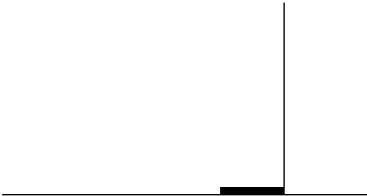


The Lizard, the Catacombs, and the Clock



The Story of Paris's Most Secret Underground Society

SEAN MICHAELS

"It's a war of knowledge. Whoever knows the most is king."

— Crato

Entrances

On August 23, 2004, they discovered a cinema sixty feet beneath Paris.

The sun was shining on the Trocadéro, the Eiffel Tower gleamed across the Seine, and deep below ground, police came across a sign. The officers were on a training mission, exploring the 4.3 miles of catacombs that twist beneath the 16th arrondissement. The former quarries are centuries-old, and the sign at the mouth of the tunnel read, "No public entry." Police are not the public; they entered. Their headlamps flashed against the limestone walls and then suddenly the officers were surrounded. Invisible dogs snarled and barked from all sides. The men's hearts

hammered. They froze in their tracks. They cooed canine comforts into the dark.

In time, the officers' lights found the PA system. They found the stereo, with guard-dog yowls burned onto a CD. They found three thousand square feet of subterranean galleries, strung with lights, wired for phones, live with pirated electricity. The officers uncovered a bar, lounge, workshop, dining corner, and small screening area. The cinema's seats had been carved into the stone itself, with room for twenty people to sit in the cool and chomp on popcorn.

On the floor of one cavern, officers discovered an ominous metal container. The object was fat, festooned with wires. The police called in the bomb squad, they evacuated the surface, they asked themselves, *What have we found?*

They had found a couscous maker.

A few days after the *couscoussière* incident, officers returned to the scene. This time they brought agents from Électricité de France. But they were too late. Already someone had undone the galleries' wiring, disappeared with the equipment, vanished with the booze. What had so recently been a private cinema, a secret hideout, was now just an empty quarry. The cinema's makers had left a note. "*Ne cherchez pas,*" they wrote. Don't search.

Don't search? *For what? For whom?* While the Agence France Presse reported a possible "extreme right-wing" connection, the BBC speculated on a full-fledged "underground movement." All of Paris dreamed of its subterranean screening society.

However, the people responsible for the cinema under the Trocadéro, a place they dubbed the

Arènes de Chaillot, are not quite any of these things. "We are the counterpoint to an era where everything is slow and complicated," they explain. This group also balances the aspect of today that is instant and shameless, hysterically tweeting. They are patient, serious, and they keep their secrets.

After the cinema episode, it would be two years until the city would see their work again.

Porte-parole

I am late. Paris's decaying public-transit system almost strands me at Gare du Nord and I arrive at Le Pantalon out of breath, panicked, terrified that Lazar Kunstmann has left. I slip past students in this noisy bar, searching for the face I have seen in a handful of photographs. I crossed the ocean to meet him and I may not get another chance.

Lazar Kunstmann is stocky, in his late thirties. He has a shaved head. He is friendly. Too friendly, almost—the eagerness in his eyes seems utterly unclandestine. This is not the mystery man I envisioned: Kunstmann is warm, cheerful, and talkative.

He first appeared in 2004, the mouthpiece for a group called La Mexicaine de Perforation (LMDP). Though it literally translates as "the Mexican of the Drilling," its moniker is best understood as something like "The Mexican Consolidated Drilling Authority." The organization was named for a bar in the 16th arrondissement's Place de Mexico. LMDP, Kunstmann revealed, was responsible for the cinema under the Trocadéro.

"Two-thousand four was the first big discovery," Kunstmann admits. "We were really caught in flagrante delicto."

I was living in Scotland at the time. The French and British press were enraptured with the underground cinema and so was I. The appeal wasn't just in the breadth of the cinema-builders' imagination but in their meticulous follow-through. "We covered our tracks," Kunstmann reassured *The Guardian*. "Short of digging up every cable in the district there's no way of knowing where we took [the electricity] from."

Giddy and well spoken, Kunstmann was at the centre of every article. He had spent decades going where he wasn't supposed to: climbing onto roofs at age seven, sneaking through the subway at twelve, delving into the Paris catacombs at fourteen. He and his co-conspirators met at school in the 1980s, when many Latin Quarter colleges still had basement ac-

cess into the tunnels. Although Parisians have been sneaking into the catacombs (known as *carrières*) for centuries, Kunstmann and his friends had no taste for the usual "cataphile" hijinks. Too young to drink, not interested in drugs, they instead began to explore, map, and expand the underground network.

Eventually, Kunstmann tells me, they entered a "post-post-exploration phase." After "you go, you survey—then it's time to do something."

Five years after the discovery of the cinema, Kunstmann has written a book exposing the full scale of this "something." In *La culture en clandestins: L'UX*, published by the French imprint Hazan, Kunstmann reveals LMDP as just one wing of a larger clandestine organization called UX. UX (pronounced "oo-eex," like the French letters) has



more than one hundred members, split into more than ten teams. While LMDP is dedicated to events, other branches are devoted to maps, restoration, or key-making. “[We] are determined to make these abandoned places a theater for new experiences,” Kunstmann explains in his book. This means more than it seems. In French, the word *expériences* connotes both “experiences” and “experiments.” UX itself, an acronym for Urban eXperiences, borrows the double meaning.

