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LOST SOULS

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essay D. GRAHAM BURNETT

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WHERE ARE WE?

It is notable that upon waking from a disorienting dream we set about restoring our equilibrium by sorting out, first and foremost, *where we are*. Just last night, for instance, my eyes snapped open into the darkness smack in the middle of a very fraught conversation with a black-haired woman who was complaining to me that the waiter had transferred her tears from the dessert plate (which he had just removed) to the saucer of her coffee (which he subsequently delivered). This was terrifying at the time, though in retrospect I cannot quite say why. The all-important movement between that terror and that puzzled retrospection occurred in those several blinking seconds during which, without moving, without seeing, I sorted out that I was emphatically not in a noir-ish café sitting across from a woman (evidently insane) who had just done some sort of inscrutable

math problem ostensibly proving I had met her previously on the island of Ithaca. I was, rather, in bed – my bed – with my sleeping wife, which meant I was in New York City, on the Upper West Side, in the United States of America. A host of things followed from this: some of them reassuring, others less so; but that nameless, shivering terror withdrew in haste as the world shifted, as on gimbals, to bring my mind's eye back into alignment with my body's position. Which is another way of saying that *orientation* (literally, “east facing” or “facing the sunrise”) has always been a basically spiritual act, the nervous activity of a species that has more to fear from its dreams than from the wolves that lurk in the dark woods.

I begin here, because I am going to proceed in this essay on the assumption that you, reader, have already perused the powerful photographs in the pages of this book (How could you not? You picked up the book; it is a beautiful thing, thick with images that ask to be seen; so you flipped around, you looked...), and that you are likely, therefore, to be feeling a little *disoriented*; that you are likely to find yourself at this moment in a blinking condition, your eyes adjusting to the darkness.

So let's initiate the process of self-recovery with that most fundamental question: Where are we?

Lena Herzog's opening low-angle image of a gothic, vaulted hall could for a moment put us in mind of the apse of some shadowy cathedral, or the corridor of a vast catacomb. Significantly, however, we are in neither of those holy caverns. We are, rather, in that still stranger and perhaps, finally, more powerful place that is their secular analogue and epitome: we are in the *museum*, one of the truly sacred spaces of modernity, and arguably the single most powerful site in the entwined histories of science and art.

The last twenty years has seen a veritable irruption of scholarship on the history, anthropology, and theory of museums.¹ Historians have sifted the genealogy of this charged institution, recovering its origins in the classical fantasy of a temple dedicated to the muses (those nubile personifications of human striving), its lineal ancestry in the *Wunderkammern* of the Renaissance (the fascinating “wonder-cabinets” where princely power and scholarly curiosity took material form in eclectic collections of exotica), its growing appetite for public instruction (not to say ideological indoctrination) across the “didactic enlightenment” of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and finally the codification (and subsequent fragmentation) of its recognizably contemporary forms in the last hundred years.² Along the way these researches have revealed remarkable things. Take just one example: while we now tend to think of the investigation of nature (call it “science”) and the celebration of visual art (call it “connoisseurship,” or, perhaps, “aesthetic sophistication”) as essentially immiscible dimensions of human experience, the history of the museum reveals their common matrix, and suggests that these “two cultures” may in fact be Siamese twins, snipped apart circa 1800.

1 Probably the best place to start for a résumé of this large literature is the set of four essays gathered under the group title “Focus: Museums and the History of Science” in *Isis* 96 (2005): 559-608. The text that marks the start of recent critical attention to these institutions would be: Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor, eds., *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985). MacGregor went on to found and edit the *Journal of the History of Collections*, which has been the major organ for work in this area.

2 Each of these clauses stands precariously on a pile of valuable studies. Indispensable works would include: Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); and Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).

