The Photography of Street Art as a Representation of Place

By Jacob Eli Thomashow

Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of Tasmania, 2006–2007

Master of Art Design and Environment, University of Tasmania, 2007–2009

Submitted in Fulfilment of the Partial Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Art: Photography

University of Tasmania, March, 2012
Signed Declaration of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of the my knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis, nor does the thesis contain any material that infringes copyright.

Jacob Eli Thomashow
Signed Statement of Authority of Access

This thesis may be made available for loan and limited copying and communication in accordance with the Copyright Act 1968

Jacob Eli Thomashow
Contents

Chapter One .......................................................................................................................... 01

Chapter Two

Section One: Introduction ................................................................................................. 06

Section Two: The Use of Vernacular Signage in Social Documentation: The Early Years ................................................................................................................................. 08

Section Three: The Use of Vernacular in Social Documentation - A Tradition Passed Forward ......................................................................................................................... 23

Section Four: Establishing a Field: Street Art and Graffiti Replaces Vernacular Signage in Modes of Documentation ................................................................................................. 28

Chapter Three: Methodology .............................................................................................. 49

Chapter Four: Conclusion ................................................................................................... 61

Appendix 1: Bibliography .................................................................................................. 65

Appendix 2: List of Illustrations ......................................................................................... 69

Appendix 3: List of Works Submitted .................................................................................. 71
The Photography of Street Art as a Representation of Place

This research project explores how the photography of street art can contribute to the understanding of place. This argument is supported through an examination of techniques and concepts utilized by a range of photographers who have practiced social documentation. The research aims to demonstrate how the photography of street art can reflect social, cultural, and natural identities that are unique to specific environments.

The background to this project is located in the tradition of social documentary in the work of mid 20th century photographers such as Walker Evans, Robert Frank, and Manuel Alvarez Bravo. The exegesis explores these artists’ abilities to capture the vernacular elements that characterize specific locations. The exegesis discusses the arrangement of elements within individual photographs, as well as the arrangement of the photographs in series, and specifically how these strategies provide a social and political commentary. The project is further contextualized by a range of contemporary color photographers including Joel Sternfeld, Steven Shore, Jeff Laio, and Jeff Whetstone, demonstrating the potential for color to contribute to an exploration of place within social documentary photography.

The result of the research is a collection of photographs that describe differences in a range of social landscapes by comparing styles and techniques in street art from three different countries: Australia, South Africa, and the United States. The thesis exhibition consists of a series of large scale photographic prints that depict street artworks in their surrounding context, including people and natural or built environments. In these photographs, street art is the dominant form of vernacular expression. It embodies the visual characteristics of environments undergoing pronounced change. These photographs form a narrative concerned with the social, political, and natural identities of a place.