The Arènes de Chaillot was built over a period of eighteen months. Starting in 1999 and continuing every summer until the cinema’s discovery, the tunnels hosted Urbex Movies. It was a festival combining careful programming and an unusual locale to present discrete visions of urban life. Shorts and features were grouped by unstated “intention,” to allow for each twenty- to thirty-person audience “to discover, or merely to feel.” A similar philosophy dominated LMDP’s other major film festival, the Sessão Cómoda. Whereas Urbex Movies screened films like *Eraserhead* and Dziga Vertov’s *Man With A Camera*, the Sessão Cómoda had a narrower focus on the underground—showing *The Third Man* and Jacques Becker’s *Le Trou*. These screenings took place nearby, but above ground, in the famous Cinémathèque of the Palais de Chaillot. Which isn’t to say that the Sessão Cómoda was part of the Cinémathèque’s official program. No—LMDP snuck in, week after week, year after year, entering (they claim) from a passage beneath the projectionist’s chair.

For both festivals, audiences were drawn from among UX’s friends, associates, and members of the

public who stumbled across scattered fliers. “The LMDP are simply interested in holding events in a free way,” Kunstmann explains. “Clandestinity is really a detail.”

It’s the detail that allows them to continue what they are doing. UX slip past the functionaries, under the cordons, across miles of red tape. Their high-concept installations use secrecy as a cover, but it’s not their *raison d’être*. “We don’t seek out the forbidden,” Kunstmann murmurs over radio-pop. “We just repudiate any notion of authorization.”

At the same time, UX’s anonymity is a major source of their allure. We are drawn by their gall, their pluck, but also the burnished gleam of a mystery. The Arènes de Chaillot would not be the same treasure if they were sanctioned, public-funded. Kunstmann is surely aware of this, yet he balks at being part of “something ‘plugged in,’ elitist, VIP.” UX do not wish to be a “secret society,” he insists. “When I say secret society, you imagine, I don’t know, like, in *Eyes Wide Shut*. But it’s more basic than that. It’s the patronage system. It’s taking advantage of a hidden alliance.”

The group’s operational need for clandestinity is offset by this distaste for old boys’ clubs. And so UX leave avenues for strangers to stumble across their works, they have published a book revealing certain details, and years ago they resolved to never hide what was in plain sight. This is why LMDP revealed themselves in 2004. Once the Arènes de Chaillot was discovered, with speculation mounting—“In that instant,” Kunstmann says, “we had to clearly explain.”

They didn’t divulge everything.

D'Enfers

Parisians call it a *gruyère*. For hundreds of years, the catacombs under the city have been a conduit, sanctuary, and birthplace for its secrets. The Phantom of the Opera and *Les Misérables'* Jean Valjean both haunted these tunnels, striking students descended in 1968, as did patriots during the Second World War. The Nazis visited too, building a bunker in the maze below the 6th arrondissement.

Honeycombed across 1,900 acres of the city, the vast majority of the tunnels are not strictly speaking “catacombs.” They house no bones. Limestone (and, to the north of the city, gypsum) quarries, these are the mines that built Paris. The oldest date back two thousand years to Roman settlers, but most were excavated in the construction boom of the late Middle Ages, providing the stone that became Notre Dame Cathedral and the Louvre. Riddling the Left Bank, these tunnels were at first beyond the city’s southern limits. But as Paris’s population grew, so did the city—and soon whole neighbourhoods were built on this infirm ground.

The first major cave-in happened in 1774, when an entire street collapsed not far from where the Catacombs Museum stands today. After a similar incident three years later, King Louis XVI created the office of the Inspection Générale de Carrières (IGC, or General Inspection of the Quarries), designated with preventing further collapses. Officials went underground: inspecting, charting, filling chambers with concrete, digging a new labyrinth of maintenance tunnels.

Then came the dead. In the late eighteenth century, Paris’s overcrowded central cemeteries leaked.

Fetid gases would waft into the cellars of Châtelet, marinating wheels of brie and braids of *saucisson*. Beginning in 1785 and for about a century, the government enacted its grisly solution: it transported six million skeletons to the southern quarries. Five per cent of the catacombs remain ossuaries today, and Racine, Robespierre, and Marat are among the dry, dusty residents.

Entrances to the tunnels can be found in the basements of hospitals, the cellars of bars, church crypts, subway tunnels, even at the bottom of Paris’s tallest skyscraper. Many of these access points have been sealed by the IGC, who both protect the city from the catacombs, and the catacombs from the city. Circulating in the *carrières* was made illegal in 1955.

That didn’t stop the catacomb craze. By the time Kunstmann and his friends were in college, almost every Latin Quarter party would end below ground. The IGC fought back, deploying a series of barrier walls that criss-crossed the passages, blocking the flow of visitors. The plan was good, but it only had so much effect: trespassers soon found ways around—and through—the concrete blockades.

By definition, Paris’s hundreds of catacomb ramblers, its “cataphiles,” decline to follow the rules. They are an odd gang of misfits—“urban explorers,” vandals, kids who just want to hang out below ground. They chatter on online message boards, share and hoard maps; they meander, explore, drink, and drill through walls. By night they drop through manholes, and emerge from them, dusty, at dawn.

