

# The importance of the unknown

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# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE UNKNOWN

## Arnaud Bostelmann, Francesco Paleari

It can be claimed that the ability of a storyteller lies in what is not said rather than what is said.

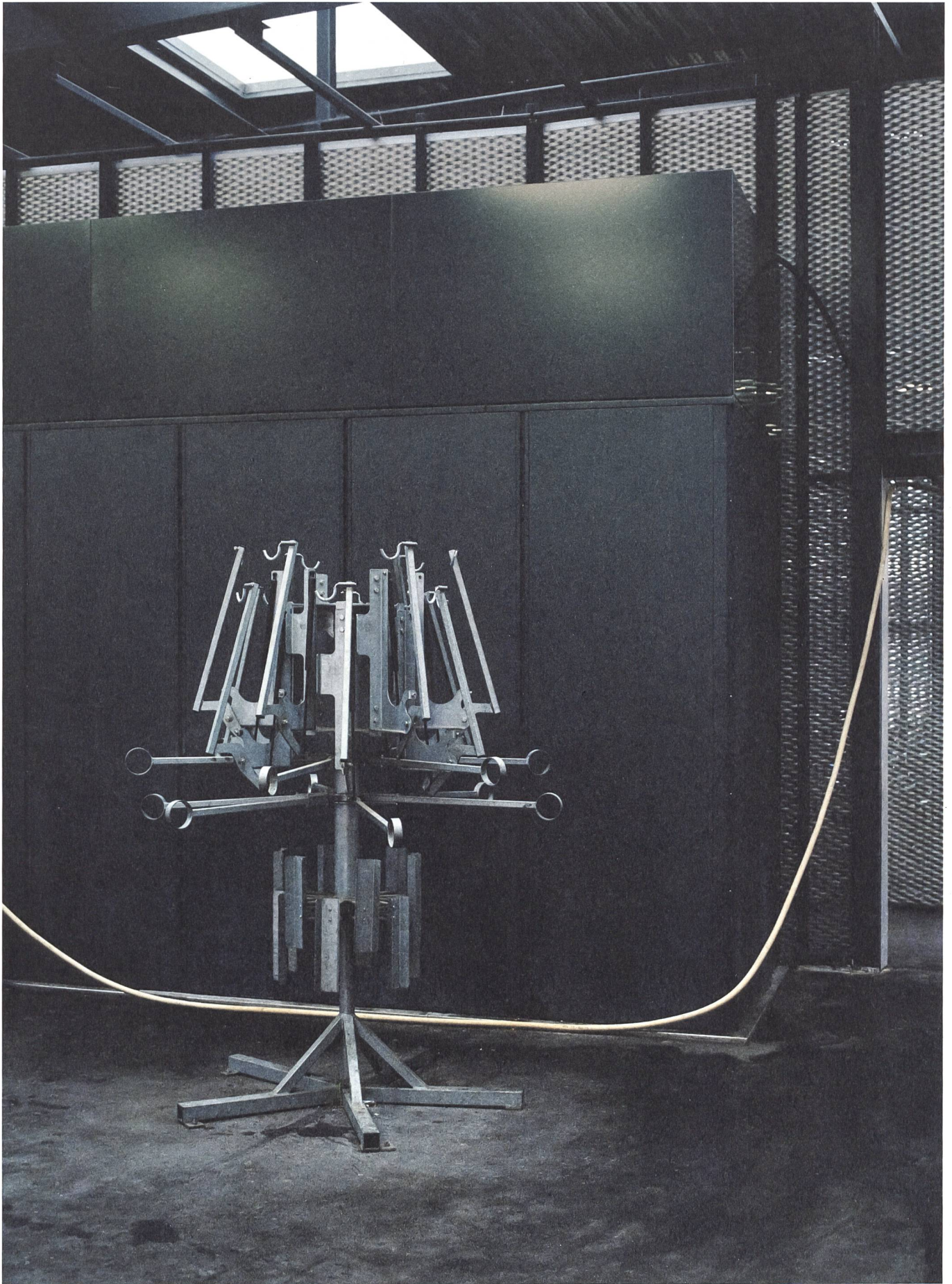
This is certainly true of photographers; during the fundamental act of composition, they decide through the process of inclusion and exclusion in a given frame what to say and what not, what to imply and suggest to the future observer.

