artists had to work within the Belfast One signature colour scheme of purple and yellow (Bonner, 2024; Belfast One, 2024) (Figs. 75 and 76, page 46). Rather than investment in another form of urban revitalisation, the Belfast One Business Improvement District, like so many other groups in the past, chose painted walls as their answer to the issue of urban blight along Garfield Street. Artists transformed the previously drab street with vibrant imagery that served their own artistic needs as well as those of the organisers.

As noted earlier, the city's Street Art advocates, including Belfast City Council, community arts organisations, and notably Daisy Chain Inc. and Seedhead Arts, have harnessed the 'means of distribution' referenced by McGonagle, allowing for open access to fine art on the streets (McGonagle 2007, 426). Daisy Chain Inc.'s Gemma Reid says, 'at Daisy Chain, we describe ourselves as place makers and cultural agitators… we're about utilising the arts to transform our cultural spaces into vibrant, relevant and playful centres' (Belfast City Council, 2020). Paint jams, community workshops, and large-scale events emphasise the importance of public art in the city's post-conflict transformation.

Through events like Hit the North, the largest Street Art Festival in Ireland, these artists and arts professionals are announcing to the world that Belfast is an international hub for painting on walls (Fig. 77, page 46). Turkington, organizer of the annual festival,

notes that the 2023 event drew artists from as far away as South Africa and Ukraine to take part in the weekend of wall painting (Campbell, 2023). Turkington says:

> there's definitely a gravitas about coming to paint in Belfast that people really like, you know, because of that whole painting on the wall vibe, you know, the murals and all mural art in Belfast tradition. (*We Speak Wall,* 2022)

The Hit the North Festival, established in 2013, has grown each year expanding beyond the original North Street City Centre location (Hanna, 2022). The event began after Turkington, along with artists, concluded a series of graffiti and Street Art workshops at Belfast's Waterfront (Seedhead Arts 'KVLR', 2023). Recognising that an event in which artists had the opportunity to paint together would build community and capacity for public art, Turkington and Eoin McGinn collaborated on the creation of the festival. McGinn and Kevin Largey sought out street artists whose work they respected, and invited them to participate, acting as public art curators (Seedhead Arts 'KVLR', 2023; Seedhead Arts, 2014). To date, hundreds of murals have been painted as a part of the annual festival. While some have endured since the first event, many are painted on temporary boards that are repainted each year.

The festival is underwritten by Hennessey, a sponsor that was secured in 2020, and also has various additional local funding. Importantly, as the primary corporate sponsor, Hennessey does not interfere with artistic choices at all. Rather, the company only asks that their brand be included in promotional materials (Hanna, 2022). Now that Hit the North is well-established, Turkington and his team do not struggle to find walls for the dozens of artists who participate in the event. Businesses and property owners around the

city recognise the benefit of having a large mural and offer walls willingly (Seedhead Arts 'KVLR', 2023). The event culminates in a weekend street party with music, games, food, drinks, and artists who stand side by side as they create their murals.

The types of Street Art included in the festival varies. Local artists serving as curators and promoters of the festival 'align themselves with the artists' visions for expansive audiences' and allow for a truly dynamic and varied series of paintings to be created each year (Lacy 1995, 41; Bonner, 2024). Signature artists, who have international reputations, locals who are just beginning their Street Art experience, and graffiti artists who have been making their marks on the city for decades have been known to work side by side at the event (Hanna, 2022; Turkington, 2023). Artists participating in the festival are given full artistic freedom, and Turkington says that his 'number one ideology around a festival is that my artists feel looked after' (Turkington, 2022). Though many artists' works act as a visual response to current events, some artists choose to lean into the circumstances of the wall they are assigned and provide a little levity to mural-rich the environment.

Ray Bonner, or FGB, an artist known for his cartoonish cheeky imagery, is a Street Art advocate and tour guide for the Seedhead Arts Street Art Tour. Bonner has participated in the Hit the North Festival annually. Previously, he painted on the temporary boards that are primed and repainted with a new design each year. However, he was assigned a partially demolished wall for the 2024 event. Choosing to work with the unique dimensions of the wall, the artist painted a giant *trompe l'oeil* partially-eaten candy bar drawing attention to Belfast's issues with dereliction with a demonstration of his unique style and the city's witty sarcasm (Bonner, 2024) (Fig. 78, page 47). Bonner is an excellent

example of an artist who gained experience with small commissions facilitated by Seedhead Arts, and then moved to larger, more financially profitable commissions (Bonner, 2024; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024).

Like other artists of his generation, Bonner recognises the importance of the community's familiarity with paint on walls. The artist says:

> we're quite open here to have an art on the outside, because we're so used to seeing it. Like, everybody's seen it since we grew up, and I think I know personally I hated the stuff I saw growing up… Like, the political stuff, because it was all these murals, but I think it gave me a taste for that idea of, oh, you can use outside to get a message to people and was like, anybody can do it. If people are used to seeing it, people are used to seeing it around them, but people want to change it and it really kind of positive way. (Bonner, 2024)

This comment echoes comments made by other Street Artists and organisers of the movement. The city is accustomed to seeing paint on walls, and Bonner and others recognise that this familiarity and respect for the medium is what has led to the possibility of pursuing Street Art as a career in the city. Bonner notes that because of the proliferation of murals, people seek out painters for shutters for businesses, and that work leads to further commissions for branding, t-shirt design, and finally larger scale murals (Bonner, 2024). Bonner says, 'I think people are used to seeing art – public art – on walls around here…. There's a lot of younger business owners, and they understand the benefit of it' (Bonner, 2024).

Thanks to the city's familiarity and respect for mural painting, along with the efforts of Daisy Chain, Inc., Seedhead Arts, the success of the Hit the North Festival, and numerous community groups that commission public art, the Street Art movement is firmly established in Belfast. It draws international artists and criticism, and its participants engage in debate about collaboration, content, and artistic vision. Critics of the Belfast Street Art movement state that these artists stay away from the segregated areas of the city, and focus primarily on the city centre (Ervine, 2022; Molloy, 2023; 'Mural Artist', 2023). While there is some truth to this, as Reid states, 'contemporary Street Art has taken off principally in Belfast City Centre, where there aren't the political murals. That's changing. Some of the contemporary street art is moving out to other parts of the city now' (Reid, 2023). Bryan, Connolly and Nagle, as recently as 2019, note, 'driven by the commercial demands of tourism and the policy and legal demands of equality, the central areas of Belfast have been developed to tackle the sectarian divide, while its residential spaces, particularly the working-class areas, have remained divided' (Bryan, Connolly, and Nagle, 2019, 204). However, as Reid points out, 'that's changing', as there are street artists who are making inroads into areas that are traditionally filled with sectarian murals (Reid, 2023).

Turkington, through his work with Seedhead Arts, has focused much of his creative energy on East Belfast, an area known for its sectarian UVF and UDA murals (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). Newtownards Road, the main thoroughfare through East Belfast, is a street well-known for its sectarian murals commissioned by loyalist paramilitaries. The previously discussed Blaze FX murals celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the East Belfast Brigade Ulster Defence Association, welcome visitors to 'Loyalist East Belfast'

(Figs. 79a-d, page 48). A few blocks away, striking images of balaclava-clad men with automatic weapons, commissioned by the Ulster Volunteer Force in 2011, can be seen dominating the landscape (Fig. 80, page 48). However, on the same road, one can also find an early example of a collaborative mural by Marian Noone, or Friz, an artist often referred to as 'the most successful female street artist on the island of Ireland' (Seedhead Arts, 'Friz', 2022) (Fig. 81, page 49). Noone has completed dozens of murals in the region and is widely respected amongst those in the Street Art community (Constance, 2023; Seedhead Arts, 'Friz', 2022). She assisted London-based artist Ed Hicks on the Newtownards Road project. Their mural of a young woman frolicking through a meadow faces the popular Eastside Visitors' Centre, overlooks a community garden, and has become a landmark on the street. The large collaboration was the first piece of public art facilitated by Seedhead Arts in East Belfast (streetartcities.com, n.d.).