Members of UX spend time underground, but Kunstmann insists they are not cataphiles. It isn’t

“Ordinary” cataphile contacts are less difficult to make. My online searchlights were glimpsed by a friend of friends, pseudonym Cavannus, who does “urban exploration” in Montréal. Cavannus put me in touch with one of his cataphile pals in Paris—a man with a fake Facebook account named for a celebrated guru. He tells me to meet him at Saint-Pierre de Montrouge church, to look for a guy “on crutches.” Two days after meeting Kunstmann, as I ride the subway and climb up to Alésia Square, there seem to be broken-legged people everywhere. I imagine this as cataphile ground zero, a place where everyone has limestone dust in their hair.

The cataphile who meets me looks about thirty, his dark hair pulled into a ponytail. He gestures at his crutches and says he slipped coming out of a manhole on the rain-soaked street. He is called BHV.

“Underground, everyone has a nickname,” BHV explains to me. He didn’t choose his own, an acronym that refers to a famous department store. Someone else picked it about a dozen years ago, and it stuck. Other names are more esoteric, like Sork, or Crato, the man who eventually takes me into the tunnels. Some conjure deliberate images. One of the catacombs’ most notorious mischief-makers is Lézard Peint, the Painted Lizard, a “devil” with alleged fascist connections, who has been known to steal fellow cataphiles’ lights or to seal up their intended exits.

“What you are on the surface, you are underground,” Crato later says, sucking on a cigarette. “When you are a violent person, given to fighting—you’re the same below.” Scoundrels like Lézard

aside, the cataphile community is civil. “In general we look out for each other,” BHV agrees. They share knowledge, lighters, cans of beer (never bottles, which are still heavy when empty). “People know that if they get too drunk or if they get hurt, it’ll be hard to get out.”

BHV and Crato’s first descents were similar—they saw a hole, or heard about a hole, and they entered. Telling me, BHV begins to cough. “Sorry,” he wheezes, “I still have dust in my throat.” On that first journey, he and his friends ran into some unlikely mentors—off-duty police officers who offered to give them a tour—“and then I spent the whole night underground.”



BHV's story is beguilingly simple. *I could go*, I realize. I could find an entrance on the internet, slip inside, wander until I find an off-duty police officer or a shy, kindly filmmaker. "It's a very supernatural setting," BHV murmurs. "You're completely autonomous. There's no light. There's no electricity. Just stones and water."

But I am here to understand UX and this is not the way that UX works. That group does not rely on word of mouth, happenstance, the kindness of strangers. UX sets goals and quietly executes them. UX never gets lost.

I find Crato online, just as I found BHV. Whereas BHV, becrutched, does not volunteer to play tour-guide, Crato—lanky, vaguely grumpy—makes the offer. "There are a lot of reasons to go down," he allows. "There are those who want to find a calm and pleasant spot. There are those who go down to meet a partner. There are those who go to party. There are even those who go to watch movies. Everyone has their own reasons."

We rendezvous on a bridge over train tracks. It's the middle of the afternoon, cars whizzing by, clouds meandering across a dirty blue sky. We're not far from Denfert-Rochereau, site of the official Catacombs Museum. That plain stone building offers historical displays, dioramas, entry onto a sanitized one-mile circuit of "legal" catacombs. This is not, cataphiles emphasize, the "real thing." Besides—you have to pay admission.

We look both ways and, one at a time, jump the bridge wall. It is thick, high as my shoulders. My jump is less deft than Crato's. I struggle for a moment and then I'm over, feet in the weeds, scram-

bling down the slope to the tracks. This is the Petite Ceinture, one of the city's abandoned railways. It is almost silent. We walk.

Crato has been visiting the catacombs for ten years. He tells me how the original quarries were built just wide enough for a man with a wheelbarrow—six feet by three feet. How they are a permanent 55° Fahrenheit, day and night, winter and summer. "I remember once it was hot in Paris, really hot, really horrible. Instead of dining in an overheated apartment, we went down into the catacombs to eat."

After a time, Crato and I come to a large train tunnel. The sunlight falls away behind us. It is easy to trip on the wooden ties of the tracks or on the irregular stones to either side. We turn on our flashlights yet I can see neither end of the tunnel. I assume the problem is fog, but Crato speaks of *fumis*, cataphile smoke-bombs, made by mixing saltpetre with sugar and flour. They are hiding something down here.

Ten minutes into the gloom, Crato swings his flashlight to the right. The darkness slips into focus. Before me, where the tunnel wall meets the earth, is a hole.

In 2009, this is the "grand entrance" to the catacombs. A craggy break in the rock, no more than two feet wide. Cataphile refuse is strewn nearby—empty beer cans, juice cartons, white paste from carbide lanterns. This is just the second "grand entrance" that Crato has known. One day the IGC will close it up, he says, fill it with concrete like the last one. But Crato hopes his fellow cataphiles do not dig a replacement straight away. Better to give the

losers, the troublemakers, time to get bored and find something else to do. The committed ones already know different ways to get in. The committed ones are patient. Even Crato seems to think that secrets are best.

