Kathryn Conrad, "Widening the Frame: The Politics of Murals Photography in Northern Ireland," 2007, Palgrave Macmillan, reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

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Analysis of Northern Irish political wall murals and their symbols has been almost as ubiquitous as the murals themselves. Little has been written, however, about the implications of actually photographing and reproducing the murals—yet images of them circulate through postcards, books, souvenirs and the Internet, a colourful collection of images that continues to shape perceptions of Northern Ireland both at home and abroad. The constant reproduction, circulation, and commodification of photographs of political murals, however, perpetuates a narrow vision of a Northern Ireland shaped primarily by a history of (para)military conflict. This in turn has material implications for Northern Ireland, effectively fetishizing a violent vision of Northern Ireland in both the local and international imaginary 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. This article is an attempt to widen the frame: to make the photographic framing process more visible and in so doing to explore the ways in which the photographic frame creates the larger frame through which Northern Ireland is seen.

I approach this analysis of Northern Irish murals from the perspective not only of an academic who teaches and writes about Northern Ireland but also as a photographer who is responsible for disseminating images of the murals throughout the world via the Internet and print.¹ My recognition of my own complicity in the process of reproducing an impression of Northern Ireland that my written work has attempted to challenge led me to consider more

critically the process in which I was, at least initially, naïvely engaged. As is the case for many who teach and write about Northern Ireland, I have also used mural images as a point of entry into discussing Northern Ireland, focusing primarily on decoding the murals themselves. Such an approach is limited, however. In 'Painting Landscapes', Neil Jarman has argued that 'to regard the murals essentially, or only, as images is [...] to restrict their power. Their very location affects how they are interpreted and what they mean, while the location is used and treated differently because of the presence of the paintings'.²

While Jarman argues for the need to understand murals in their material contexts, he also acknowledges that the circulating images of the murals, the de- and re-contextualized murals, have a power as 'a highly mobile signifier of violence and danger'; 'their power and importance is always in part derived from this capacity to resonate meaning both at a specific localised site and at seemingly endless other sites, at one and the same time'.³ Jarman's essay makes clear that there is an important relationship between the murals, the muralists, and the audience of the murals; and he alludes to the importance of photography when he notes that, during the tours of Belfast that have become even more prevalent since his article was written, 'the tour bus stops to allow the sightseers to disembark to make their own photographic record of their visit'.⁴ Jarman sees the mural photograph as an 'image' of the mural that takes on new meanings when relocated away from its originary space. But, the photograph is more than an image: it is the material outcome of a particular technology and a particular set of choices on the part of the photographer. As John Szarkowski points out, 'photography is a system of visual editing. At bottom, it is a matter of surrounding with a frame a portion of one's cone of vision, while standing in the right place at the right time. Like chess, or writing, it is a matter of choosing from among given possibilities, but in the case of photography the number of possibilities is not finite

but infinite'.⁵ The choice of what and what not to frame, in other words, is an essential element of the photographic process, one that profoundly affects the viewer's understanding of the photographic subject. To understand the relationship between the mural in context and the mural as floating signifying image, therefore, one needs to consider mural *photography* in the particular geopolitical space of Northern Ireland. It is on this tension between the selective image of the mural, the photograph, and the mural in its material occasions that this essay will focus.

Photography in Northern Ireland has been a charged process since the beginning of the conflict. Allen Feldman notes that 'photography in the policed zones of working-class Belfast has been a dangerous avocation throughout the conflict. The photo lens of the aimed camera is considered equivalent to both the gun sight and the pointed rifle'.⁶ The Linen Hall Library's 2000 exhibition catalogue, *Images & Reflections: Photographers and Writers Seeing Our Century*, evokes this sense of threat through juxtaposition of a photograph and text. On the left page, the catalogue reproduces a photograph of a soldier seated atop an armoured Humber Pig riot-control vehicle (and in front of a Republican mural, no less), readying his camera and gazing at the photographer. The heading, 'Soldier', and the caption, 'Soldier with camera, Belfast, 1980s / Sean McKernan, Belfast Exposed', implies the complex relationship between photography and power more fully realized when read in conjunction with the facing page, an excerpt from Glenn Patterson's *Fat Lad*:

Hugh McManus told Melanie, last time she saw him, that a camera had been found in a derelict building across the road from his parents' law firm. The local TV companies sent their cameras round to film it. A crowd gathered, as crowds do. Someone said that a car

which had passed the scene several times was army undercover, taking pictures. The car sped off when someone else tried to take a picture of it [...]