Just steps away, another large 2018 Friz mural titled *Winter's End* can be found, and work by the street artist KVLR along with an interactive painting by Danni Simpson are also near (Figs. 82, 83, 84, pages 49 and 50). As Daichendt notes, the presence of artwork with different points of view creates a dialogue 'of ongoing conversations where imagery is layered upon each other or where multiple artworks are placed in close proximity to each other' (Daichendt 2013, 11). Friz's early impact on the Street Art scene blossomed on a road that is known for its sectarian murals. Just as the proximity of Ed Reynolds's work creates a dialogue with the sectarian images near it in the Shankill area, the juxtaposition of Friz's work alongside the paramilitary and PUL cultural murals that are still *in situ* provides a fuller depiction of the current cultural climate in East Belfast.

Street artists are crossing out of their own communities and engaging in public art practice in areas where they may have felt unwelcome just a few years ago (Bonner, 2024). Thanks to neighbourhood organizations, government and private funding, as well as community-minded artists, the Shankill area in West Belfast is becoming home to a budding contemporary art scene and hosts the studios of many artists who have a CNR upbringing (Bonner, 2024). This area faced decades of violence during The Troubles, and it continues to struggle with issues of dereliction and lack of affordable housing; however, new alliances are being forged between businesses, property owners, and artists, to revitalise the neighbourhood (Turkington, 2023; Drummond, 2024; Bonner, 2024).

The Shankill Mission Building, an 1896 architectural gem originally built for support services for the local community, had been neglected, lying derelict since 2009 (Argyle Business Centre, n.d.) (Fig. 85, page 51). Vault Artist Studios is an interdisciplinary artist collective, including many street artists, was seeking new studio spaces after a 'meantime use' deal ended in East Belfast (Turkington, 2023). An agreement was made between Vault Artist Studios and the owner of the Shankill Mission Building, Argyle Business Centre, and with artists' sweat equity and a bit of funding from Belfast City Council, a new art hub was created in the middle of the Shankill (McCarthy, 2023). As a part of this refurbishment project, seven Street Art images were commissioned with Daisy Chain, Inc. serving as the consultancy. The local artists, Ray Bonner (FGB), Gerry Norman (NRMN), Kerrie Hanna, Laura Nelson (SzuSzu Signs), Marian Noone (Friz), Eoin McGinn (Emic), and Rob Hilken, created individual artworks subtly referencing the area's history along the side of the Shankill Mission building (Figs. 85 a-g, pages 51-54). These artists range from those who work solely in Street Art to stained glass workers; however,

they have all incorporated aerosol painting into their oeuvre. Gemma Reid describes the commission with pride, noting the value of adding Street Art to major transformations such as the Shankill Mission Building. Reid continues:

> there's something about the temporary nature of [Street Art] as well, that it's a moving and changing conversation with the place that it inhabits. Where sculpture feels so permanent and unmovable… Street Art has that vibrancy and flexibility in response to a moment in time that escapes what a statue does. (Reid, 2023)

While each of the seven artists hired for this commission are worthy of discussion, one artist's work exemplifies the Daisy Chain, Inc. process as well as the pull that the Street Art movement has on artists in the city. Kerrie Hanna's artistic training, and her primary practice, is in stained glass. Like many artists who work in a variety of media in Belfast, Hanna incorporated Street Art or mural painting into her artistic output. Hanna's interest in stained glass influences her aerosol work on the Shankill Mission building. However, the image is also informed by the history of the building and the Shankill area itself (Fig. 85c, page 52). Daisy Chain's Gemma Reid was instrumental in the creation of the brief for this project. Reid recognises that Street Art must respond to its environment, and her sensitivity to those spaces can be found in the briefs that she and the team at Daisy Chain, Inc. provide to artists with whom they work.

Reid's research for the Mission Building project provides a deeper historical approach to the study of the Shankill area in an effort to give the community a narrative that goes beyond The Troubles (Reid, 2023; Hanna, 2023). Reid was moved by the history of the Shankill's original church, the community's creation of a mission, and the area's history of 'cooperative collective action' (Reid, 2023). According to the artist, Kerrie

Hanna, the brief Daisy Chain, Inc. provided encouraged a focus on 'the original Old Church itself in the year 550 and how the interconnected local communities grew from it being established as the first Belfast parish 1500 years ago' (Hanna, 2023). With this research in mind, Hanna found artistic inspiration in an early 20th century woman artist, Wilhemina Geddis, whose stained glass can be found in the nearby Townsend Presbyterian Church (Hanna, 2023). To celebrate the history of the area, its legacy collective action, and its previous employment of women artists, Hanna created two stained glass style women looking over the church at sunset.

For their Street Art commissions, Daisy Chain's detailed and well-researched project briefs are an important part of the city's visual arts transition. Artist Eoin McGinn says 'I really like doing projects for Daisy Chain because they do all that research, and they dig deep into a place, and they find the find the stories and the narratives' (McGinn, 2022). As Street Art, as opposed to political murals, is a relative newcomer to the public art landscape in some segregated areas, the more prepared the artist is, the more likely the community will embrace the public art and be proud of it. Reid's experience with heritage preservation, her interest in a longer view of Belfast's history, and her understanding of the value of art in the public sphere, are an integral part of Daisy Chain's success in public art projects (Reid, 2023). The Street Art images on the Shankill building join many sectarian images that are still *in situ* in the area. In fact, Kerrie Hanna's image is painted over the letters UDA, which can still be seen as they are raised above the surface of the wall (Fig. 85c Detail, page 52).

Daisy Chain, Inc. and Seedhead Arts are joined by community organisations, government groups, as well as formal art schools in their efforts to shift the city's narrative

of painted walls, and they are all turning their attention to the city's historically segregated housing estates as the locations for their creative placemaking efforts. In addition to Vault Artist Studios, the Shankill Mission building also houses the ArtEZ University of the Arts' site-specific college and its International Master Artist Educator Programme, which trains artists to create 'art for equality and social justice' (www.artez.nl, n.d.). The leader of this programme is John Johnston, the Belfast native who has overseen multiple public art projects in the area and writes extensively on the power of Street Art to serve as public pedagogy (Baker, 2015). The ArtEZ programme and Johnston encourage artists to create artwork that is meaningful to their communities providing 'pedagogies and educational approaches [that] enable agency' (www.artez.nl, n.d.). The International Master Artist Educator Programme brings art students to the Shankill area, specifically because of its history of conflict, as students 'team up with artists and cultural workers from communities most affected by social or cultural marginalisation' (www.artez.nl, n.d.). It is through ArtEZ's international programme that Iranian artist, Leyli Rashidi Rauf, was introduced to Belfast's mural tradition and chose a community based large-scale mural as her capstone project (Fig. 86, page 55).

