

JOLENE BRINK

Kinderbrutanstalt

The child hatchery

IT WAS A temporary world inside a very old city. The 1896 Berlin Industrial Exposition arrived to show the world how one nation saw its place in history. From early spring into late autumn, more than 7 million people passed through the main gates, an imposing stone edifice of minarets and cupolas, to wander the exhibits and stand at the edge of a human-made lake buzzing with electric lights. The crowd marveled at Dr. Wölfert's steerable airship reaching record heights in the atmosphere. They wandered through a reconstruction of a medieval Berlin market. In another reconstruction, this one modeled after villages in East Africa, Cameroon, and New Guinea, crowds watched over one hundred Black men, women, and children—imported for the event from Germany's distant colonies and dressed in costumes—unwillingly playact the colonial ideal of how the colonized village might appear. And then, somewhere between the Tyrolean yodelers and parachute jump exhibits, six babies the size of birds sighed in their sleep.

Nobody knows how the mothers felt about their premature infants being used for a public science demonstration. Most likely they believed their children wouldn't survive the season. At the time, most hospitals dismissed babies born too soon as hopeless causes. Some families—shaken by the sudden arrival of these fragile offspring—were sent home with hot water bottles and told to hope for the best. And yet. Here in the *Kinderbrutanstalt*, the "child hatchery," a new technology modeled after farming equipment used to hatch baby chicks—think metal incubation boxes with ventilated air warmed by hot pipes—offered a different story.

Hovered over by nurses and swaddled in clean sheets, the infants who weren't supposed to live survived day after day, while curious visitors peered over the railing to see what everyone was talking about.

One photograph taken around the time of the expo shows a group of nurses standing guard, each lined up next to an incubator, each incubator marked with a clear porthole the size of a small television. One nurse folds her hands at the waist. Another hides them in her apron pockets. All stare directly at the camera. None of the babies are visible, but we know they're just inside the flecked static of this black-and-white photo. The incubators look like spaceships next to the nurses in their Victorian ruffles, but they are also familiar: the early predecessors to our modern appliances. The juxtapositions between metal and infant, sideshow and nursery, experiment and motherhood, make me study the gazes of these nurses for something else. Do they feel the strangeness of the event they're participating in? Did they hold these babies against their starched dresses in awe of their survival? And what did the nurses see in the gaze of the crowds shuffling past?

The Berlin Exposition built a temporary world where anything was possible, and children who weren't supposed to live stared back at the mystified crowds. The rudimentary incubators proved how much we had to learn about the world we were trying to shape. And yet, for all the technology developed since then, when a premature baby is born today the basic equation is the same: safety, warmth, the passage of time. And somewhere, a mother waiting for her baby to come home. ○