You forget sometimes till you went back, Hugh said, how bad it was. Somebody was always filming somebody else. You didn't know from one moment to the next if they were filming you too. The temptation was to act as though they were at all times.⁷

As the text goes on to suggest, this filming places the objects of the photographic / filmic gaze into a larger narrative of conflict in which 'everyone had a part to play, however humble'—a deliberate re-framing of the clichéd phrase so often used by 'police and politicians'. In this case, the parts to be played are the parts of victims ('bit parts, tit-for-tat parts'): 'five workmen heading home on such and such a road' or 'a schoolgirl caught in the crossfire'.⁸ The photographic process in Northern Ireland is linked here to a surveillance culture in which the captured image is part of a larger system of information with deadly consequences—a surveillance culture aligned with violence as a form of control and a counterculture that returns the violent gaze.

Of course, combatants have not been the only photographers in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has been represented through the work of photojournalists throughout the history of the Troubles. In the early 1980s, Belinda Loftus suggested the extent to which the Troubles were imperfectly represented by the then-current generation of British war photographers who focused primarily on 'British soldiers in action on the streets; children involved in violence; political leaders; paramilitary fighters; and IRA bombs on the British mainland'.⁹ As Declan McGonagle puts it, 'sometimes it seems as if only certain perceptions [of Northern Ireland] are permissible (viz) tragic, turbulent, taciturn, tribal and tiresome'.¹⁰ These

perceptions are arguably reinforced in the publication of photographs in black and white, a traditional choice for photojournalism; this is also true of the photographs I have included in this essay, which, rendered into black and white by the economies of publication, make sometimes upbeat or amusing photographs seem ‘grittier’ or more serious by the historical associations of the medium.

The perceptions of Northern Ireland as ‘tragic, turbulent, taciturn, tribal and tiresome’ are echoed in the objects of the tourist’s photographic gaze. Jarman’s allusion to the new tourist culture of Northern Ireland evokes a vision of the photographer as consumer, a less threatening player/participant in the circumstance of the more obviously violent surveillance culture of Northern Ireland. A commercial infrastructure has emerged to facilitate this process, as with the tour buses that take their passengers through the mural-rich areas of working-class republican and loyalist Belfast, as, for instance, in Fig. 1 [note: figures in this draft are at end of document]. As the conditions of this photograph imply, this is a safer gaze in a safer time than that of which Feldman writes: note in the photograph not only the open curiosity of the tour bus passengers, but also the unabashed gaze I wield as the photographer. The object of the gaze of the tourist is the residue of the conflict, occasionally referred to as ‘terror tourism’: the tourist (and, as Jarman notes, occasionally the local) traverses the city with the express purpose of viewing and recording signs of the Northern Ireland conflict.¹¹ Not only is the tourist gaze generally trained on the remnants of the conflict, but that gaze sometimes relies literally on the infrastructure of colonialism, as when the walls of Derry where the surveillance cameras are mounted are billed as the place to get a good view; Spurgeon Thompson has noted the ‘structural homology between political or state surveillance (police and military) and tourist surveillance’ in such places—a connection visible from the photographs I took from the wall that faces the mostly Catholic

Bogside area of Derry (see Figs 2 and 3).¹² Sontag pushes the homology further: ‘To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power’.¹³

