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Abstract

First Thursday Gallery Walk in Seattle’s Pioneer Square neighborhood was established in the early 1980s to increase visibility of the art galleries in the neighborhood. What started as a collector-based event evolved into an event for a broader public audience, where locals and tourists visit the galleries to learn about and engage with the art presented. The Pioneer Square gallerists worked in cooperation to establish the event and a monthly printed publication that announces the shows opening on each First Thursday. As Pioneer Square and the city of Seattle change in infrastructure, population, and size, First Thursdays live on as a public event for the public to experience art.
First Thursday Art Walk of Pioneer Square: A Case Study

The First Thursday of every month, from 5:00 PM to 8:00 PM or later, the Pioneer Square neighborhood in Seattle enlivens with people. Attendees range from tourists visiting the area for the first time to locals who come every month, but they are all there for the same reason: to visit the art galleries. Motivations vary: some want to learn about art, some come for the free wine and cheese. However, the chance to experience art for free is enough incentive for the general public. Paige Petrangelo started attending First Thursdays after moving to the Seattle in 2015 and describes it as “a secret society that only shows its face after sunset,” adding,

I love engaging artists about their space, their work, and getting to know my community in that way. Pioneer Square art walks are so good at that - they put their hidden gems on display for folks like me who crave that intimacy, yet it also offers a refined high art experience for collectors. (personal communication, March 3, 2019)

Pioneer Square’s First Thursday gallery walk was the first of its kind in the city, and some say the first on the West Coast. First held in 1979, it was established as a monthly event in 1980. Today, First Thursday continues to draw a crowd, and many other neighborhoods in Seattle have adopted the idea. Capitol Hill invites the public to its art walk on the second Thursday of the month, and Georgetown hosts on the second Saturday. The event has proven its success in inviting the public in, engaging the community around art, and contributing to the vitality of the overall art scene in Seattle.

**Founding of First Thursdays**

The first gallery walk was staged in 1979 as a result of a shared frustration among Pioneer Square art gallerists over the lack of press attention towards their openings and shows. Sam Davidson, of Davidson Galleries, describes the initial event:
We were frustrated with the amount of coverage we weren’t getting… But the whole event spun off events surrounding Fat Tuesday, the beginning of Lent, and the restaurants regularly made a big deal of that. So we thought, why not try combining with them and do something? (personal communication, February 23, 2019)

The first event was so successful that in 1980, the gallerists decided to make it a monthly event. The initial roster of galleries included American Art, Davidson Galleries, Linda Farris Gallery, Foster/White, Diane Gilson Gallery, Greenwood, Miller Gallery, Gallery Mack, Roscoe Louie, Silver Image, and Carolyn Staley. In 1985, the gallerists began publishing the *Pioneer Square Gallery Guide* to promote the gallery walk. It included a map of the galleries and information about each show.

Collaboration among art dealers was a bold business move for an industry mostly reliant on client-based sales. Distributing the *Pioneer Square Gallery Guide*, which later evolved into *Seattle Gallery Exhibitions*, meant sharing mailing lists. Some were reluctant at first to share client information, fearing the potential poaching of clients. But Davidson recalls that,

After we combined the mailing list, we got a sense that there was really only about a ten percent overlap. The relationships in many cases were so personal and individual that somebody went to a particular gallery because they either like the artists that were shown there or they like the person who ran the place. (personal communication, February 23, 2019)

By 1984, Davidson Galleries, Equivalents, Linda Farris Gallery, Foster/White, Silver Image, and Greg Kucera Gallery were cooperating on shows opening on First Thursdays by coordinating their hours and sharing their mailing lists. Each gallery individually maintained a
mailing list in the range of 1500 to 3500 clients. The combined mailing list totalled about 11,000, eventually reaching a height of 25,000 in 2001. As Greg Kucera remembers it,

We feared that when we put all of our mailing lists together, … we figured we might have five or six thousand names total… We presumed that there was a lot of overlap in our lists. But we found out the reverse, that actually, there was very little overlap… So when we put them all together, then we had a mailing list of around ten or eleven thousand people, which was very surprising to us, but which turned out to be very effective, because now all the galleries were reaching all ten thousand people. (personal communication, March 5, 2019)

The establishment of the Seattle Art Dealers Association (SADA) in 1990, further increased cooperation among the gallerists. Sam Davidson recalls feeling comfortable recommending to a client that they visit another gallery whose artists might interest them, as a result of the collegial environment among the art dealers created by SADA (personal communication, February 23, 2019).

The Gallery Guide Publication

Along with the development of the Pioneer Square First Thursdays, a monthly publication was produced and distributed to the individuals on the combined mailing list. In 1985, Pioneer Square Exhibitions was produced in tabloid format, on electro-bryte paper, and was printed and distributed by Dinner and Klein. Davidson Galleries, Equivalents, Linda Farris Gallery, Foster/White, and Greg Kucera Gallery each contributed a folded-page spread in black and white, with spot color throughout. In 1991, Encore Media Group began to print the monthly as a magazine format of sixteen pages with each gallery contributing a two-page spread. Later that year, the name of the publication changed to Seattle Gallery Exhibitions to include more
galleries in neighborhoods beyond Pioneer Square. In June of 1994, Greg Kucera initiated the first four-color printing to publicize his show of Matisse’s Jazz Suite. From then on, four-color printing was used for selected pages until it was adopted by all the galleries in 1996 (G. Kucera, personal communication, March 5, 2019).

