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ART IS WHAT YOU CALL IT

By CALVIN TOMKINS; CALVIN TOMKINS, A STAFF WRITER FOR THE NEW YORKER, IS THE AUTHOR OF "THE WORLD OF MARCEL DUCHAMP."

WHY DUCHAMP An Essay on Aesthetic Impact. By Gianfranco Baruchello and Henry Martin. Illustrated. 158 pp. New Paltz, N.Y.: Documentext/McPherson & Company. Cloth, \$20. Paper, \$10. GIANFRANCO BARUCHELLO, an Italian artist whose real gift may be for conversation, has talked another book into print. Like "How to Imagine," a book by Mr. Baruchello published last year - a stream of ideas, verbal images and mental fireworks on dozens of loosely related subjects, from sugar beets to death and the soul - "Why Duchamp" has been distilled and edited by Mr. Baruchello's friend Henry Martin from many hours of taped Baruchello monologues. "Why Duchamp," however, has only one subject - how to make use of the life and works of Marcel Duchamp.

The book requires of its readers a certain familiarity with that life and those works, and with the spirit of total iconoclasm that lay behind them. Fair enough. Interest in Duchamp is as lively today as it was when he died, in 1968, and his influence, which still functions mostly in opposition to the prevailing esthetic winds, may even be greater. Duchamp set out early in his long career to create an alternative to what he called "retinal" art - art whose appeal was purely visual. He wanted "to put painting once again at the service of the mind," as he said, and it is this alternative that continues to fascinate certain artists.

Mr. Baruchello, a painter, film maker and performance artist, attributes to Duchamp's influence his own recent experiment in running a farm "as a work of art" (one of the main themes of "How to Imagine"). Anything could be a work of art, as Duchamp had proved early in the century with his famous "ready-mades" - ordinary manufactured objects promoted to the status of works of art by the mere fact that an artist had chosen them. The trick was all in the mental adventure, the new thought set free; for example, by hanging a snow shovel from the ceiling and calling it "In Advance of the Broken Arm."

Mr. Baruchello knew Duchamp, and it is easy to see why they became friends. The mind that emerges from these pages is playful, allusive, witty, surprising, unpretentious and iconoclastic. It rejects the myth of "Superduchamp," the godlike figure who never erred. Mr. Baruchello even suggests that "Etants Donnes," Duchamp's last work, which occupies a room to itself in the Philadelphia Museum of Art and about which a truly vast amount of twaddle has been written, is something of a disappointment. Spurning critical exegesis, Mr. Baruchello keeps the focus on Duchamp as an object of use. And how does one use him today? Primarily, it appears, as a giver of permission. "Duchamp gives authorization to do whatever you want, anything at all, just so long as you really like it, just so long as it really makes sense to you," he says. Mr. Baruchello himself has used him as "a stimulus for undertaking similar adventures" - Duchampian adventures of the mind, such as becoming a farmer and thinking of it as an esthetic experiment. If you accept the challenge of Duchamp, Mr. Baruchello says, "his lesson is always something that you end up by inventing for yourself."

Although Duchamp was a person of great simplicity, there was nothing simple-minded about him. Beneath the levity, the lightness of spirit that made him such a joy to be around, a serious exploration was always in progress. The goal, however, was never merely esthetic. Duchamp believed that life was more important than art, and his own life, according to everyone who knew him, was a marvelously free and happy adventure. He also managed to produce a few surpassingly important works of art - something that the artists who have used him as a permission giver rarely seem able to do. One of the implications of this scintillating book is that, unless you are as intelligent as Duchamp, you had better not expect to have it both ways.