Art on the Political Front in America: From The Liberator to Art Front

Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt


Stable URL:  
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0004-3249%28199321%2952%3A1%3C72%3AAOTPFI%3E2.0.CO%3B2-C

*Art Journal* is currently published by College Art Association.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/caa.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
Art on the Political Front in America
From The Liberator to Art Front

Virginia Hagedorn Marquardt

Two major formulations of the relationship between art and society appeared in politically affiliated or aligned magazines in America from the early twenties to the late thirties. These formulations were "revolutionary art" and "proletarian art." Under these slogans, the issues of the social role of art and the formal characteristics and techniques appropriate for a politically activist art were raised. As radical artists in America became overtly pro-Communist during the early thirties, these slogans acquired more sectarian connotations. From the founding of the Liberator in 1918 to the last issue of Art Front in 1937, politically involved artists and writers debated the conflicting demands of technical and artistic merit versus political content, and the opposition between nationalistic American-scene art and propaganda art founded on Marxist-Leninist principles having international application.

After World War I, the Liberator (March 1918–October 1924) assumed the mantle of the Masses (1911–17), a politically conscious monthly that had served as an organ for liberals and socialists prior to the war. Politically, the Liberator aligned itself with labor, as editor Max Eastman stated in a full-page statement appearing in the first issue: the magazine "will fight in the struggle of labor . . . for the ownership and control of industry by workers . . . will present vivid and accurate news of the labor and socialist movements in all parts of the world." The magazine's sympathy for the Communist line was indicated by the third issue (May 1818) when Alexander Trachtenberg, a member of the American Communist Party, authored the column "International Labor and Socialist Notes." Other contributors expressed pro-Soviet sentiments; Floyd Dell, for example, in "Art under the Bolsheviks," commented that "any American composer or director who is worth his salt" would envy the enthusiasm and freedom for artists that prevailed in Russia. In addition, interest in the cultural life of Soviet Russia appeared on occasion, in articles on the "Moscow Art Theatre" (February 1923) and "The Socialist Theatre in Soviet Russia" (April 1923), both written by Alexander Chramoff.

Although the Liberator was clearly pro-Soviet, the magazine took a nonpolitical position on matters of art. It encouraged experimentation and freedom in art, addressing bourgeois artists working in modernist styles as well as artists seeking to develop an indigenous American art, which, in its implicitly unschooled and working-class origins, anticipated the concept of proletarian art. Eastman expressed the openness and nondoctrinaire position of the magazine in its first issue:

THE LIBERATOR will be distinguished by a complete freedom in art and poetry and fiction and criticism. It will be candid. It will be experimental. It will be hospitable to new thoughts and feelings. It will direct its attack against dogmas and rigidity of mind upon whatever side they are found.

The earliest suggestion of the concept of proletarian art appeared within the first year of publication. In his review of the work of Stuart Davis, which appeared in the August 1918 issue, Eastman associated experimentation and the rise of an American-scene art and propaganda art founded on Marxist-Leninist principles having international application.

THE LIBERATOR will be distinguished by a complete freedom in art and poetry and fiction and criticism. It will be candid. It will be experimental. It will be hospitable to new thoughts and feelings. It will direct its attack against dogmas and rigidity of mind upon whatever side they are found.

The earliest suggestion of the concept of proletarian art appeared within the first year of publication. In his review of the work of Stuart Davis, which appeared in the August 1918 issue, Eastman associated experimentation and the rise of a native art with the tradition of Walt Whitman, commenting that while the advent of a great American art and poetry "has not fully appeared, there has appeared a mood of reckless experimentation that holds abundant promise of it. And character indeed, rather than loveliness of line and color, is the principal theme and preoccupation of the experimenters."