Deeper

For Kunstmann and his associates, there is little appeal to wandering around underground. Their cinema aside, the catacombs are a means, not an end: a way to access UX work sites or to hide their tracks. But as a first-time visitor plunging into these grey chambers, the experience is thrilling. It is a labyrinth of branching channels and sudden openings, cool and quiet. Most of the catacombs are dry, tall enough to stand in—but from time to time we duck or crawl, or swish into ankle-high water. Still, they are not the dank, sweaty caves I imagined. Even wading into a passage called Banga, whose thigh-high water swirls like miso soup, the tunnel's soft silence recalls a theatre, a wine cellar, an attic.

In Kunstmann's book, cataphiles like Crato are called "*bodzaux*," for their wet and dirty boots, or "Ravioli," for their tendency to dine on boxed dumplings. ("I prefer wine and sausage," my guide retorts.) Ravioli seek to "consecrate" the underground, Kunstmann argues, guarding it from precisely the kind of transformation that UX enjoy. "[They] are protecting an image [of the catacombs] and they want to keep this image intact for the feelings it evokes in them."

Crato speaks of these feelings without actually speaking of them. He talks about how years ago, he

and his now-wife would spend all of Saturday night in the tunnels, wandering until four in the morning. They would emerge, dust themselves off, go to sleep—and on Sunday they would walk the same route, retrace the same steps, above ground, hand in hand.

While this is a beautiful image, it is the opposite of what UX hope to accomplish. "It's a typically Parisian phenomenon," Kunstmann sighs. "Nostalgia for a period we didn't know. Areas 'flashed' in time. The work of UX is to de-flash, to thaw, to transform."

As Crato and I weave beneath the 14th arrondissement, the subway murmurs in a passage over our heads. You could walk these caves in jeans and sneakers, I think. I have read how the Painted Lizard has ordered people to do the circuit naked for his own wicked entertainment. I am in knee-high boots and a cardigan. Crato wears the basic cataphile uniform: hip waders, waterproof backpack, strong flashlight, gloves, a cap to keep off the dust. The athletics stores of Paris, he says with a grin, sell a disproportionate number of fishermen's boots and impermeable packs.

Although the catacombs are covered in graffiti tags, there are also sudden instances of art—amateur gargoyles, carved castles, life-sized sculptures of cataphiles. Crato brings me to La Plage, a large gallery with a sand-packed floor. Our flashlights sweep across wide murals: Hokusai waves and Max Ernst-like portraits. In the Hall of Anubis we sit at a table chiselled out of stone. We light candles, drink beer, share cookies and chocolate. I am absolutely enchanted. I have no idea of the time.

For the most part, cataphiles don't dispute Kunsmann's characterization of them. BHV says his friends enjoy "taking photos, exploring a particular area, repairing things, going to spots where no one has visited for a long time." The community's holy grail, he suggests, is to clandestinely enter the Catacombs Museum. I balk at this—the same place you can visit for just €8, six days a week? "Yes," he agrees, "but that's the goal of tons of cataphiles. And they succeed almost every year—every year there's a hole that's drilled."

When cataphiles do stage large events, they tend to be one-off parties—not permanent "transformational" cinema installations. Crato remembers someone bringing down oysters—stupid, silly, "just as heavy on the way back as on the way down." BHV has organized two Breton-themed shindigs, where more than three hundred people joined dancers, musicians, and amateur chefs cooking subterranean crêpes. Among the largest celebrations was a farewell to Commandant Jean-Claude Saratte in 2000. Head of the catacomb police for twenty-one years, Saratte was respected for his knowledge, instincts, and moderation—pursuing the drug user, vandal, or "tibia collector" instead of the gentle catacomb geek.

Today, officers of BICS (la Brigade d'Intervention de la Compagnie Sportive) patrol the catacomb thoroughfares handing out €65 tickets. The *catacops* are regarded with resentment and disdain. But they force cataphiles to be vigilant: listening, looking out for standard-issue lights, sniffing for aftershave. It is illegal to drink on public streets, Crato proposes, but not beneath them.

"When you're caught, you have the chance to recognize or not recognize an infraction," he explains to me. "If you choose the latter, you're supposed to get an appointment with a judge." Crato has been awaiting his court date for years—and counting down the days until the automatic amnesty triggered by each presidential election.



We emerge from the maze three hours later, flashlights still shining, and again we are wreathed in smoke. It is dark as night. The opening of the railway tunnel is a circle of gold-white light in the far distance. Treading toward the open air, out and past the wild bright green of the weeds, it's as if we're passing through stained glass.

On our way back along the tracks we meet a quartet of cataphiles in black hoodies and running shoes, acquaintances of Crato's. We talk. The conversation is a mixture of bravado, feigned indifference, outbursts of earnest feeling. They talk of girls, parties, police, numbskulls with smoke bombs.

These men seem so gentle. ux's rejection of this community seems unkind. No, Ravioli are not engaged in the same activities; no, their ambitions are not to the same scale. But if ux want to be something other than a secret club, at least they could be friendly with their neighbours.

Kunstmann sees it differently. ux are absolutely unrelated to these cataphiles, separate "from the start." "We were *learning* from one experience to another," he says. "We had an intention for these places." Besides, his group is not based in the catacombs. As Paris was to learn, they hide in the above ground as well.

Flying Saucer

On December 24, 2006, after fifty years of silence, the clock of the Paris Panthéon began to ring.

