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An Alphabet of Disaster: 9/11 from A to Z

Blagovesta Momchedjikova

Abstract

This is a postcard performance project about the Twin Towers, language, and memory.

On 9/11, New York City lost not only hundreds of lives, loves, and hopes but also its beloved Twin Towers postcard skyline. The city was severely wounded as was its famed representation.

What is in a skyline? Buildings that stand out with their unique architecture and function; landmarks that speak to the feat of the imagination and labor; icons that serve their original purpose doubled with representing a place, making it easily recognizable; symbols of ingenuity, progress, and prosperity.

To locals and tourists alike, the Twin Towers were not only grandiose and pretty but also dependable: as the tallest structures in the metropolis, on the Southern tip of Manhattan, they were the perfect NYC compass. “Do you see the Towers?” my friend Susu asked me the very first time I, a newcomer to the city, wanted to visit her in her SoHo apartment. “Just walk towards them,” she said. They helped us orient ourselves and others, putting a spring in our daily step: we could tell where South was, and subsequently, all other directions, thanks to them. Rain or shine, they were always there, and they worked without fail.

The longer I stayed in the city, the more I got to know the Towers and learned valuable tips for experiencing them: if you lay down at one particular location at their foot, you could take someone’s picture with the Towers converging above the head, like I did with my cousin Peter. If you danced on their famous *Windows On the World* dance floor, 107 floors above the city, like I did one night with my friends Pascal and Hiroko, you could really feel like you owned all the tiny lights down below. If you took the Staten Island Ferry, like I always did with family and friends visiting the city, you could not only take your own perfect Twin Towers skyline photo—you could also insert yourself in it!

And then, they were gone.

Those towering behemoths had collapsed, like a gigantic bouncy house that had suddenly popped and lay down—deflated, pitiful, useless.

Gone was our vertical pride.

We would never walk towards the Twin Towers again.

We would never take pictures of them again; we would never take pictures from them again.

We would never see them in the city again; we would never see the city from them again.

But before too long, the destroyed Twin Towers skyline came back to haunt us: from in-memoriam postcards (with patriotic messages written across—“United We Stand”; “We Will Never Forget”), baseball caps, T-shirts. The Twin Towers skyline was having a commercial comeback—as a souvenir.

Seven months after 9/11, I put together and performed *An Alphabet of Disaster: 9/11 from A to Z*—an alphabetic compilation of words related to the tragedy written on the back of Twin Towers skyline postcards—for the 2002 Performance Studies International (PSi) Conference, which was held in New York City. I wanted to bridge the pervasive language of division and disaster from the media with the nostalgic proliferation of Twin Towers skyline images, all of which continued to dominate our social landscape. By then, a viewing platform had been erected, for visitors to stare directly into the void of Ground Zero. At the end of my performance, I circulated the postcards among the audience, so that they could add more words.

Here are the original 26 Twin Towers skyline postcards and what I and the audience members wrote on the back of each. I had gotten these, as well as the disaster collages that you see at the end, in Chinatown, for a \$1 each. Today, the City has a different skyline but many of these “9/11 words” are still with us.

Trying to resurrect *An Alphabet of Disaster* after 17 years, for this volume, was not easy: the quality of the postcards had gotten worse over time. My friend Ralph tried to shine a very special light on them and stand tall above them, in order to photograph them well. As I saw him towering above the carefully laid out Twin Towers skyline postcards on a flat white surface, I thought to myself: those Towers tricked us! Once, camera in hand, we searched for the light and position that would best capture the three-dimensional vertical giants in 2D; now, camera in hand again, we are the 3D giants standing tall above the two-dimensional, destroyed, pocket-sized structures, yet we are still searching for the best way to capture them...