Describing Davis as having "the character of an alley cat," Eastman wrote: "His art lives among the same squalid and strong-smelling and left-out objects, and it goes its sordid way with the suave dirty muscular self-adequate gracefulness of power." Similarly, Lydia Gibson wrote of Adolph Dehn's close identification with the subject matter of a lowly mother and child: "He is not outside his life; he is one with
these hills and one with this mutilated and defiant humanity which wells up so unquenchably in cellar cabarets. Both common, everyday subject matter and the untrained critic were given credence. In his reviews, Eastman presented himself as an uneducated commentator on art who nevertheless knew what he liked:

I write with a vast uneducation about these matters, but I love some of the paintings so much that even at the risk of offending the more eagle-eyed experts of art, I will make free to say from time to time what I think and feel about them.

Don Brown, in the same vein, wrote that the response of factory workers was “assuredly more sincere and probably more intelligent than that of the Metropolitan newspaper critics.” In these scattered statements are the basic tenets of proletarian art: the self-deprecating demeanor of the unschooled critic; the unsophisticated worker viewed as a genuine appreciator of art; and the elevation of direct, forthright character as the fundamental criterion of art. While these writers and artists alluded to proletarian art, Michael Gold (here using the pseudonym Irwin Granich) addressed the subject directly in “Towards Proletarian Art.” In this important essay, Gold, like Eastman, asserted that a distinctly American art would arise spontaneously in a Whitmanesque fashion from the working-class masses.

In addition to proletarian art, the idea of propaganda art was also introduced, albeit in a nonpartisan context, in the Liberators dual commitment to politics.

The nonpartisan tone of Robinson’s definition of propaganda art was more explicitly expressed by Don Brown, a cartoonist, who asserted that the very nature of creating works of art made the artist a rebel:

Every creative artist is a rebel, a revolutionist. Whether he is in conscious alliance with a revolutionary group or not, he is still a rebel, a creator of new forms, a foe of stale conventions, an exponent of Conception as opposed to Representation. He knows that a work of art does not have to be about anything, that it is something.

Although issues of proletarian art and propaganda art were discussed or alluded to in the Liberators visual imagery of the magazine included all formal and thematic directions. Most of the illustrative material consisted of drawings and cartoons, principally by Cornelia Barns, Maurice Becker, Brown, Davis, Fred Ellis, Wanda Gag, Hugo Gelbert, William Gropper, Louis Ribak, Robinson, and Otto Soglow. The tone of these works was mildly critical or satirical, as indicated by the titles; for example, Bolshevism in Bohemia by Davis (fig. 1) and Work like Hell and Be Happy by Gropper (fig. 2). Less frequent were figural compositions by Dehn, Gelbert, Gibson, Reginald Marsh, Robinson, and Frank Waltz; views of factory buildings by Dehn; cubistically rendered cityscapes by Louis Lozowick and Niles Spencer; and primitivistic woodcuts by J. J. Lankes. In a typically satirical approach to social commentary, Gag’s cover for the October 1924 issue depicted autumn’s leaves of red and green; each leaf was identified as a country characterized by red (Bolshevik) or green (capitalist).

Reflecting the Liberators dual commitment to politics.
favoring workers and to art, the magazine was reorganized in May 1923. Robert Minor, a political cartoonist for Communist publications, was named editor; Joseph Freeman, a writer with pro-Communist leanings, became managing editor; and two associate editorial boards—political associate editors and art associate editors—of nearly equal numbers, along with a board of contributing editors of artists and writers, were formed. The board of art associate editors included the writers Dell, Arturo Giovannitti, Gold, and Claude McKay and the artists Robinson, Gropper, Gibson, Gellert, Walts, and Brown. Artists on the contributing editorial board included Barns, Becker, Lankes, Maurice Sterne, and Art Young. Although the two associate editorial boards reflected the dual focus of the magazine, more often than not staff members—most notably Gold, Gropper, Gellert, and Young—were pro-Communist, thereby establishing a common, politically radical ground among staff members.

