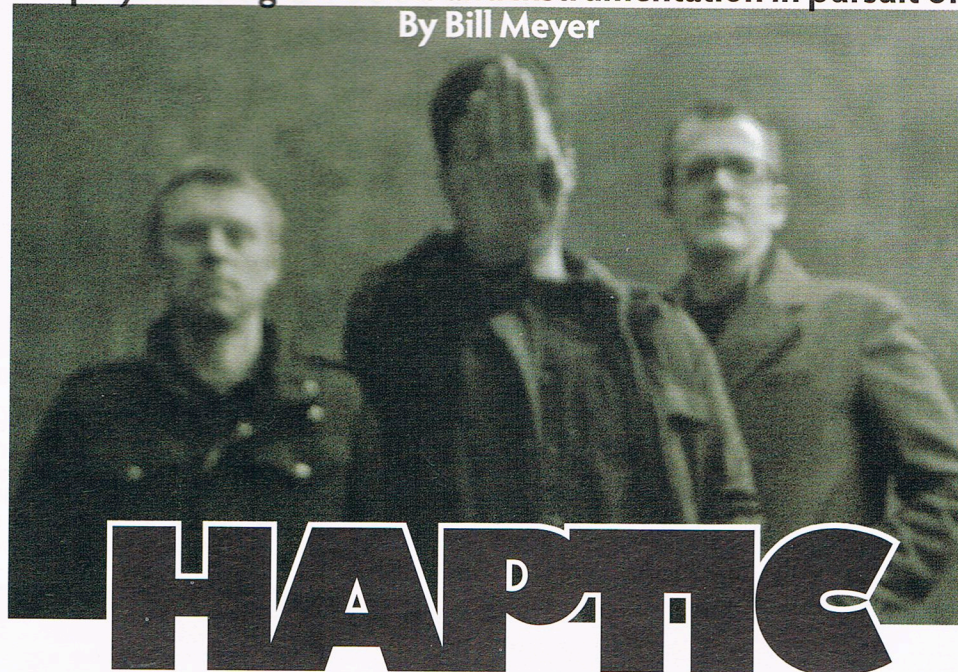


## Chicago trio employs shifting aesthetics and instrumentation in pursuit of the ineffable.

By Bill Meyer



“‘Haptic’ pertains to the sense of touch. It has to do with the actual texture of an object, but also with the way in which an object’s visual appearance can give you a sense of how it would feel to touch it.” Chicago’s Joseph Clayton Mills is explaining the name of his electro-acoustic venture with Adam Sonderberg and Steven Hess, but he might just as well be describing their music. “To me it seemed like a really apt name for this group, because we were all interested in exploring musical texture, and also the group is also very much about different surfaces coming in contact with each other.”

There is no signature Haptic sound or methodology, nor any fixed setting in which to hear them. They’ve played in semi-legal lofts, grimy rock clubs, and posh museum spaces. Founded in 2005, when all of them were part of the late, mainly studio-bound Dropp Ensemble, Haptic has performed improvisations in concerts with a rotating fourth member, painstakingly constructed records, created audio-visual installations, and realized a composition by the California composer Michael Pisaro. Like Pisaro, their materials and approaches change from one project to the next. The constant is music with a striking surface beauty, and beyond that, countless layers of detail obtained from electronics, field recordings, and played instruments.

There are 54 sound sources on their newest album *Scilens* (CD by Entr’acte, cassette by Flingco), including sewing machine, lap steel, and marbles. In concert Sonderberg often plays computer, but might just show up with a drum. Hess often brings at least part of a drum kit, but also plays electronics. And Mills’ favored instruments include a hearing aid and a Morse Code Instructograph, which yield rich percussive and electronic tones. At some concerts Sonderberg and Mills park behind a table of electronic gear, looking like any old laptop combo, only to have the picture unbalanced by Hess’s assertive playing on a full rock drum

kit. But they’ve also confined themselves to the sounds of VHS tape decks, and in their last concert of 2011, at Chicago’s Museum of Modern Art, the trio plus three guests directed their sounds from two different floors into the Museum’s atrium, where it mingled their minimal playing with the casual sounds of the museum’s guests and some racket from an exhibit under construction.

Early on, Haptic was mainly a live act, but within a year of their founding they’d released their first record, a split 12” with Milwaukee’s Mouths on the English Entr’acte label. Each concert was a guided improvisation featuring a fourth member, initially free players like drummer Tony Buck and bass clarinetist Jason Stein. But as they’ve involved participants from other genres and media — sound artist Olivia Block, power-noise badass Mark Solotroff, and video artist Lisa Slodki. Most of their recordings, all released by Entr’acte and the Chicago-based Flingco imprint, share an engagement with continuous sound that invites you to call it drone, but even a cursory listen shows that there’s a lot happening beneath the surface. Even when the source of a record is a live performance, it has been edited and otherwise altered.

“To me, making records is a completely different process than performing live,” says Sonderberg, “which is why I don’t like live recordings. I have a problem with them. There’s always something that has to be fixed. You listen back to a live performance and say that was very instructive, but what do you do with it? We’ll use that material and rebuild it.”

Before Sonderberg moved to San Francisco in 2009, he recalls, “There was rarely a week that we missed playing together, unless someone was out of town. The last full year I was here, we played three shows, excluding the museum performances, but we would get together every week and play at our practice space, because it felt important to do so. A lot of extra-musical consider-

ations go into these recordings and go into conceiving performances. It’s absolutely crucial that we can talk about building a piece based on a line from a book or something like that, that we can take a germ of an idea and can turn it into something.”

That germination process sometimes crosses between projects. The trio spent several months exchanging ideas with Pisaro, who composed a piece for them named “Concentric Rings In Magnetic Levitation,” which they performed in Chicago and Minneapolis. It is conceived as a series of rings analogous to the planet Saturn’s that orbit a planetary mass of sine waves and wind around each other. They agreed early on that Sonderberg would play piano. When it came time to record *Scilens*, Sonderberg brought his ideas of what those piano parts might sound like, and Mills brought a poem about the Danube River by Friedrich Hölderlin and lectures about the poem by Martin Heidegger. The result is like a long, winding journey, one in which subliminally moaning drum skins, brief sine tones, and distorted scrapes are occasionally interrupted by repeated piano notes that stand like night beacons along the way. It doesn’t sound much like the Pisaro piece, which they haven’t record yet, but it’s a trip worth repeating many times. Here and elsewhere, the surface sheen that has covered other Haptic recordings is peeled back to show the discrete parts and the vast spaces that separate them.

Sonderberg hopes to move back to Chicago in 2012. In the meantime, they’re considering making a new, mostly electronic record, and also recording “Concentric Rings.” But Hess has hopes for another commission. “Maybe we can get Stephen O’Malley to write a piece for us and tour some metal festivals.” Says Sonderberg, “That’s the thing. I know that would be both funny ha ha and improbable, but we would be comfortable and happy to do it. Just because it speaks to our curiosity about things, and our inconsistency.” \*