

Surrealist leader André Breton's archives up for auction

By Antoine Lerougetel
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On November 6 a small article in the French daily *Libération* announced that the contents of André Breton's small flat at 42 rue Fontaine where he lived from 1922 until his death, near Pigalle in Paris, would be sold at auction between the 1 and 18 April 2003.

Breton (1896-1966) is the historic leader of the revolutionary artistic movement surrealism which, launched in Paris in 1924, has influenced many spheres of creativity throughout the world. Poet, theorist of artistic creation, art critic and socialist, he participated in most of the advanced social and artistic movements of his time.

Yet how is it that this priceless record of twentieth century culture risks being broken up and dispersed without protest from the French intellectual milieu?

Libération reports: "His heirs, his wife Elisa then his daughter Aube, having kept in place, for 36 years and despite, we can imagine, very pressing approaches, the collection of pictures, books, photographs, objects belonging to Breton: all the philosophical clutter of a collector of curiosities of genius had remained there, in its authentic setting."

In the catalogue of CamelsCohen, organisers of the auction, which is taking place at the Hôtel Drouot-Richelieu, can be found works of Le Douanier Rousseau, Magritte, Picabia, Toyen, Miro, Arp, Tanguy, André Masson, Max Ernst—more than 400 pictures. Also 1,500 photographs, many original prints by Man Ray, Nadar, Denise Ballon, Bellmer, Boiffard and Claude Cahun. There are books signed for Breton by Leon Trotsky, Freud, Apollinaire and many others. There are cultural artifacts from aboriginal societies in the Americas and Oceania as well as the manuscripts of many of Breton's own writings. The sale is expected to fetch \$30-40 million.

The only major public exhibition of the surrealist

leader is "Breton's Wall", the wall behind his desk at 42 rue Fontaine, with shelves full of his *objets trouvés*, pictures, photographs, donated by his wife Elisa Breton Elléouet, and to be reconstructed at the Pompidou Centre art museum in Paris in lieu of death duties on Breton's estate. "Presented to the museum, this installation is due to take its place among the permanent collections, as death duties, as part of payment on Elisa Breton's estate" (*Le Monde*, 21 December 2002).

The auction catalogue posted on the Internet gives this account of the vain attempt to find a proper home for the collection:

"The association ACTUAL, founded by Jean Schuster in May 1982, had as its main aim to make a full inventory of the Surrealist archives throughout the world and to create in Paris a Documentation Centre on Surrealism, or, as José Pierre wanted, *The Ideal Palace of Surrealism*, open as fully as possible to all. This project was considered utopian by most observers. Cold shouldered by the main cultural institutions, deprived of subsidies, ACTUAL had to give up in December 1993, as it was only collecting sarcastic comments from its detractors. Nevertheless it was thanks to this association that there came out definitively, in the collection Archives of Surrealism, published by Gallimard, through the work of Marguerite Bonnet and Paule Thévenin, collections of documents essential to the internal history of the "movement".

"Unable to keep the whole of this legacy intact ... owing to the unsuccessful actions to try to create a surrealist foundation in Paris, Aube Breton and her daughter Oona have taken the decision to organise a public sale."

The almost total silence in the French media on this

event and the total disinterest within French intellectual circles is a testament to their sclerotic and complacent state and fundamental hostility to Breton's restless and permanent questioning of conformism and authority in artistic, social and political spheres, his refusal to accept what is. This reporter was unable to find any reference at all to the sale on the *Le Monde* web site until 21 December. On page 20 an article by Michèle Champenois expressed surprise that "the announcement of the dispersal by auction of the treasure of the rue Fontaine has for the moment provoked no polemic." A disingenuous remark since the editor of *Le Monde*, Edwy Plenel, claims a certain residual "Trotskyist culture" from his days in the Pabloite Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire in the '70s.

It is this layer which, with almost near unanimity, swung behind the pro-Chirac campaign between the first and second round of the presidential elections of April 2002.

Maurice Nadeau, for some time after the Second World War an active member of the surrealist movement alongside André Breton and at present director of the literary magazine *La Quinzaine littéraire*, waited until the December 16 issue to comment. His statement is buried in less than a column of his diary on page 27 and does not enjoy headline or even subheading status. Nadeau has contacts with the Parti des Travailleurs (Workers Party of Pierre Lambert), at whose meetings and in whose journals Breton intervened until the 1960s, when the party's predecessor, the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI), was still a member of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Breton defended Trotsky against his Stalinist, reformist and bourgeois detractors till the day he died.

When the WSWS contacted Nadeau, he said he had nothing to add to his words in his magazine. These are full of resignation, have none of his former collaborator's combativity and give a flavour of the atmosphere of the milieu today:

"A public sale, that is to say an auction, that is to say that everything is going to the highest bidder, everything that André Breton had collected, in a lifetime, at his home at 42 rue Fontaine.

"The information reached me like all my colleagues. None to my knowledge reacted. André Breton? Who's that? Surrealism? Oh, yes, that's old hat now.

"But to think that all the things that Breton had chosen to delight his existence at 42 rue Fontaine, to think that all that, which ignited our imaginations too, is going to end up under the auctioneer's hammer, does that really leave you cold?"

Nadeau proposes no campaign, no protest. Jean-Jacques Marie, the Parti des Travailleurs's leading historian, who has just published *Le Trotskysme et les trotskystes (Trotskyism and the Trotskyists)*—and who also writes for *La Quinzaine littéraire*—has yet to speak up on the subject.

There is clearly a tale to be told about the failure to establish a suitable place to keep this historic legacy which should be available to researchers and the public in its entirety. We plan to investigate and report on this further.

In a period when, in every advanced country, on the pretext of the "war against terrorism" and economic constraints, civil and democratic rights are under sustained assault, the need for Trotsky and Breton's declaration of the organic link between artistic creation and human emancipation is as relevant as when the manifesto "For an Independent Revolutionary Art" was drawn up by them in Mexico in 1938:

"The need for emancipation felt by the individual spirit has only to follow its natural course to be led to mingle its stream with this primeval necessity—the need for the emancipation of man."

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