During the early twenties, the Liberator was not the only politically aligned magazine that dealt with artistic matters. The Young Worker (February 1922–April 28, 1936) and the Labor Herald (March 1922–October 1924) were two publications that also addressed workers. Described as “A Magazine for the Militant Young Workers of America,” the Young Worker discussed proletarian culture occasionally. In an oblique allusion to workers’ art, the editorial of March–April 1922 contained the statement, “Cartoons by its own members will also appear regularly.” By December 1923, the magazine’s readers, presumably workers, were encouraged to send in news reports and write stories of “work-life.” Arguing that teaching culture was irrelevant to the immediate goal of developing class-consciousness and the overthrow of capitalism, Martin Abern asserted that “only when there is economic freedom of opportunity can there be real freedom of thought and research, the realization of the impulse to create without the fetters and restrictions of capitalism,” and warned: “Let us not any longer be ensnared by the siren songs of ‘culture,’ ‘broadmindedness,’ ‘art for art’s sake.’ There is only one culture—the proletarian culture, the culture of the Free Man.” Virgil Geddes wrote of the need for poetry that was “dictated by an unrestrained impulse. . . A poetry that is born out of the despair of our smoky and grimy existence, yet the ardour [sic] of which helps us to rise and escape momentarily from our predicament.” This was not to be an escapist poetry, but verse with “purpose . . . sufficiently intentional . . . inspired as to be encouragement to surmount our present conditions by the vision of a new order.” Of the “tragedy of existence” in America would come “a literature with a social meaning, and with a definite force as a factor in disruption.” Here, as in the discussion of proletarian art in the Liberator, the author stressed the brute reality embedded in a forthright (i.e., unschooled) style, what Eastman called the “character” of proletarian art. The statement that proletarian art would be “a definite force as a factor in disruption” anticipated the agitational, propagandist role of revolutionary art during the early thirties. Reflecting these suggestions of proletarian and propagandist art, the pictorial material in the Young Worker included social content drawings and cartoons of “Capitalism” and “Labor” by such frequent contributors as Gropper, Minor, J. Stokes, and Young. While these contributors were professional artists, they strongly identified with workers.

Unlike the Young Worker, the Labor Herald was a short-lived publication that had minimal impact on the development of proletarian art. Visual material was limited to the cover, which usually featured a cartoon by Ellis. Ellis captured the publication’s sympathy for Soviet Russia in his drawing for the October 1924 issue, which depicts a striding worker with the hammer and sickle tattooed on his arm (fig. 3). Sharing a proletarian bias and an alignment with Soviet Russia, the Labor Herald joined with the Liberator and a third
magazine, *Soviet Russia Pictorial* (June 7, 1919–October 1924), to form the *Workers Monthly* in November 1924. Published by the Daily Worker Publishing Company, the *Workers Monthly* (November 1924–February 1927) was the official organ of the Trade Union Educational League, which had formerly published the *Labor Herald*, and of the Workers Party of America [i.e., the Communist Party] and was edited by Earl R. Browder. The associate editors of the *Liberator* continued as staff members of the *Workers Monthly*.

The new publication sought to continue "the traditions of revolutionary art and politics established by THE LIBERATOR" and to publish "the productions of the best revolutionary artists . . . [and] the current writings of the outstanding writers of the Communist International and the Red International of Labor Unions."17 The decidedly sectarian focus of the *Workers Monthly* represented a significant departure from the nonpartisan *Liberator*. Art was now called "revolutionary art," not "proletarian art." The monthly included drawings and cartoons by Hay Bales, Becker, Dehn, Ellis, Gropper, Minor, Juanita Preval, and Young. Its political bias was evident even in a review of Lozowick's book *Modern Russian Art* (1925). The reviewer stated that "the Russian Revolution was like the onrush of a mighty wave leaving in its wake an infinite number of ripples. Modern art is one of these ripples."18 On another occasion, the *Workers Monthly* paid tribute to the artists Ellis, Bales, Gibson, Minor, and others of the *Daily Worker* for demonstrating that "among the ranks of the proletariat is all of the genius that is needed to make the revolutionary press."19 The *Workers Monthly* implicitly supported Lenin's view that there should be "no more 'non-party' writers."20 Such a position foreshadowed the re-forming of the journal in March 1927 into *The Communist: A Magazine of the Theory and Practice of Marxism-Leninism*, published by the Workers (Communist) Party of America, a change that had presumably been the goal of the *Workers Monthly* from its founding. By 1926 political theory and application had become the dominant emphasis of the publication, eclipsing the liberal heritage of the *Liberator*, with its commitment to art and literature that addressed workers and to the development of a native American culture.

