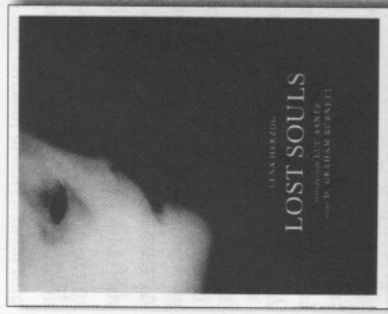


LOST IN LIMBO

Lost Souls

Photographs by Lena Herzog, with essays
by Luc Sante and D. Graham Burnett

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Published in tandem with her recent exhibition at the International Center of Photography in New York, Lena Herzog's book *Lost Souls* (2010) documents the hidden wonders and horrors of Europe's *Wunderkammern* (Cabinets of Curiosities), precursors to natural history museums that contain unusual plant, animal, and human specimens. Herzog was granted special access to photograph these collections, which are not usually open to the general public. Inspired by the *Kunstkamera* in St. Petersburg, Russia, Herzog visited and photographed collections in Vienna, Utrecht, Turin, Leiden, Berlin, Amsterdam, Pavia, London, and Paris.

Lost Souls opens with an introduction by Luc Sante followed by an essay by D. Graham Burnett. Both writers question why Herzog's photographs resonate beyond the anatomical specimen to something more primal and spiritual. Exquisitely reproduced black-and-white photographs follow without titles or captions. Interspersed throughout the pages are meditations on mortality by Homer, John Dryden, Euripides, Hippolytus, and Vladimir Nabokov. The latter half of the book features images of babies born with genetic defects. Other images include animal and human skeletons. Some of the more playful images depict "The Mice Orchestra," an entire miniature orchestra created by an eighteenth-century anatomist from mouse skeletons. The tableau had been kept in storage for many years at the Anatomical Museum of Leiden University Medical Center. The orchestra of mice adds a bit of diabolic humor, in contrast to the somberness of the other images.

Most haunting of all are the baby photographs, which arouse both wonder and horror. In the introduction, Sante poetically states:

The creatures who inhabit Lena Herzog's photographs—who inhabit jars and cases in the museums of medical oddities around the world . . . exist in a realm that seems to stand outside the usual distinctions between life and non-life. In a sense they are ghosts: they are far older than we are, but they remain neo-natal, or prenatal, depending on whether it can be said that they ever actually lived. (5)

Sante notes that babies born with physical anomalies are legitimate subjects for medical study, but "they have been preserved for reasons

that embarrass science" (6). He suggests that the infants function symbolically—a visual reminder that creation is beyond human comprehension. During the formation of the *Wunderkammern*, a debate ensued within the Russian Orthodox Church. The church could not reconcile God's perfection with the creation of what they deemed "unnatural" creatures, declaring their souls "lost," unable to enter heaven.

Herzog's "lost souls" exist in a suspended state of limbo. One infant gazes upward, hands clasped in prayer. Conjoined twins embrace, seemingly comforting each other. Other babies seem to be screaming in pain. Did they suffer? Are they now at peace? The infant on the book's cover appears alien, otherworldly. In some images the jars are not visible, allowing the infants to transcend their status as oddities or specimens and enter the human realm. Herzog's decision not to title these photographs reminds us that the babies are human and should not be classified by their defects and deformities.

Burnett's essay, "Where Are We?," opens with the author recounting a dream that evoked both terror and confusion. For Burnett, the dream and its subsequent disorientation is analogous to viewing Herzog's photographs. The essay provides a brief history of the museum and outlines some of the debates between historians, who wish to reclaim the museum as "a crucial locus in the history of inquiry," and anthropologists, who criticize the museum as complicit in "past sins of racial injustice and cultural violence towards native and colonized peoples" (14). Burnett suggests science and visual art have a "common matrix," and while we tend to perceive the two in opposition to one another, he argues that "these 'two cultures' may in fact be Siamese twins, snipped apart circa 1800" (13). He relates this metaphor to Herzog's photographs, which exist as art but are composed from optics and chemistry. The subjects are scientific specimens, but their preparation (through taxidermy and embalming) was once considered an art. Burnett closes the essay with an epigram venerating Dutch anatomist Frederik Ruysch's art (dioramas constructed from body parts and fetal skeletons), from which engraver Cornelius Huybert produced detailed drawings. Translated into engravings, Huybert's drawings of Ruysch's work appeared in eighteenth-century pamphlets and a text entitled *Thesaurus*, which illustrated his anatomical preparations and collections. Reproductions of these engravings comprise the inside front and back covers of *Lost Souls*. Burnett ends with a poem from Ruysch's *Thesaurus*:

Through thy art, O Ruysch,
A dead infant lives and teaches
And, though speechless, still speaks.
Even death itself is afraid. (19)

Herzog's infants speak to us. They resonate beyond anatomical specimen, to something more primal, visceral, and spiritual. They teach us about who we are as a species, intimating our human limitations. Herzog's photographs remind us that such "oddities" are not just "the other"—they are us.

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