The process of the photographic cataloguing of signs of the conflict both engages and distances the photographer and, ultimately, the viewer of the photograph. Sontag argues that ‘the feeling of being exempt from calamity stimulates interest in looking at painful pictures, and looking at them suggests and strengthens the feeling that one is exempt’.¹⁴ For the tourist-photographer who leaves Northern Ireland after the terror-tour, the photographs become reminders both of one’s nearness to the conflict and comfort at one’s distance; they also become proof for others of one’s adventurousness—a way of experiencing conflict and ‘terrorism’ that resonates as simultaneously excitingly present and safely past. For the professional or semi-professional cataloguer of murals, the power over the subject is both constitutive and economic: such photographers are reminiscent of the folklore collectors of the nineteenth century, cataloguing ballads and stories as discrete objects and ultimately ‘owning’ and controlling the circulation of their photographic output.¹⁵ Photographers, in other words, have a great deal of control over how Northern Ireland is literally, and figuratively, seen; and what is ultimately seen resonates locally and globally, offering ‘terror’ as a fetish object that can be safely consumed.

Northern Irish political wall murals are amongst the most popular, prevalent visual artefacts for the photographer, whether amateur or professional, to capture; and given the scopic terror of recent Northern Irish history, the mural has been an obvious object of the photographic gaze for several reasons. The violence that the photographic gaze has signified historically means that, even in post-Agreement Northern Ireland, it is much safer to point one’s camera at a mural than, for instance, a local businessman or a soldier or a woman walking alone. All the more

reason, too, for a tight frame on the photo: one makes it clear that one is taking pictures of the mural and not anything else. The murals also offer a compelling focus: colourful, politically charged, seemingly iconic. As Oona Woods notes, murals have featured heavily in British television news programmes and documentaries on Northern Ireland; the murals, particularly ‘visually intimidating’ ones, are shown in lieu of showing the members of proscribed organizations, since such people were for many years banned from appearing on television.¹⁶ Their circulation, however, reinforces the notion that Northern Ireland is reducible to the set of symbols and issues represented on the murals, and obscures the way in which this misperception is reproduced.

The veteran photographer, visitor, and local know that these images are always changing. New murals emerge out of the ashes of the old. Mural-painting styles change; paint bombs are thrown; new events are reflected in the murals. And, the muralists themselves, sometimes self-promoting and sometimes anonymous, respond to the attention they are given. More murals and signs emerge in response to catalogues, newspaper articles, tourist visits, and other evidence of the notice generated by the circulation of the images. The unspoken dialogue between photographer and mural painter is an economy of consumption, as Sontag suggests: ‘to consume means to burn, to use up—and, therefore, to need to be replenished. As we make images and consume them, we need still more images; and still more’.¹⁷ This is most visible in the increasingly frequent use of murals in postcards (usually with very little contextualizing information) and even on refrigerator magnets (Fig 4). Note the tight frame on the individual mural photographs on the magnet: it is the image of the mural alone, divorced from any surroundings and describing a decorative, commodifiable Belfast that can be purchased in the tourist office and presented as a ‘Beautiful Gift’ ‘Just for You’.¹⁸

Eoghan McTigue's photographic exhibition 'All Over Again', a collection of photographs of painted-over murals, focuses on the process of change itself, and Aaron Kelly, in his essay 'Walled Communities' that accompanies McTigue's exhibition catalogue, has suggested that,

if murals are taken, by and large, to be examples of either Loyalist or Republican iconography, then something must be said about what an icon now means, for this has implications for the supposed communal identities instantiated by murals as cultural symbols. Notably, the icon has been divested of its original religious ideological import as the manifestation of a sacral presence that assumes a seamless receptive community. This dissemination of iconic presence is fundamentally rewritten by our late capitalist or postmodern society, wherein the image is transformed by what Marx dubbed commodity fetishism. Put simply, the image becomes a compensatory fetish object that disavows its actual historical referent and social context. In Walter Benjamin's terms, the image loses its "aura" through both its reification and reproducibility.¹⁹

This is the complex milieu out of which the murals arise: with an eye to the eyes that watch, but increasingly based on an economy of consumption and less on dialogue. What, then, is being consumed, precisely? Although Kelly refers to the reproducibility of the mural and its iconic images, what are ultimately being reproduced are photographs of the murals. The murals' rich environment is generally lost in these snapshots—and what we see are primarily snapshots, collected as data: mural photographs generally make no attempt to make their own constructedness visible but are, rather, read as mere recording. There is the sense that the

snapshot, without artifice, represents things as they really are, a transparent reality. But, what is naturalized in the snapshot? What is presumably self-evident?