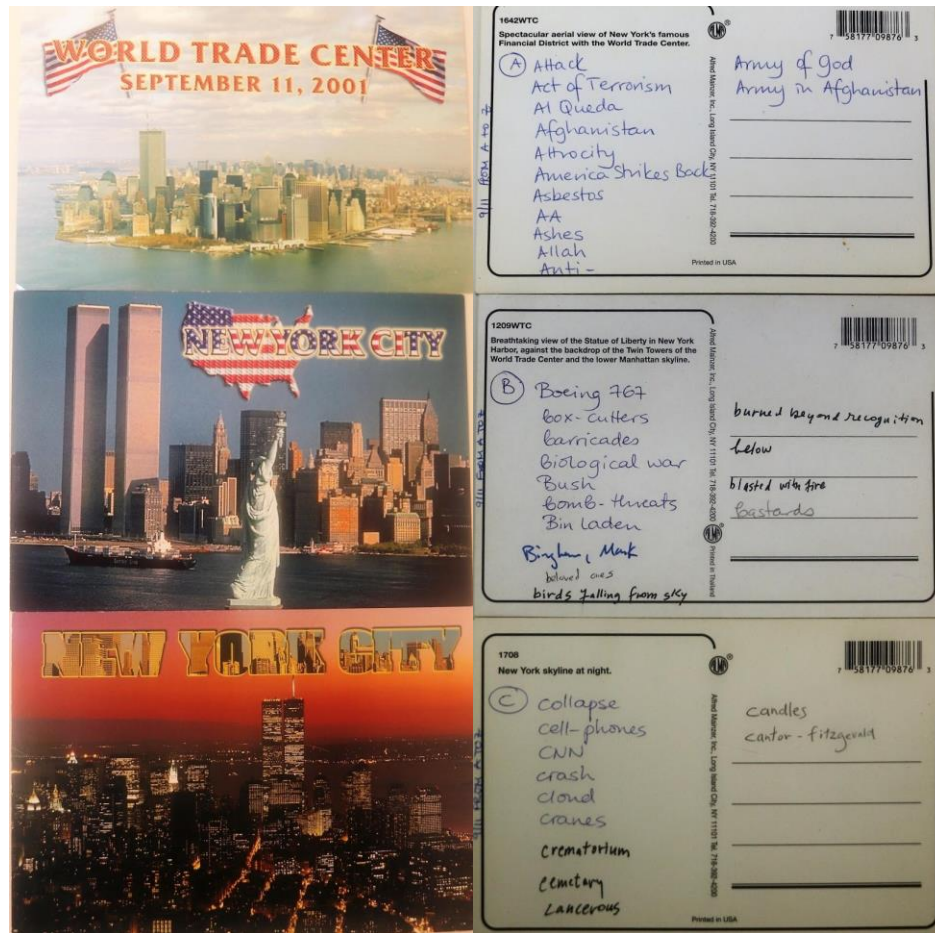


Fig. 1. *An Alphabet of Disaster: 9/11 from A to Z* (2002). **A:** Attack, Act of terrorism, Al Queda, Afghanistan, Atrocity, America Strikes Back, Asbestos, AA, Ashes, Allah, Anti-, Army of God, Army in Afghanistan; **B:** Boeing 767, Box-cutters, Barricades, Biological war, Bush, Bomb-threats, Bin Laden, Bingham, Mark, Beloved ones, Birds falling from sky, Burned beyond recognition, Below, Blasted with fire, Bastards; **C:** Collapse, Cell-phones, CNN, Crash, Cloud, Cranes Crematorium, Cemetery, Cancerous, Candles, Cantor-Fitzgerald).

