

## The 3 themes

The main themes of the exhibition documenta 12 guide the essays, debates and works of *documenta 12 magazines* and anticipate the reflection around the exhibition.

### The three thematic axes of documenta 12

#### Is modernity our antiquity?

Many of the utopian projects of modernity have survived only as fragments and today appear “unfinished”. Many of the material structures, forms and achievements we associate with concepts of modernity seem to be disappearing amid present-day transformation processes. Yet at the same time, the real and conceptual spaces of modernity - its aesthetic and political structures and ideas - continue to be a major preoccupation of numerous projects taking place in the artistic realm and beyond, and also give rise to conflicting projections. Is modernity our antiquity?

Roger M. Buergel writes in regard to the “leitmotifs” for the exhibition (December 2005): “Is modernity our antiquity? – This is the first question. It is fairly obvious that modernity, or modernity’s fate, exerts a profound influence on contemporary artists. Part of that attraction may stem from the fact that no one really knows if modernity is dead or alive. It seems to be in ruins after the totalitarian catastrophes of the 20th century (the very same catastrophes to which it somehow gave rise). It seems utterly compromised by the brutally partial application of its universal demands (liberté, égalité, fraternité) or by the simple fact that modernity and coloniality went, and probably still go, hand in hand. Still, people’s imaginations are full of modernity’s visions and forms (and I mean not only Bauhaus but also arch-modernist mindsets transformed into contemporary catchwords like ‘identity’ or ‘culture’). In short, it seems that we are both outside and inside modernity, both repelled by its deadly violence and seduced by its most immodest aspiration or potential: that there might, after all, be a common planetary horizon for all the living and the dead.”

#### What is bare life?

At issue here is “the subject”: the exposed nature, powerlessness and defencelessness of the subject fuels many current philosophical and aesthetic debates. This is accompanied by political considerations and artistic demands for a new self-empowerment of the subject. The forms of representation of such considerations, and questions related to the status of the subject in contemporary art, provide the thematic framework for this particular project topic.

Roger M. Buergel (December 2005): “What is bare life? This second question underscores the sheer vulnerability and complete exposure of being. Bare life deals with that part of our existence from which no measure of security will ever protect us. But as in sexuality, absolute exposure is intricately connected with infinite pleasure. There is an apocalyptic and obviously political dimension to bare life (brought out by torture and the concentration camp). There is, however, also a lyrical or even ecstatic dimension to it - a freedom for new and unexpected possibilities (in human relations as well as in our relationship to nature or, more generally, the world in which we live). Here and there, art dissolves the radical separation between painful subjection and joyous liberation. But what does that mean for its audiences?”

#### What is to be done (Education)?

The question of developing adequate forms of education and communication is one of the most fiercely debated issues in present-day society, not just in the art world. Accepted practices and established institutions are coming under increased pressure and currently find themselves in the midst of a crisis of definition. Newly founded institutions, however, often follow the example of these traditional models. In a parallel development, a wide range of new forms of

organisation and selforganisation, new kinds of artistic and communications work have emerge - above all on a local level. Which of these local initiatives and action spaces are capable of securing the future of advanced, open and autonomous working practices and providing answers to the question of education they themselves represent?

Roger M. Buerger, December 2005: "The final question concerns education: What is to be done? Artists educate themselves by working through form and subject matter; audiences educate themselves by experiencing things aesthetically. How to mediate the particular content or shape of those things without sacrificing their particularity is one of the great challenges of an exhibition like documenta. But there is more to it than that. The global complex of cultural translation that seems to be somehow embedded in art and its mediation sets the stage for a potentially all-inclusive public debate (Bildung, the German term for education, also means 'generation' or 'constitution,' as when one speaks of generating or constituting a public sphere). Today, education seems to offer one viable alternative to the devil (didacticism, academia) and the deep blue sea (commodity fetishism)."