In 2005, Kucera and Davidson turned the publication over to SADA, reducing their responsibility but still keeping influence over some decisions regarding its printing. Now, the publication is in flux as mailing costs increase. Currently, SADA distributes printed copies and releases a digital copy through their website, but both Kucera and Davidson express wariness of moving to an all-digital publication. According to Davidson, “The people who have been receiving the printed publication, almost without exception, weren’t really interested in going and visiting the digital thing” (personal communication, February 23, 2019). Although the move to a digital publication would cut costs for the galleries, their audience seems to prefer the beautifully printed copy.

**Changing the Image of the Commercial Art Gallery**

The commercial art market historically has been viewed by the general public as elitist, meant for the wealthy, for collectors or designers with the capital to afford art for their walls. First Thursdays contradict this stereotype; the art dealers host the event to engage with the general public with the expectation that it may not result in art sales. By the time Greg Kucera opened his gallery in 1983, First Thursday was well established as a monthly event. In its early days, the event mostly attracted collectors:

As the event became much more of a public event over time, then its usefulness as a collector event kind of waned, and instead of it being an entertainment for the collecting community here, it became entertainment for the larger art community, not necessarily all
people who thought of themselves as collectors (G. Kucera, personal communication, March 5, 2019).

The transition from a collector-focused event to a public event was welcomed by the gallerists who intended to contribute to the broader art scene of Seattle as well as encourage more foot traffic at the galleries in Pioneer Square.

Recognizing First Thursday as a night to enjoy art but not necessarily buy the art, many dealers altered their method of communicating with collectors. To accommodate the change from a collectors’ event to a public event, some galleries now mount new shows on six-week cycles instead of monthly cycles, so that their openings do not always correlate with First Thursdays (Farr, 2005). Some galleries host special receptions for their shows separate from First Thursdays. Some, like Linda Hodges, prefer to stick with the First Thursday openings but invite clients earlier in the day to preview the new art before the event (Farr, 2005). The decision to participate in First Thursdays, even though the gallery may not sell any art those nights, speaks to the Pioneer Square gallerists intent to simply be seen and engage with the public about the art they show.

At a certain point, the event became almost too public, and street vendors began to set up booths along the gallery walk route. In 2003, the participating gallerists advocated for city regulation, and the street vendors were eventually licensed to participate in a street art fair that would take place earlier in the day on First Thursdays. However, the two events continue to compete with each other. As more business and arts organizations take advantage of the crowds on First Thursdays by hosting events on that day, attendees are having to make more choices on what to do. In a 2010 article in the Seattle PI, Greg Kucera mentions shutting down a proposal by the Chihuly Museum for an event during First Thursdays. “While it may seem intuitive that
having all kinds of free things to do on First Thursdays is a good thing, in point of fact, all of those 'free things' simply compete with one another to make it impossible for anyone to do all of them well…” he wrote Chihuly's people in a letter (Ho, 2010).

**Keeping Pioneer Square an Arts Destination**

Since the 1960s, Pioneer Square has been a haven for art galleries. In 1981, it was reported to host “more art galleries per block than any other part of Seattle” (Beers, p. 28). Sam Davidson attributes the attraction to the neighborhood’s historic architecture, and long history as a gallery area. The two-block long pedestrian mall on Occidental Avenue creates a venue for public events during First Thursdays.

Recently, the neighborhood has struggled with constant construction, limiting accessibility to the area. The replacement of the Highway 99 viaduct, and the transformation of the areas along the waterfront present uncertainty about what Pioneer Square will look like in the future (Flock, 2019). When asked about the challenges of the construction projects, Greg Kucera responded, “it’s a drag, but it’s progress, and progress is good for the city” (personal communication, March 2019). To combat the inconveniences of construction, the neighborhood promotes accessibility to First Thursday by posting instructions and directions for free parking on its website.

Both Greg Kucera and Sam Davidson recognize the presence of the homeless as an issue for attracting people to the Pioneer Square neighborhood. The Bread of Life Mission and the Union Gospel Mission, in providing vital and necessary services, do attract homeless people to the neighborhood. At the close of 2018, KUOW reported Seattle and King County as having the third largest homeless population in the United States, behind only Los Angeles and New York (Walters, 2018). Sam Davidson says,
So I think that the challenge is somehow addressing that problem, which obviously is a national problem, not just Seattle's problem. We've got to come to terms with it in a better way than we are, but it is making the Square a challenging place to have a gallery.

(personal communication, February, 2019)

**The Future of First Thursdays**

Certain aspects of First Thursdays in Pioneer Square have changed over the years, but the event’s intent to spread awareness of Seattle’s art scene remains strong in its messaging. Although the viability of SADA’s *Seattle Gallery Exhibitions* as a print publication remains uncertain, many visitors to First Thursdays do not elect to receive it, and instead hear of the event through word of mouth or social media (P. Petrangelo, personal communication, March 3, 2019). Galleries in the neighborhood may close, new galleries may open, but as long as the galleries continue to open their doors, the crowds that appear the First Thursday of every month will continue to look forward to a free opportunity to engage around art.

Method note:

This case study was developed by Rachel Ballister, MFA 2020, as part of Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership applied research seminar focused on the Arts Ecosystem Research Project. Interviews were conducted with Sam Davidson, owner of Davidson Galleries; and Greg Kucera, owner of Greg Kucera Gallery as part of this research during Winter Quarter 2019. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing.
References