Photography and Design: Ralph Hardy, SirRalphBJ@gmail.com

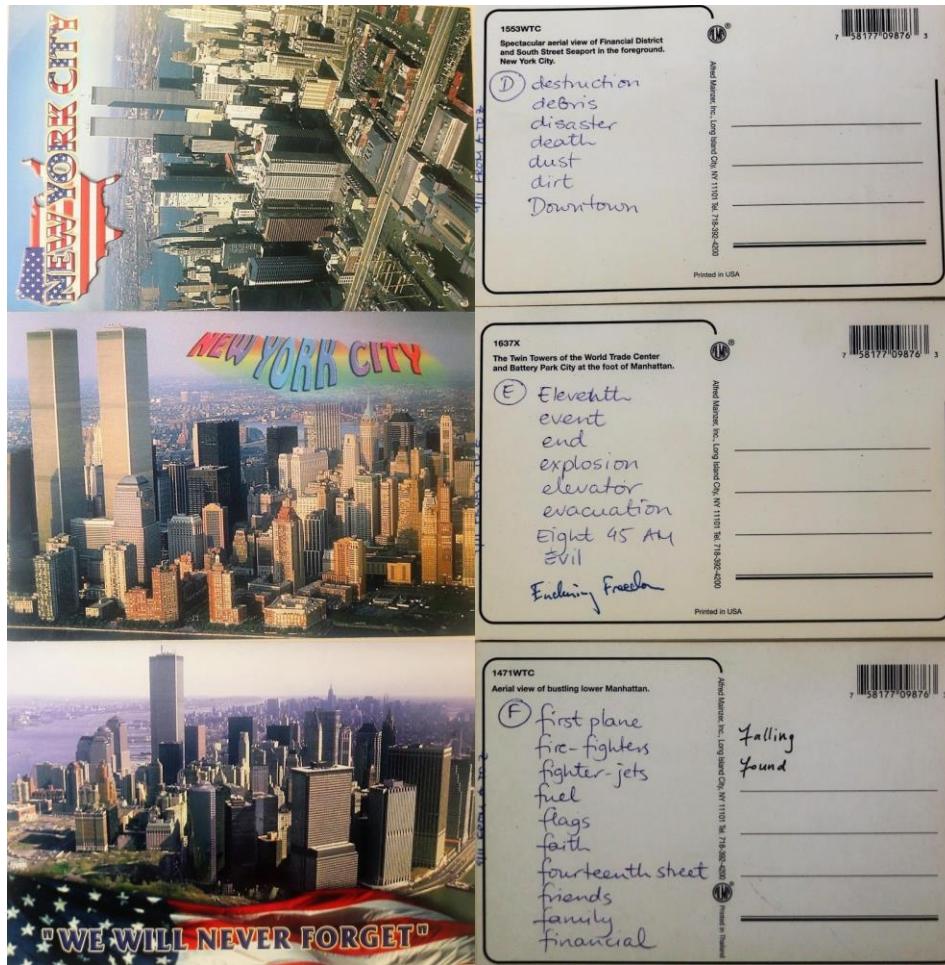


Fig. 2. *An Alphabet of Disaster: 9/11 from A to Z* (2002). **D:** Destruction, Debris, Disaster, Death, Dust, Dirt, Downtown; **E:** Eleventh, Event, End, Explosion, Elevator, Evacuation, Eight 45 AM, Evil, Endangering Freedom; **F:** First plane, Fire-fighters, Fighter-jets, Fuel, Flags, Faith, Fourteenth street, Friends, Family, Financial Falling, Found.
Photography and Design: Ralph Hardy, SirRalphBJ@gmail.com

