

Pop Press as a Microtonal Field
Reflections on John Sparagana's *Der Spiegel* Series
John Corbett

When he speaks about his latest body of works, gathered under the title of the German magazine from which it draws its sources, *Der Spiegel*, John Sparagana sometimes lands on the words "ghosts" and "ruins." His collaged images are distressed, consisting of mass-mediated magazine pages that have been manually fatigued, then systematically cut and pasted, interrupting and altering the original image. They have a preternatural feel. The clear, punchy, informational news images are defaced, made ambiguous and enigmatic. They are ghosts and ruins indeed, but not specters of the particular people and scenes in each page's photos or the text that accompanies them. Instead, they are perhaps better thought of as ghosts of their own mediation, the ruins offering a lament for an ecstatic mode of communication, an elegy on impermanence. All the blurring, in the end, reveals more than it covers up. It sets up a distinctive tension with the latent images, text, and page-designs, a kind of generalized abstraction that draws out hidden meanings, a poetic dimension previously unseen, unexamined.

Because they involve a dizzying amount of painstaking hand-production, it's possible to get distracted by the technical aspect of the *Der Spiegel* series. Sparagana is eager for viewers to look beyond their construction alone. "It's not about how they're made, but where that leads," he says. Nonetheless, Sparagana's methods are worth explaining, perhaps as a way of clearing the path to a deeper unpacking. His working process occurs in stages, with an end product that is always multiple times the size of the original (the first group have all been four times, but Sparagana plans to make some as large as 64 times the original). The first step involves selection and preparation of the pages, which are chosen on the basis of their potential for association and allusion. He then spends a period distressing the pages, which means physically handling them until they are uniformly fatigued. This has the effect of turning them into a very different kind of working material, less like glossy paper and more like matte fabric. Each specific page breaks down a little differently, adding the first of several elements of unpredictability. The next step requires Sparagana to systematically cut, interdigitate, and paste the pages, and this in turn is done in several steps, first cutting the page into vertical strips, arranging those in sequence (four of the first 1/8" strip of page, then four of the second strip, four of the third strip, etc.), and gluing them down. If he stopped at this point, he would have expanded the page four times its initial width by a means that was termed *rolláge* by Czech artist Jirí Kolar. But Sparagana then cuts the expanded page into horizontal strips of the same size, doing so for each of four such prepared pages. These are then interdigitated according to the same logic as the vertical ones had been, and in the end the final piece consists of hundreds of 1/8" squares which are configured into an enlarged image, the proportions of which are the same as the original but which reads very differently.

Those differences are, of course, the crux of Sparagana's inquiry. In several senses, he actively opens up the image. Physically, he breaks it down and blows it up; in semiotic terms, he moves the image from a hard informational modality to something more ambiguous and poetic. The fatiguing of the pages has several consequences. It calls attention to the materiality, corporality, viscosity of each page, an action that the glossy magazines' "news bite" sensibility is at pains to avoid. The surfaces respond differently to light, absorbing it, making it less harsh than the original high-sheen. The fatigued images are de-saturated, moving the values closer, bringing the intensities together, rendering them soft, subtle, painterly, and field-like. This is compounded by the surgical procedures, which produce redundancies and irregularities in the image as seen up close. Some works come together quite coherently at a distance, reconfiguring back into the original news format and look of *Der Spiegel*. But there is always a tension between the iconic kick of the images and their ambiguous counterparts.

There is also a strong harmonic element to the works, de-emphasizing the line in favor of vibrational fields. In its unrelenting reduction of color and texture, Sparagana's work recalls "Inner Time II," a composition for seven clarinets in an extremely narrow register by Horatiu Radulescu. By keeping a cluster of like instruments in such a small range, Radulescu sets up a shimmering, pulsing, extreme microtonal field in which events are as much sensed as they are articulated. Likewise, in Sparagana's pieces the apperception of the shapes and even text occurs in an all-over context, with a persistent, gnawing buzz that originates as an integral part of the material of the piece, rather than an overlay or layering. This is quite different from Sparagana's previous works, some of which used similar techniques, but which almost always dealt with an explicit image. Where the *Sleeping Beauty* series, for example, also utilized fatiguing, it was often more linear, more articulated, featuring areas that had been distressed and areas that had not. Each of the *Der Spiegel* pieces is like a humming, murmuring unit, a charged field of particles. It connects more with color-field painting than with dada collage, although it also occupies a very interesting bridge between those seemingly incompatible practices.

Sparagana's overt desire is to slow down the way the news pages are read, commandeering the ephemeral image – meant to be consumed instantly – and retarding it, requiring the viewer to pause, pay attention, examine, ponder. These collages are not easily digested; the *Der Spiegel* pieces are complex,

multi-course meals, and they need to be delectated over not rushed through. As such, the initial act of choosing the image is paramount. Not all images would work equally well; certain page-structures, collections of images, fonts respond to his treatment. It is a funny mix of systematics and emotion, adjoining a pure process of preparing and assembling the material with certain unsystematic elements, namely the selection of the original and the variability and human error inherent in the execution of the process. A distinctive melancholy note is struck in this juxtaposition, in the jammed radar of the supposedly objective and impartial (news, system) living in proximity with the honestly imperfect and decidedly tendentious (imprecision, choice).

For me, the *Der Spiegel* series poses a big question: Is pure connotation possible? Sparagana takes something with extremely strong denotational, literal meaning, grinds it up, pulverizes it, then puts it back together into a soft-focus Frankenstein of its former self, meanwhile expanding the range of associations legible in the newly constructed image. Can we recognize the original? Does that matter? Do we mistake something grave for something comical? Something terrible for something beautiful? Is there movement between these terms, a sort of perceptual affective disorder in which the grave becomes comical, the terrible beautiful? Does the abstraction of a politician's face reveal something else, something we can't quite explain? What are all these associations, the ones that flood into an ambiguous image? Does connotation need denotation like a parasite needs a host, or, again, is pure connotation possible? Sparagana says, for him it's like "an alternative index in poetic space," which is perhaps an excellent way of pointing at the way connotation takes the upper hand. "Spiegel" is both mirror and looking glass. It is designed to view outward and inward, to observe and reflect. Here is an image. What does it make you think of? Better question: How can the image contain as many associations as possible? Beat the image into an anxious state, fill it with free-floating anxiety so that it may land on many different meanings, emotions, thoughts, ideas. Ghosts inhabiting ruins, a renewed ecstasy in the shambles of mass-communication.