RE-PRESENTING THE CITY

Also edited by Anthony D. King

Culture, Globalization and the World-System

Re-Presenting the City

Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the
Twenty-First Century Metropolis

Edited by

ANTHONY D. KING

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Ali A. Mazrui, Nkiru Nzegwu, Nihal Perera, Saskia Sassen,
Joseph Sciorra, Rob Shields, Neil Smith, John Tagg,
Sharon Zukin 1996

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Preface

Most of the chapters in this book began as papers, or commentaries, at a one-day symposium with the same title, held at the State University of New York at Binghamton (now, Binghamton University, SUNY) on 4 April, 1992. Sponsored by the History and Theory of Art and Architecture Graduate Program of the Department of Art and Art History (now the Department of Art History), the symposium was the fifth in the series, 'Current Debates in Art History' held at the University. Subsequently, Greig Crysler, James Duncan, Nkiru Nzegwu, and Nihal Perera, originally commentators at the symposium, developed full papers for this published edition and Rob Shields, who was also present at the symposium, was also invited to contribute a chapter. Chapter 9 is a revised version of a lecture with the same title delivered at the University some three weeks after the symposium by Saskia Sassen who was the Distinguished Visiting Scholar in Art History for 1992.

In the original proposal for the symposium – on which I draw for the following paragraphs – attention was focused on certain dominant representations of major 'world cities' which had been published in the early 1990s. According to these accounts, a range of economic, social, demographic and cultural transformations had taken place in major world cities – particularly New York, Paris, London, Los Angeles, Tokyo – of which New York was seen as a paradigmatic example – especially since the 1970s. As organizer of the symposium, I highlighted four of these transformations as having special significance: the substantial growth of the producer service sector (particularly banking, financial services, advertising, legal, business services, realty, etc.) and their increasingly dominant role, both internationally and nationally; the increasing importance of the cultural industries and of the cultural economy in general; the immense change in the ethnic and racial composition of the population resulting from recent immigration and out-migration; and with deindustrialisation, the increase in economic and social polarisation, widening the gap between rich and poor.

Not least resulting from the ever-widening economic and social divisions in both the society and the city, and the transformation in its ethnic and cultural composition, a new cultural politics, a new politics of identity had emerged. Far from being subordinated into simple categories of class, diverse social, ethnic, racial, and gendered cultures were gaining increasing visibility, inscribing their presence on the urban scene, not merely in the old

form of 'ethnic neighborhoods' but in public art, street life, and the built spaces of the city.

It was these assumptions that were behind the original title: the city was in the process of being 're-presented' to the city's inhabitants as well as to others; the city was 're-presenting' itself to itself. As I discuss in the Introduction, the notion of representation here was understood primarily (though not exclusively) as a physical, spatial, material and visual phenomenon.

The aim of the symposium, therefore, and subsequently of this book, was to provide an opportunity for a group of leading scholars researching and writing on New York, but also other cities in Africa, Asia and North America, to respond to these issues, but also to address some of the theoretical and methodological questions prompted by the task of urban representation itself.

However as Rob Shields implies in his careful deconstruction of the title, the limitation of the discussion of urban representations within these parameters is not so easy, an issue on which John Tagg also comments, the word 're-presenting' broken by a hyphen, perhaps, because of 'the weight of meaning it has to bear' (p. 179). The published outcome of the symposium, therefore, was left open, both to accommodate the theoretical challenges made to some of the assumptions behind the original proposal as well as the contributions of the commentators who, though unfairly limited to ten or fifteen minutes during the proceedings, were subsequently invited to develop their contributions at length. This also enabled a more substantial discussion of issues and theories of representation to be included in the final section.

The degree to which some of the assumptions behind the original proposal have been challenged, and the different discourses and arguments heard during and after the symposium developed, therefore, has exceeded my own expectations. The contributors not only contest many of the conventional social, political, geographical, ideological and cultural positions of what Sassen terms here the 'privileged viewers' of the different processes that make up the city, but more especially, the very practice of representation itself. Many new insights come from the theoretical chapters in the last section of the book; an equal if not greater number, however, come from a critical reading of the different positions and styles of narration of all of the essays themselves.

Finally I have stayed with the original subtitle of the symposium which refers to the 'twenty-first century metropolis'. By the time this book is published and reviewed, the twentieth century will be at an end. Thinking critically about representation in relation to ethnicity, capital and culture in the world cities of the future is one of the most urgent tasks which we will have to address.

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ANTHONY D. KING

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