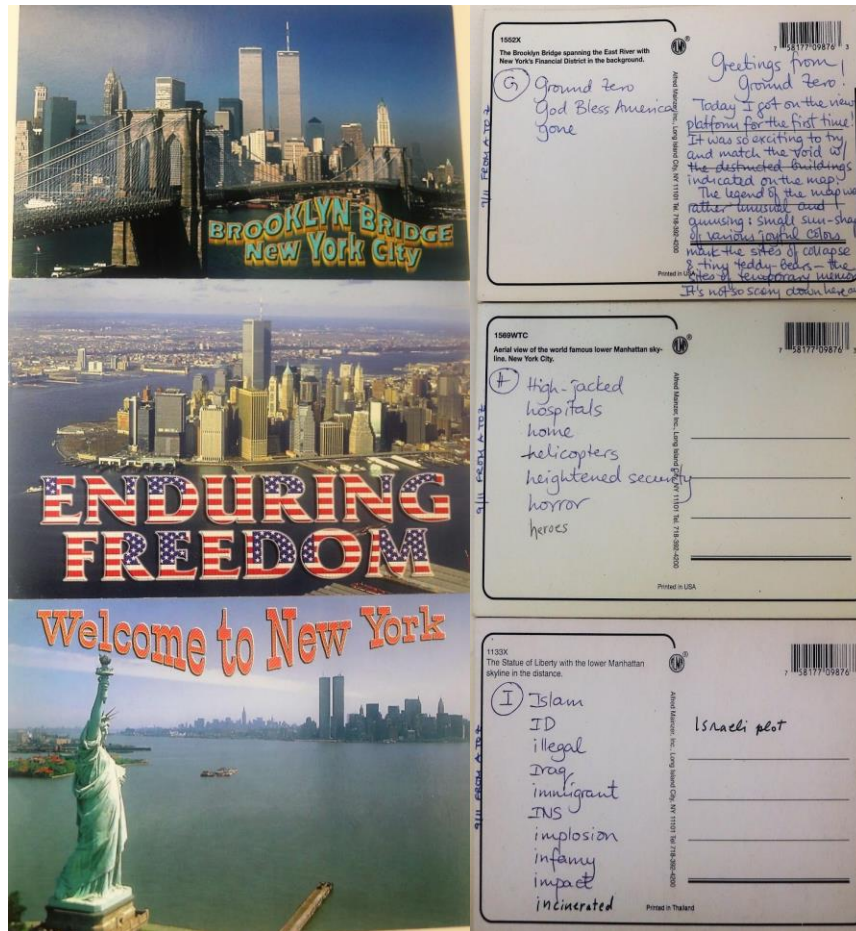


Fig. 3. *An Alphabet of Disaster: 9/11 from A to Z* (2002). **G**: Ground Zero, God Bless America, Gone, Greetings from Ground Zero! <Today I got on the viewing platform for the first time! It was so exciting to try and match the void with the destructed buildings indicated on the map. The legend of the map was rather unusual and amusing: small sun-shapes of various joyful colors mark the sites of collapse & tiny teddy bears—the sites of temporary memorials. It's not so scary down here anymore!>; **H**: High-jacked, Hospitals, Home, Helicopters, Heightened security, Horror, Heroes; **I**: Islam, ID, Illegal, Iraq, Immigrant, INS, Implosion, Infamy, Impact, Incinerated, Israeli plot. Photography and Design: Ralph Hardy, SirRalphBJ@gmail.com



Fig. 4. An Alphabet of Disaster: 9/11 from A to Z (2002). J: Jumping out of the windows; K: Koran, Kodak, Kids; L: Loss, Loved ones, Like in the movies, Lower Manhattan. Photography and Design: Ralph Hardy, SirRalphBJ@gmail.com

