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The Days May Be Grim, but Here's a Good Word to Put in Your Pocket

By [MICHAEL M. GRYNBAUM](#)

“[The Waterfalls](#)” flowed in the East River. “The Gates” snaked through Central Park. Now New York’s latest large-scale public art project is being exhibited in an even unlikelier space: your wallet.

On the back of seven million MetroCards distributed this fall is a single printed word: “optimism.” Composed in clean, bold, sans-serif letters, it floats in a sea of white just beneath the boilerplate fine print. Another seven million are on the way early next year.

At first glance, the word appears simple and unassuming, a non sequitur easily overlooked amid the blur of travel in the city. Even its creators acknowledge that many subway and bus riders may never see it.

But as unemployment in the city reaches a 16-year high, as corporations close and deficits mount, optimism has become a scarce commodity, aboveground and below. New York, it seems, could use a chance to restock.

“God knows people want to feel good, they want to feel up, they want to feel positive,” said Christopher P. Boylan, who oversaw the project at the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#). “If I can make a couple of customers smile a day, that’s nice.”

The work itself is the creation of Reed Seifer, a graphic artist and designer who first printed the “optimism” logo on small buttons that he [distributed as a college student](#).

“I’ve always loved art that exists in unexpected places,” he said recently, near his home in Hell’s Kitchen. “I like that maybe not everyone’s going to see it. Or maybe one day you just look and say, ‘Oh.’ ”

The [MetroCard](#), a ubiquitous slip of thin plastic barely three and a half inches across, certainly qualifies as an

unusual canvas for conceptual art. The back of the card is mostly reserved for historical factoids (“The first female subway conductor began work on Dec. 28, 1917”), safety tips (“Fold the stroller. Hold your baby”), or the occasional commemoration of a World Series win or Rockettes performance (“MetroCard saves you \$10 to the Radio City Christmas Spectacular!”).

Occasionally, the card is also used for advertising, but those revenues have remained low, in part because of a lengthy production process. This year, the authority sold \$165,000 worth of MetroCard ads, a fraction of its overall take in advertising revenue.

The MetroCard ad revenue in 2009 is nearly double the amount sold in 2008, but ads were still printed on fewer than 3 percent of the 120 million MetroCards produced in the first 10 months of this year — perhaps underscoring the relevance of “optimism” to an agency facing further budget cuts from the state.

Indeed, not all that the “optimism” project suggests is, well, optimistic. The word on the card can be read as an encouragement, a command, a taunt, an aspiration.

“I like that people can digest it in any way they choose,” Mr. Seifer, 36, said. “I accept all praise and criticism. I love artwork in which people perceive things beyond the intention of the artist.”

Despite its sunny surface, “optimism” originated in a darker place. Mr. Seifer was inspired by a maxim he found printed on a Domino’s sugar packet: “An optimist is someone who tells you to cheer up when things are going his way.”

An undergraduate at the time, studying art at Clark University, Mr. Seifer incorporated the phrase into his senior thesis, which focused on an incident with his father, who once offered an empty soda bottle to a homeless man collecting cans for redemption. The man refused, finding the offer patronizing.

To promote the project, Mr. Seifer created the “optimism” logo, a balanced, streamlined composition in Akzidenz-Grotesk, a [19th-century font](#) considered a precursor to Helvetica. (An influential, widely used font, Helvetica is common in the subway system’s signage.)

“It’s very open and minimal, and you can see the line weights of the letter forms are all equal weight, so it’s not

distracting,” Mr. Seifer said. “What I like about this typeface is it promotes without calling attention to itself, which is sort of what the ‘optimism’ MetroCard is about.”

“Optimism” buttons have been sold at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) and the [New York Public Library](#), and handed out free by Mr. Seifer himself. Early last year, seeking a wider distribution, he got in touch with [Creative Time](#), a nonprofit organization that works with artists on public art projects. The MetroCard idea came to him at an interview, after his initial plans were rejected.

[Arts for Transit](#), an arm of the transportation authority, receives hundreds of ideas from artists. But Mr. Seifer’s plan, with its simplicity and ease of installation, caught the eye of Sandra Bloodworth, the program’s director, who immediately accepted it.

Riders and reporters were not informed when the word began appearing on MetroCards in September. The point, Mr. Seifer said, was for it to be intimate, a serendipitous discovery for the viewer. “It exists between the card and the person who receives the card,” he said.

As he designed the card, Mr. Seifer said, he did not take into account the small hole punched along the left edge of every MetroCard. In a happy accident, the hole lined up perfectly with the word, becoming a kind of period.

Mr. Seifer found this appropriate: “Optimism is about openings where people don’t expect to find them.”

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