



# SEE YOU IN THE STREETS

Art, Action, and  
Remembering the  
Triangle Shirtwaist  
Factory Fire

**RUTH SERGEL**

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Shirtwaist Factory Fire

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# WELCOME

Every so often it happens. A trigger jolts us out of our day-to-day lives. Drawing on outrageous energy from one past injustice after another, we cast off the world as it is presented to us and surge forth. Trusting in our own instincts and possibilities, we boldly assert our presence, our voice, our will.

In 1911 the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire was such a trigger. Many witnessed the inferno in the heart of New York's Greenwich Village. Helplessly watching as 146 garment workers, most of them young immigrant women and girls, burned or came out the windows to plummet to the pavement below. The bosses ran a defiantly nonunion shop, but many of the dead were secretly members of the fledgling International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. They had bravely gone on strike just over a year earlier. Each Triangle worker who perished served as an indictment of a public that had not stood up when the call for solidarity was made. In the wake of the fire, a movement for social and economic justice was galvanized. People from wildly different walks of life stepped forward to insist that the lives of these workers could not be simply erased. The specter of the Triangle dead became an impetus to a progressive movement that created many of the laws that protect us to

this day. Even decades later, the Triangle Fire retains the power to outrage and incite.

*See You in the Streets* is the story of how, nearly one hundred years later, the activist legacy of the fire was reimagined with the creation of Chalk, an annual community intervention, which in turn inspired the founding of the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition, uniting artists and activists, universities and unions—in all, 250 partners nationwide—for the 2011 centennial of the infamous blaze. With political actions and academic symposia, theater, music and fine art, poetry, and film, the Coalition framed the centennial as a collective act of memory and resistance.

I believe deeply in the capacity of people as the experts of their own lives and communities. In creating Chalk and the Coalition, I am driven by an exploration of what makes it possible for us to move from the inner realm of thought, dream, or feeling to the exterior world of public action. Through films made with communities, public interventions and new media, my projects explode out traditional mediums. Aligning content and form, the work investigates experiences of agency, teasing out the delicate mix of vulnerability and unexpected strength as we cycle from a frozen state, vibrating between personal and political distress, to moments when we burst forth to act on our own truth.

*See You in the Streets* is my attempt to translate years of creative experimentation and learning from radical pedagogues, artists, and activists into language. It is not a set number of stages or a three-part plan. It is diving, twirling, biting to draw a little blood, sinking back, punching through, and a lot of dreaming. What worked for me will be different from what works for you. This text is only part of an ongoing exchange. Throughout the book you will find ‘postcards,’ short essays contributed by partners in the Coalition. These essays are a small taste of the diversity of the group, to whet your appetite for further investigation. I hope you find something here that is useful to you.

At the time Chalk and the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition were being realized, we were a country at war in two nations with another more amorphous war on terror steadily expanding. The economic divide was the worst it had been since the gilded age. The gross negligence that created the Triangle Fire had been shipped overseas, where our cheap goods are paid for with the lives of unprotected workers. Greed is organized. Across the globe people continue to be treated as if they are of so little value they could disappear from the face of the earth and their absence not be noted. It is a kind

of daily terrorism unleashed on workers in environments where there is no living wage, no physical safety, and where—like the Triangle owners of one hundred years ago—no one faces accountability.

Our own lives seemed oddly blinkered in response. Forms of dissent that had been successful in the past were no longer proving to be effective, while new models had yet to coalesce. There was a sense of unease as we continued old rituals of protest but no longer had any faith in their actual efficacy. In this environment, art, with its unique capacity to break free from convention, has a central role to play.

In 2011, the year of the Triangle fire centennial, seventeen people in the United States were killed by terrorism, while 4,609 died in workplace accidents.<sup>1</sup> Between economic distress, the hysteria over terrorism, and a growing realization of the breadth of the surveillance state, there was little sustenance to conceive bold possibilities. Our imagination colonized, there was no need for official censorship. The dream is cut off before it even reaches the surface. Yet if a lesson is to be learned from the Triangle Fire, it's the hard knowledge that if we don't stand up for ourselves, they will let us burn.

The story that I would like to tell is about the necessity of civic engagement. It begins with an uprising, then a tragedy. It culminates in a lasting sense of purpose deeply held by members of a broadly diverse set of communities. The heartfelt fervor inspired by the Triangle Fire mirrors something larger—our hunger for meaning, connection, and effective engagement. I share the story of Chalk and the Coalition as part of a larger conversation about the exuberant joy of inhabiting a passionate life.