The artist does not usually engage in mural work. Rather, Rashidi Rauf's studio art practice is 'focused on representing the female body' in drawings and installations (Rashidi Rauf, 2023). She notes, 'upon arriving in Belfast, I was struck by the abundance of political murals related to The Troubles conflict in the city, as well as newer paintings in fantasy or graffiti styles' (Rashidi Rauf, 2023). Being influenced by the male-dominated political murals on nearly every wall in the Shankill area, Rashidi Rauf says, 'I began questioning to what extent the real lives and narratives of all the women in this city contributed to its

visual identity, and how this presence could be reflected in the subjects of the murals. I observed that most images of women in the murals were either political (historical) paintings or fantasy depictions. This made me wonder about the women currently living in the city' (Rashidi Rauf, 2023).

After being shown several walls as options for her project, Rashidi Rauf chose a long wall across from the Cupar Way peace wall, the wall that separates the PUL Shankill neighbourhood from the CNR Falls Road area of West Belfast. The artist was struck by the peace wall, its draw for tourists, and its imposing nature, and thought a dynamic piece of artwork would be an effective response to the dominance of the wall (Rashidi Rauf, 2023). The artist says her goals were:

> promoting greater inclusion, diversity, and representation of less visible identities in the public arena. The gaze, bodies, and presence directed towards the peace wall prompt questions about the existing structure and mechanism of the wall, including its commercial value and revenue-generating capacity. I hope that this inquiry can initiate a cycle of observation and acknowledgment of those bodies and identities that have been overlooked in the public arena until now. (Rashidi Rauf, 2023)

Rashidi Rauf first turned specifically to ethnic community groups in the area and conducted interviews with the women there. She states that 'an important aspect for me was the diversity of their identities. My objective was to depict women from different races and generations together in a public space. However, I was cautious to ensure the artwork did not come across as merely a poster or a strong political or social statement' (Rashidi Rauf, 2023). Though the artist had to be encouraged by local community leadership to include

more Shankill women rather than her original focus of ethnic minorities, the process was considered a collaboration with community members (Drummond, 2024). Billy Drummond, of Alternatives Restorative Justice, advised Rashidi Rauf on the project, and that local community connection was crucial. Because she worked closely with Alternatives Restorative Justice, who helped secure permissions for the wall, there was a deeper connection to the Shankill community through much of the artistic process (Drummond, 2024).

The Shankill area is not new to these types of public art projects, as this area experienced significant investment through the Re-imaging Communities Programme along with continued community art projects discussed above. Drummond's experience of facilitating art with community groups relies upon best public art practices and tries to avoid what art with 'values [that are] drawn from a limited source and deposited onto a community without consultation or inclusion' (Baker 2015, 178). Learning from his experiences in community arts programming in earlier decades, Drummond noted that the *process* of Rashidi Rauf's mural was as meaningful as the final product. Drummond said that having an Iranian woman artist – a woman of colour – live in the city and paint in public while engaging with the community was consequential, especially for the area's youth (Drummond, 2024). The artist agreed that the public aspect of this project was evocative stating, 'engaging with the audience was also a crucial aspect; I often initiated conversations with those who showed interest in the work. This aspect made working in public spaces particularly meaningful to me' (Rashidi Rauf, 2023).

In their digital archive of murals in the city, this mural is marked as a PUL mural by Extramural Activity, which serves as a demonstration of how even international artists

who are unaffiliated with the region's sectarian identities, are often forced into an association with one side or the other (Extramural Activity, n.d.). This signifier is likely attached to Rashidi Rauf's painting because of its location on the PUL side of the peace wall, her collaboration with Alternatives Restorative Justice, and the inclusion of local Shankill women. However, the artist has no affiliation with either side of the sectarian divide and sought out the perspectives of a diverse group of unaffiliated women during the artistic process. Rashidi Rauf was moved by the presence of the PUL political murals that can be found around the area where she was in residence as an art student, but she intended to add non-sectarian faces to the area's visual landscape (Rashidi Rauf, 2023). As Rashidi Rauf's work demonstrates, when artists and their intentions are centred in the conversation about murals, the sectarian narrative often becomes obscured.

As noted earlier, many artists who identify with one side of the sectarian divide often produce artwork commissioned by the other, and artists who have no clear association with either identity may create artwork in spaces known for their polarising imagery. Street Artist Eoin McGinn is internationally celebrated amongst Street Art critics and also known for deftly navigating community collaborations on both sides of the sectarian divide (streetartcities.com *Emic*, n.d.; Drummond, 2024). The artist has been active in the Belfast Street Art scene for over a decade, and his work can be found all around the city. McGinn works exclusively in aerosol-based public murals and has been focused on the medium since 2013. He has not explored a studio art career since two gallery exhibitions in 2016, as Belfast has continued to offer enough public art opportunities to keep him fully scheduled. He says 'I ended up being really busy, just like literally from January through to December and the calendar year. And I didn't, I just didn't have time to do it from the

studio. So, it was kind of like a battle with myself in terms of like, you know, be an artist to make work and like have a have a voice and an identity' (McGinn, 2022). McGinn's concern about an artistic identity is one with which many artists working in the public realm struggle. However, he has managed to remain true to his own style, moving skilfully through a stylistic evolution over the last decade. His work is easily recognisable, and he is highly regarded amongst those who facilitate both high-profile public art projects, as well as community arts programming (streetartcities.com, n.d. *Artist Emic*; Drummond, 2024).

As a part of a larger refurbishment project in the New Lodge area of North Belfast, McGinn was commissioned to work with residents to paint several murals of wildflowers on walls that had previously been covered with graffiti. The visual overhaul of the New Lodge area was commissioned by Communities Restorative Justice Ireland through the Communities in Transition program. This organization is funded by the Northern Ireland Executive and 'aims to support eight geographic areas where there has been a history of paramilitary activity and coercive control to transition into communities where paramilitary activity no longer plays a role' (The Executive Office, 2018). Like Alternatives Restorative Justice, the previously discussed program that uses art to engage with the community in the Shankill, Communities in Transition uses art for creative placemaking and is eager to remove the more aggressive political murals in the area (McGinn, 2024). In addition to the community-aided wildflower paintings, the undertaking included a large-scale mural of a woman holding a dark red rose, known to the locals as a symbol of the political song *Róisín Dubh*, a mythical female figure and a metaphor for Ireland (Fig. 87, page 55). McGinn's painting covered *Unbowed Unbroken,*

a mural dedicated to the Maghaberry republican prisoners created by Damien Walker, that had been in place for a decade (McParland, 2023; Extramural Activity, 2024) (Fig. 88, page 56). McGinn's new image is painted on what is referred to as an 'anti-agreement' wall by those who document mural changes in the region, as the murals painted on the wall, including *Unbowed Unbroken,* have been sponsored by the 32 County Sovereignty Movement and have historically referenced republican political prisoners (Extramural Activity, 2014).

Projects like these are complicated and are often the result of a collaboration between multiple parties with varying agendas. The artist's choice of the soft colour palette and feminine depiction of *Róisín Dubh* strikes a balance between the symbols of republicanism, and the creation of an aesthetically pleasing urban landscape. However, since the symbolism is not overt, and the figure joins numerous similar murals of women painted by street artists throughout the city, including many by McGinn, the painting's symbolic impact is diminished. The work was not completed without challenge, and the artist did receive threats from those who facilitated the *Unbowed Unbroken* mural as the painting process began. Though Communities Restorative Justice commissioned the piece, not all parties were consulted about the drastic change (McGinn, 2024). The completion of the mural was rushed, and the quality is not in line with the artist's usual standards (McGinn, 2024). In fact, while he did add his signature to some of the other walls that were part of the larger refurbishment project, as of June 2024, McGinn has not signed the *Róisín Dubh* piece. The artist notes that street artists often choose to leave their names off a political piece if the content is not in line with their own beliefs (McGinn, 2022). The artist also did not publicise the piece in the same way he does much of his artwork, and the

image is not included in digital catalogues of his work (streetartcities.com *Artist Emic - Street Art Cities*, n.d.; Emic, 2015). Whether his choice to leave the piece unsigned is due to his dissatisfaction with the quality or the politics that the piece represents, is unclear.

