

Weak in review

Nessitivity: The Suffix Glut

By Arthur Kunst
Printing Press
257 pp., \$19.95

By Ed Rifferey Jr.

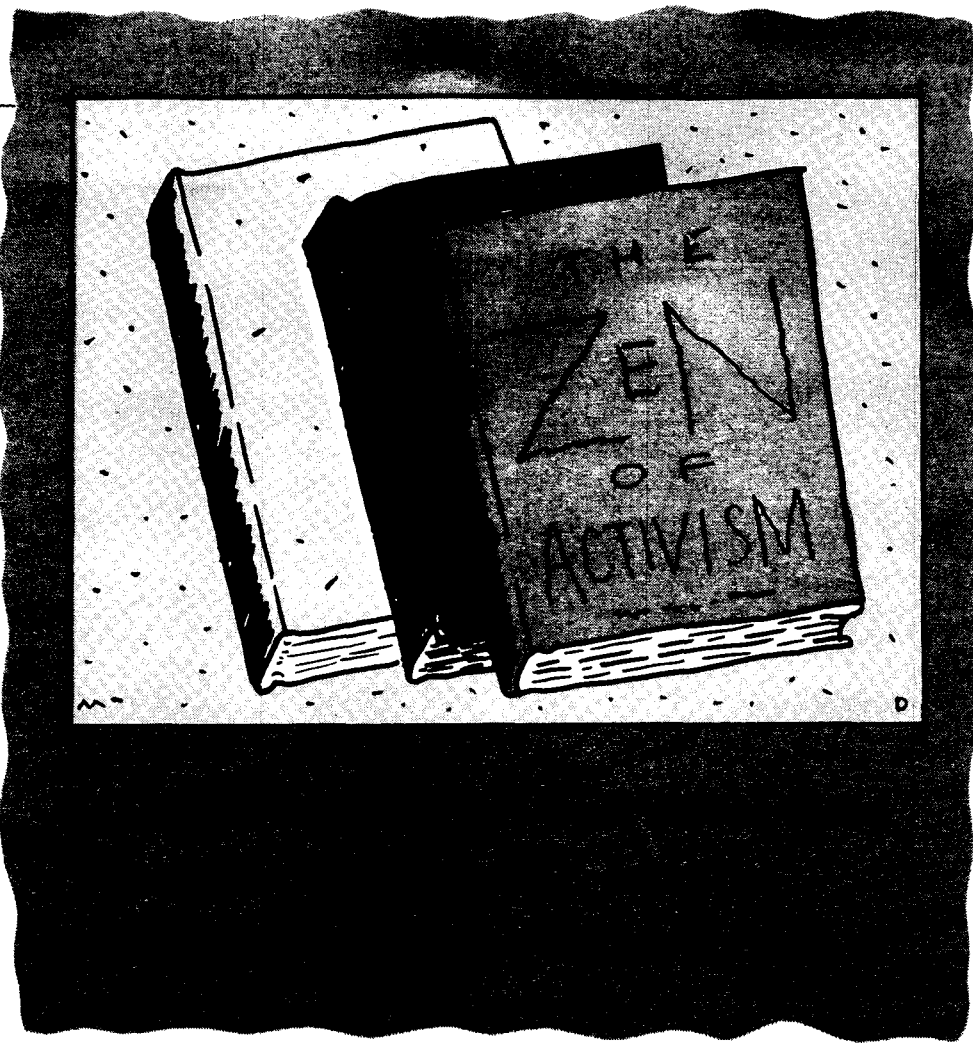
Arty Kunst's career has been nothing if not controversial. As chairman of the department of study studies at Der Schule University, he has become a magnet for polemicists of various stripes. Kunst's critical strategy has been that of an academic amoeba: assimilating and devouring all he touches, using the energy of other, often hostile, theorists to power his own polemics. For instance, in response to the accusation that his paper, *Against "Against Interpretation,"* was "mere bull-shitting," Kunst wholeheartedly agreed, but said that he preferred to call it "com-post-modernism."

This new collection finds "Scat Man" Kunst shoveling his fertile insights as furiously and provocatively as ever. The title essay, "Nessitivity: The Suffix Glut," has been alternately hailed as an important monograph and flailed as an impotent monolith. Just as divisive in lit-crit circles (or spirals) is his "Knocks on Jacques: Deriding Derrida," in which he spins deconstructivism off into an infinite regress: "If a deconstruction is needed to 'read' any text, then that deconstruction requires a meta-deconstruction to understand it as a text—it sounds more like an M.C. Escher parody than a trenchant literary strategy, but go figure."

Typical of Kunst's playfulness is the aforementioned *Against "Against Interpretation"*—a collage of seemingly random ricochets through a book of Susan Sontag's essays. Kunst's technique here is merely to carve out the most flaccid slabs of Sontag's prose and butt them together with ellipses: "...[I]f form may be understood as a certain kind of content, it is equally true (and perhaps more important to ... have a chunk of that endless labor of self-explication and self-vindication ... and not to be caviled at, is his evident belief..."

Kunst—as he related in his PBS interview performance with Dick "I Knew Groucho" Cavett—was attempting to show how the negative space between Sontag's insights had an internal logic that would come to the fore in an aleatory context. Obviously, interruption is a key motif for Kunst—witness the dangling parenthesis, stuttered (and studied) ambiguity, relentless ellipses. Indeed, he leaves more things up in the air than Dow Chemical. As he pointed out to Cavett, their whole conversation was an interruption of sorts: because they were on public TV they could interrupt the usual pattern of interruption, i.e., commercials.

