

Zu XIV. ROSE (*Rosa damascena*)

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XIV. ROSE (*Rosa damascena*) is not just a rose, not just a pre-text, nor is it just a photographic image of a rose. It is not just a keepsake from a funeral wreath either. It is not even just a picture of nothing, not just a photographic text in itself. Looking at the last picture from *ADSV MVS ABSVMVS, in memory of Hollis William Frampton, Sr. 1913–1980, abest* goes beyond all of these different ways of seeing this particular photograph, of seeing images in general. It is an investigation into what might be the structure of photography. As spectators we seem to be guided into his research through the elements Hollis Frampton includes: words and images. The words expose us directly to abstract and theoretical thoughts about photography, allowing them to be experienced in the photographic images, which can be seen as photographic assimilations. It is exactly in this demanding way, going from the textual theory to the visual practice, that XIV. ROSE (*Rosa damascena*) will be approached in the following text.

Ways of seeing

The starting point for reflecting on this photograph, paradoxically, does not begin by looking at it in itself. That is to say that prior to XIV. ROSE (*Rosa damascena*) there are already two ›non-images‹ which demand our attention: the title of the series and its introduction text. These two text-components seem to function as a kind of guide in the way the rest of the series must be approached. Of great importance, however, is that these two text-components are being acknowledged as part of the whole series, not just as a ›warm-up‹. Their function goes beyond trying to generate certain understandings on the topic, they are part of the topic itself. Each part of the

series is a »natural-language artefact«,¹ including words and images which are doubly identified: once with itself, once with that which it references.² They are saying something and they are some thing. In these two text-components we establish a theoretical framework for approaching Frampton's work; but there is also a third text-component, the long subtitle of the image, the caption. The caption functions differently because, like the image, it relies on this theoretical framework. These four elements, the title, the introduction text, the caption and the image itself have to be constantly analysed in separate parts and also as a whole to serve as a guide into Frampton's research.

ADSVMVS ABSVMVS, in memory of Hollis William Frampton, Sr. 1913–1980, abest. These word-combinations imply presence, absence, memory, death. These four experiences offer four ways of approaching any single photograph, four words which describe what the essence of photography may be. The introduction text emphasizes the oscillation between what Frampton calls »the pretext« and »the photographic text«. He suggests that when observing a photograph, one has to always go back in time to see its object(s) in the world, whose »likeness« has been conserved in the act of making the photograph. From that point, one has to go forward in time to the presence, seeing the photograph itself, the »photographic text«. This »oscillation« of attention is described by Frampton as a paradox wherein there is a constant play of the presence and absence of the »pretext« and »photographic text« where each is »the sign of the perfective absence of the other.« This way of seeing photography faces the problem of the »economy of the intellect«, and that of time, which he calls »our supreme fiction.« The economy of the intellect causes the brain to choose only one way of seeing at a time, there is simply no room for these two texts to exist simultaneously when looking at a photograph. According to Frampton, our Western concept of time »parses sets of spaces in favor of successiveness«, hence thinking in different sets of time seems impossible.

The oscillation between these two texts seems to be blocked and the thinking of photography remains stuck in either one of the two concepts: in the »pretext« or in the »photographic text«. By offering these understandings of photography, the introduction text pro-

vides us with the grammar needed to talk about the medium itself. Furthermore, it lets us realise that the image has a grammar of its own, which can be revealed by and expanded upon with written language. For Frampton, this combination of image and the systems of words (text), is where the »germ of consciousness« is embedded: »Eventually, we may come to visualize an intellectual space in which the systems of words and images will both, as Jonas Mekas once said of semiology, seem like half of something, a universe in which image and word, each resolving the contradiction inherent in the other, will constitute the system of consciousness.«³

Fictions to see

Let us not forget about the pictures themselves. The way they are constructed and applied are of great interest. Hollis Frampton already wrote about digging deeper into the structure of photography in the work of American photographer Edward Weston (1886–1958). In Frampton's opinion Weston's photography focused on the »photographic text«, rather than the »pretext«.⁴ The pretext became completely absent and an annihilation of time was applied. Two concepts at the heart of photography disappeared. Frampton noticed that »we must also remember that there may be strategies more elegant and powerful for accomplishing the same end that are simply and permanently rendered inaccessible by Weston's a priori refusal to manipulate [...] Such strategies, however, are not to be discovered [...] They must be invented. Some have reasoned that they are all of invention.«⁵

