

Exhibition September 28, 2022 – March 27, 2023

Sabatini Building, Floor 3

Francesc Tosquelles

Like a Sewing Machine in a Wheat Field



Francesc Tosquelles in the garden of the Saint-Alban-sur-Limagnole Psychiatric Hospital, ca. 1944–1945.

Photograph: Romain Vigouroux, Ou-Rabah Tosquelles family collection. Photographic reproduction: © Roberto Ruiz

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This exhibition surveys the avant-garde practices implemented by the psychiatrist Francesc Tosquelles (Reus, 1912 – Granges-sur-Lot, 1994) in the therapeutic, political, and cultural fields. Tosquelles dignified the lives of the people who least mattered to others, those abandoned in mental asylums, while at the same time questioning the meaning of the “normality” and opposing the traditional view of pathologies in a Europe dominated by fascisms. Today, he is a referent for reflections on the value of mental health at moments of extreme crisis.

In 1931, with the proclamation of the Second Republic, Barcelona was transformed into a “little Vienna” by the arrival of psychiatrists and psychoanalysts fleeing from antisemitism in Central Europe. It was during this period, between the end of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera and the uprising of General Franco in 1936, that Tosquelles familiarized himself with psychoanalysis to the extent of becoming one of those who introduced it to Catalonia and the rest of Spain under the new public health policies. He understood then that in order to cure the patients, it was necessary first to cure the institutions that took charge of them.

As a militant in the Bloc Obrer i Camperol (BOC, Workers’ and Peasants’ Bloc), which merged in 1935 with the Partit Obrer d’Unificació Marxista (POUM, Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification), Tosquelles turned to an alliance between psychoanalysis and Marxism to transform the asylums, the heirs to nineteenth-century psychiatry, by proposing the need to treat the entire hospital as a sick body and change its authoritarian and concentrationary unconscious. This

anti-authoritarianism also impregnated Tosquelles’s relationship with politics throughout his militancy with the anarcho-syndicalists and minority communist parties critical of Stalinism.

During the Civil War, he worked with non-professional teams as head of psychiatry for the Republican army on the Aragon Front and in Extremadura. It was in this context of war that the first therapeutic communities *avant la lettre* emerged. These included members of civil society with roles in the field of psychiatry that were unusual before their spread in England and Scotland in the 1950s.

In 1939, by then steeped in the political and cultural experience of the Mancomunitat de Catalunya, and having worked in Sariñena and Almodóvar del Campo, Tosquelles was forced into exile in France like so many other Republicans. For three months, until January 1940, he was in the refugee camp of Septfonds, where 17,000 Spaniards were interned. There he organized a psychiatric unit with the aid of a nurse, a guitarist, and a painter.



Francesc Tosquelles on the roof of the administration building of the Saint-Alban-sur-Limagnole Psychiatric Hospital holding aloft a boat made by Auguste Forestier, 1947. Photograph: Romain Vigouroux, Ou-Rabah Tosquelles family collection. Photographic reproduction: © Roberto Ruiz

After leaving the camp, he moved on to the Saint-Alban-sur-Limagnole Psychiatric Hospital, where he fostered a transformation of the psychiatric institution through the collective work of interns, carers, nuns, doctors, and peasants. Impregnated with the lessons learned in the Catalan cooperatives of the 1930s, he introduced the self-management of labor, a patients' assembly and clubs, amateur theatre and cinema, and training for the carers. Tosquelles opened the psychiatric hospital to collective cultural practices and was a pioneer in the introduction to this type of institution of mural newspapers and house journals, as well as work with the printing press and ergotherapy workshops.

During the Nazi occupation of France, the sanatorium of Saint-Alban became a

refuge for Jews, resistance members, and avant-garde artists, who lived together with the medical community and the interns. Between 1943 and 1944, for example, Paul Éluard wrote *Souvenirs de la maison des fous* [Memories of the Madhouse], a compilation of poems inspired by his stay at the sanatorium, and it was also there that Tristan Tzara created *Parler seul* [Speaking Alone] in 1945, a long poem that was illustrated by Joan Miró in 1948.

After the end of World War Two, the artist Jean Dubuffet visited Saint-Alban at the time when he was planning the “hunt for *art brut*” for his collection and starting to extract these objects from the hospitals where they originated. Dubuffet opposed *art brut* to the “cultural art of the museums, the galleries, the salons,” and defined it as

an anti-cultural art created by people outside that circle. However, Dubuffet's project was different to that of Saint-Alban. Far from taking an interest in anti-cultural statements, Tosquelles made cultural practices into a tool for awakening social ties in the patients. Locating these objects in the context of the psychiatric hospital, and within the project for which they were created, this exhibition asks what name might be given to this production, both cultural and social, if we ceased to think of it through the label of *art brut*.

Tosquelles summed up his own experience from its beginnings in Catalonia with a quotation from the Comte de Lautréamont's *Les chants de Maldoror* (1869), which inspired the Surrealists to extol the haphazardness of beauty: "beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella." In his view, what had been done in Catalonia between the 1910s and the 1930s was "like a sewing machine in a wheat field." With this expression, he preserved the memory of the attempts of the Mancomunitat and the Republic to organize therapeutic care in close connection with the municipalities, the countryside, and manual labor.

Related activities

School of Disturbance II

Thinking with Tosquelles beyond the exhibition
September 28, 2022 – March 27, 2023

Project presentation:

Wednesday October 5, 2022 – 5:00 p.m.

Sabatini Building, Floor 3

Further information: www.museoreinasofia.es

Education program developed
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Exhibition Tour

Les Abattoirs. Musée – FRAC Occitanie, Toulouse (October 14, 2021 – March 6, 2022);

Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona – CCCB (April 8 – August 28, 2022)

and the American Folk Art Museum, New York (June 12 – October 23, 2023)

Organized by



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