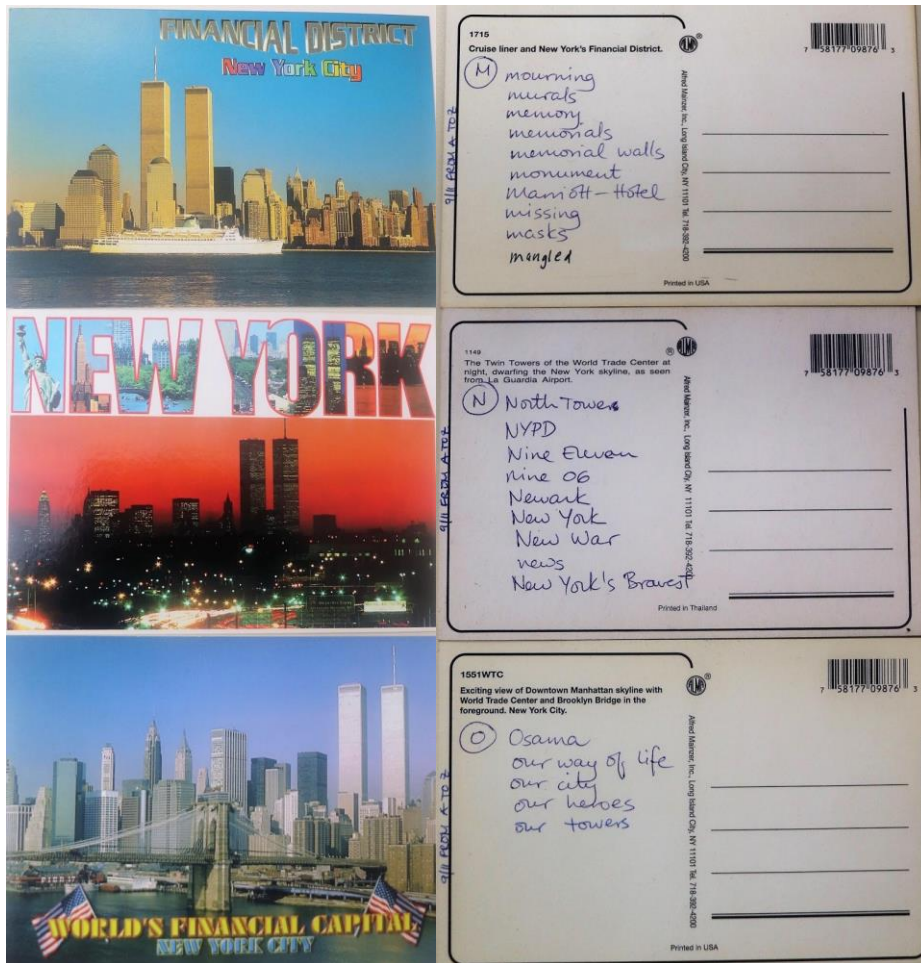


Fig. 5. *An Alphabet of Disaster: 9/11 from A to Z* (2002). **M**: Mourning, Murals, Memory, Memorials, Memorial walls, Monument, Marriott-Hotel, Missing, Masks, Mangled; **N**: North Tower, NYPD, Nine Eleven, Nine 06 AM, Newark, New York, New War, News, New York's Bravest; **O**: Osama, Our way of life, Our city, Our heroes, Our towers.
Photography and Design: Ralph Hardy, SirRalphBJ@gmail.com