This is where the metahistorian Hollis Frampton comes along.⁶ The photograph must be seen as a fiction for the sake of being able to talk about the structure of the medium. The fiction, which generates insights into the formal significance of its pretext (that is history),⁷ has the photograph as its pretext. It transcends this pretext, however, to talk about the identity of the photograph itself. Every single aspect of this rose shows that it is a construction, a manipulation, a fiction. This rose then exposes its identity as a pretext and as a photographic text and as an object that is filled with time. It is a

fiction that applies the language and grammar of photography from Frampton's point of view. In this way the four ideas, extracted from the title of the series, can be seen and read in XIV. ROSE.

A photographic assimilation

The plant is shown in front of a black background. The contrast of this dark colour and the bright colours of the plant strengthen the outlines and make the object visible and clear. The rose seems to be without context, there is nothing to see but the rose. The result of the drying-process, which is understood to be a manipulation by Frampton, brings us further into the picture. The big flattened mass of petals at the top shows all different kinds of red, their colourfulness contrasting with the pale layers of leaves. From the bottom to the top, the plant appears elevated, expressive, and squeezed down. XIV. ROSE guides the onlooker from its surface to its depth, from the rose to the photo of a rose, and back. The oscillation between the pretext and the photographic text is experienced and its paradox unfolds. All of this is possible through the use of time, which is noticeable in the condition of the rose: it is dried. The rose is dying, it is dying in the process of photography, it is dying through its conservation. The caption together with the image offers the spectator awareness of a fourth aspect given by the title: memory. The captions and the objects represented in the series seem rather trivial, however it is important to remember that the author is a collector choosing these particular words and images, since for him »every photograph is potentially a keepsake.«⁸ Remarkable are the silver dots on each of the leaves. It can be assumed that they are pin needles holding the leaves in place. This manipulation is a reminder that a construction is being faced, making us aware that this is not just a trace found in nature like a fossil. A fiction is presented, constructed with the grammar of photography. And only by being a fiction, the pretext of this fiction, the photograph, can be transcended and the reflection on its structure can begin.

Hollis Frampton does not strip this rose down to its »pretext«, nor to its »photographic text«. What he was aiming for in this pro-

ject was »to close the circle between these two sorts of likeness.«⁹ Instead of trying to parse photography into its different parts to reach an understanding of it, he assembles all the parts together in *ADSVMVVS ABSVMVS*. The combination of the title, the introduction text, the fictional image and the caption evoke »Circles of Confusion« wherein one has to constantly hop between the different specifications photography has to offer. It is because of this combination that a constant oscillation between »pretext« and »photographic text« can be experienced in XIV. ROSE. Frampton's photography initiates a circular structure of thinking, wherein one knows at least that one does not know. And let this just be the starting point of knowledge.

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- 1 Hollis Frampton: Impromptus on Edward Weston: Everything in Its Place (1977–78). In: Bruce Jenkins (Ed.): *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters. The Writings of Hollis Frampton*, Cambridge (Mass.)/London 2009, p. 69.
 - 2 »[...] because the photograph is, in fact, like language, doubly identified: once with itself, and once again with its referent [...].« *Ibid.*, p. 71.
 - 3 Hollis Frampton: OX HOUSE CAMEL RIVERMOUTH. A preface. In: *Circles of Confusion. Film, Photography, Video, Texts 1968–1980*, Rochester 1983, p. 9–10.
 - 4 Frampton, Impromptus on Edward Weston, p. 71.
 - 5 *Ibid.*, p. 72.
 - 6 Hollis Frampton: For a Metahistory of Film: Commonplace Notes and Hypotheses. In: *id.*: *Circles of Confusion*, p. 131–139.
 - 7 *Ibid.*, p. 131.
 - 8 Hollis Frampton: Proposal for *ADSVMVVS ABSVMVS* (1981). In: Jenkins, *The Writings of Hollis Frampton*, p. 105.
 - 9 *Ibid.*