

## Jessica Feldman on Live & Active

What if the Palestinian suicide bomber on the point of blowing him - or herself (and others) up is, in an emphatic sense, 'more alive' than the American soldier engaged in a war in front of a computer screen against an enemy hundreds of miles away, or a New York yuppie jogging along the Hudson river in order to keep his body in shape? ... Or, in terms of the revolutionary process, what if the difference that separates Lenin's era from Stalinism is, again, the difference between life and death? ... What makes life 'worth living' is the very excess of life: the awareness that there is something for which one is ready to risk one's life (we may call this excess 'freedom', 'honour', 'dignity', 'autonomy', etc.). Only when we are ready to take this risk are we really alive.<sup>1</sup>

-Slavoj Žižek

**Live & Active is a group exhibition that transforms the gallery space** and its surrounding environment into a forum for action on, and critique of, our current political situation, through the use of interventionist, interactive, and documentary art forms. Organized by José Ruiz and myself, the exhibition brings together a group of artists/creators/activists making work that intervenes in aggressive ways -- all of the art works pose a threat or supply the receiver with information and possibilities that are empowering, dangerous, or forbidden. They share the common concern of using art as a means of dissecting and reimagining our society and engaging the public in this creative activity.

**Some of the works employ fiction and lies**, creating a space where we can imagine new perspectives and activities, while some are entirely literal, taking action, and providing information or materials that directly have implicating, and revealing consequences. Tom Bogaert asks us to put ourselves in the position of a suicide bomber's operations; her last jinxed attempts, and her quest for infamy. Hasan Elahi, in response to being placed under extreme surveillance and on the Terrorist Watch List, offers his privacy to his public, thereby reclaiming his perspective as his own original creative material and de-privatizing and disempowering the act of surveillance. John Movius's multi-layered images challenge elements of mainline communication, language, media, and consumerism to reframe debated truths and facts regarding recent events in Iraq, South America, and the U.S. In doing so, he positions the viewer as an accomplice to commercialism and voyeurism. My work focuses on the act of assembling: the bringing together of disparate objects and quotidian materials in multiplicity to suggest the behavior of congregations of people organized by a collective objective. *Assembly* deconstructs the volatile materials commonly used in uprisings and revolts. Taken as a whole, these works offer the situations and provisions necessary to create new paradigms - versions of the world as seen from the eyes of artists, transients, dissidents, and others who are typically labeled as outsiders and enemies.

**The critical positioning of the exhibition at the Bronx River Art Center gives the works special meaning.** The nature and location of the institution are deeply relevant. BRAC is a noncommercial, unspectacular, enthusiastic, artist-run, and community-involved center, committed to accessibility in one of the

poorest neighborhoods in the richest city of one of the richest countries. Here, the art works exude a different potency than they would in a more gentle, gentrified setting where the discussion of empowerment is often abstract.

**Live & Active** grew from a feeling of desperation and frustration with our current political and economic moment, one wherein the art object and the creative act seem completely devoid of power and influence. Art is either illegal and censored, or commercialized to the point of becoming decorative. Yet my interest in art has been in its ability to provide a forum for innovative and critical behavior - a place where new thoughts, objects, and actions can be invented without the burden of commercial function. What is to be done? Perhaps the answer is in the problem. Art has historically been defined as distinct and separate from 'reality', rhetorically rendering it without direct consequence in the 'real world'. This distinction may in fact be among the only refuges that we currently have for freely productive, creative, and constructive behavior. By labeling itself 'artificial', rather than 'real', art creates a space to experiment with perspectives, materials, and actions that are not allowed in our highly repressive reality. In this post-9-11 decade, the claim to artifice and fiction is one of the only claims that *can* allow free thought and offer the opportunity for individuals to engage and participate in a creative 'coming together' that incites change.

**The works in this exhibition bridge the gap from desperation to optimism and action.** As sinister as some may seem, their effects are intensely hopeful, as they give form to some of the most empowering behaviors we have: acting collectively, creating, organizing, sympathizing, imagining, informing. French art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud has written that "the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real."<sup>2</sup> Not accepting the terms and conditions of the "existing real" -- of the art, social, economic, and legal systems to which we are subjected -- these works all interrogate and rebel against the dominant positioning of art, production, creativity, and the individual citizen. They go beyond metaphor and symbolism and affect actual shifts in the environment beyond the gallery in which they are being displayed.

**The process of assembling Live & Active has been perhaps the most important and meaningful part of this project for me.** Each individual work speaks on its own, but the combination, proximity, and conversation of the exhibition's constituent elements create more than the sum of its parts. The alchemy of the exhibition's works, audiences, artists, organizers, and subversive strategies of promotion and documentation combine to catalyze a greater realization of the issues being discussed. The uniting of these ingredients, in time and space, allows for the creation of a vital and volatile state, object, understanding, and future.

<sup>1</sup> Žižek, Slavoj, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (New York: Verso, 2002), pp. 88-89.

<sup>2</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans, Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon, France: Les presses du réel, 2002), p. 9.