Two and a half years later, I arrive at the building for a tour. My group's guide is a man in his fifties, bird-haired, who talks in clipped and concentrated French. He doesn't mention the Panthéon's clock. Nor are there any references in the written program. After the tour ends, as the other tourists disperse, I ask him a question: "Didn't something happen with this clock?" We are standing directly beneath the three-foot minute hand.

The guide looks startled. "There are these people..." he begins to say. He does not make eye contact.

"They infiltrated the Panthéon." This group had all the keys; he doesn't know how. The clock had been broken. They fixed it. They have also held plays here, and projected films. He explains everything with a weird, wry solemnity, as if he both hates and relishes being asked. "Untergunther," he says finally, though he doesn't know how to spell it. "Look it up on the internet."

What the internet will tell you is that the Untergunther are a branch of ux. Whereas the Mexican Consolidated Drilling Authority are dedicated to events, the Untergunther are the organization's restorers. In September 2005 they came here, to one of Paris's most important monuments—and they went to work.

The Panthéon was commissioned by Louis XV in 1744, as a tribute to Saint Geneviève. By the time it was finished in 1789, the French Revolution had guillotined the church idea. Instead, the domed neo-classical cathedral became a mausoleum for great French citizens. Voltaire, Rousseau, Émile Zola, and Victor Hugo are buried in its crypt; so are Marie Curie, Louis Pasteur, and Louis Braille. In the centre of the Panthéon's floor, where architect Soufflot had imagined a statue of Ste. Geneviève, Foucault's pendulum swings. Tourists like me come and gape at the way this simple experiment, commissioned by Napoleon, offers evidence of the rotation of the planet. It is such an unassuming marvel.

Another modest wonder lies at the end of the main hall, on the left, above a doorway. The Panthéon's clock is not an elaborate timepiece, like the Prague Orloj. The face is about as tall as a person, mounted on frosted glass. The clock hands and

roman numerals look like they are made of cast iron. Built by the house of Wagner in 1850, it is plain, even austere. But for one year, this was the Untergunther's project.

"[The Untergunther] have compiled a huge list of slowly degrading places," Kunstmann told a *National Geographic* reporter in 2006. "The list is too big to ever be completed in our lives so each year we choose [just] one." The Untergunther have only three conditions for accepting a restoration project. First, to have the technical ability. Second, to have the means. And third, to have the desire. By 2009, they claim to have completed about twelve projects, including the Panthéon, a hundred-year-old government bunker, a twelfth-century crypt, and a First World War air-raid shelter.

"[We] are only interested in a very precise part of [French] cultural inheritance," Kunstmann writes in his book. "The part that is non-visible." These are not just places that are inaccessible or hidden to the public, like the mechanisms of a clock, but also sites that are invisible to their administrators. Since the city administration scarcely has enough money to maintain what is in plain view, UX suggests, it is doomed to ignore what is not.

This is a beautiful idea, but only compelling if acted upon. The Untergunther could be fakers, blowhards taking credit for conveniently hidden restorations. Yet as with the LMDP and their rock-hewn cinema, the endeavour at the Panthéon dismisses doubt.

The Panthéon's nineteenth-century clock had been broken since the 1960s, left to decay, but it caught the eye of a man called Jean-Baptiste Viot.

Viot is a clockmaker, formerly head of restoration for the Swiss house Breguet. He is also a member of UX. Viot observed the rust caked on the Wagner's machinery and ruled that it was a "now or never" moment. If the Panthéon's clock were ever to tick again, it would need the Untergunther's help.

On September 18, 2005, the group formally adopted the project. Soon after, an eight-person "core"—including Viot and Untergunther leader Lanso—went to work. Using a copied key, they infiltrated the building after dusk, dodged security agents, and made their way up. High above the clock that had lured them there, the Untergunther arrived at a cavity along the base of the building's dome. This dusty, neglected space became their home.

They called it the *Unter und Gunther Winter Kneipe*, (the Untergunther's Winter Tavern), taking their inspiration from a door marked UGWK. A similar whimsy had inspired the Untergunther's naming, back when they were just known as "the restoration wing." Unter and Gunther, Kunstmann says, were the names of the imaginary guard-dogs in the Arènes de Chaillot's security system.

For the next twelve months, the Panthéon was the Untergunther's playground. They learned every nook and cranny, copied every key, learned the habits of every guard. It was made easier by relatively lax security. When I visited in 2009, there were still no real security badges, and both of my tour guides failed to count the group with their clickers. According to Kunstmann's stories, UX had already used the Panthéon to stage plays and other events; the Untergunther's residency was just a difference of scale, of persistence.

First they had to figure out what was wrong with the clock. The UGWK became a makeshift library, stocked with books on vintage timepieces and easy chairs that transformed into inconspicuous wooden crates. Gradually the team concluded that one of the clock's integral components, the escapement wheel, had been sabotaged—likely by an employee decades ago. The mechanism had eventually been replaced with an electric mechanism, but this, too, had been sabotaged. Finally, they learned that fully restoring the Wagner clock would not just mean fiddling around behind its face—the antique mechanism had machinery located in several different parts of the building.