The surrounding community murals are primarily depictions of wildflowers painted with both aerosol and brush on a black background. Floral subjects such as these are a speciality of the artist and can be found in much of his Street Art in Belfast and around the world. These murals were created with the assistance of both youth groups and adult community members, and the finished product has received positive responses thus far with comments that the images are a 'welcome improvement', and the 'residents have been delighted with the end product having been consulted throughout' (McParland, 2023). Press documenting recent Street Art in segregated areas like New Lodge, where the majority of the historical political murals reside, demonstrates that people are willing to accept murals in a new style, especially when the work activates the community members, and gives a nod to their political interests. As was the case with the Re-imaging programme, consultation with all parties concerned is the key to a successful image that is embraced by a community, and artists need a certain amount of protection by the commissioning bodies to ensure successful completion of the work.

The emphasis on consultation and collective engagement that took place on the New Lodge wildflowers project may not have extended to the mural depicting *Róisín Dubh.* Very few public comments can be found about this painting. Though the project was unveiled with a small street party, there was little publicity about the event or the finished product. While the painted wildflowers are a neutral community project, to be clear, this culminating image of *Róisín Dubh* is a political mural. Though artist is part of

the contemporary Street Art movement, rather than a republican activist, and the image is less overt than the one it covered or other political murals in the area, nevertheless it is a still depiction of a subject that is deeply connected to republicanism. The mural also resides in a CNR community that was home to some of the worst violence during The Troubles, one that continues to create artwork that supports republican ideals.

The New Lodge efforts represent the blurred lines that now exist with art in the public sphere in Belfast. The project was funded by a government program that focuses on anti-paramilitary imagery. The artist engaged the community in the production of the images. The large mural that served as a capstone for this refurbishment project is definitely a political mural, even though it adheres to the artist's Street Art style. Again, to return to the predictions by Rolston and others that the mural tradition is in danger, it is clear from large-scale projects like this, that the tradition will continue, though, as it has previously, political mural production continues to change with the tides of the communities within which they are made. As an artist who honed his craft working with community groups on both sides of the sectarian divide, McGinn acknowledges the importance of understanding these complexities. Though some works may be a challenge to complete, like the *Róisín Dubh* mural at New Lodge, the artist believes that the Street Art movement is 'reshaping the city as a cultural space', leading to what he calls 'viable change' in Belfast (British Council NI, 2023; McCormick and O'Rawe, 2024).

Local Street Artists who began their careers on community art projects understand that the artist must always contend with the complexities of the environment in Belfast, and this includes both political issues as well as matters of aesthetics. Though they rely on the community's familiarity with painted walls for the success of their artwork, street artists

do find ways to both separate themselves from the political mural tradition and compete in an ever-crowded public art environment. The development of a distinctive style is essential in a city in which nearly every wall has some form of painting. Street artists study their craft, learn from each other, and experiment in small commissions to help develop a style that is both unique to their artistic vision and also marketable. In addition to the development of a distinctive style, street artists use colour to challenge the history of political murals that once dominated the visual landscape. Change of colour palette may seem like a small detail. However, in a city where colours are reflexive identifiers for sectarianism, removing sectarian colours automatically neutralizes an image. Street artists often use secondary and tertiary colours rather than primary colours or greyscale which are historically associated with political murals. Many street artists choose purple and pink, teal and turquoise. If they use colours associated with sectarianism, like orange and green or red and blue, they tend to combine those colours with politically neutral colours to separate their work from the political murals (*Field Notes RUA,* 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024; *Field Notes International Wall,* 2024).

The result of these aesthetic changes is a city that, even on its most grey day, is vibrantly coloured. However, this form of brightening the city must be carefully managed if the community is interested in preserving the historic mural tradition while also nurturing new artworks. In *Conflict Graffiti: From Revolution to Gentrification,* John Lennon seeks to 'contextualise ways governments from around the world have embraced Street Art to "improve" city infrastructures' (Lennon 2021, 171). Improving infrastructures has been associated with public art in Belfast for generations. From the mural tradition's beginning

in 1908, to the Re-imaging Communities Programme and the current projects like the refurbishment of the New Lodge area, mural painting has evolved from an artform focused primarily on sectarian agendas, to one that is used as a crucial tool to combat dereliction, blight, anti-social behaviour, and other social ills. Mural making has also entered the collective and corporate consciousness as a means of creative placemaking, offering a new way to experience contested spaces. Lennon considers the benefits of Street Art, noting 'developers use Street Art to transition a neighbourhood into something "more". Regardless of the content, Street Art is made safe through its inclusion in the city's economic revitalisation plans' (Lennon 2021, 174).

Kwon offers a critical analysis of this type of public art programming noting that the artwork can be viewed as 'aesthetic vanguardism, a renewed mode of social and political activism, or a new strategy of urban reform and revitalization', *or* 'a moment of arrival in which a well-developed mode of practice that had been undervalued in mainstream art finally receives broader cultural attention' (Kwon 2002, 107). Through in-depth artists' interviews and study of the processes by which Street Art is commissioned and produced, this research has determined that Kwon's latter point is most relevant to Belfast. Namely, artists and arts institutions are carefully drawing on the history of the tradition of painted walls in the city, collaborating with community members and those in positions of power, and finally having a 'moment of arrival' for the 'undervalued' artform of mural painting (Kwon, 2002, 107; Turkington, 2022; McGinn, 2022; Bonner, 2024).

Considering the variety of new murals tackling any number of social issues and global political problems that have emerged in Belfast, Caroline Campbell notes, 'they wouldn't seem out of place in London, Miami, or Berlin. These additions highlight through

art a strange paradox: while the past is immutable and can never be changed, the way we see it alters all the time' (Campbell, 2023). What is clear from the plethora of new artworks that are being produced in the city, is that the mural tradition did not die with the Re-imaging Communities Programme. Rather, it is alive and well and continuously shifting with the tides of the communities in which the murals are being produced. Murals that have political themes are being completed alongside community murals and Street Art, and competition for mural production challenges artists to strive for professionalisation, innovation, and successful community engagement.

In a society that has been represented through a binary visual narrative for decades, the new generation of artists, patrons, and creative producers are defying this perception as they pass on the mural tradition through the public act of painting. The work of street artist Nuala Convery, or Wee Nuls, serves as an example of the evolution of the mural tradition, as her work is representative of the way artists are connected to the painted walls of the past, while they illustrate the concerns of their generation. Convery, received quite a bit of press in 2022 for a mural she created in collaboration with the Menstruation Matters Campaign of the Homeless Period Project (freemuse.com, n.d.). The depiction of a partially nude, menstruating, anti-idealised woman in the artist's signature pink and teal colours was devoted to the issue of period poverty. A visually challenging work, it was defaced within just a few days after completion (Figs. 89 and 90, pages 56 and 57). The artist repainted the image after a city-wide uproar about censorship, and the entire experience became the subject of a short documentary titled *We Speak Wall*. There is no doubt that this original image was a political one; a mural created in vibrant colours and a dynamic style to draw attention to a particular political issue. Like many political muralists

of the past, the artist was not specifically commissioned for this piece. She did receive permission for the wall space, but the mural was not funded by an outside source. It was an act of activism, created purely to draw attention to an issue that the artist valued (*We Speak Wall,* 2022). However, because this issue is non-sectarian, the mural itself is rarely considered political. The artist says, 'since my mural was painted over, I feel even more motivated to create work that raises awareness for causes and issues that affect the people that I draw inspiration from' (freemuse.com, n.d.).