Recognizing the need for a magazine that would continue the nonsectarian legacy of the *Liberator*, the former editors of the *Liberator* and the *Masses* founded *New Masses* in 1926. Like its predecessors, this monthly publication was aimed at liberals sympathetic to the plight of workers.21 From May 1926 to June 1928, *New Masses* (May 1926–January 12, 1948) attempted to combine its desire to create an artistic renaissance in America with its sympathy for workers, a union that was reflected in an editorial board that was nearly divided between former editors of the *Liberator* and the *Masses* and writers committed to the revival of American letters. In the "prospectus" of the proposed magazine, which was initially to be titled "Dynamo," the organizers set forth its many objectives:

*The publication will represent no special school of literature or art, and will welcome the expressions of all schools. . . . It will regularly interpret the activities of workers, farmers, strikers, etc., but in such a way as to bring out the general human and cultural significance of particular movements. For it believes that a deeply human interpretation of any event is better than propaganda. . . .

*It must strike its roots strongly into American reality. It must not be afraid of slang, moving picture [sic], radio, vaudeville, strikes, machinery or any other raw American facts. Its job will be to assimilate these facts of life into art and satire. It must maintain the highest standard of art and literature of which its editors are capable, but it must also be sympathetic to any crudeness which is the expression of something young, vital and as yet groping and undeveloped. . . . At least half of the pages will consist of pictures. These will be cartoons of our current political and social events, drawings of American life and also, though not ever predominantly, pictures that have no "journalistic" value but are based on the emotion of art."22

Gold, one of the six original editors, denied that "I, or anyone else, demands of young American writers that they take their 'spiritual' commands from Moscow" and stated that it was "not a magazine of Communism or Moscow, but a magazine of American experiment." He characterized *New Masses* as "the bridge" to the discovery of "the world of revolutionary labor."23 Initially, the illustrations were selected by the entire executive board, although Gellert, an ardent supporter of Russia, and John Sloan, a liberal sympathetic to workers, served as art editors.24

During the first two years, pictorial images in *New Masses* reflected its diverse goals. The magazine's proletarian orientation was set forth in Gellert's design for the cover of its first issue of May 1926; it showed the head of a miner printed in black, white, and red (fig. 4). Images of dishwashers, linemen, miners, construction workers, and pneumatic-drill workers—the last two quintessential images of American workers—appeared frequently in drawings by David Burliuk, Gan Kolski, Lozowick, Jan Matulka, Morris Pass, Ribak, Robinson, and William Siegel. These images depicted workers actively engaged with machines, as in J.
Social criticism was generally confined to satirical captions accompanying drawings and cartoons, such as the caption to Gropper's drawing of a group of socialite women hearing a report of their charitable works: “Ladies, it gives me great pleasure to announce that we have saved 5,000 starving children in the past year. And we hope there will be more next year” (July 1926: 14). Similarly, [sidore] Klein titled a drawing of an assembly line in a boiler factory Ballet Mécanique and added the caption, “This Antheil is a genius. Since introducing his theory of orchestration into the boiler factory, our profits have almost doubled” (May 1927: 24). Abstract and semiabstract compositions appeared regularly on the covers or as illustrations: cubistic cityscapes by Lozowick and Matulka; futuristic compositions by Abraham Walkowitz; and geometric designs and mechanical abstractions by Lozowick, such as his cover of the August 1928 issue (pl. 4, p. 12), which alluded to El Lissitzky's pronoun. Much as the Russian Constructivists prior to 1924, writers for New Masses spoke of abstract geometric art as revolutionary art and described Meyerholdian theater productions as “revolutionary both in theme and method.”

