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One Photo: (Un) photographing peace

Photography & Culture 12:3, p 377-381

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BIO

Dr. Tiffany Fairey is a visual sociologist specializing in participatory and community photography. She is a Research Associate in the Department of War Studies at Kings College, London and co-founder and former director (1999-2009) of PhotoVoice. In 2010 she was awarded the Royal Photographic Society's Hood Medal for outstanding advance in photography for public service.

Figure 1:

Cupar Way by Sharon Johnston with young people at Belfast Exposed

This photograph of a street in West Belfast is, at first glance, unremarkable. But when people who know the city are told it is a picture looking out to Cupar Way from Bombay Street, it will cause them to look again. The actual view from this standpoint would be of an 11 metre high wall. But in this photograph, created by two youth groups working with community photography facilitators from Belfast Exposed, the wall has been digitally removed to reveal the open street view that has not been seen since Belfast's biggest peace wall, which divides the Protestant Shankill from the Catholic Falls Road, was built 50 years ago.

The first of Northern Ireland's peace walls or peace lines were built in 1969, growing out of temporary barricades erected by local communities during periods of intense rioting. The British Army replaced the existing barricades with barbed-wire barriers of its own and these were replaced with more permanent structures to separate communities as violence escalated. Over the years many more walls were erected. A recent report lists a total 116 barriers across Northern Ireland running along the interfaces of unionist and loyalist areas, 97 of which are in Belfast.¹ While many date back to the years of the Troubles several more have been built during the last 20 years of relative peace. There are, in fact, now more peace walls across Northern Ireland than existed before the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

As former flashpoints of violence, where lives were lost and destroyed, the walls serve as potent reminders of the deep-rooted divisions and contested histories that shape Northern Ireland.² Communities living in the interface areas alongside the walls, who suffered disproportionately from the violence and disorder of the Troubles, continue to endure high levels of multiple deprivation. They responded to the Northern Ireland Executive's commitment to remove all of the peace walls by 2023 with widespread scepticism and disbelief.³ Many people are not yet ready for them to come down. Communities living by the walls report feeling safer with them still in place.

The walls, which have become a staple of the Belfast black cab and bus tourist circuit, are important as both relics of and memorials to the conflict and stand as a reminder of the unfinished nature of the peace process (Cosstick 2015). Many recognise that the most enduring walls are the mental barriers in people's heads.

Today there is a complex network of people, communities and agencies working towards making Belfast a 'city without walls'⁴. While interface communities are distrustful, most want change for future generations⁵. Nowadays many of the walls have gates that are open during the day letting people and cars pass through. Some of the younger generations see no need for the peace walls, believing they hold communities back⁶.

¹ 'Interface Barriers, Peacelines and Defensive Architecture'. 2017. Belfast Interface Project. <https://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/sites/default/files/publications/Interfaces%20PDF.pdf>

² It is beyond the scope of this article to provide an account that sufficiently conveys the complex and charged social and political history of the peace walls. This summary is a good starting point to explore the existing literature: Conway, Mary, and Jonny Byrne. 2005. 'Interface Issues: An Annotated Bibliography'. Institute for Conflict Research. <https://www.belfastinterfaceproject.org/sites/default/files/publications/Interface%20Issues%20-%20An%20Annotated%20Bibliography.pdf>.

It is also important to note not all of Northern Ireland's interface communities live alongside visible barriers such as walls. Some interface markers are invisible to those who do not know the area. They may consist of a turn in the road, a local shop, landmark or a park that signify the segregation of one community's territory from another's'.

³ Four years off from the target only a small number have been demolished.

⁴ For a compelling account of these efforts see Cosstick, Vicky. 2015. *Belfast: Toward a City Without Walls*. London: Colourpoint Books.

⁵ http://www.internationalfundforireland.com/images/stories/documents/press_releases/2016/IFI_Summary_Report.pdf

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-43991851> 3rd May 2018

I came to the image of Cupar Way while undertaking research into the role of the arts in reconciliation and peace-building processes⁷. It was shown to me by Mervyn Smyth, Belfast Exposed's Community Engagement Manager who has over 30 years of experience of working on community photography projects in Northern Ireland. The young people who created the image come from the communities living either side of the peace wall. They were part of a project funded by Belfast City Council, from October 2018 until February 2019, which sought to ask questions about the wall from the perspectives of youth living alongside it. The participants shared images from each other's viewpoints and created digitally manipulated photographs in which they removed the wall.

This project is one of many hundreds that Belfast Exposed has run in Northern Ireland's communities over its 35-year history. One of Northern Ireland's premier contemporary photography organisation, Belfast Exposed's roots are in the front rooms of its founding members, a group of local photographers who came together to document community experiences of conflict from a predominantly working class perspective. Forging solidarities across Belfast's sectarian divide, the photographers documented all aspects of life during The Troubles, and held exhibitions in venues in all areas of the city.