Just as the political activists took to the streets to paint murals in response to events during The Troubles, the city's street artists and muralists take action to address a myriad of interests. Art critic Brian McAvera notes, 'if the graffiti artist/muralist gets it right, he or she is responding to the moment and, at the very least, is producing something which is much less of an eyesore than that of the graffiti scribbler. The knack, as ever, is in the transition from Outsider to Insider; from wall to gallery; from the ephemeral to the enduring image' (McAvera 2014, 91). As street artists gain prominence and build careers in Belfast, very few have made this transition to the fine art gallery as McAvera encouraged. However, these artists consider themselves part of the city's outdoor gallery and recognise the power their images may have on a large audience, on a movement, or on the Belfast's standing as a cultural hub.

Painted walls have historically displayed the state of mind of the city. Along with contemporary social issues, like period poverty, suicide, and drug use, political murals, cultural murals, and even paramilitary murals, continue and endure in Belfast. It is clear from the work of politically minded artists who are involved in the Street Art movement, that there are a number of political topics that supersede the constitutional issue for the

younger generation. Many of the murals discussed in this text illustrate that as the city moves further from the period of active conflict, the perceived divisions between mural types will continue to become obscured. Convery, and other artists of her generation, continue to turn to mural painting as both a career choice as well as an outlet for political ideas, however, their political interests often lie outside of the sectarian debate.

Conclusion

Through the evaluation of the impacts of the Re-imaging Communities Programme, the proliferation of community arts, the impact of including the young people in the public act of painting, and the discussion of new models of building careers and community through Street Art, this chapter has demonstrated that Belfast's mural culture is on a dynamic path to continue into the next decades. Contrary to Rolston and Crowley's concerns about the death of mural painting during the city's period of Re-imaging, the future of murals does not seem to be in question, with literally hundreds of walls being painted each year. There are fewer overtly aggressive political images currently being commissioned, though, these historic images can still be found on the streets of Belfast. In addition to these lingering historical images, the organisations, like paramilitaries, that choose to adorn the walls with images of propaganda, are also turning to cultural themes along with easily produced digitally printed boards. However, though they are produced with ease, and are less costly than hiring a painter, these boards are generally disliked by the community, who prefer the personal appeal of a hand painted mural (*Field Notes Shankill,* 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). Just as painted walls have always served as a barometer of the changing concerns of the community, now the content of painted walls along with the

digitally printed boards, has shifted to depict something other than a balaclava-clad man with a gun. As has been discussed previously in this text, the new 'cultural' murals are no less political. They are simply the evolution of political themes for a community that, presently, seeks symbolism other than a balaclava-clad man and a gun to represent their culture.

Communities who engaged in mural production in the Re-imaging Communities Programme have continued to value the act of artmaking, just as the ACNI had anticipated when the programme began. At the onset, capacity building and 'opening up' the arts and raising the profile of artists were listed as benefits of this programme (Independent Research Solutions 2009, ix-xii). Though scholars questioned the efficacy of such programming, centres like Alternatives Restorative Justice, R-CITY, and Communities Restorative Justice continue to use the Re-imaging model to encourage their constituents to engage in the collective action of making art. Through these community centres, young people are introduced to the value of investing in public art experiences.

The city's muralists and street artists continue to cross community lines to ensure that the next generation of artists is given a strong foundation in the local mural-making tradition. These public artists are respected in their communities and have served as ambassadors for both public art and the peace-making process around the world (Vaughn, 2012; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). By passing mural-making skills to those who seek out or simply pass by the mural painters, these artists provide not just training but an authentic art experience that can be transformational (Gallagher, 2023; Doran, 2023; Seadhead Arts 'KVLR', 2023).

Though scholars may separate the city's political murals from the imagery currently being created by the Street Art movement, the two are intertwined, as the old rules of production in which an activist only paints imagery for their cause no longer apply. Street artists take commissions for political murals, and many political muralists are commissioned for community or cultural murals. Paramilitaries commission murals that are not overtly antagonistic, like the *Highland Soldier* mural by Dee Craig that was discussed in Chapter Two, or they link themselves to cultural traditions and historic events. Community groups commission murals, like McGinn's *Róisín Dubh,* that may be considered either cultural, sectarian, or neutral Street Art depending on the point of view of the audience. The CNR/PUL political murals accompany the new generation of artwork created by community groups, school children, activists, and every other group in the city who turns to the medium of mural painting to respond to the issues that concern their communities. These murals are also joined by the Street Art movement, which creates a new visual narrative for the public art history of the city.

Time will tell if the current Street Art movement continues to grow as it has over the last decade. With more and more artists moving to the city for public art opportunities, there will be greater competition for large-scale projects. However, there seems to be no sign of decline in the incorporation of mural painting into all manner of programming, with projects ranging from murals on the new Grand Central transportation hub, to small paint jams held to brighten up an alleyway or underpass. Gemma Reid comments that Street Art is a 'perfect medium' to demonstrate what is unique about Belfast as it is 'a language we in Belfast already understand' (Belfast City Council, 2020). The language is understood because of the political murals and authentic artistic expressions that adorn every gable and

wall. For Caroline Campbell, the director of Ireland's National Gallery who was raised in Belfast, the presence of the murals in her childhood formed her career path. She acknowledges the lack of access to traditional art spaces in her youth and credits her experience with murals and public art as training ground for analysing meaning in artwork (Campbell, 2023). People living in Belfast have been surrounded by symbolic art imagery, so they have learned to speak its language. Adam Turkington says:

> I always say we speak wall in Belfast. We speak the language of wall. We understand wall. We've had that drummed into us from a very early age. So, when something goes up on a wall, we get it. We get it at a visceral level. We get that it's important and that it has impact, identity, a sense of place. (*We Speak Wall,* 2021)

Turkington's efforts to 'flood the city' with high quality Street Art in an effort to water down both the remaining Re-imaging works, as well as the lingering aggressive political murals has begun to work (Turkington, 2022). The community has become more discerning about the artwork in their neighbourhoods, and they are ready with either praise or criticism (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; Bonner, 2024; Drummond, 2024). Street artist Ray Bonner, known as FGB, comments, 'especially if it's been a commissioned piece of public art and it relates to The Troubles or the past or things like that, then they'd better be bloody good. Because, yeah, people are screaming out for wall space around here' (Bonner, 2024). The people all around the city recognise the value of public murals, whether because they are driving economic improvements, tackling urban blight, or addressing social and political issues. The city's painted walls represent the joys and concerns of the community and continue to be a great source of pride as well as a dynamic

indication of the shifting political and cultural tides. To fully understand Belfast, in Gemma Reid's words, 'in all its eccentricity, anger, bitterness, vitality, irreverence and absurdity,' we must look to the walls as they are the places where the true colours of the city and its people can be found (Belfast City Council, 2020). Artist Glen Molloy adds that the citizens know that 'the masterpieces are on the neighbourhood walls. That's it. They're not in a gallery no more' (Molloy, 2023).