As the double-negative title of this game of Sontag implies, cancellation is also a favored strategy of Kunst's (ironically, Cavett was canceled shortly after the Kunst segment aired). Clearly, Kunst's tortured rationalizations are as full of post-structuralist neo-logisms (neo-log-jams?) and theoretical cul de sacs as those he ridicules, but he's nonetheless



become something of a "Teflon intellectual" with an endearing anecdotal style that lets him sidestep questions that would kneecap any other scholar.

A case in point: when asked at a recent symposium about the meaning of post-modernism, he replied,

"What kind of person would spend his time trying to answer that question? Well, I'll tell you. The kind of a person who, as a kid, fished with a cheap spin-casting rod (a Zebco 202) that was constantly snarled with backlash from always trying to cast too far out. The kind of person who spent countless hunchback hours on docks and in rowboats trying to uncoil these knots, until a perverse enjoyment developed in the (Gordian) unraveling. The kind of person who was overcome with awe by contemplating that such an amazing tangle had emerged (evolved?) from a single line. The kind of person who after a while asked if he could try to straighten out the reels of others (and perhaps their realities as well). The kind of person who lost sight of the lake—metaphorically at first, and then literally—until finally he repaired to his parents' knotty-pine-paneled basement enraptured by the slow-mo rococo explosion of rainbow-striped monofilament line.... It's been a long time since I've been fishing."

This non-answer/answer is a typically Kunstian gesture of allegorical self-annihilation. The opening gambit—rewrite the question to suit your purposes—is page one from the playbook of the quintessential proto-post-structuralist statesman Richard M. Nixon. After that it's equal parts Tom Snyder self-interview narcissism and Ronald Reagan loopy lyricism. And when Kunst pulls the story's string with that last line, you see the price paid for epiphany.

One is tempted to try to lure Kunst from his lair with a siren song from the Ramones ("Hey daddy-o, I don't wanna

go, down in the basement, there's something down there, I don't wanna go, Hey Romeo, there's something down there").

On second thought, who better to send into the suburban basement of our souls, fishing for postmodernism, than Arty Kunst. There amid the collectible debris of obsolete home entertainment centers, worn-out easy chairs and forgotten memorabilia we can almost hear him shout, "Eureka!" But then again, that might just be him tripping on the cord of the old vacuum. ■

The Zen of Activism

By Vishnu Feinberg
South Shambhala Press
121 pp., \$3.95

By Bo DiSadva

Time magazine called him "an enigma wrapped in a riddle wrapped in a mystery—wrapped in a Ralph Lauren suit." *Newsweek* said the same thing as *Time*, only it was an Yves Saint Laurent suit. *Spy* magazine called him "a Joe-College Werner Erhard, but even more of a weenie, I mean, ick."

Vishnu Feinberg, the object of all this hyperbolic invective, bills himself simply as, "an imperfect master for an imperfect world." But whatever his flaws, this Brooklyn-born college dropout has hustled himself to the top of the paperback bestseller list with his instant-karma classic, *The Zen of Activism*.

The book is built around a series of nouvelle-Zen riddles, or "Koans" (Feinberg calls them "Cohens"). Some examples: "What is the sound of one knee jerking? ...What if they gave a demonstration and no one came? ...Why do I have to repay my student loan when my older brother didn't?" Although these riddles remain in essence unanswerable, Feinberg follows each one with what has become his trade-

mark tag line: "Yo, am I a guru, or what?"

I cast my ballot for "or what," but Feinberg does have his moments of lucidity, as in this timeless conundrum of campus life: "Why do the rugged-individualist entrepreneurs of tomorrow band together on campus in fun-seeking fraternities and sororities, while many campus radicals—ostensibly organized to promote social unity and understanding—tend to be lone-wolf losers and anti-social jerks?" ■

The Socialist Register

(2nd, Revised Edition)
By Irving J. Minutiae
University Press
117 pp., \$39.95

By Pinky LaRouge

While essentially a rehash of Professor Minutiae's groundbreaking work *Late Capitalism, Early Retirement* (which he also regurgitated as *Assays and Essays: The Deconstructivist Strategy* and which was subsequently repackaged, revised and reprised by an opportunistic pulp publisher as *Hot to Trotsky*), this second edition of *The Socialist Register* does offer a new preface by an old friend of the author as well as an updated price.

Intellectual bulimia aside, however, the professor's thesis and methodology remain unique in a field long picked over by carrion-foul grad students circling in the publish-or-perish skies of academe. Minutiae examines how the families of wealthy socialists got their money and speculates (using an idiosyncratic Freudian-Marxist calculus) as to the various rifts and affinities between and among those loaded—and loaded with guilt.

He finds the socialist scions of timber barons, for instance, to be the stingiest supporters of lefty causes, a fact he attributes to the frontier mythology associated with logging (though he discredits other myths promulgated by male lumber heirs—to paraphrase Freud, sometimes a log is only a log). The descendants of real-estate speculators; conversely, tend to be relatively more forthcoming with politically correct contributions. (The professor's much-touted and oft-cited "gelt/guilt equation" is given full treatment here). The section describing the internecine hectoring of various Maoist stock-market millionaires and Stalinist shipping heirs debating which struggling left-wing publication isn't left-wing enough to get a donation this year is a tad overlong but has moments of comic-opera brilliance.

The author's list of disaffected DuPonts, recanted Rockefellers and the like will doubtless prove useful to novice snipers of granstmanship, but the old hands in the non-profit kiss-and-tell cartel already know who's a soft touch. Perhaps more interesting in the final analysis is Minutiae's ability to secure tenure with little more than the wisp of an idea and a wheelbarrow full of entrepreneurial chutzpah. ■