This liberal embrace of all formal presentation, from representational drawings and cartoons to abstraction and technical innovation, was set aside in June 1928, when the ideologically broad-based editorial board was replaced by Gold as editor in chief and Gellert, also a Communist, as art editor. As editor, Gold undertook a campaign to transform New Masses from a liberal bourgeois publication sympathetic to workers to a magazine produced for and by workers, while continuing to identify experimental art with political radicalism, as in his statement that “the style of Lenin is curiously the style of Ernest Hemingway and other young writers of today. It is the Communist style.” In furtherance of workers’ art, Gold initiated a series of biographical sketches of contributing writers and artists that stressed their working-class roots or jobs in marked contrast to earlier entries that had listed their professional activities and reputations. For example, Lozowick was identified as “worker, globe trotter, student and incidentally artist”;27 Anton Refregier as a textile worker, dishwasher, bakery worker, house painter, and “Jack of all Trades”; and Gellert as a ditch digger, mule skinner, cotton picker, and teacher.29 Gold set guidelines for the subject matter and form of the literary and illustrative material appearing in New Masses. He urged writers to report on working-class life and industry from firsthand experience—to become “industrial correspondents” —and proclaimed that “proletarian realism” was “never pointless”, that “it portrays the life of workers . . . with a clear revolutionary point.” Applied to illustrative material, such criteria resulted in an increased emphasis on the figure of the worker, who was shown in productive labor or in defiant revolt. Some illustrations arranged the worker with his tools and machinery in designs that suggested the Soviet emblem of hammer and sickle, as in Theodor Schoel’s cover for the January 1930 issue (fig. 6).
and new form in revolutionary art.” Despite the conflicting priorities of its directive, the IURW criticized New Masses at the end of 1931 for including illustrations that displayed insufficient militancy and a preoccupation with aesthetic innovation and formalism, citing as an example Lozowick’s subjects of factory and construction sites in which the figure of the worker was secondary to the compositional design elements. Reflecting the IURW endorsement of political content, New Masses adopted the slogan of “revolutionary art” and published drawings and cartoons that were more overtly socially critical and political in content, militant in tone, and supportive of the Soviet Union. Drawings by regular contributing artists, such as Ellis, Gellert, Gropper, and Scheel, depicted strikes, demonstrations, police brutality. In addition, Gropper drew maps that bitingly contrasted hungry, unemployed workers in capitalist countries (especially America) with well-fed, productive, happy workers in Soviet Russia. Even Lozowick departed from his usual design-oriented compositions of factories, construction sites, and workers to draw a full-page drawing for the back cover of the December 1931 issue that showed the Statue of Liberty turned away from a ship of deported immigrants; the base of the statue was inscribed with references to sites of notoriously brutal strikes and to arrested strikers (fig. 7). In 1933, New Masses, now explicitly sectarian in text and image, adopted a weekly format in which drawings and cartoons by radical artists were increasingly replaced by photographs of events relevant to the radical cause.

With New Masses an organ of Moscow during the thirties, Art Front (November 1934–November/December 1937) assumed the mantle of an activist, though nonsectarian, monthly. Initially the publication was the dual venture of the Artists’ Committee of Action and the Artists’ Union. By the April 1935 issue, however, it was designated as the “Official Publication of the Artists’ Union,” though the masthead continued to display the emblems of the two founding groups until January 1937. Art Front united artists of all political persuasions in an effort to secure federal government support for the arts. Its title alluded not only to the political front—namely, the Popular Front against fascism and war—but also to the frontiers of artistic expression. During its three years of publication, Art Front became the single most important forum for radical and nonradical artists to air their views concerning the appropriate social function of art, to review and address new art movements, and to lobby for federal support. Though nonaligned, the magazine, especially during its first year of publication, was sympathetic to the radical heritage of the John Reed Club, which had been disbanded in 1934. Its ties to the radical movement were clear in its preference for socially critical art in opposition to artists who favored an American art that depicted indigenous subject matter and used a formal language devoid of foreign influence. In a series of vitriolic and impassioned exchanges from
FIG. 7 Louis Lozowick, back cover, New Masses (December 1931).
which Schapiro emphatically stated that issues of race and formal presentation, especially their appropriation of technical perspective on artistic matters was further indicated by its standing of the underlying conditions and forces that operated publication of Meyer Schapiro's address to the American Artists' Congress, "Race, Nationality and Art," a talk in which Schapiro emphatically stated that issues of race and nationality were erroneous in matters of art and that artists should oppose those who provoke racial and national antagonism.36