The “flying-saucer-shaped” atelier of the Untergunther became a not-quite-state-of-the-art clockmaker's workshop. The Untergunther carried up thousands of euros in tools, materials, and chemicals. They installed thick red curtains along its chilly outer wall, because, Viot said, “a clockmaker can't do anything with mittens on.” They posed for photos among the Panthéon's statues; they watched fireworks from the roof; they made a new escapement wheel and cleaned the clock machinery piece by piece.

Usually, Kunstmann writes, sites restored by the Untergunther remain “just as inaccessible and unknown as they were before their repair.” The Untergunther do not need to trumpet their accomplishments: they seek only the immediate satisfaction of renewing part of their city. Often, the sites' invisibility even shields them from further damage. Alas for the Panthéon's clock, this obscurity was not to be.

Stopping Time

UX doesn't have a blog. Members share a single email account. Lazar Kunstmann is not on Facebook, and the group's other members do not speak to the press. In this era of full disclosure, of never-ending networking, forwarding, and sharing, it is an organization that refuses friend requests. Members have only as many contacts as they require and they will not invite you to events.

The group's secrecy makes it hard to check their facts. Almost everything one *can* check out *does* check out. For the rest, you have to believe or disbelieve their claims. Kunstmann says the group has between one hundred and one hundred and fifty members ranging from age eleven to fifty-six. They are mostly professionals in their late thirties and early forties. UX's groups formed “by accident” in the early 1990s, gradually formalizing and adopting names. They are the product of “aggregation,” the regrouping of kindred spirits within “the same, very reduced, geographic area.”

Of the dozen teams that Kunstmann says exist, only three have been revealed—LMDP, the Untergunther, and a group called the Mouse House, recent inductees, allegedly an all-female “infiltration unit.” All members benefit “from access to a [Paris-wide, universal, integrated] map, all the possible keys, all the possible knowledge.” By sharing resources, pooling expertise, everyone is able to “work less for the same results, or to work the same amount for a better result.”

Viewed a certain way, UX offers the same thing as Wikipedia or Google Earth—information for the community to do with as they please. But

whereas Wikipedia relies on the wisdom of the masses to perfect its frustratingly imperfect data, while flash-mobs rally as many participants as possible, UX remains private. They reject openness, spurn crowds. The group's discretion allows them to slip below the authorities' radar, to operate with impunity, but there is more to it than that: by closing the network, they accomplish better works. There is no need to screen a film before thousands, to trumpet mysteries from the rooftops, to bring dancers and musicians and chefs making crêpes. UX quietly create wonders, carefully rescue treasures. Members are expected to be capable, informed, autonomous. "Everything is dedicated to avoiding wasted time," Kunstmann says. The doing, not the discussion, is what matters.

Because of this pragmatism, the Untergunther always knew they would have to reveal their venture to the Panthéon staff. "If you want a monumental clock to work, someone has to mount and maintain it," Kunstmann explains. Two, ten, or fifty years after the gears are set in motion, they must still be regularly tended. "The logic always being to minimize the amount of work for a given project; it's a conversation we had with the whole group. At a certain point, the administrator would need to be clued in."

Standing with my tour guide under the clock's black hands, I ask him whether the mechanism still works.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Management took a piece away."

"Why?"

I glimpse the tiniest sarcastic roll of the eyes. "Pfft. I don't know."

At the end of September 2006, the Untergunther claim they met with Bernard Jeannot, administrator of the Panthéon, and his assistant Pascal Monnet. (In the book, Monnet's name loses an *n*.) Jeannot was thrilled, delighted with the Untergunther's ingenuity, marvelling at their secret workshop and horological handiwork. Monnet was less enthused. Still, everything seemed set for the clock to be mounted, for it to resume functioning—except that it didn't. Weeks passed. The administration, UX allege, did not want to reveal their failure to maintain the clock, or the way it had been restored.

With real sorrow in his voice, Kunstmann confesses they "misjudged the internal tensions that ruled at the CNM [the organization responsible for Paris's monuments] and the administration of the Panthéon. How different interests would exploit this affair to pursue their own agendas." Shortly after the UGWK was revealed, Bernard Jeannot left—or was forced out of—his job. Monnet ascended to the top seat. "That was the defeat," Kunstmann says. "That was the fuck-up. That we underestimated these factors."

It was an oddly naïve mistake. Most citizens of Paris—indeed, most citizens of the world—know to never underestimate the hopelessness of their bureaucrats. Blinded by their own panache, UX assumed their work would be embraced by the people they shamed. Instead, two months later, the clock still had not been mounted.

The Untergunther are usually content for their restorations to remain hidden, but they were curi-

ous about their Panthéon handiwork. UX did not know whether their repair job had even been successful. They decided to test it on a day when the Panthéon was closed. The options were few—Christmas Eve, New Year’s Day, May 1.

On December 24, the Untergunther once again slipped past security and into the building. They mounted the clock. It began to chime. The mechanism was found to lose less than one minute per day—Viot deemed it “acceptable.”

But when Monnet returned from his holiday, he marched up the Panthéon’s steps and gazed furiously at the tick-tick-ticking timepiece. He called a clockmaker to unmake the clock. The man who

came, reportedly from the Maison Lepaute, refused to sabotage the mechanism. Instead, he removed the escapement wheel—the same piece damaged those decades before, rebuilt by Viot. At 10:51, the Wagner mechanism stopped.

