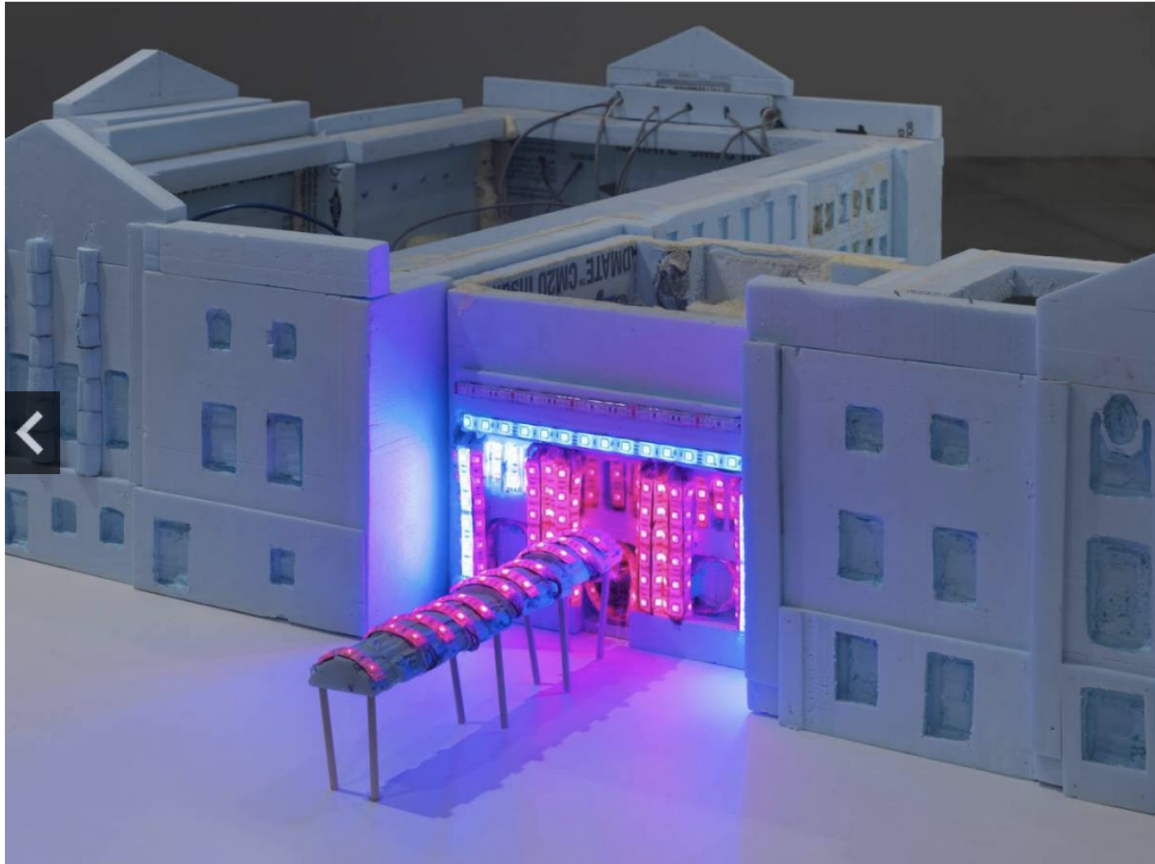
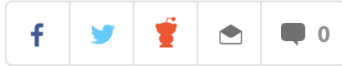


# Kevin Schmidt's far-out We Are the Robots invites you into a DIY world where you can spin vinyl and play keyboards

by Robin Laurence on July 31st, 2018 at 11:28 AM



An installation view of RGB Beg Cycle, in which viewers can activate low-tech light and sound effects.

📷 RACHEL TOPHAM, VAG

## At the Vancouver Art Gallery until October 28

Alas, I forgot that the public is invited to bring vinyl records to the Vancouver Art Gallery, to play in Kevin Schmidt's audio installation *DIY HIFI*. I wasn't able to appreciate what one of my old LPs would sound like through Schmidt's enormous, handbuilt speakers. On the plus side, this lapse spared me judgment on my musical tastes by other, more hip visitors to the show, not to mention that of the young volunteer who stood behind the turntable. On a busy Saturday afternoon, she answered questions about the work, told us that the artist "likes to play around with opposition and paradox", and kept repeating the phrase "back in the day".

That "day" was the 1970s, a time of counterculture striving, handbuilt homes, and manuals instructing folks how to make their own stereo systems. The three-metre-high speakers Schmidt created are based on plans by the legendary audio designer Nelson Pass, now posted on the Internet for contemporary DIY enthusiasts. The utopian beliefs and aspirations of today's DIY communities, including the embrace of creative commons and the furthering of individual agency, nicely echo the older hippie refusal of capitalism and social conformity.

An inventive and accomplished artist and musician, previously from Vancouver and now living in Kelowna, Schmidt also built *Excess Dispersion*, the installation's acoustic diffusers, using waste materials from kitchen-cabinet shops. They function well in audio terms and are also visually pleasing, evoking hard-edge and op art while exploring what the show's intro panel calls "the aesthetics of knowledge production by DIY communities". (The speakers are also impressive as pure sculpture.) At the same time, the diffusers add a note of economic and environmental commentary (overconsumption and its associated waste; inflated real-estate markets driving home renovations and demolitions), as does *DIY HIFI*'s default soundtrack. This consists of the chirping of birds and other natural sounds Schmidt recorded in the Peace River area that is due to be flooded by the Site C dam.



The installation *DIY HIFI* invites you to kick back and listen to old LPs.

📷 RACHEL TOPHAM, VAG

In *RGB Beg Cycle*, the artist again invites audience participation, deploying electronic keyboards and computer technology to enable us to activate low-tech light and sound effects inside the gallery and, simultaneously, on the building's exterior. Each key we play sounds a snippet of field recordings Schmidt made at small-town music festivals. Mostly what we hear is undifferentiated hubbub, with occasional clumsy drum beats. *RGB Beg Cycle* is a playful and accessible work, although not, perhaps, as successful in its probing of spectacle as other Schmidt works, past and present.

More curious, complex, and weirdly insistent is *How to Make an Off-Grid Hydroelectric Light Show*. Here, videos projected on three walls of a darkened gallery demonstrate, in how-to fashion, Schmidt's conversion of a washing machine into a portable generator driven by water from a wilderness creek. The power so derived is used to support a modest light show—with the artist as its sole producer and audience—in a clearing in an evergreen forest. As curator Grant Arnold suggested during the media preview of the exhibition, the work thwarts society's "pressure to commodify and monetize" the entertainment and the natural world that is its setting. Back in the day, hippies would have loved it. I loved it too. Far out, man.