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"Free Art Fridays," a Treasure Hunt Powered by Instagram, Takes Off in NYC

Ben Davis, Thursday, September 25, 2014

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Instagram post for Free Art Friday New York from @uncutart: "Ok. One more before I head bkc to BK. #YoungMJ Sticker. #uncutart#FreeArtFriday #Faf #fafNYC #GivingBack"

Photo: Via @uncutart/Instagram.

People love free stuff. And people love Instagram. And—a distant third—people love art. The latest art and social media mini-craze combines all three: "Free Art Fridays" has artists deposit works for free in public spaces on a Friday, then post clues to Instagram, encouraging people to seek them out and post their finds.

Over the weekend, the *Wall Street Journal* profiled the trend, saying that Free Art Fridays has arrived in New York, and is spreading fast. Here's the key explanatory section ("Mr. Bailey" is artist Brad Bailey):

"I've never seen a large group of artists in New York do it,"

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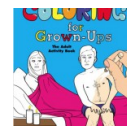
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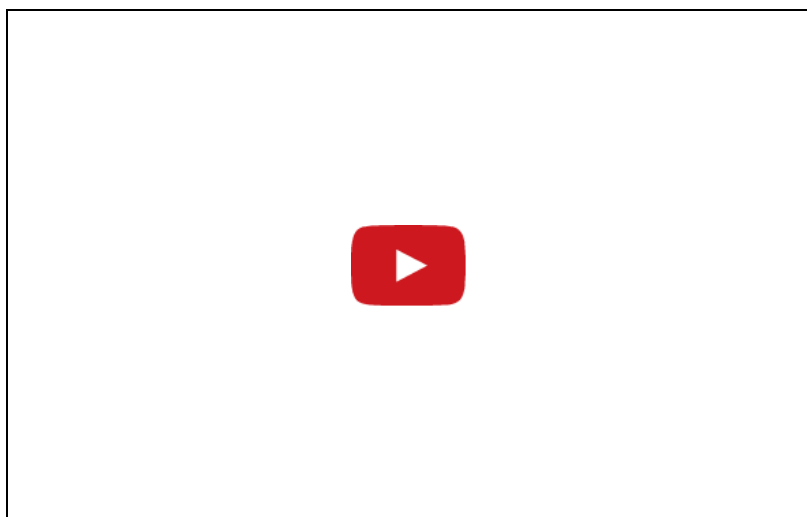
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said Mr. Bailey, on Instagram @__cb23__, who brought the game from his native Atlanta this spring. "I decided to chat with a group of 10 friends to see if they'd be interested."

That inaugural effort came in May. Since then, the number of artists who participate has swelled to more than 60, Mr. Bailey said.

The hiding spots were once clustered in Manhattan's East Village and Brooklyn's Williamsburg and Bushwick neighborhoods, but they now extend deep into Queens and the Bronx.

The Free Art Friday game has actually been around for some time, with credit for its origin often going to British street artist My Dog Sighs, otherwise best known for using crushed aluminum cans as his medium, painting them as quirky characters. My Dog Sighs began keeping a Flickr group of Free Art Fridays way back in 2006—before the iPhone, let alone Instagram—and the mini-movement drew enough attention to get a segment on the BBC's *The Culture Show*:



Then, however, the rules of the game were different. Free art pieces were simply deposited in a public spot, with a price tag appended that read "free art, to take home and enjoy." Social media was optional ("Some make a game out of it and leave clues on Twitter.")

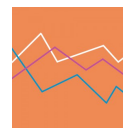
As it has more recently gained traction in the United States, the "social media scavenger hunt" aspect has become more prominent and helped it go viral, as social media tends to do. Free Art Friday Detroit, which has been up and running since 2011, has one of the more sophisticated web presences, and operates via Facebook and Twitter. Free Art Friday Miami was birthed by the man known as Registered Artist last year. Free Art Friday Austin was recently launched by the graffiti art collective SprATX, and has already garnered local media attention. There are dozens more.

In New York, evidently, Instagram is the social media platform of choice, and #fafnyc is the hashtag you need to know to take part. The *WSJ* article notes that New York has been slow to catch on to Free Art Fridays, and it does make some sense that a "free art" movement would not start in the art-and-money capital (though some participants are obviously hoping to leverage the novelty as a means to gain commercial exposure).

Maybe the trend's late arrival in the Big Apple actually says something about the spark that caused it to catch fire in the first place: In addition to being a bit of innocent fun, Free Art Fridays serve a function—to show how social media makes it possible for art lovers to identify each

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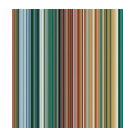
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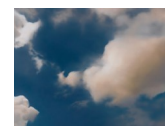
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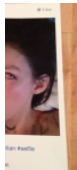
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other outside of a traditional, concentrated "art scene," sort of like a game of Marco-Polo for art nerds.

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