Mervyn Smyth works with a pool of photography tutors and facilitators on projects with diverse communities and groups in partnership with community organisations, museums, institutions and government schemes. Belfast Exposed's photography work is remarkable for its longevity. It has relationships with people that go back over decades; working with church and women's organisations, youth centres and pensioner clubs, ex- and serving prisoners from different combatant groups, restorative justice projects, conflict victims and survivors, new and emerging communities, refugee groups, people living in mental health units and rural communities. Most recently it has undertaken therapeutic photography projects with young men at risk of and affected by suicide in response to the rising suicide rates amongst young males that are in part attributed to the impact of intergenerational trauma and legacy of conflict on the current generation.

Belfast Exposed harnesses the dialogical and disruptive potential of photography to facilitate community healing, activism, engagement and education. Mervyn talks of photography as being a means for starting conversations that act as catalysts for wider processes of peace-building. There are no off-the-shelf projects. The methods evolve and shift according to the specific group. Weary of politics, communities in Belfast feel unrepresented. Taking charge of their own representation, they want to highlight the social impact of failed political processes, and the ways in which the ongoing political stalemate shapes people's lives.

Communities debate and respond to images from the Belfast Exposed archive, they create new images, they document and re-imagine their communities, they

⁷ For further details see <https://artreconciliation.org/>

record their histories and stories. Mervyn describes how images have a way of opening dialogue that can move things forward.

[01:12:03] Pictures just provoke chat, you put them down on the table and they start people off – oh look at that, remember that, I hated that, that was good, can we go photograph that now? (Mervyn Smyth interview, September 2018)

His account downplays the skills required to harness the dialogical potential of images across difference, and in politically charged contexts: facilitation expertise and an intimate inter-linked knowledge of the visual and community landscape. The skill lies in knowing what images to use with what groups, what is relevant, what archival and found images people will react to, what kind of images they might want to take and what will open up rather than close down conversation.

In responding to archival images and creating new ones, photography creates encounters and an exploration of different perspectives. Such moments, that push people out of fixed ways of seeing, are fundamental to transforming conflict and the long, slow process of building peace.

People in Northern Ireland have grown up with images of The Troubles. They are used to seeing the atrocities and violence that befell their communities portrayed graphically on television and in the newspapers. Having seen their communities (mis)represented through a singular lens, they are wise as to how images can be manipulated. In projects where participants use Photoshop to construct different visual realities, they harness the malleability of the image for their own ends.

Belfast Exposed tutors first manipulated an image to remove a peace wall in a project in Derry, nearly 20 years ago. In the community exhibition, the images were displayed quietly, without any explanatory caption, in amongst the other photographs taken by the participants, of their city and its habitants. People from the communities on both sides of the wall were drawn to them. They could not work out where the pictures were taken. They knew that place. It was an area that many of them passed through daily but without the wall they could not recognise it. When they were told it was their community with the wall removed they were amazed. Seeing the reactions, Mervyn saw the potential of working more with Photoshop.

[00:32:08] 'With digital manipulation communities can re-invent what they are. The children come up with brilliant ideas - if they want to put a beach in West Belfast they can, with the magic of photography we can make that happen... We are working with groups who want to change the story of their area, they want to show something completely different. They use photoshop to remove and insert things into their images, they re-design their neighbourhoods. They put in shops, schools, parks, everything and then we ask, 'Is that really what you want? If it's so perfect you'll never want to leave!' (Mervyn Smyth interview, September 2018)

John Paul Lederach, the leading peace theorist, talks about peace as a potentiality that requires the creative capacity to imagine, to take risks and to recognise

possibilities (2005). In constructing images that visualise their communities without walls, these young people and their photography tutors imagine beyond what is seen. They visualise something that does not yet exist. Visual representations of the walls are as much a part of the story of division and conflict as the walls themselves are a consequence of it. For outsiders, the walls are potent visual symbols of the entrenched barriers to peace; for communities who live alongside them they are commonplace, a normalised part of the landscape. By erasing the walls, the photographers playfully disrupt both these perspectives and envision a new reality. This image, and the many others created through Belfast Exposed's community collaborations, when fed back into their archive reconstitute it. The archive shifts from being a historical repository towards being a place of material and social re-interpretation.

Academics, noting photography's fixation and even collusion with conflict and atrocity, have begun to ask what might a photography of peace consist of? (Ritchin 2013, Moller 2019). How might images and image-making be complicit in supporting communities to recover from conflict and facilitate dialogue? How can photography help to frame the conditions of possibility for peace? I would suggest that this photo is a good place to start.

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