

## Holly Ward & Kevin Schmidt at the Varley Art Gallery of Markham

By Yuluo Anita Wei

After clocking out on a busy Friday evening, a stranger's T-shirt caught my eye as we both waited for the light to change. "OUT OF OFFICE." I barely had time to process it before I thought to myself, "That resonates. Where can I buy one?" T-shirts are like walking billboards that honk messages down the streets, facilitating self-expression and engagement with the surroundings. I once had a passion for collecting T-shirts with various slogans. Some artists, like [Holly Ward](#) and [Kevin Schmidt](#), have evolved their practice by turning these garments into sculptures.



Holly Ward & Kevin Schmidt, *Lost and Found*, 2023, T-shirt display (photo: Toni Hafkenscheid)

Over the summer and fall of 2023, the duo in collaboration with Markham Public Art Curator Yan Wu organized a series of performances where musicians, clad in slogan-bearing T-shirts designed by the artists, played an eclectic mix of music along the [Rouge Valley Trail](#). The musicians were free to choose their instruments and the pieces they played. They performed anywhere from trail benches to under tree canopies. The performances were never announced publicly, which made each encounter for unsuspecting passersby feel like they were stumbling upon a hidden quest in an RPG game.



Holly Ward & Kevin Schmidt, *Lost and Found*, 2023, installation view at the Varley Art Gallery of Markham (photo: Toni Hafkenscheid)

The accompanying exhibition, currently on display at the Varley Art Gallery of Markham, seeks to capture these unexpected encounters through visual language, presenting them in an indoor public space that feels completely alien compared to the original trail. Divided into three sections, the exhibition space features a central wall painted sky blue and the title *Lost and Found*, a standard park bench on the left (relocated from the trail), and, on the right, sound installations and newspaper racks that invite interaction.



Kein Schmidt playing the *Lost and Found* music cart

Listening through headphones, visitors can experience the diverse range of performances from various musicians, including Schmidt's own sessions on the trail. The odd timbres of some recordings make it hard to identify the instruments until you see the right room's installation. Innovative instruments crafted by the artists from whimsical found items such as gas cylinders, stainless steel bowls, wine bottles, and tricycles, all stand silently against a backdrop filled with musician recruitment posters whispering an invitation to "come play."





Local musician playing on the Rouge River Trail in the summer of 2023 as part of Lost and Found (photo: Alessandra Pozzuoli)

Although I missed meeting any musicians on the trail last year and learning about the sounds and encounters firsthand, I'm drawn to the exhibition's striking contrast: the T-shirts, once wearable by everyone, are now elevated on tall T-shaped metal stands, revered and untouchable. Across the room, what might be mistaken for static sculptures in a sterile white cube actively invite visitors to touch and play them. And while I remain undecided about which T-shirt from the exhibition is my favourite, this story from the *Lost and Found* project publication that documents the artists' and musicians' work and is available for purchase in the gallery stands out:

*One of the really cool interactions I had was when I was out playing my acoustic guitar. I played some finger style pieces, and this man just pops out and says, 'Can I sing with you? Can you play a song for me to sing?'*

*I said, 'It depends what song it is because I'm still just learning and practicing.'*

*He gives me the chords to a Turkish song. Then he sits beside me and I try to play the chords, and he starts singing in Turkish. He recorded all of it, so I actually posted that using the [#lostandfoundunionville](#) on my Instagram to show my friends.*

*It was just a really wholesome experience because this complete stranger just came in and made a nice little song with me."*

That serendipitous encounter captures the essential spirit of public art.