It is a metaphor that can be understood to haunt this volume, which sets out to make art from the forgotten stuff of the sciences. And it is better than that, since the art in question here (photography) is itself, of course, a demanding science of chemistry and optics, and the scientific objects in question (largely preserved organic specimens) were themselves understood, in their day, to be the product of considerable art: anatomical preparation, taxidermy, and embalming all lay a hair's breadth from beaux-arts sculpture for much of the early modern period.³

If a generation of historians has now tapped the archives to recover the museum as a crucial locus in the history of inquiry, affect, and collective identity, the anthropologists, for their part, have waged a distressingly oedipal struggle with this institution over the same two decades.⁴ In an era of increasing sensitivity to past sins of racial injustice and cultural violence, the museum's self-satisfied Victorian role as tutor of Anglo-Saxon ascendancy (and mausoleum of the primitive tribes) came under withering attack. Multicultural social scientists led this charge in the 1980s, but found, after storming their Bastilles (the Hall of Man at the American Museum of Natural History, the African Galleries at the British Museum, etc.), that they had razed the very cradles of their several disciplines: anthropology was, after all, born in the museum, born in the endless business of collecting, sorting,

3 On this proximity, consider: Rebecca Messbarger, "Waxing Poetic: Anna Morandi Manzolini's Anatomical Sculptures," *Configurations* 9 (2001): 65-97.

4 Consult, for example: Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn, eds., *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture, and the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1998); and Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

and—above all—*arranging* the flotsam and jetsam of colonial peoples. It was a little late to apologize, and very hard to start over. In fact, one could do worse than define the museum as the architectural expression of this fundamentally oedipal idea: *It is very hard to start over*. This is, in a sense, the refrain sounded by our footfalls down those long corridors, whether what hangs on the wall are Yanomami blowdarts or late Matisse. The book in your hands knows this. As proof, run the following experiment: let your eye linger on each of these photographs as you imagine that each is entitled “It is very hard to start over.” It is an experience.

As for the critics and theorists, they generated (as they are wont to do) a new *field* for their collective cogitation, “museology,” under the banner of which they turned in tightening circles around these august edifices, stroking their chins, now and again pointing a finger.⁵ Aha! These are, of course, Foucauldian structures *par excellence*, are they not? Panoptic, totalizing, authoritative—the museum has always been palpably a site of hegemonic cultural reproduction, and its back door amounts to nothing less than the memory hole of modernity: what goes out that exit is well and truly unpreserved.⁶ And in all this the critics were not wrong: what the museums have forgotten has died a kind of second death. This too

5 Plenty of this work is perfectly interesting: Peter Vergo, ed., *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion, 1989); Bernard Schiele and Emlyn H. Koster, *La révolution de la muséologie des sciences* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1998); Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kraemer, and Steven D. Lavine, *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).

6 Gender theorists have been particularly attentive to the museum as a site for normative presentations of human reproduction. Relevant in this regard is Catherine Cole, “Sex and Death on Display: Women, Reproduction, and Fetuses at Chicago’s Museum of Science and Industry,” *The Drama Review* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 43-60.

whispers through the pages of *Lost Souls*. What act of resurrection can raise the twice-dead? The theology of this problem centers on the controversial doctrine of the *Anastasis*—otherwise known as the “Harrowing of Hell.” But put that vexatious bit of patristics aside. The aesthetics of the problem is more tractable, and can be subsumed under the genre of the *vanitas*, on which we might do well to reflect a little further.

The ghost that goes maundering in the halls of every museum is death. This is quite obvious, and the popular-cultural preoccupation with museums that “come to life” at night is merely the collective unconscious expression of our tacit fisticuffs with this poltergeist on its home turf. The elite skip *Night at the Museum II* and take their refuge in the chipper notion of the *ars longa vita brevis*, which is meant to be similarly reassuring as one wanders among the Titians. But none of this can quite put off the lingering suspicion that we have entered, as one museologist puts it, a “tomb with a view.” It is in museums of natural history and medicine these matters become most urgent, since there death itself is *on display*, and (in one of those paradoxes that we learn to overlook) death is on display *in the name of life*.⁷ The stuffed birds, the false-eyed doe, the skeleton of some Paleolithic hominid—all these carcasses and remainders carefully arranged behind the glass live together in what is, in the end, the charnel-house of the sciences, the place where the flesh (bodies) can become word (knowledge), and in doing so redeem its putrefaction.

