

BICYCLE WHEELS, TOMATOES, AND CONDOMS

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To label something as "toxic" is to postulate its negativity. Recently, I heard someone speak of "toxic conceptualisms" to refer to deformations or mannerisms to which current art has supposedly accustomed us, alluding to the promiscuous coexistence of "bicycle wheels, tomatoes, and condoms." I confirmed that, like so many others, this person lacked the proper tools to analyze not only the relationship of objects they alluded to but also other more recognized ones, such as those between bicycle wheels and stools, or between balls of twine, metal plates, and screws—not to mention bottle racks or snow shovels.

Much has been said about the *readymades* created by Duchamp, which are pointed to when mentioning "bicycle wheels." Indeed, one cannot assume any innocence on the part of the enunciating subject of that unfortunate rhyme; therefore, in this attempt to provide an answer to their assertions, I will begin my analysis with the unavoidable Marcel Duchamp, who is not only the creator of the *readymade* but the most influential artist of the 20th century. Better said, I will focus neither on Duchamp nor on his objects, as I cannot add anything to the vast amount of theory already produced on the subject. I am more interested in pointing out that, so far, I have not found any analysis that risks a conjecture about how it was possible for these to have such a powerful effect on the history of the visual arts, even though a hundred years have passed since their appearance.

Nietzsche's radical philosophy, which sought to de-divinize the world, and the scientific progress of the late 19th and early 20th centuries had shaken the foundations of Western thought, challenging traditional truths and metaphysical beliefs. "The loss of belief in the existence of a God who is the ultimate judge, witness, and guarantor of truth," says Fernando Savater, "has led to a fragmentation of meaning and a crisis of authority in all areas of human life."¹

This crisis of meaning was the breeding ground for the emergence of the *readymade*. By displacing an ordinary object from its functional context and placing it in an artistic one, Duchamp was not only questioning the traditional definition of art but also the very nature of reality and our ability to know it. The bicycle wheel, the bottle rack, or the urinal were no longer objects of use but became objects of thought, "limit-objects" that forced the spectator to question their own certainties.

Thus, the artistic power of these objects does not lie in their aesthetic or formal qualities but in their ability to act as "epistemological obstacles," in their capacity to interrupt the flow of common

¹ *Apología de la incredulidad*. Interview by Ivana Costa with Fernando Savater. 04.14.2007. Revista Ñ. Page 8.

sense and open a space for reflection and doubt. The "toxic" nature that some attribute to contemporary art is, in reality, its greatest virtue: its ability to challenge the established order and force us to think the world in a different way.

In this sense, it is worth clarifying that the artistic power lies in what the work "makes us say," not in its strictly formal qualities nor in the more or less virtuous ways in which these have been approached; and, as is known, thousands of voices have debated those very "unfriendly" works.

The secret of the misunderstanding surrounding Duchampian *readymades* and their trail in subsequent conceptual art lies in the failure of the Nietzschean attempt on God which, while demonstrating how necessary He has been and is for human life, it is no less true that current art has managed very well without Him. Like the beauty we Platonically associate with truth and goodness (virtue, in short), God is not a particularly relevant value in contemporary artistic practices. But I am optimistic, as I belong to the small group of art lovers who believe that beauty is possible without mimesis, that is, even without allusion to the excellent, transcendent, universal, sublime, necessary, or perennial, and I take responsibility for the displacement of the aura, which no longer dwells in the object. In any case, what must be clear to those who face the apparent toxicity of bicycle wheels, tomatoes, and condoms, or much better yet, that of bicycle wheels mounted on wooden stools, is that it is useless to approach new problems with definitively outdated tools.