

Exhibit puts consumerism, democratization and records through spin cycle

We are the Robots is at the Vancouver Art Gallery until late October

John Kurucz / Vancouver Courier

JULY 18, 2018 10:06 AM



Kevin Schmidt's exhibit *We Are the Robots* invites Vancouverites to hear their records played in an entirely different way.
Photograph By DAN TOULGOET

Kevin Schmidt's attempts to reconcile technology and art almost leave you thinking there's a bit of a conflicted communist living inside the 46-year-old Vancouver visual artist.

His exhibit *We Are the Robots* is on display now at the Vancouver Art Gallery and plays on the conflict of mass media consumption versus DIY sensibilities.

Visually, Schmidt does this in multiple rooms at the art gallery through the use of homemade speakers, a vintage tube amp and a series of light displays surrounding the gallery. Converted washing machines used to power interactive displays are even part of the deal.

Attendees are also invited to bring in their records to play through Schmidt's contraption, which then remotely activates lighting rigs on Howe, Georgia, Robson and Hornby streets.

"I'm thinking about this idea that machines are doing the work for us," Schmidt said. "But then also that the original meaning of the word robot is pointing to the fact that we are the machines and the system that we're living in is using us as machines."

Schmidt started out as a musician long before attacking such heady concepts and high art. He's watched the demise of record companies and the democratization of music that's led to people consuming art in ways that were completely foreign when he first hit stages in the 1990s.

Gone are A/R reps — "gatekeepers" as he calls them — while home studios are the here and now.

But Schmidt doesn't necessarily see that as a good thing.

"There are still gatekeepers, but it's a lot more democratic," Schmidt said. "The problem is that creates pressure on everybody to compete. Before you could look to the labels, media, or record companies to know. Now it's about who's got lots of clicks."

Adding to Schmidt's mishmash of weirdness is the use of a washing machine.

How to Make An Off-Grid Hydroelectric Light Show takes a washing machine that's then made into a hydroelectric generator, which powers a synthesizer that eventually creates a light show.

OK, then. But what is the lay person supposed to take away from all this?

"On one hand, it's just a simple listening experience," Schmidt said. "Whether someone goes from that to starting to think about private and public space and the democratization of culture, that's fine with me."

We Are the Robots runs until Oct. 28.