Francesc Tosquelles (Reus, 1912–Granges-sur-Lot, 1994) was a Catalan psychiatrist who trained in the political and cultural experience of the Commonwealth of Catalonia and the Republic who, after fighting on the Aragon Front and in Extremadura during the Spanish Civil War, had to go into exile in France in 1939. At the Septfonds concentration camp and, above all, in the psychiatric hospital at Saint-Alban, Tosquelles revolutionized the psychiatric institution with an experimental approach that linked clinical practice with politics and culture, humanizing the lives of thousands of patients. Saint-Alban became a haven for avant-garde artists living side by side with inmates, farmers, nuns, doctors and nurses in a practice that sought to open up the psychiatric hospital and encourage the patients’ social ties, seeing theatre, film, art and writing as a vital therapeutic tool.

The exhibition Frasesc Tosquelles. Like a Sewing Machine in a Wheat Field, curated by Carles Guerra and Joana Masó, helps to recover the figure and work of this Catalan psychiatrist, still largely unknown in our country, a unique voice, absent from the history of winners and losers.

The leading thread of the exhibition at the CCCB is the transformation wrought by the Reus-born psychiatrist in the hospital institution passed down from the 19th century. Francesc Tosquelles, who regarded it as “sick”, saw only three approaches that could cure it: politics, clinical experimentation and culture. Tosquelles was a pioneer in introducing self-management tasks, commissions and inpatient clubs; training for caregivers; theatre, film and writing experiments; mural periodicals and internal newspapers, and printing and occupational therapy workshops, among many other activities.
This project is the result of a research process developed by art critic, teacher and researcher Carles Guerra, and research led by literary critic and University of Barcelona lecturer Joana Masó, which was financed by the Mir-Puig Foundation and produced the publication Tosquelles. Curar les institucions (Arcàdia), awarded the Ciutat de Barcelona Essay, