Ravish the Republic: The Archives of The Iron Garters
Crime/Art Collective

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I was a child of a suburban lake, and its scraggly coastline populated by an underground society. That’s what I called them when I discovered that “underground” and “subterranean” had exciting insinuations. Words that conjured hiddenness and remoteness, but also the cultivation of secrecy and resistance for their own sake. Surrounding me was the stucco and asphalt and steeples of sun-lit life. But the lake was a dark oasis of unsuspecting thrills. The adrenalized joy of espionage and the catalytic zest of conspiracy: my body wanted these vectors to steer my life. So I read detective and spy fiction, but also delved into the ecstasies of mysticism and theology. All the while I wandered the ragged paths around the water. The human body, I realized, was at the mercy of forces that wanted to use it. The body is a radio for cosmic transmissions! But some of these forces were more beneficial than others. In my receptive imagination, I became a spy for a Goddess in exile, a dethroned and oppressed Sophia who needed my radio-body to help resuscitate her watery kingdom inside the beige and fluorescent compartments of the everyday.
I was lured into the reeds and coves of lacustrine life, but also the ambergris and mildew ambiance of Greyhound stations and empty plazas and seedy motels. Ruinscapes and shadowscapes secreted seductive aromas that lured me away from the bright and sanitized. Wherever shadows fell ornately, where noise became muddied, and wherever human motives turned inconsequential, I gravitated, knowing there was knowledge there in more poetic doses. The opacities within me needed to find their outer world corollaries. Life that seethed and fermented beyond the searchlights of family house and sports field, church and supermarket, Television and youth group: an intricate and suggestive wilderness that, for all the attempts to be dammed and categorized still persevered as an irresistible and mutable Outside. This is the realm of a wild Logos, a savage Gnosis, where Pan, Eros and Dionysus endure, locked in amorous combat, of undomesticated fields in which adventure and transport are still desirable and fruitful endeavors.

As an agent of this underground society, I began to encounter and summon my kindred entities. Whether they were fisherwomen with garter snakes around their arms; or errant lighthouse keepers hunting for crawfish; or soccer stars gone pill-mad and truant; or medicine-mothers leading some scandalous nightlife; or worshippers of minor saints, like Lucia; or bizarre spice importers; or chandelier saboteurs; or textbook redactors; this underground society schemed, muttered, experimented and loved among the reeds and grottoes, gardens and coves, fields and gorges of that sweltering lake district. Their odors and breaths leaked into my room, thru the rattled screen, thru polluted moonlight, thru fig spoor and radio tide. I fell asleep to their coyotes howling in the sage-scrub gullies while the lunar-glazed fig tree rasped the window. Such sounds
belied the otherwise suburban, overly-plotted world I lived in; they were goads to more life and more of its *expressing*. To express was something more erotic than telling, more violent, more sensuous, and more complicit in kaleidoscopic erosions and swamp life and the inhuman ecstasy of crows.

I was reading, scribbling, wandering and keeping vigil, gouging minute depths and subtle labyrinths. To be secret was to be apart but also, strangely, to be *in the know*. It was to also be, potentially, forgotten and overlooked, left to your own bizarre and elaborate devices. History was just the history of what has remained or endured as un-secret, or as open secrets. But secret is also a verb, to *secrete*: to take a thing magically outside of yourself as a way to foster connections, alliances, relations, and collaborations. The world, or what little of it I could access was enriched by small, tantalizingly elusive micro-communities that did as little harm as possible but reveled in the adrenalized excitements of their borderland sensualities. They were apart from the legislated spotlights and the gossip mills, but not always; yet they nourished their “apartness” as a sustaining sanctuary to sulk back to when life got overbearing or oppressive.

The Iron Garters Crime/Art Collective was born in the febrile imaginings I made with a few delinquent friends in that wilderness of Southern California. When these friends went their separate ways, I preserved this “underground society” in my own projects as I grew up. When I landed in the dune city of San Francisco, I knew I had reached a place that my imagination had predicated its desires upon. Here artists and alchemists, seekers and sorcerers, “failures” and “outcasts” of all predilections swarmed in crowded, candle-lit apartments while ocean gales shook the rafters. Nightly, complex bacchanalia brought out the most vivid characters into the night; the streets resounded with the
discord of souls in ferment, bodies in heat and imaginations unleashed.