Kunstmann is still livid. “The notion of conservation, the value of the objects in Monnet’s care, don’t concern him. He thinks only of his career, to have a good retirement.”

I write to Monnet, asking for his version of events. The Panthéon administrator responds in an unmistakable tone: “I absolutely refuse to discuss this file. It is part of an active case and the law prohibits me from commenting.”



After the story of the clock repair broke, journalists swarmed—and Kunstmann once again came forward, revealing all. “Underground ‘terrorists’ with a mission to save city’s neglected heritage,” shrieked the *Times of London’s* headline. Monnet agreed with this characterization, pursuing the Untergunther in court. But there was one problem: they didn’t seem to have committed a crime. Nothing was damaged during the Untergunther’s stay at the Panthéon, and at the time there was no such thing as “trespassing” on public property. (This has since been rectified, with a bill passed in December 2008.) Authorities had to wait almost an entire year before finding a reason to bring UX in.

On August 14, 2007, Panthéon security claimed to find four members trying to force the building’s locks. The case was heard on November 23, 2007, before the 17th Chambre du Tribunal de Grande Instance. The CNM sought a total of €51,394.76 for damage to public property. The accused: Sophie Langlade (surely Lanso, the Untergunther’s leader), thirty-five, unemployed; Dorothée Hachette, thirty-nine, nurse; Christophe Melli, thirty-eight, artistic director; Eric Valleje, thirty-eight, filmmaker. Four members of Untergunther, revealed before the court.

“A real experiment never presumes its results,” Kunstmann says. “If someone had asked us, ‘What are the chances that one day you will appear in court to talk about the repair of the clock?’ We would have said, ‘Zero per cent? One per cent?’ The improbable is still within the realm of the possible.”

The charges were ultimately dismissed. Kunstmann says UX took back the removed escapement

wheel, stealing it from Monnet’s office. LMDP claim to have used the Panthéon for another full year, staging photo exhibits and a festival of police films. And the clock? “[It] is simply waiting for its chance to run again,” Kunstmann told *The Architects’ Journal*.

The way that Untergunther tell it, this acquittal was inevitable. UX’s members are so clever, after all. They are so sophisticated. They are a world away from hoi polloi like Crato, caught in the catacombs and awaiting presidential amnesty. UX are not Ravioli. And you would certainly never see Kunstmann in the same room as the Painted Lizard.

La-zar Kunst-mann

The Painted Lizard, wrote American journalist Christopher Ketcham, is “one of the nastiest pranksters in the underworld.” Cavannus, a former Parisian now living in Montréal, says something similar: “Dangerous. To avoid.” Another catacomb rat goes further. “The guy’s a megalomaniacal jerk and deserves no publicity of any kind,” G—— wrote in an email, asking that I not use his name. “He is a lesser human being.”

Ketcham recalls seeing a photograph of the Léopard (and a black friend) in Nazi SS uniforms, “singing old German war songs at full throttle, stomping through the tunnels, sieg heiling, the songs echoing down the halls for a half-mile.” He’s a fascist, G—— tells me. “In the 1990s him and another guy going by the name of Ktu used to beat people up. They had the network shared, one ‘gang’ held the south, the other the north. . . . Idiots are in awe of him because he can break into anywhere [but] an asshole is always an asshole.”

I obtain the Untergunther's court records less than a week after my visit to the catacombs. I Google the names—Sophie Langlade, Dorothée Hachette, Christophe Melli, Eric Valleye. Slim pickings, except for Valleye. He is named in Ketcham's 2002 article for *Salon*. Valleye, Ketcham writes, is the real name of the Lézard Peint.



“We dress up as Nazis, sure,” the Lizard said, “but we have no politics, none whatsoever. This is all . . . theater. A game of transformations, masks.”

I consider the Lizard, reformed, assisting the patient restorers of the Panthéon's clock. Perhaps he met them below ground. And then suddenly the darkness slips into focus. *Lazar*, after all, sounds an

awful lot like *Lézard*. Kunstmann, the German word “art-man.” Lazar Kunstmann—*Lézard art-man*?

After that, I'm running. I dig into the Untergunther website, ugwk.org. I discover the site's files reside on a different server, and I note the URL: <http://web.mac.com/peint/UGWK>.

I scour cataphile forums for photographs of the Lizard, search Flickr. Most photographers lack UX's discretion. I find the Lizard, head bowed, in a series of subterranean snaps. It is the same man with whom I clinked glasses at Le Pantalón.

When I go back to speak to BHV, his ankle has healed. I ask the question whose answer he neglected to volunteer last time. Yes, the cataphile admits, “Lazar and Lézard Peint are the same single person.”

I do not know how to feel. Thrilled by my discovery? Proud of my detective skills? Or utterly deflated, imagining UX as an asshole's practical joke? It is as if I am back underground. This time I have no leader.

“Lazar always had a group of friends, but they didn't particularly have a name,” BHV says. He suggests they adopted the name LMDP after the discovery of the cinema, Untergunther after the discovery of the clock, UX after the publication of his book. Whereas UX claim to have more than a hundred members, BHV and Cavannus guess that “Kunstmann's group” are no more than twenty. The Untergunther say they have completed a dozen different projects, LMDP to have hosted dozens of events, but there's scant evidence. Perhaps it is because these actions were secret. Or perhaps they didn't happen.