Conclusion

Former paramilitary prisoner turned politician, the late David Ervine states, 'it's foolish to countenance throwing away something that is now part of you. We are now mural painters. Perhaps we weren't, but we now are. And I think that that's important' (Vaughn, 2012). Belfast is now a city of painted walls. While the tradition began as a political act, and expanded during the height of The Troubles, currently, the variety of painted walls is illustrative of the varied interests of the communities in the city. Some walls continue to be adorned with symbols of sectarianism, while others are painted purely to spark joy in the viewers. Opinions about the future of the political murals are as varied as the types of public art in the city. Arguments for their preservation as well as proposed legislation for forced removal of such images demonstrate that the community has not yet decided the murals' fate (Ervine, 2022; Kelly, 2023; Kura, 2024). Henri Beunders, in a 2007 article, notes that:

> in the end, it is not the law, not the artist, not the art elites, not the authorities, but rather the general public or "public opinion" that decides the fate of publicly exhibited art. To put it another way, the cultural climate in a country is the real judge. (Beunders 2007, 44)

In Belfast, the cultural climate has always determined the type of public art on display, as well as how long that public art lasts. Though a few images in the city have crossed into the realm of the iconic, and have therefore remained untouched over decades, the artform is inherently ephemeral, and most walls undergo changes that reflect the interests of the

communities that surround them. In the century-long history of mural painting, the city has experienced political and cultural movements that shifted this artistic tradition. The ephemerality of these images is one characteristic of their success, as artists and the community recognise that the mural tradition is a visceral way to respond to current events, while providing an exciting and dynamic visual landscape. Through a focus on the power of murals as public art along with an emphasis on the artists, their training and influence, this research sought to evaluate the artistic influence of the city's political murals and place the Belfast mural tradition within a larger context of mural arts, public art, and the study of artists without academic art training.

This thesis offers an overview of the mural tradition in a structured way. In Chapter One, the century-long tradition of political mural painting by non-academic, community artists was evaluated. The research drew parallels between the political murals created by each community's self-taught artists, and the broader academic mural tradition that existed in the city, noting that in the early stages of the historic mural tradition, the political murals were regarded by some of the most significant academic artists of the day as images of 'high artistic merit' and revivals of the 'very ancient art of decorating wall spaces' (Conor 1933, 7). Using Bill Rolston and Belinda Loftus's foundational texts chronicling the history of the political mural tradition, along with Joseph McBrinn's careful study of academic murals on the island of Ireland, the chapter compared each rise in political mural production to similarly timed murals by formally trained academic artists. By including the political murals in the conversation of other pieces of traditional public art, Chapter One began the process of recognising the political murals as part of the city's artistic heritage.

Chapter Two focused on the characteristics of successful public art and connected Belfast's political mural tradition to those features. With an evaluation of scholarly discussion on the topic of public art, this chapter aimed to recognise the city's political murals as influential art objects rather than solely sectarian propaganda. Individual murals served as examples adhering to Krause Knight's definition of public art: 'designated for a larger audience and placed to attract their attention; it intends to provide aesthetic experiences that edify, commemorate, or entertain; and its messages are comprehensible to generalized audiences' (Krause Knight 2008, 22). Artists' interviews provided the support for the consideration of the city's political murals as effective public art. Noting that they are representing the interests of their communities on the walls, artists create visual representations that commemorate or edify. Artists' emphasis on audience and community involvement demonstrates that the political murals, though they are not embraced by everyone, have had an artistic role in their communities. The connection between murals and place, their reflection of their community's ideals, and their temporality provides the 'relationship' that Lucy Lippard states is required for public art that is 'worth its turf' (Raven 1989, 210).

The goal of Chapter Three was to illustrate the importance of self-taught artists, and those working outside of fine arts institutions, in the city's visual landscape and artistic tradition. A thorough discussion of the terms outsider art, folk art, and self-taught artists laid the foundation for the evaluation of individual artists and their association with these categories. The political mural tradition has continued because of each community's emphasis on teaching the next generation of mural painters. Though some artists lament that the tradition has been adopted by artists with academic training, the craft has continued

to be passed from one artist to the next, primarily outside of the academic setting. The artists who attended art college claim that their experience in academia did not prepare them for mural making. Rather, they have learned by doing (Seedhead Arts, 'Friz', 2022; Hanna, 2022; McGinn, 2022; Constance, 2023; Doran, 2023; Gallagher, 2023; Seedhead Arts, 'KVLR', 2023). As Adam Turkington considers the number of full-time street artists in the city, many of whom do not have an academic art background, he notes that young artists are being trained in the 'institution of Street Art' (Turkington, 2022). Continuing the tradition of outsider/folk/self-taught artists, the city's muralists are learning their craft either from workshops hosted by community groups and arts organisers, from other artists as they paint side by side in Street Art festivals, or from the previous generation of painters who continue to take younger artists under their wing.

Almost twenty years after their first collaboration, Mark Ervine and Danny Devenny continue to teach the medium to the next generation of painters as they express concerns of their communities on the walls (Ervine, 2022; *Field Notes International Wall,* 2024; Ervine, 2024). In addition to working with Paul Doran and Niall Conlon, recently Ervine has painted with his own daughter as well as Adaja Cooper, a young artist who travelled from Arkansas to Belfast to learn about the mural tradition (Clancy, 2023). Devenny is also still painting in the streets and encouraging dozens of community members to participate in the Painting for Palestine murals on the International Wall (Ervine, 2023; Devenny, D. and Rolston, B., 2024; *Field Notes International Wall,* 2024). With formative years spent watching murals being painted, and invitations to paint with mural artists who have become cultural icons, like Ervine and Devenny, Belfast's public artists inherently

understand that their greatest asset for learning the craft of mural painting is the city's self-taught artists.

Finally, in Chapter Four, Belfast's dynamic present mural production was evaluated with an emphasis on contemporary artists and their ability to navigate a complex public art environment; one that includes historic divisions as well as a new generation of community members who would like to see the city embrace a more positive narrative. Though scholars agree that the efforts by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to remove sectarian imagery were flawed, with greater hindsight, and taking a broader perspective, the research in this chapter made clear that the Re-imaging Communities Programme did reach some of its goals. Raising the profile of artists and building capacity for art appreciation in the communities, the influx of funds and support given to artists who worked in this programme shifted art-processes by both artists and arts administrators and encouraged more public art commissions. The investment in public art after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement impacted the arts made in the public realm, encouraged community involvement, and set the standard for public arts programming around the city. This flurry of activity provided the foundation for the rise of the Street Art movement and the current proliferation of mural painting in Belfast.

The Future of Mural Painting

Just as Chapter Four focused on what the future may hold for tradition of painted walls in Belfast, each artist interviewed for this research was asked about the future of mural painting in the city. There were very few similar answers, and artists expressed clear generational differences. What was consistent among all artists, however, was a shared

respect for the artform, an interest in preservation of the art objects either through photographic databases, mural conservation, or museum exhibitions, and a concern about the continuation of the mural tradition. Artists who began working in the 1980s lamented that there were no new political muralists who were being trained in the medium, while younger artists sought to visualise a new narrative through their artwork (Ervine, 2022; McGinn, 2022; Kelly, 2023; Doran, 2023; Molloy, 2023; 'Mural Artist', 2023; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024). With a positive outlook, Paul Doran, for whom mural painting is a form of respect for the artistic traditions and self-taught artists of the city, believes that the future of murals lies in their ability to inspire communities, saying, 'I see an opportunity to bring forward that optimism and positivity of communication through mural art' (Doran, 2023). Similarly, the street artist Hannah Constance, or HMC, sees the boom in Belfast's mural production as one of the city's best attributes noting, 'I definitely see it being an inspiration to other places, you know, because it's creating a positive attitude' (Constance, 2023).