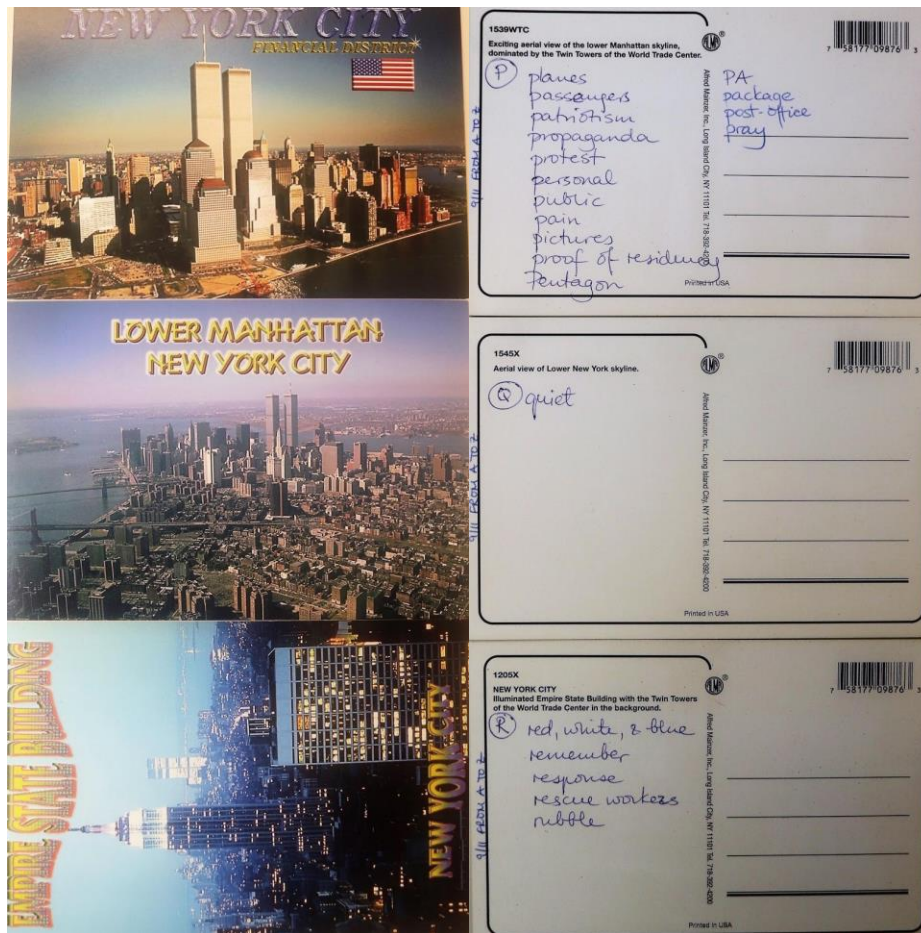


Fig. 6. *An Alphabet of Disaster: 9/11 from A to Z* (2002). **P**: Planes, Passengers, Patriotism, Propaganda, Protest, Personal, Public, Pain, Pictures, Proof of residency, Pentagon, PA, Package, Post-office, Pray; **Q**: Quiet; **R**: Red, white, & blue, Remember, Response, Rescue workers, Rubble.