Fortified by an education in critical theory and theology, I spent a decade exploring San Francisco (and Oakland) as a place of both self-liberation and self-overcoming, singularly and collectively. Social progress couldn’t happen without individual progress; and vice versa; material conditions couldn’t improve without alterations in consciousness; and vice versa. Failures and setbacks and instabilities marked much of this era, but also transports and joys and transformative charges into the unknown. In the process I met life-changing collaborators who became, for me, the very blood of the City, especially when the City was at its most imperiled. Daily, we saw our San Francisco over-determined and overrun by the tyrannies of profit, luxury, security and privileged homogeneity masquerading as artisanal variety. We saw this happening in other cities as well: boisterous urban loci that historically are seedbeds of creative ferment and radical resistance were becoming the bedroom-and-restaurant communities of the boringly lucrative and vapidly self-satisfied.

Under these complex conditions, the Iron Garters soldered a compact to resist and sabotage the forces of both inner and outer gentrification, and resisting especially, in Sarah Schulman’s words, “the gentrification of the mind.” To honor this concord, we knew we would have to make unprecedented collaborations between art and theory, spirituality and labor, crime and love, writing and noise, among other contrasts. The unquestioned divisions between genres and modes and forms could no longer be tolerated. The Academy would have to be thrown into the street. Theory would have to be disrupted by economic brutalities. Culture would have to be rewritten by the powerless. Sexuality and desire would have to be undermined by artistic frenzy
and mystical devotion. Above all, we would have to be reckless yet cunning like the most devoted outlaws, protectors of a Wild Outside that has no real analogue in human rationality. The Garters, in deference to those intimations of the lake, agreed to live as smugglers of a precious and sacred ecosystem of wilderness and transport, which they are sworn to protect from all bureaucrats, judges, managers, bankers, zookeepers, cataloguers, economizers, and the rationalistic defangers of culture and vitality.

At the beginning, in the mid-aughts, Garter work had variously provocative manifestations: the cryptic and erotic mail art created in a South of Market office and distributed to special agents; the rowdy theatrical performances hosted by the now-defunct New College of California; the communal, anarchist film screenings at the still-enduring, and always-ramshackle Artists Television Access; as well as the visceral and somatic art work produced by several Feminist and Queer art collectives. Just as powerfully, the Garter ethos extended into and became nourished by the hermetic and pagan communities of San Francisco, many of which proliferated upon the misty hill districts. Suffice to say, despite the economic crimes that were robbing San Francisco of its vitalities, a still vigorous “underground society” endured. And to make sure it still endures the Iron Garters are remobilizing in the imperiled cities of America and beyond as the very threat to progress that insures that the human soul remains imperishable.

The documents that follow are the inaugural and incomplete batch of contagious evidence we have secreted to revive our artistic-criminal lives. A new reader might be confused about our preference for the word, crime. So we ask you to suspend judgment and sink somewhat heedlessly into the heretical counter-histories of creativity and the social. Begin with François Villon, steer into Dada and
'Pataphysics, Genesis P-Orridge’s art and music, and then linger long in the Cookie Mueller-era New York of the 1970s. The Iron Garters agree that we are all members of a real criminal organization: Mankind. The Emergency of History is no longer the Exception but the Banality. Therefore, we suggest: embrace the banal by making it, again, theatrical. If the so-called little things are where we might reap the most ardent pleasures, then let’s take our own advice and telescope our direst minutiae into ecclesiastical transports. Remember: dominant social strata win out because they have the strongest performers. Bureaucracy and paper trails and red tape are analogues to the complex rituals of a polytheistic society overseen by the most mnemonically gifted of high priests. Organization is always performative, even when it is chaotic.