Gerard Kelly, who professes that his primary purpose for mural painting is to represent his community and their goal of a united Ireland, believes that the future of mural painting lies in the numerous pre-printed boards with clear political messages that adorn walls and fencing around the city (Kelly, 2018; Kelley, 2023). Noting, that the primary political mural painters currently painting in the CNR community are the same men of his generation who have been painting murals for decades, Kelly does not see young artists engaging in the type of political mural painting that he painted during the height of The Troubles (Kelly, 2023). However, echoing sentiments expressed by other artists like Mark Ervine, Kelly is also in favour of the preservation of the island's murals to serve as a visual

map of the area's history, adding, 'what I would like to see is Ireland to be turned into an art gallery. Look at the history that we have' (Kelly, 2023).

One unnamed loyalist mural artist, who began painting in the 1980s, and has engaged in international mural collaborations, is concerned about the future of mural-painting in Belfast. Like Kelly, this artist says that there are not many young artists interested in the political mural commissions (*Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024). While he recognises that the Street Art movement is making headway into the traditionally segregated areas of the city, he notes that professional street artists must be willing to work with people like himself (well-connected political muralists), in order to gain access to the people in positions of power who control the walls ('Mural Artist', 2023). He also notes, 'public funding is going to dry up' which he predicts will limit the number of commissions going to established artists ('Mural Artist', 2023). This artist's concern about public funding is echoed by the statements of arts administrators who have begun to turn to lesser-known artists for their commissions (Drummond, 2024). Ciaran Gallagher is also concerned about how funding will impact the tradition. Gallagher, who works primarily for a single patron, the business owner Willie Jack, believes that the mural tradition could be embraced by funders as a way to regenerate areas and drive the economy but fears that 'substandard' work will be commissioned because of lack of funds for artists (Gallagher, 2023).

Glen Molloy notes that corporate funding will likely be the driving factor, and therefore will dictate the culture of mural painting, saying:

> corporate companies that are set up specifically trying to fly in artists everywhere (apart from Belfast) monopolising the scene to the point where local artists can't get work, because they're going to have to compete against top American famous artists and European famous artists… and it's just going to go down that point to somebody realises that all this stuff they're doing is pointless because the city centre is dead. (Molloy, 2023)

Molloy's outlook is quite bleak and is informed by feeling ostracised from the local Street Art movement (Molloy, 2023; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024). However, his assertion that the city centre is dead is not particularly supported by the facts of mural painting in the area. In the last decade, the city has gone from supporting two or three street artists to supporting dozens (Turkington, 2022). The Hit the North Street Art Festival has grown each year and is now a highly sought after festival for both international and local artists. Community groups continue to embrace traditional mural painting in their programming, and artists, including Molloy, are still receiving commissions for cultural or political murals. The city's mural scene continues to thrive.

Molloy is not the only artist who expresses concern about the commercial aspects of the current use of mural painting and Street Art. Even though street artist Ray Bonner, or FGB, is presently experiencing a boom in his personal large mural commissions, he says that he feels somewhat pessimistic about the possibility of mural painting, and especially Street Art, being used for commercial purposes, noting, 'that idea of using the tools of Street Art and graffiti to paint ads? It's a complete opposite of what Street Art is supposed to be, and I can see us heading that direction' (Bonner, 2024). Adam Turkington agrees

with Bonner, noting that he often turns down commissions from businesses who want an advertisement rather than a piece of art (Turkington, 2022).

What is clear from the answers from every artist is that their response to the question about the future of mural painting is dependent on their personal experience with the recent shifts in the mural tradition. Artists who learned to navigate public funding under the Re-imaging Communities Programme show concern about the end of the government funding associated with peacebuilding ('Mural Artist', 2023). Artists who have embraced the Street Art movement see that while there seems to be enough funding for the maintenance of the tradition, they are concerned with either oversaturating the market or losing a sense of authentic expression (Bonner, 2024; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024).

For Belfast, the preservation of the medium of mural painting has always relied upon its authenticity; a characteristic that is difficult to maintain with any public art, and especially difficult to preserve in art created by consensus. Distress over the loss of authenticity is a recurring theme throughout this research, especially amongst the older generation of artists who are concerned with the preservation of a cultural tradition for which they risked their lives during The Troubles. Regarding authenticity, Sharon Zukin states:

> Yearning for authenticity reflects the separation between our experience of space and our sense of self that is so much a part of modern mentalities. Though we think authenticity refers to a neighbourhood's innate qualities, it really expresses our own anxieties about how places change. The idea of authenticity is important because it connects our individual yearning to root ourselves in a singular time and place to a

> cosmic grasp of larger social forces that remake our world from many small and often invisible actions. (Zukin 2010, 220)

For artists who have a negative outlook on the future of wall painting, Zukin's analysis of authenticity rings true. These artists are responding to recent changes in their familiar environment, and as Zukin notes, they are likely expressing anxieties about those changes (Ervine, 2022; Molloy, 2023; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024). Whether they are critical of the corporate sponsorship of the Street Art movement, the payment another artist receives, or the shift away from recognisable symbols and toward greater artistic expression in murals, some artists find that the evolution of the mural tradition, and its connection to the Street Art movement, lacks the authenticity of earlier imagery to which they are accustomed (Ervine, 2022; Molloy, 2023).

Street artists also receive criticism as they build successful careers using Street Art to boost the economy, create community, and bring attention to neglected spaces. Critics warn that the historic medium of mural painting has been appropriated for personal or corporate gain (Ervine, 2022; Molloy, 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2023; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024). This issue of cultural consumption is not unique to Street Art or even to visual art, however. Peter Atkinson's addition to *Developing a Sense of Place: The Role of the Art in Regenerating Communities* considers, 'that the way in which culture has been appropriated and set to work as the fuel for the now semiotic motor of capital accumulation is the defining feature of late capitalism' (Ashley, T. and Weedon, A. 2020, 228). With corporate and government sponsorship of new large-scale projects and festivals, the Street Art movement continues to struggle to balance artistic integrity, public perception, and

maintenance of relationships with those in positions of power. However, currently, the Street Art movement is benefitting from the city's recognition of this creative practice as an essential element in a positive public perception of Belfast. As Atkinson notes, 'cities strive to be recognised as being "creative" as this encourages visiting, participation and investment' (Ashley and Weedon 2020, 229). Adam Turkington notes that this interest in being connected to the creative economy has led to public art commissions by small businesses in the city who are 'wanting to attach themselves to a cultural vibrancy' (Turkington, 2022).

Interestingly, even the academic art world has very recently begun to try to connect itself to the dynamic Street Art movement. In a departure from the standard practice of alienating mural artists and street artists from the academia, Ray Bonner, or FGB, was asked to speak at the Belfast School of Art in October 2024. He was invited to participate in the school's *Industry Talks* by Conor McClure, a lecturer for illustration students. The artist discussed artistic process as well as ways for students to make their way into Street Art as a career (Bonner, *University Talk*, 2024). The artist, who is self-taught, did not attend art college, and does not have GCSE certification in Art, publicly expressed anxiety about speaking in the university setting because of his lack of credentials (Bonner, x.com, 2024). For street artists and muralists, the authenticity of their lived experience helps to validate their work. Carefully asserting their working-class roots and being outspoken about their lack of academic training is one way artists preserve their authenticity and avoid claims of cultural consumption and gentrification.

