Surrealism as a Weapon GERRIT L. LANSING

Politics played an important role in the Surrealist movement from the outset. The artistic revolution called for in 1924 by André Breton in the *First Manifesto of Surrealism* was part of a more general program to liberate humankind from all forms of oppression: nationalism, militarism, colonialism, capitalism, bourgeois morality, and religion. As early as 1925 the French Surrealists associated themselves with the Communist Party, whose revolutionary ideals they shared. The Surrealists' involvement in politics grew in the early thirties, until their disillusionment with the Party's cultural policy and especially with the development of Stalinism in the second half of the decade led them to take their distance from direct political action.

It was also in the early thirties that Surrealism gained popularity in the United States. In 1931 and 1932 Everett ("Chick") Austin Jr., the director of the Wadsworth Atheneum, and the New York dealer Julien Levy devoted major exhibitions to it. Their presentations, however, ignored the political aspects of the movement, so that for Americans the relationship between Surrealism and politics became much more distant. One exception was represented by a group of artists later called Social Surrealists, who used Surrealist imagery and technique to address political and social issues. Active from the mid-thirties to the mid-forties, this loosely knit group included Peter Blume, O. Louis Guglielmi, James Guy, Walter Quirt, David Smith, and a few others. The ways in which they adapted Surrealism to their cause is the subject of this essay.

"The first condition for the liberation of mind is the liberation of man, and we can only expect that from the proletarian Revolution."[1] This statement by André Breton exposes the political commitment of the French Surrealists, whose magazine *La Revolution Surréaliste* was renamed *Le Surréalisme au service de la Revolution* in 1930 to further clarify their position. The artistic freedom that was central to their beliefs could only be fulfilled if man was liberated from social and political oppressions. Their commitment to freedom also meant that the Surrealists did not advocate one particular form of art. Indeed, they encouraged artists to explore new ways of expressing themselves freely through such methods as automatism. This attitude conflicted with that of the Communist Party, which rejected modernist experimentation as a bourgeois form of art and insisted that a revolutionary, proletarian art must rely on traditional, figurative modes of representation, of a kind better understood by the man on the street. As a result, while the Surrealists were politically active and believed in the role of art as an instrument of social change, their artistic production, with a few exceptions, did not directly reflect a specific political commitment.

In the America of the thirties, the economic crisis led many artists to become political activists. Like their European counterparts who were involved with the Communist Party, American artists joined left-wing organizations such as the John Reed Clubs (1929–35), the Artists' Union (1933–42), and the American Artists' Congress (1936–40). These associations encouraged them to take a stand in their art on important issues of the day: widespread unemployment, the aggressive reactionary response of