Photography is never simply recording. As concerned with aesthetics as much as with representation, photographers circulate images that are themselves just as constitutive as they are representative. As John Tagg writes, 'like the state, the camera is never neutral'.²⁰ As the photographer frames the mural, s/he makes several choices: this is a mural; this is worth photographing; this is where the end of the image should be; this is the best angle; this should be left in, this out. But, all of these choices profoundly affect one's understanding of what one is seeing even as those choices are often invisible to the viewer of the photograph. Political signs, for instance, or painted political images on tarps are often included in collections of mural photography;²¹ while this choice is certainly logical, it weights the definition of 'mural' toward political signage, leaving an image like Fig. 5, a mural without a clear sectarian message, as categorically anomalous. The definitional question—'what, precisely, is a mural?'—is certainly open to debate. One thinks primarily of large paintings on gable ends, but the line between 'murals' and 'graffiti' is often blurred. An article by Marie Foy in the *Belfast Telegraph*, for instance, reports:

A Belfast City Council scheme to remove sectarian graffiti on the Shankill Road could land one of the UK's top environmental awards. Twenty-seven murals and 7000 metres of kerbstone paint portraying unionist and republican messages have been scrubbed away. And now the cleanup project has made it to the final of the UK's People and Places Awards, managed here by Tidy Northern Ireland.²²

Any distinction between ‘mural’ and ‘graffiti’ is here elided; later in the article, graffiti is considered together in a list with ‘litter, dog fouling, flyposting’; the article, read as a whole, suggests a surprising equivalence between muralists and ‘litter louts’. The context for the article is a post-ceasefire, post-Agreement Northern Ireland in which murals are read as part of the ‘legacy of the past’, as Alan Woods, awards organizer, describes them. Despite the surprising equivalences suggested by this newspaper article, it also suggests a particular, historically specific, local and contested environment for the murals, conditions not visible to the viewer of a typical mural photograph and certainly not implied by, for instance, the refrigerator magnet of Fig 4. The juxtaposition of this campaign and the postcards and other souvenirs that feature mural photographs suggests that murals occupy a contested place in the new Northern Ireland: for some, they are Northern Ireland’s most popular commodity, and for others, they are barriers not only to reimagining geopolitical terrain, but also to encouraging foreign investment and development. Mural photography has tended to elide these issues.

Graffiti, in the sense of text or image added to or near a mural by someone other than the muralist(s), complicate the boundaries of the mural image in interesting ways; photographs of murals with graffiti are less transparent, since they are less obviously recordings of a static object. The mural photographer must choose what to do when faced with a mural that includes graffiti. McCormick’s ‘Mural Directory’ describes murals as ‘deteriorated’, indicating that the ‘mural has faded or is covered with graffiti’; Rolston tends not to comment on graffiti in his *Drawing Support* collections, even when they occupy a significant portion of the photographic frame.²³ Changing the frame of the photograph changes one’s understanding of what one is looking at, particularly when graffiti is part of the image. For instance, Fig. 6 represents a typical mural photograph, tightly framed and cropped around the mural image; Fig 7, on the

other hand, photographed in late March 2004, implies the charged context in which these murals occur: in this case, the graffito ‘assesins!’ suggests a Spanish viewer whose reading of ETA, most likely immediately following the Madrid train bombings, is at odds with that of the idealism of the Republican muralist(s). The photographs, read together, suggest that the relationship between muralist and viewers is multi-layered, dialogic, and includes the photographer herself.