BHV points to another sign of obfuscation in Kunstmann's book. The volume is peppered with comic relief courtesy of Olrik and Peter, UX's goofy,

incompetent jester duo. Olrik is real, well known underground. But Peter? “He is maybe Lazar,” BHV supposes. “I looked into it. It might be him.” *Peter*, I note, is the French word for *farting*.

At that noisy, crowded bar, as I set a pint of Leffe before him, Kunstmann had confessed that he sometimes “gives simple answers to questions that deserve complicated ones.” Months later, I contemplate UX as a tall tale, an exaggeration, the invention of an arrogant catacomb trickster. And yet the truth still feels just out of reach, beyond the beam of my flashlight. It is as if I can hear the footfalls.

Misdirection

Almost a month after our meeting, I confront Lazar Kunstmann (a.k.a. Lézard Peint, a.k.a. Eric Valleje) over email. Fifteen hours later, I receive a reply. Kunstmann says the Painted Lizard does not exist. He claims that this character’s reputation is intentional, invented, part of a concentrated effort to muddle perceptions of UX. Stories of villainous cataphiles quickly take over the discourse, masking any other activities. I am reminded of a comment he made at the bar that night. “A secret launches any information,” he said, leaning forward in his chair. “It’s a very simple principle. ‘I’m going to tell you something. It’s a secret—above all don’t tell it to anyone.’ You will see two other people and say to them, ‘I’m going to tell you something. It’s a secret—above all don’t tell it to anyone.’ In four seconds, everybody knows.” The greater the tale, the bigger the lizard, the faster word spreads.

Kunstmann admits that one “operation,” between 1985 and 1987, “was mildly violent”—but

never, he insists, “physically violent.” “For a Ravioli,” he writes, “anything outside of routine is psychologically violent.” He does concede that one of Ktu’s friends might have knocked some heads.

And then I receive a message from Lanso. This is unexpected. The head of the Untergunther does not relish the spotlight, hasn’t written any books, never talks to journalists. She has not contacted me before. “I know that [catacomb adventures] are very entertaining to foreign readers,” she writes, her verbiage precise. “It’s the exoticism of ‘subterranean Paris.’ But it’s not what defines [UX]. We are people who realize projects without asking permission. That’s all.”

From there, Lanso acknowledges that UX’s cast of regulars, the nicknames most often cited, may now seem like mischievous cataphiles. But she says these are part of a “media group” led by Kunstmann—a team meant to dazzle and distract the press, mesmerizing us with catacomb talk.

“The small world of the catacombs, which is apparently your place of departure, easily amplifies the importance of Lazar’s band of rascals,” Lanso writes. “Lazar is a good spokesman . . . but all of the intox [obfuscations] and [media] diversions that he has been able to do, he and his friends, both in the press and [among cataphiles], gets linked to *our* activities, which they have nothing to do with.” Kunstmann is an important member, Lanso admits, but the Untergunther and most of the rest of UX “have nothing to do with ‘cataphiles,’ nor even the catacombs. Nothing to do with Ravioli forums nor the beliefs and myths of these places. Nothing to do with the dozens of confusing articles conceived by Lazar and

his cohorts between 1985 and 2004. Nothing to do with the folklore of the Latin Quarter so dear to the previously-mentioned.”

Kunstmann’s tales, the activities he recounts, the cataphile culture he invokes—it is, Lanso suggests, a *fumis*. It is smoke. It is the smoke that fills our vision, fills newspaper pages, conceals the group’s true projects and real work.

Look to the Untergunther website, available in French and English, a kind of souped-up press release, useful for journalists. Look to Zone Tour, maintained by Olrik and Kunstmann, ostensibly a website for Paris cataphiles but purely in English. Look to an article in *Zurban* magazine, two years before the “restoration wing” of UX announced themselves. There are the “Untergunther,” doing nothing more than run-of-the-mill culture jamming, changing George V subway station signs to “George W.” Fog, smoke, misdirection.

As for what this “real work” is, Lanso will not say. These projects, she underlines, are secret. “Don’t think that I say this against you, or against journalists in general. It’s the same for everyone. To be able to do what we do, this is how it has to work.”

I have reached a dead end. Lanso’s secrets are tantalizing, but I can neither confirm nor deny them. UX’s deepest riddles cannot be Googled. The question I ask is, *Do I believe them?* And then I ask, *Do I want to believe them?* And then I know my answer.

Exits

Despite their unassailable secrecy, UX still have something to offer the rest of us trapped on the far side of the smokescreen. Kunstmann talked about this as we finished our beers that night. “Over time,” he said, “I’ve noticed that the principal reason that UX completes its projects is that we dismiss past inhibitions.”

The organization simply *tries* things. If one idea doesn’t work, they move on to the next. And whereas doubt inhibits, precedents inspire new experiments. “If someone says tomorrow, ‘Ah, I’d love to fly across the Atlantic,’ no one would say, ‘It’s impossible! It will never work!’” Kunstmann said. “If it’s already been created, it must be possible to recreate.”

We cannot join UX. They will not tell us who they are, or what lies at the heart of the maze. But we can do as they did. We can make our own maps.