SO! Amplifies: The Electric Golem (Trevor Pinch and James Spitznagel)

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Abstract

***SO!* Amplifies. . .a highly-curated, rolling mini-post series by which we editors hip you to cultural makers and organizations doing work we really really dig. You're welcome!** — On March 24 th , 2019 the record release party for The Electric Golem's 6th CD *Golemology* was held at the Loft in Ithaca, New York.

Keywords

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On March 24th, 2019 the record release party for The Electric Golem's 6th CD *Golemology* was held at the Loft in Ithaca, New York. The Electric Golem is an avant-garde synthesizer duo featuring Trevor Pinch and James Spitznagel, that has been in existence for about ten years.

Trevor Pinch is a local sound artist and professor at Cornell University. He is an STS (Science and Technology Studies) and Sound Studies scholar. As a key thinker of STS, Trevor is the coproducer of theories about Sociology of Scientific Knowledge, Social Construction of Technology (SCOT), and the role of users in technological history and innovation. However, Trevor's interest in dates back much farther; he built his first modular synthesizer when he was a physics student in London in the 1970s.

The other half of The Electric Golem, James Spitznagel, is a multi-media artist who uses the iPad as a musical instrument and to create digital paintings. While he has played many roles in the music and culture industries—guitarist in a rock band, record store owner, art gallery and guitar shop investor, and even business manager for the Andy Warhol Museum—he moved to Ithaca to focus on producing abstract art: digital paintings and experimental, improvisational music. Being an energetic and enthusiastic person who has unrestrained fantasies, James finds that everything around him can be his inspiration.

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Pinch and Spitznagel formed the group after Spitznagel read *Analog Days: The Invention and Impact of the Moog Synthesizer* (by Trevor Pinch and Frank Trocco) and realized Pinch also lived in Ithaca. Spitznagel simply looked his name up in the phone book and called him up: "I go, 'is this Trevor Pinch?' He said, 'yes.' I said, 'well, you don't know me, but I just read your book and I love it.'" And then they got together for a beer and have been best friends and collaborators ever since. Once Spitznagel heard about Pinch's homemade synthesizer, he asked Trevor to try to make something together and it turned out to be a fascinating mixture of analog–Trevor's synth, Moog Prodigy, and a Minimoog–and James's digital instruments.

Building from this first moment of discovery, The Electric Golem's music is electronic, experimental, and totally improvised. Typically, the pieces of music last twenty minutes to half an hour and expresses their interaction with the machines and with each other in the studio. James is much more controlling of the tone and rhythm, and patches the sound as he goes along, whereas Trevor is much more about making spontaneous weird sounds. They complement each other and the creation process is usually by random and spontaneous, as Spitznagel describes: "I didn't tell Trevor what to do or what to play, but I said, here's the piece of music I've written. He just instinctively knew what add to it." Reciprocally, "he might just play something that I go, oh, I can weave in and out of the ambient sound he's putting there."



Trevor Pinch, Electric Golem at Elmira College, 2012

For the duo, the process of producing music becomes a shared experience with their listeners. The music is ever changing and evolving. In addition, unexpected drama adds vitality to the palette. "The iPad might freeze up or synthesizer might break somehow," Spitznagel notes, "that's happened to us, but we carry on. Like Trevor looks at me and says, it's not working there. Or, I look at him and go, I have to reboot my computer, it's not working. But, those times actually inspire us to try new things and go beyond what we are doing." James explained. Their inspiration comes from the unknown, which just emerges from their practice. "Generally, this sort of music is completely unique to Electric Golem." Trevor concluded.

The name "Electric Golem" comes from a series of books with Golem in the titles that Trevor collaborated on with his mentor Harry Collins. "The golem is a creature of Jewish mythology," Pinch and Collins wrote in *The Golem, What You Should Know about Science*, "it is a humanoid made by man with clay and water, with incantations and spells. It is powerful, it grows a little more powerful every day. It will follow orders, do your work, and protect you from the ever threatening enemy. But it is clumsy and dangerous. Without control, a golem may destroy its masters with its flailing vigour" (1). Noting Trevor's association with the concept of the Golem, Spitznagel added the "Electric" twist not just as a metaphor for their sound but also because "it's kind of like a retro name." The Electric Golem mushroomed from there, and in the past decade they have had many invitations and bookings to play out, receiving the first recording contract from the Ricochet Dream label, and have played with a bunch of notable musicians, such as Malcolm Cecil of Tonto's Expanding Head Band, Simeon of Silver Apples, and "Future Man" (aka Roy Wooten), and they haven't stopped there.

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According to Pinch, the key feature of The Electric Golem's music is its ability to encompass different moods. "I think Electric Golem has become good at one thing: its changing and transitioning from one sort of mood of music to another. And we have become quite good at those transitions. I think people would say that's what they kind of like about us." These sorts of slow transitions construct a unique texture of sound that can be quite cinematic, so much so that in 2012, the Electric Golem performed the accompaniment to the silent movie *A Trip to the Moon*, a special Cornell cinema event. Overall, as improvised experimental music, it is sometimes challenging to listen to, with no regular rhythm or reliable melody. Trevor produces warm, rich drones from the analog side that contrast with the sharper digital rhythms that James programs. In short, the Electric Golem varies between these two affects but the music goes far beyond the representation of emotional states; sometimes it conjures up the feeling of the vastness of space and time.

Experimental music, is a collaboration and negotiation process between instruments and their users. No matter if analog or digital, instruments have autonomy; they are non-human actors with their own agency to some extent. As Trevor Pinch intimates, "I understand the general sort of sound that can be produced, but the particular details of how it will work out, you don't really know, that's much more spontaneous, you have to react to that." Instruments can often be uncontrollable–making their own sounds—so that Electric Golem must respond in kind. "So, it's sort of like higher level meta-control versus actually doing what you're doing in response to the instrument that combines together," Trevor describes, "which I think is the secret to controlling these sorts of instruments." It is incredible that Pinch and Spitznagel know each other so well—and each know their instruments so well–that they can improvise for long periods with no trouble. Trevor says: "Follow the use of these instruments! Follow the instruments! They are not essentialized. They are just stabilized temporarily."

On the whole, The Electric Golem shows an artistic form which breaks the traditional paradigm, deconstructs and then reconstructs it, seeking to free sound from the instruments. Their music is beyond pure melody and rhythm, beyond the expression of existence, expressing more of an aesthetic state of transcendence. They challenge what music is, and what musical instruments are; they challenge divisions between the identities of engineer and musician. Electric Golem's music co-constructs art and technology and binds them together; art, for them, is a mode of presenting technology, and vice versa, technology is a pathway through which art can flourish.

My favorite Electric Golem piece is called "Heart of the Golem." What is the heart of the Golem? According to Pinch, "It is a mystery, a process of unfolding and discovery. It is somewhere where analog and digital sound meet, and an improvisation." What the magic is remains unknown and unlimited, just like the future of the Electric Golem.

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https://youtu.be/dFaieN08Cd8

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Featured Image: Courtesy of The Electric Golem

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