In addition to criticism of individual artists, arts advocacy groups like Daisy Chain, Inc. and Seedhead Arts, along with community arts programmes that have overseen the

current Street Art boom also risk being linked to gentrification, loss of authenticity, and commodification of the city's mural tradition, as is noted in in Chapter Four (Lennon, 2021; Molloy, 2023; Ervine, 2022). However, as Zukin notes, 'calling these changes "gentrification" minimises and oversimplifies the collective investment that is at stake' (Zukin 2010, 221). Similarly, as Howell observes, often scholars 'fail to acknowledge ordinary people as key actors in the politics of their own culture' (Howell 1994, 153). Zukin's emphasis on the 'collective investment', and Howell's focus on 'ordinary people', both seem especially relevant to Belfast, as many of the artists who participate in the city's Street Art movement, create community art programming, and manage the city's Street Art festivals are local and deeply rooted in the community.

Regarding the issue of gentrification and Street Art in Belfast, Scottish artist KMG reflects that:

> it doesn't come across as gentrification. I think that's a really important thing too. There's a lot of mural festivals now that are capitalizing and monetizing murals and they are using them to force out communities… You don't get that vibe here. It doesn't seem that contrived. It doesn't seem like it is being used to make money. It's very much seen to support artists and have good art on the wall. (Seedhead Arts 'KMG', 2024)

Though KMG's comment is quite positive about how Street Art is used in the city, other artists, especially those who began painting during The Troubles, are less supportive of the contemporary Street Art movement, calling the arts organisers 'culture vultures' and the artwork 'gentrification' (Molloy, 2023). However, this type of negative commentary seems

like a personal response, or in Zukin's assessment, an expression of anxiety to change rather than a broader critique of public art in under-served or marginalised communities (Zukin 2010, 220). Even when artists, like KMG, come from other locations to paint in Belfast, they are often given a deeply researched brief about their mural's location and the community around it. They are also painting in public and answering questions from passers-by, and their work is facilitated by local arts organisers. Gemma Reid, of Daisy Chain, Inc., who provides many of the briefs for these artists, notes that it is important that artists with whom they work 'feel looked after, that they feel respected, that their process is respected' (Reid, 2023). Reid understands that international artists who travel to Belfast to create artwork in 'a language we in Belfast already understand' could feel daunting (Belfast City Council, 2020). However, artists return to Belfast again and again, both because of their respect of the long tradition of mural painting and because of the positive experiences enabled by the local arts administrators (Seedhead Arts 'Kitsune', 2023; Seedhead Arts 'KMG', 2024).

The organisations that facilitate mural making are deeply connected to the communities and employ many local artists in addition to those who may come in from other areas (Drummond, 2024; Turkington, 2022; Reid, 2023; Turkington, 2023). As noted in Chapter Four, these arts administrators have differing opinions about the inclusion of the community in their commissions and have found ways to facilitate the creation of an object that is relevant to the community and draws on its history, while remaining true to the vision of the artist. Adam Turkington, who advocates for artistic freedom with most of the commissions he manages says, 'there are ways of doing community consultation, but with Daisy Chain, we… say, "let's talk about what's important in the community" and then turn

that into an artistic brief, and then let the artists decide' (Turkington, 2023). It is this process of community research and an artistic brief that resulted in the effective series of works on the Shankill Mission Building discussed in Chapter Four.

Local artist Rob Hilken's 2023 painting on the Shankill Mission Building serves as a final example of the marriage of Street Art, Belfast's mural culture, and the changing narrative in sectarian spaces. Like Kerrie Hanna's Shankill Mission image discussed in Chapter Four, Hilken's work is based on a deeply researched brief provided by Daisy Chain, Inc. In her research for the project, Gemma Reid was interested in connecting the current use of the building, an artists' collective, to the deeper history of the Shankill. The fact that the building had once held a mission, and the community was known for its 'collective action' was the link the arts administrator needed. Hilken says his 'work is routed in the everyday: things that have become embedded and accepted in our lives so much that we barely register them' (Hilken, 2010). The artist often turns to geometric shapes and abstraction. By painting imagery that does not include human figures, Hilken's work serves as a disruptor in a landscape of images of political heroes and martyrs.

For the artist's addition to the Shankill Mission Building Street Art series, he gained inspiration from the building itself, which was once a soup kitchen and 'has a history of providing locals with entertainment, food, and cheer', and painted the word 'JOY' arranged with the alphabet noodles or 'Alphabetti Spaghetti' (Hilken, 2023; *Field Notes Newtownards,* 2024; *Field Notes Shankill,* 2024) (Fig. 91, page 58). The mural, painted in aerosol from a photograph of the same image, is exquisitely rendered, making the viewer feel as if they are looking directly into a bowl of the childhood comfort food. Historically, large scale capital letters in murals are reserved for symbols of paramilitaries in Belfast. In

fact, just feet away, the UDA symbol can be seen through the paint of Kerrie Hanna's Shankill Mission image, and in the same area are numerous paramilitary images with large, blocked text dedicated to the UVF (Figs. 92 and 93, pages 58 and 59). However, Hilken's image takes this medium, and the use of capital letters, and challenges the viewer to have a different experience. The artist says that he is 'trying to spread a little of Vault's [artist studio] values to our neighbourhood' (Hilken, 2023).

Hilken's work 'aims to disrupt the way we experience the world around us' (Hilken, 2010). As noted in earlier chapters, creating artwork that is not political in areas with a history of sectarian imagery can be seen as a political act, and this is certainly true for the Shankill Mission series, including Hilken's *JOY* mural. Public art's ability to disrupt the everyday experience is a driving force for many artists who are working in the city's vibrant Street Art scene. They have built a community of artists, arts patrons, and a public who are often surprised and moved by artwork that does not necessarily speak to their own historic divisions (Turkington, 2022; Turkington, 2023). Though, as Turkington notes, the political murals provide 'an interesting context in which to work', a new generation of artists are interested in imagery that may be political but does not follow the city's historic binary narrative (Turkington, 2022).

Gerard Kelly and others may not recognise the next generation of political muralists in their communities, but political murals *are* being created. Scholars who warn of the end of mural painting may be proven wrong by young artists and activists who continue to take to the walls for the interests of their generation (Rolston, 2012; Crowley, 2011). Though Turkington says that the Street Art movement is not a natural biproduct of the political murals, he notes that 'people who grew up embedded in a culture where the politics of

division is played out on walls, and people learn to read those walls. They're more inclined to kind of understand the importance of putting stuff on it [walls]' (Turkington, 2022). It is the instinct of the community to take their concerns to the walls. Street artists, muralists, and even cultural agitators turn to mural painting to respond with immediacy to political events.

Mural artists with histories of political activism are included in projects ranging from large-scale, heavily administrated developments like new transportation hub in the city centre, to small community projects and business shutters. In many of these wide-ranging images, political themes can be found. Wee Nuls includes feminist imagery that both advocates for women's rights and challenges the feminine ideal and the male gaze (Fig. 94, page 59). Ciaran Gallagher creates political murals that are rooted in the historic mural tradition, though they are a satirical response to current political events (Fig. 95, page 60). Eoin McGinn uses his signature Street Art style to soften traditional political symbols (Fig. 96, page 60). Dee Craig crosses community boundaries to create an homage to East Belfast's working class, a traditional symbol of the PUL community in that area (Fig. 97, page 61). Community members still flock to the International Wall to engage in mural painting to show their support for oppressed people around the world (Fig. 98a and 98b, page 61). Students tackle sectarian themes in paint as they hope for a future without division (Fig. 99, page 62). Artists like Rob Hilken use the traditional artform to link themselves to the city's history and also bring joy to the community (Fig. 91, page 58). All of these examples demonstrate, as David Ervine said, in the city of Belfast, 'we are now mural painters' (Vaughn, 2012). The historic divisions in the city are still relevant and are

still visualised in murals, but now, a new generation of artists/activists are creating artwork that illustrates an interest in contemporary issues, making Belfast a painted city.

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