Art Front articles of 1935 and early 1936 promoted the Marxist-Leninist doctrine that the function of revolutionary art was to emphasize the class origins of social struggle and to show a "solution" to the problem, the latter requisite being rarely achieved. The work of the Spanish social-realist artist Luis Quintanilla received high praise from Davis, who found that Quintanilla integrated "the outward world with an inward comprehension and understanding of the forces at play in that world."37 Similarly, Paul Elliot described Quintanilla as a good example of a painter "effective as an agent of progress and sanity."38 Critics did not always agree on the success of revolutionary artists' political interpretation and formal presentation, especially their appropriation of techniques from past and modernist movements. In their reviews of the work of John Reed Club artists, Jacob Kainen and Margaret Duroc criticized revolutionary artists for either being too dependent upon borrowed styles or for inadequately analyzing or ambiguously presenting the subject.39 Jerome Klein warned against the extremes of transforming a scene to "pure ornamentation" or of being indirect or ambiguous in presenting it. He was particularly critical of Isaac, Moses, and Raphael Soyer, whom he described as having "taken a step to the left . . . they have looked out from the studio into the street, but they have not yet stepped down into it."40 In contrast, Clarence Weinstock praised Joe Jones for his use of line and organization to emphasize the meaning embedded in his subjects.41 Duroc faulted revolutionary artists for appropriating both High Renaissance and Surrealist styles in what she described as "tokens of sympathy" for the working class.42 In contrast, Weinstock found that Walter Quirt created a distinctly socialist content while including "suggestions" of Surrealism and the old "proverb idea" used by Bruegel.43 Though critics differed in their assessment of revolutionary art, Mary Randolph voiced American radicals' general antipathy toward Trotsky in her two-part article "Rivera's Monopoly," in which she accused Diego Rivera, a Trotsky supporter, of painting for tourists and the Mexican government, not for workers, and labeled him a counter-revolutionary.44

Abstraction was also debated at length, with writers revealing their respective forms of political activism. On the occasion of Fernand Léger's lecture "The New Realism," delivered at the Museum of Modern Art in 1935, Balcomb Greene and Weinstock wrote conflicting assessments of Léger's abstract idiom. Greene noted that Léger's work, like that of any specialist, "must often fall beyond the comprehension of most people" and argued that "the complete revolutionist," unlike the strictly political revolutionary, who, according to Greene, was incomplete, would welcome a new art that although rejecting literal representation integrated "intellectual and emotional habits toward clarity, conciseness, and precision."45 In contrast, Weinstock, arguing the social-realist position, dismissed Léger's work as demonstrating "a semi-idealistic relation to the visible world."46 He opposed two-dimensional abstract painting as lacking a structured and relevant meaning and thereby allowing for subjective interpretation.47 Davis countered Weinstock's argument with the assertion that the dialectical process required knowledge of the bourgeois tradition and abstraction. He suggested that the abstract artist might be best equipped to provide artistic expression to social problems because "he has already learned to abandon the ivory tower in his objective approach to materials."48 Phil Bard captured radicals' view of the whimsical subjective techniques of the abstract artist in a drawing depicting the abstract artist painting from the perch of a rocking horse that alluded to Don Quixote's tilting at windmills (fig. 8).

During 1936, Art Front underwent a transformation that reflected its role as a nonpartisan Popular Front publication. In March 1936, a newly constituted editorial board was announced: Joe Solman, an artist with expressionist tendencies, replaced Davis as editor in chief; new members included Harold Rosenberg, also an expressionist artist, Greene, an abstractionist, and James Yeagans, a black artist; continuing members were Joseph Gower, Murray Hantman, Kainen, and Weinstock. Long-time radicals Gelert, Harold Glitenkamp, and Max Spivak resigned from the board.

