

# HOLLIS FRAMPTON

## ADSVMVS, ABSVMVS

INTRODUCED BY HIS GALLERIST **STEVE PULIMOOD**

*A picture is no substitute for anything.  
Photographic control is total control.*

As fate had it, Hollis Frampton's life was cut short in 1984 just as the digital age shifted into high gear. It was the year of Orwellian doom and gloom, the year that Apple launched its first Mac. The public era of the Internet's big bang was still a decade away, and while most at that time were still in full denial of the coming obsolescence, others leapt freely toward the unfathomable new depths of the digital paradigm shift. And embrace technology he did. (His writings are littered with profundities such as "The photograph was doing to nonverbal thought what movable type had done for verbal thought ... and just as unexpectedly.")<sup>1</sup> Frampton explored the inner capacity of the photographic medium in his writings, and in his photography and filmmaking he found ways to test its outer limits. There is no person in the last quarter of the twentieth century, who, as both a writer and an artist (and a contributor to *Artforum* and *October*), speaks as poignantly about photography as Frampton does. He is the conduit of the greatest aesthetic schism of our times, both the ghost of our analog past, and the arbiter of our digital present.

"Photography was indeed conceived in the belly of the Muse, but later plucked from her ashes and nurtured in the thigh of Commerce."<sup>2</sup> He reveled in the ageless precocity of photography, the facts of its birth in the drawing rooms of waistcoated nineteenth-century tinkers, gentlemen, and scholars, and its ingenue-self that was picked up in the twentieth by an industrial revolution of the moving image. His contribution to the medium was to analyze its parts, writing about his heroes like Edward Muybridge, whose eleven folio volumes of *Animal Locomotion*, he described "constitute a unique monument that is clearly the work of a man obsessed"<sup>3</sup>, while pontificating on the beauty of both human and photographic reproduction: "Between birth and death, leaving aside the automatic transactions of metabolism, most animals engage in only one pursuit: the more or less intricate and constant exercise of sexuality ... which I understand to be a remarkably elegant and economical method for assuring the physical species of virtual immortality by offering immediate rewards to the mortal participants."<sup>4</sup>

*ADSVMVS, ABSVMVS* (1982) was his swan song to photography, and his last great work, a dirge on the facticity of life. "The lost presence of the photographed thing, person, situation, is invoked through a mummified echo, reduced to a husk of the light that once revealed it." Shortly after its completion he was diagnosed with lung cancer. He anticipated the accelerationist tendencies of our time, and in *ADSVMVS, ABSVMVS* sought to slow down the photograph to its humble origins. It remains a classic late work, in the mood of Beethoven's brooding last sonatas, Goya's macabre black paintings, and Rothko's hallowed final canvases. In his writings and associated captions for the fourteen images that consist of the portfolio he at times takes the tone of a photographer-dandy who jests at the incidental banality of its subjects, from the lavish grotesquerie of roadkill to a rose preserved from his father's funeral. Yet the voice is unmistakably that of Hollis Frampton, the philosopher king of photography, for which no introduction can replace his introduction:

ADSVMVS, ABSVMVS

In memory of Hollis William Frampton , Sr.  
1913-1980  
*abest*

The author has come to suppose that he conserved the things represented herewith against the day when they were to be photographed, understanding them to harmonize with photographs then unmade according to a principle within the economy of the intellect. A photographic text and its proper pretext bear the following resemblance to one another: each is a sign of the perfective absence of the other.

In the unimaginable or ordinary case of their copresence, an object and its picture, contending for the center of the spectatorial arena, induce, out of mutual rejection, an oscillation of attention whose momentary frequency is the implicit *cantus firmus* of our thought. If we understand but poorly our own notion of likeness between paired entities, we understand even less the manner in which entities are like, or unlike, or may come to be like, or unlike, themselves. This indisposition depends from a temporary defect: that we have not yet evolved to comfort in the domain of time, our supreme fiction, that parses sets of spaces in favor of successiveness.

But before there were photographs, there are autographs, or happenstances whereunder bounded vacations of matter generate asexual artifacts, reproductions of themselves, necessarily incomplete: desiccations, fossils, memories, mummies, traces indistinguishable from residues. Appearances like these, found free in nature, command our attention, for the present to us, hovering at the margins of legibility, a collocation of failed instants when matter seems about to invent, in comparison and its precedent recollection, the germ of consciousness. Nature, or the customary behavior of matter, implies the photographic image at least as certainly as it implies ourselves. Accordingly, since they predate us, photographs may be treated scientifically.

Fourteen argued plates are appended. The author acknowledges that their identifications are as probabilistic as the captions of all photographs, thereby suggesting that taxonomy is an incomplete discipline.

Hollis Frampton, 1982