In that spirit, the Iron Garters are performing a complex criminal and gang-based ritual to exorcise banality and make it again visceral, sensual and immediate. World making is a moment-by-moment process that we cannot ever shirk; and just as often it involves the undoing of one world’s parts and fragments to be transposed and reimagined towards the making of another. We are masquerading as criminals only to show you the counter-laws of liberation already inscribed in your cellular makeup. Only when society adopted its hierarchical organization did crime fall into the hands of the powerful and not the playful. Today the criminals wear suffocating suits without anything sexy to hide; when Garters wear suits it’s like Christmas wrapping paper around the world’s most fetching pair of chain-mail lingerie. Garters, thereby, are asked to create their own individual Costumes and Fetishes, Rituals and Rulebooks, Cosmogonies and Charters, Alphabets and Blueprints. Towards this prerogative, we invoke the soul-based writings of neo-Jungian psychologist James Hillman, the
artistic/religious letters of performance artist Linda Montano, and the Deleuzian Nomadic Ethics of Rosi Braiddoti, all of whom have acted as “Garter radios,” or transmitters of that feral gnosis that belongs to our unhampered bodies and souls.

The Unknown is constantly pinging us for any signs of response no matter how muffled we become by the paranoid dictates of our collective interiority. Does the Unknown come necessarily as Information? Perhaps, and quite often. But to Garters what registers more viscerally as the Unknown arrives as Sensation, which is why our Bodies have become our Crafts, bolstered by souls at their most receptive and vulnerable. We are living in worlds increasingly made insular and corralled by the ejaculation of data. We are corralled by the next update, the next piece of news, the next blip of digital feed as the world our bodies want to play in waits for us outside. Our survival steadily seems to depend on sifting through unquantifiable data. But this is illusory. Sensation contains more knowledge than information, if but we only listened with our whole fleshly, ensouled selves.

When we talk about life, we are only ever talking about strata, ever-shifting, ever-silting layers and strands of existence, like a beach with its tongue in the water, or a swamp with its crotch in the forest. This Garter revelation we owe to two of the most visionary proto-Garters in the theoretical landscape: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. In league with their findings, Garters love seeking out strategic plateaus among the tumult of entangled boundaries and blurred conditions. There is something about beaches we want to make live in non-beach environments. There is something about the depths that look better when we propel them into the heights. Hierarchies are playgrounds that we can dislodge and reassemble at will, or at caprice. The
future belongs to ecologists who can put the Human Bias on the backburner, play with ontological boundaries and create new affiliations that are in the best interest of Life, itself, regardless of anthropocentric desires. What appears ossified to a Non-Garter (that doesn’t know s/he is a Garter) is Fluid to a Garter who knows. But all are welcome into the sandbox of knowing, i.e. playing. Ludic Gnosis is for all. The Outside awaits its protectors, its smugglers, its regal feral citizens.

We know that becoming an Iron Garter is a compact of manifold desires buried in each of us, but which has become socialized into docility by the more dominant, more legible social strata. Exiting upon the earth, unfinished at the womb—for all living from the get-go is lavish unfinishment—we believe that failure, as the dominant strata recognize and demarcate it, is the only option for us. Failure opens up new worlds of success: it is actually the most fertile, seething realm for all the metamorphoses we define our lives by. The Iron Garters believe that your most brazen and boldest character traits are your most authentic; what you are most apt to suppress for survival and face-saving sake; they are most suited towards vigorous and sincere reality construction, which is a messy yet rewarding job. For Garters, Reality is always Pending. On the same token, what is considered Messy often proves for a Garter to be immensely rewarding. Hence, you must reveal and flex what yearns the hottest in you if you want to make reality.

Reality making is a risky expedition but life is already the riskiest proposition. In order to take the most risks, you have to work in tandem with the riskiest characters, both within and without. This is where leather and chains and nylon can make you feel bolder, can make you perform with a more dynamic devotion to life. This is where dressing as your drag alter-id can bolster reality-building confi-
rence. To make reality you must enter into your own visceral personae. The vaudeville chorus you’ve kept harbored in your heart must come to life. A chorus is a cosmos. So please delight and take initiative from the following paper-trail chorus of the Iron Garters Crime/Art Collective.

Those seeking initiation into the Iron Garters are counseled to write a letter of passionate intent, with a snail-mail address included, to the email: thesaltedlash@gmail.com.

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