Photography and Design: Ralph Hardy, SirRalphBJ@gmail.com

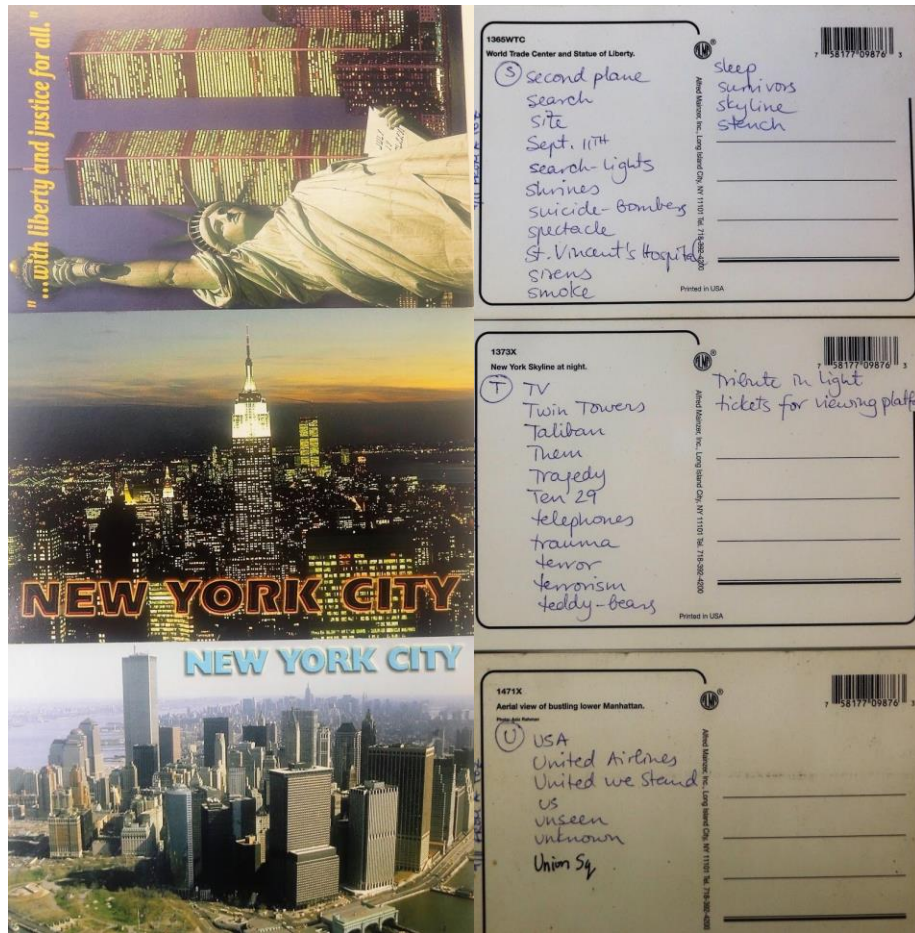


Fig. 7. *An Alphabet of Disaster: 9/11 from A to Z* (2002). **S**: Second plane, Search, Site, September 11th, Search-lights, Shrines, Suicide-bombers, Spectacle, St. Vincent's Hospital, Sirens, Smoke, Sleep, Survivors, Skyline, Stench; **T**: TV, Twin Towers, Taliban, Them, Tragedy, Ten 29, Telephones, Trauma, Terror, Terrorism, Teddy-bears, Tribute in Light, Tickets for the viewing platform; **U**: USA, United Airlines, United We Stand, Us, Unseen, Unknown, Union Square.

Photography and Design: Ralph Hardy, SirRalphBJ@gmail.com

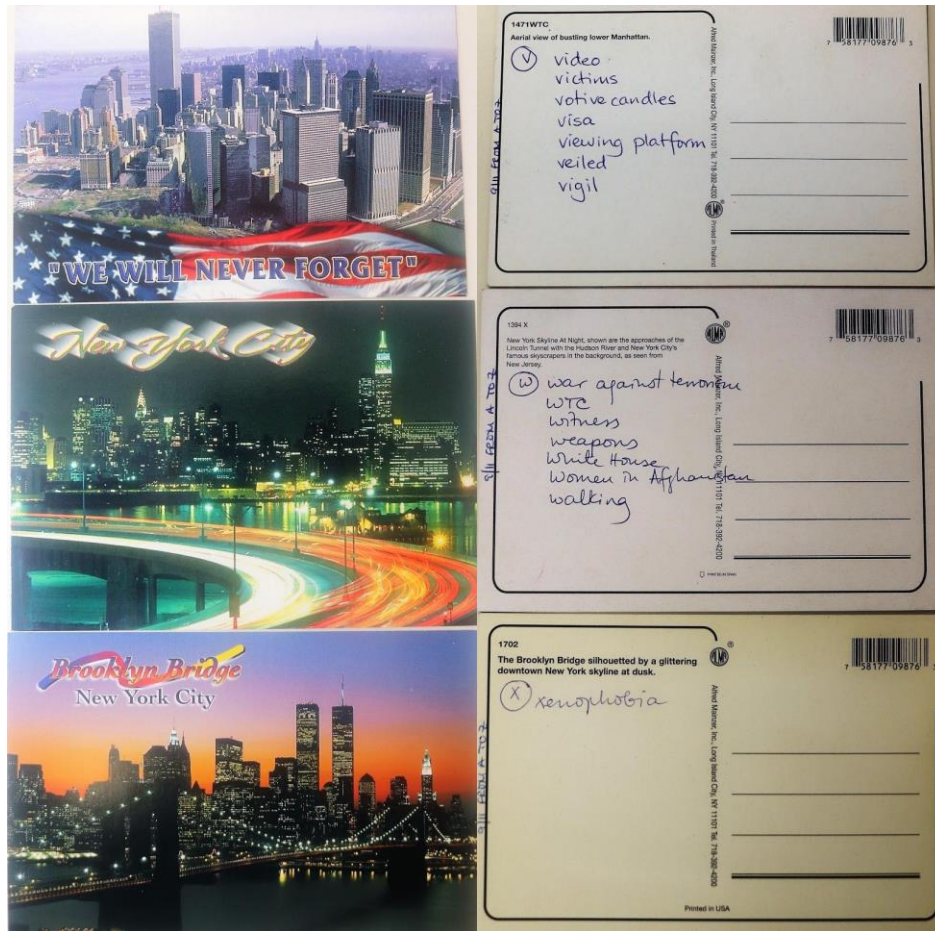


Fig. 8. An Alphabet of Disaster: 9/11 from A to Z (2002). **V**: Video, Victims, Votive candles, Visa, Viewing platform, Veiled, Vigil; **W**: War against terrorism, WTC, Witness, Weapons, White House, Women in Afghanistan, Walking; **X**: Xenophobia.
Photography and Design: Ralph Hardy, SirRalphBJ@gmail.com