The pairing of images is one strategy for making the photographic framing process more visible, for denaturalizing the image. Another, to echo the title of the essay, is literally to widen the frame, as I have done in Figs. 8 and 9: in so doing, we see the murals in the context, respectively, of a Belfast in the midst of development, with the Sandy Row mural’s location next to a new Day’s Inn, and, in the case of the paramilitary salute photo, of a Belfast that is part of a global marketplace of consumption—of Disney films, beer, and even political art.²⁴ In commenting on a photograph of a painted-over mural that appears next to a David Allen advertising sign, Kelly remarks that ‘the photograph captures the advertising sign in the midst of rotating its display, proffering another indeterminate sign, an openness between advertisements that seduces us towards another blankness—the phantasmagoric realm of commodity culture’.²⁵ I would go further and suggest that the photograph itself has the potential either to participate uncritically in the latter, even to encourage it, or to make that ‘blankness’ more visible.

I will end with a particularly evocative photograph given the concerns of this essay (see Fig 10), one that refers explicitly to ‘frames’. A typical mural photograph might focus in tightly around the ‘Saoirse—Free the Prisoners’ sign that occupies the space just below the centre of the photograph. This photograph, however, has a wider frame, in line with the slogan on the advertisement. In the Varilux advertisement, what is meant to ‘count’ is precisely what lies

inside its metal frame: the advertisement attempts to encourage the viewer to ignore what surrounds it, to embrace the promise of framing what really ‘counts’—the eye, with which one is viewing the advertisement—by buying the eyeglass frames. But as a photographer, I have framed the photograph to include the politically charged but currently, in post H-Block Northern Ireland, mostly irrelevant ‘Saoirse’ sign: that is, by the time this picture was taken in 2004, the Maze prison had closed, and the freedom of political prisoners was no longer a live political issue. By framing the image as I have, I offer the viewer the ability to consider the possibility that what ‘counts’ is both the advertisement in a Northern Ireland whose consumer culture is developing rapidly with the promise of the peace dividend, but also an outdated sign, individual graffiti tags, fencing, and dilapidated buildings, all of which exist simultaneously in this image, just as they do in Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland is an environment in which urban decay, consumer culture, urban renewal, multinational investment, local and global political discourse can be literally visible in a single frame. The photographer chooses what visual markers remain in play. What I hoped to show in this photograph, ultimately, is not just a Northern Ireland of sectarian division, but a Northern Ireland whose sectarian divisions are itself commodifiable, thanks in part to the complex web of photographic images; this in turn has a material impact on political, social, and economic development in Northern Ireland. Widening the frame has the potential to expose the commodification of the conflict to show, literally, a Northern Ireland that exists in a more complex, if not necessarily always more hopeful, dialogue than that indicated by sectarian discourse. With that in mind, I might suggest that we as viewers must continually remind ourselves to be critically aware of the substantial impact of how our own gaze is framed.

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¹ This article emerged out of a conference presentation and lecture delivered several times in 2005; although page and printing limitations prevent me from reproducing many of the images that illustrated that talk, a photo essay that will supplement the ideas presented here currently appears at <<http://people.ku.edu/~kconrad/widenframe.html>> [accessed 31/01/06]. All of the photographs included in this essay are my own—with the exception of the photographs within the fridge magnet, which are credited to the Irish Picture Company, <www.irishpicturecompany.com>copyright 2000.

² Neil Jarman, ‘Painting Landscapes: The place of murals in the symbolic construction of urban space’, in *Symbols in Northern Ireland*, ed. Anthony Buckley (Belfast: Queen’s University Belfast Institute of Irish Studies, 1998); reprinted <<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/bibdb/murals/jarman.htm>> [accessed 21/01/06].

³ Jarman, ‘Painting Landscapes’.

⁴ Jarman, ‘Painting Landscapes’.

⁵ John Szarkowski, as quoted in Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Girous, 1977), p.169.

⁶ Allen Feldman, ‘Violence and Vision: The Prosthetics and Aesthetics of Terror’, *Public Culture* 10:1 (1997): 26.