⁷ Very valuable on these issues is Ruth Richardson’s essay “Human Remains” in *Medicine Man: Henry Wellcome’s Phantom Museum*, edited by Ken Arnold and Danielle Olson (London: British Museum Press, 2003).

This stylized alchemy of loss and decay stands in something deeper than a simple analogical relationship to the indispensable artistic tradition of the *vanitas*—that line of paintings, dioramas, and associated works that enjoin a sensual lingering with death in the name of moral instruction and/or spiritual redemption. A *memento mori* is a mere reminder of final things. A true *vanitas* is a work that resolves the riddle of resurrection through a double-death, since its efficacy as an object of aesthesis hinges on subjecting death itself to the *petite mort* of representation. Thus, a lock of hair from a lost loved one is a *memento mori*, but Frederik Ruysch's uncanny anatomical tableau, "Child's Hand with Adult's Heart" (it is the former holding the latter in a small jar of clear preservative), realized sometime before 1720, is a *vanitas* of disconcerting power.⁸

Or is it? One might plausibly object that this peculiar bottle of bits is really properly understood as an anatomical specimen, and that it thus belongs somewhere (but where, exactly?) in a genealogy of rational inquiry. Conversely, one might well counter that such sentimentalizing and charismatic manipulations of the body have more to do with freak-shows than with spiritual redemption (on the one hand) or the development of cardiology (on the other). Suddenly one begins to think of a Damien Hirst pastiche of Ruysch, where "on the one hand" is taken quite literally...

This temptation, to chase what amounts to an insoluble and ontological problem up into the formaldehyde of snark and pun in contemporary art, points, I think, to the terrible power of our two dominant narratives for making sense of the past: progress (It's part

⁸ On this piece, see Julie V. Hansen, "Resurrecting Death: Anatomical Art in the Cabinet of Dr. Frederik Ruysch," *The Art Bulletin* 78, no. 4 (December 1996): 663-679.

of the development of science!) and pathology (Those people in the past were crazy!). The museum, of course, has been the primary site where the narrative of progress has been built and taught, and, similarly, the museum has played a privileged role in the discrimination of anomaly and pathology. And it is for this reason that an object like Ruysch's "Child's Hand with Adult's Heart" – and many of the overwhelming specimens depicted in this book – have ended up hidden away in the basements and storage closets of the modern museum. They defy the categories that museums themselves have *installed*. They throw everything open again.

Blinking, disoriented – one asks *where am I?* But for the historian, the answer to this question is always a date. And it would be my contention, in closing, that the only way to negotiate the swarming antinomies conjured by this book (art and nature, order and anomaly, progress and decay, life and death) is to go *back* – to go back and try to recover the network of meanings and aspirations that gave shape to these artifacts and the institutions that now secret them with no small disease. This move to the past is, of course, a kind of flight, but where some combat is concerned one can retreat from the field and maintain at least a modicum of dignity. Or this is what we historians tell ourselves.

So allow me to throw up an image to hide my withdrawal: the frontispiece of Ruysch's 1738 *Icon Durae Matris* depicts a putto who has arranged himself behind a row of specimen jars, each of which contains some embalmed little corse; but these together serve the putto as a veritable bulwark against the onslaught of a terrible giant figure of death – a skeleton that lurches back as if transfixed by the luminous radiance of the putto's wares. The iconography is, of course, hackneyed: great art stopping father

time (the grim reaper) dead in his tracks. Though here we confront a chewy complexity: the art in question is *embalming*—an art of death itself.

This choice doubling of death into a kind of immortality was not lost on Ruysch himself, or on his contemporaries (many of whom venerated his prodigious gifts), or, for that matter, on the author of the accompanying epigram:

*Through thy art, O Ruysch,
A dead infant lives and teaches
And, though speechless, still speaks.
Even death itself is afraid.⁹*

Or so we hope.

⁹ Cited in Hansen, *supra* n. 8.