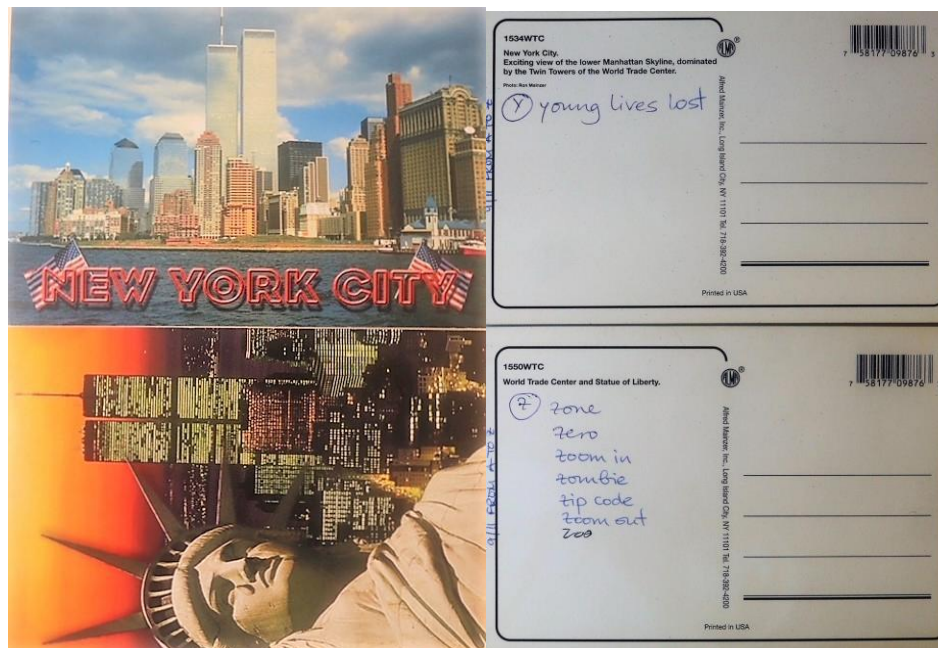


Fig. 9. *An Alphabet of Disaster: 9/11 from A to Z* (2002). **Y**: Young lives lost; **Z**: Zone, Zero, Zoom in, Zombie, Zip code, Zoom out, Zoo.
Photography and Design: Ralph Hardy, SirRalphBJ@gmail.com



Fig. 10. *An Alphabet of Disaster: 9/11 from A to Z* (2002). Postcard collages: From Twin Towers to Ground Zero.

Photography and Design: Ralph Hardy, SirRalphBJ@gmail.com

About the author

Blagovesta Momchedjikova, PhD, is a lover and writer of cities. She teaches writing, art, and the urban experience at New York University; and chairs the Urban Culture Area for the Mid-Atlantic Popular/American Culture Association (MAPACA) and the Conference Scientific Committee for the International Panorama Council (IPC). She has edited *Captured by the City: Perspectives in Urban Culture Studies* (2013) and *Urban Feel* (2010); co-edited *From Above: The Practice of Verticality* (2019), *Thoughts and Visions On and Around the Queens Museum's Panorama of the City of New York* (2018), and *Public Place: Between Spectacle and Resistance* (2016); and contributed to *The International Panorama Council Journal*, *The Everyday of Memory*, *Robert Moses and the Modern City*, *Streetnotes*, *Iso Magazine*, *The Journal of American Culture*, *Tourist Studies*, *Genre: Imagined Cities*, and *PIERS*.

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