⁷ *Images & Reflections: Photographers and Writers Seeing Our Century*, ed. and curator John Gray (Belfast: Linen Hall Library, 2000), p.68.

⁸ Gray, *Images*, p.68.

⁹ Belinda Loftus, 'Photography, Art & Politics: How the English Make Pictures of Northern Ireland's Troubles', *Circa* 13 (Nov. / Dec. 1983): 10.

¹⁰ Declan McGonagle, 'Introduction', in *Troubled Land: The Social Landscape of Northern Ireland*. Photographs by Paul Graham (London: Grey Editions, 1987), np.

¹¹ For references to Belfast's 'terror tourism', see, for instance, Dominic Casciani, 'All Aboard Belfast's Terror Tour', *BBC Online (Northern Ireland)* (1 December 1999)

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/544851.stm> [accessed 31/ 01/ 06]; and Ron DePasquale, 'Destination Belfast? Tourists Flood In', *Christian Science Monitor* (1 September 2005) <<http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0901/p06s02-woeu.html>> [accessed 31/ 01/05].

¹² Spurgeon Thompson, *The Postcolonial Tourist* (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertations, 1998), pp.277-319.

¹³ Sontag, *On Photography*, p.3.

¹⁴ Sontag, *On Photography*, p.147-8.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Bill Rolston, *Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992); *Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1995); *Drawing Support 3: Murals and Transition in the North of Ireland* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 2003); Kathryn Conrad, 'Northern Ireland photo gallery: murals, graffiti, marches, and protests' <<http://people.ku.edu/murals.html>> [accessed 31/ 01/ 06]; Jonathan McCormick, 'Mural Directory: A Directory of Murals in Northern Ireland' <<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/mccormick/index.html>> [accessed 31/ 01/06]. All of these collections copyright their images, which, as John Tagg has noted in his discussion of nineteenth-century legal debates over the property status of photographs, gestures toward their status as something

other than unmediated reality, as ‘creation rather than mere reproduction’. See John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. (Amherst: U. of Massachusetts Press, 1988), p. 108. Oona Woods, in *Seeing Is Believing?: Murals in Derry* (Derry: Guildhall, 1995), notes the frustration of some muralists at the ways in which their artwork has not only been decontextualised but also used for profit through photography (pp.7-8).

¹⁶ Woods, *Seeing Is Believing?* p.7.

¹⁷ Sontag, *On Photography*, p.157.

¹⁸ Fridge magnet photos credited to Irish Picture Company

<<http://www.irishpicturecompany.com>> [31/01/06] copyright 2000.

¹⁹ Aaron Kelly, ‘Walled Communities’, in Eoghan McTigue, *All Over Again* (Belfast: Belfast Exposed Photography, 2004), np.

²⁰ Tagg, *Burden*, p.63.

²¹ See, for instance, Rolston, *Drawing Support 2*, plate 49, p.26; plates 81 and 82, p.43; *Drawing Support 3*, plate 88, p.47; McCormick, ‘Mural Directory’, Album 11, Mural 357

<<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/mccormick/album11.htm>> [accessed 31/ 01/06]; Conrad, ‘Northern Ireland photo gallery’, <<http://people.ku.edu/~kconrad/murcan.html>> [accessed 31/ 01/06].

²² Marie Foy, ‘Graffiti Work paves way to Awards Finals’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 22 January 2004, p.13.

²³ See McCormick, ‘Mural Directory’, any album page. For unremarked graffiti, see, for example, Rolston, *Drawing Support 2*, plate 81, p.43 and plate 91, p.48.

²⁴ The Day’s Inn website advertises the hotel as ‘conveniently located close to many of the city’s shops, restaurants, attractions and night life’, conveniently cropping the mural out of its own

promotional photographs. See Day's Inn Belfast website <<http://www.belfastcityhotel.co.uk>>
[accessed 31/ 01/06].

²⁵ Kelly, 'Walled Communities', np.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10