Art Front attempted to appeal to bourgeois artists by
allocating additional space to artistic issues and by adopting a less strident sectarian tone. In December 1935, an "Exhibition Section" was added as a regular column; and the topic of "revolutionary art" was discussed in broad, nonpartisan terms. In "Towards Revolutionary Art," Lozowick, a former John Reed Club member, expressed radicals' new tolerance of artists striving to develop a Marxist-Leninist basis for their art in his acknowledgment that revolutionary art was in its infancy and that painters of still lifes and landscapes could be considered revolutionary artists—a position that would have been considered counter-revolutionary by Lozowick and other John Reed Club radicals in the early thirties.49 Similarly, Rosenberg remarked in his review of an exhibition of Gropper's paintings that "everything of value in the art of painting is becoming the property of the revolutionary movement. It will soon be possible to speak of a revolutionary landscape, of a revolutionary still-life."50

Assessments of Surrealism as revolutionary art demonstrate a distinct shift from criticism to acceptance from 1935 to 1936. Writing in 1935 on the occasion of an exhibition of Salvador Dali's work, Davis, Weinstock, and Klein uniformly dismissed the idea that Surrealism was a revolutionary art form. Davis found that Dali's work "precludes any intention of change or movement";51 Weinstock described Dali's technique as anachronistic and his content romantic;52 and Klein claimed that Surrealists introduced "a set of new illusions in their flight from external reality into phantasy" and that the movement represented artists' struggle for freedom "symbolic of the needs of the great oppressed majority in capitalist society."53 By 1936, however, Surrealism was discussed more favorably. Grace Clements asserted that Surrealists' techniques of juxtaposition and associative ideas were based on the dialectical materialistic method of using modernist technique and past art to create new content.54 Similarly, Charmion Van Wiegand, in her review of the "Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, argued that Surrealism, in "contributing new discoveries of the inner life of fantasy by pictorializing the destructive and creative processes of the subconscious mind," offered techniques useful to the development of a new humanistic social art.55

The pictorial imagery of Art Front reflected the two
phases of the magazine. Stuart Davis’s cover of the May 1935 issue articulated Art Front’s initial view of the activist artist: paint tube, palette knife, pencil, saw, hammer, and T-square, symbolic of the traditional artistic media of painting, sculpture, and drawing, are crossed by a banner of artists’ demands (fig. 9). Issues of that year included political cartoons by Bard, Dehn, Boris Gorelick, Gropper, and Ben Shahn. A year later the May 1936 cover by Greene showed soldiers rendered as a simplified abstracted form (fig. 10). This shift from propagandist symbols to semi-abstraction indicates very clearly the more traditional artistic perspective of Art Front from 1936 on. Other covers included a primitivist woodcut (March 1937), a design of blue horses (April 1936), a sculpture entitled Homeless from the Federal Arts Project Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (September–October 1936), and a still-life object (November 1936).

Art Front was a forum for discussion of the many aesthetic and ideological positions concerning the relationship between art and society that coexisted in America in the mid-thirties. With its cessation in December 1937, Leftist publications of a more literary focus, principally the Partisan Review, continued the debate. By 1937, radicalism in America was in decline, in large part in response to artists’ improved economic circumstances under the Federal Arts Project but also in protest against Stalin’s purge of Bolshevists and his nonaggression pact with Hitler. Nevertheless, during the period between the world wars, artists, critics, and writers wrestled with the issues of proletarian art, propaganda art, and social-content art in the Liberator, New Masses, and Art Front, all of which served as important forums for the debate on the nature and form of socially relevant art in America.

Notes
6. Ibid.
17. Workers Monthly 4 (November 1924): [1].
24. Joseph Freeman, letter to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, February 5, 1926, American Fund for Public Service Records, reel 11, This procedure was confirmed by Isidore Klein in an interview with the author, July 6, 1979.
27. New Masses (June 1930): 22.
33. see “To All Revolutionary Artists of the World,” Literature of the World Revolution, special number; Second International Conference of Revolutionary Writers, 1931, [1].
42. Durce, “Critique from the Left,” 8.
43. C. W. [Clarence Weinstock], “Quart,” Art Front (April 1936): 13.

Virginia Hagedorn Marquardt is guest editor of this issue of Art Journal.