As precise as words, the technical knowledge and creative intentions of the person behind the camera gradually start to construct an image. The particular moment of shooting a picture defines the beginning of a story that the photographer intends to tell in one way and that can be understood in another way by the observer. Of course, it can never show everything or tell the whole story; there is always more in an image than meets the eye.

Within this moment also lies a certain peril; the observer will only witness fragments without a general understanding of the context or the knowledge required to read the image. In that case, the deliberate absence of certain aspects or key elements that help its comprehension might have the power to generate what could be called the *alien*. Whether this exclusion concerns only certain details left out of the frame or the broader context of the image itself, the intentional omission of information necessary for the understanding of a scene or subject leaves the barthesian *Studium* clearly unsatisfied. In this instance, the content of the picture works on its own and leaves any background knowledge deliberately inaccessible.

Acting as a foreign language, the alien affects observers in the same way as an unknown alphabet affects readers; they might get glimpses of significance or admire its shape in a semiotic way, but the meaning remains hidden. To a certain extent, observers are thus forced to remain ignorant, like Plato's prisoners tied up in his allegory of the cave. In the case of an image, however, the observers may well be aware of their ignorance and the incomplete nature of what they are witnessing. For them it might be a purely aesthetic aspect that intuitively attracts them or it might be something that engages their memories and recollections. In that sense, an image has the potential to underline





Arnaud Bostelmann, Altstetten, 2018



a personal reading that they might not be able to explain. Is it not precisely this uncertainty about something we cannot understand or identify at a first glance the very thing that arouses our interest and, like a voluntary naivety, opens our minds and makes us capable of questioning a given condition?

Facing the choice of pursuit for comprehension, the observers might think that a revelation could endow them with an unbreakable knowledge that, once acquired, will allow them to gain a better understanding and access to the truth. This might be correct, but they will never be able to experience again the enigmatic attraction they once had, nor will they ever feel again the excitement that went along with the precise moment of revelation. They will have traded a timeless interest and curiosity for a brief moment of satisfaction.

The alien captures our attention within familiar patterns, inside the borders of a system made up of each individual's set of experiences and perceptions. Therefore, it is intimately linked to subjective knowledge in an *aut-aut*: the understanding of a context necessarily leads to the dissolution of a primal curiosity, of the atavistic fear and attraction of the mysteries that inhabit the unexplored realms outside our own experience.

Nevertheless, the inescapable desire to clarify the alien belongs to our nature. Words outside of the spoken language are not solely born from the need to keep written records of existing and certified data; with literature comes the longing to investigate and transform the unknown into words through the creation of stories. From this perspective, the alien guides the writer's hand as well as the photographer's eye. This kind of narration would not provoke our minds without it as an unexpected vector for the conflicts and disruptions of an apparent order.

Once accepted, the alien will act as a liberating moment, freed from the heavy weight of necessary search for meaning. Perhaps what one might need would be the strength and resistance to remain in this thrilling uncertainty rather than venturing into an implacable resolution, as appealing or comfortable as it might be, for the alien remains a feeble conception, fragile as an eggshell surrounding the image or the text, and its revelation is permanent and irremediable.

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Arnaud Bostelmann, born 1990, studied architecture at the ETH Zurich, EPF Lausanne and RWTH Aachen University. He has worked for various architecture and photography offices in Switzerland and France on a series of projects, competitions, designs and publications. After graduating in 2018 he joined the chair of Prof. Alexandre Theriot at ETH Zurich as a teaching assistant, in parallel with his work as an architect in Zurich.

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Francesco Paleari, born 1992, is a visual author based in Milan. He graduated in Communication Design at the Politecnico di Milano and received his Master's degree in Photography at the luav. He worked as an assistant for Bas Princen in Zurich and Rotterdam and currently collaborates with several photographers as a consultant for post-production. Since 2019 he has been teaching a class for the Master in Photography at the luav University of Venice. He co-founded Brace Brace, a project space for exhibitions and a collaborative research studio for contemporary art as well as Altana, a collective aimed at joining forces for the self-production and publication of photography projects.