

Doublespeak

Laura Legge

Manuel Alvarez Bravo, conjurer of this image, was lifelong friends with my favourite poet, Octavio Paz. In a MoMA catalogue, Paz described his contemporary's photos as *realities in rotation*, highlighting, too, their quality of transience. Bravo was eight when the Mexican Revolution began, and it is said he used to come across bodies on his walks as a boy. Death is waiting in most of his photographs, though transmuted into various textiles, shadows, women, objects, interactions, mythoi.

Paz wrote often about death and its twins. In India he found Samsāra. In Paris he found Eros. In Bravo's work, he perhaps found another twin—the metaphors and mirages he often roused by way of language, the cares of his mystical, spiritual, emotional life, made legible by another man's camera.

"To love is to undress our names."¹ Of all the Paz lines that revisit me, this one knocks most often. And to Bravo's work it applies impeccably, because his titles are responsible in large part for his photos' alchemy. He was opposed to leaving his works untitled. Further, he maintained that an obscure title most "accurately defines the picture," and that by emboldening his audience to grasp for the meaning of a photograph, he was insisting they look into their own bends and deeps. Put another way, the images are the *rotations*. And the titles are the *realities*. Without the *realities*, the rotations lose much of their bearing.

And so Bravo made a practice of naming the things he saw. And he picked multilayered names, so that we would have to undress them. Which is an attentive, otherworldly act of love.

Or, as Paz framed it: Manuel photographs / that imperceptible crack / between the image and its name.²

Optical Parable. The Good Reputation, Sleeping. Somewhat Gay and Graceful. Fable of the Dog and the Cloud. The Black Grief.

And then this photograph of an eclipsed woman covering her head in dark cloth, looking into the top of a miniature, fantastical home that we cannot enter—this he called *Caja de visiones*. Box of Visions. We cannot see inside, and so we must follow his poetic direction and build the promised visions for ourselves. We must trust that they are inside our own little vision-boxes, atop our shoulders.

And maybe this is the only way artists can create a double of death: by finding the imperceptible crack between the image and its name.

1 Octavio Paz, *Sunstone*, trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions, 1991), line 365.

2 This is from the poem "Facing Time," dedicated to Bravo. Also translated by Eliot Weinberger.