

Deborah Shaffer

From the Ashes



On September 11, 2001 I was on the street in front of my house when I heard a roaring engine and looked up to see the belly of a plane right over my head. The view downtown was blocked by a building, but seconds later I heard the explosion, and ran to the corner to see smoke pouring from the North Tower of the World Trade Center. I thought it was the most shocking accident I had ever witnessed. Of course, within a half hour we all knew that it was not an accident, and that our lives had been changed forever.

Of the many phone calls I received that day (even though I live 12 blocks from where the Twin Towers stood, I had phone and e-mail service), one was from Kunststucke Executive Producer Karl Khely. After reassuring him that we were physically okay, I began writing daily e-mails describing the scene in lower Manhattan — everything covered with ash and soot, a horrendous burning smell invading everywhere, no traffic, all but the most essential business closed, identification necessary to move around, soldiers and police everywhere. We were all glued to our televisions, watching the same few images over and over again, trying to understand what had happened and why. A few days later, Karl proposed that I make a personal documentary about what was happening in my community of artists who, like me, had lived and worked near downtown Manhattan for over twenty years. I said “yes” at once, happy to have something to do, an assignment, a purpose, and a reason to go out and talk to people. We began shooting at once, with an Austrian crew (Michael Berz, camera, and Harald Wilde, sound) who had recently moved to New York to set up a production office for MMK-media. We were shooting nearly every day for two weeks, and then editing around the clock to make the ORF broadcast in November. Somewhere along the way, we realized that we were not just making a quick television report, but a more lasting document that reflected the reality of the moment we were all living through.

When we showed the film at the Sundance Festival in January, a reporter asked if we didn't feel we had acted too quickly, that it was too soon to make a definitive statement about the meaning of September 11. While I agree entirely that it will take years to fully understand, we hope this film, *FROM THE ASHES—10 ARTISTS*, represents a beginning of an attempt to come to terms with the meaning of the attack, with terrorism, with the US role in global politics, and with our individual responsibilities and actions. As for the epilogue, which we are just creating at this moment, it is obvious that

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a lot has changed in ten months. The immediacy of the horror has receded, the physical damages have mostly been cleaned up or covered over, and everyone has taken up the rhythms of their daily lives. The painters are painting, the musicians are playing music, the performers are performing—with more or less direct references to September 11 incorporated into their work. However, even though life seems more normal, there is tremendous sadness and confusion just below the surface. Life is quieter in lower New York City, more serious and more somber. The global problems have not been solved, US soldiers are once again at war in a foreign country, and the conflict in the Mid-East is raging out of control. We would like to maintain hope for the future, and contribute our small voice to global understanding and world peace.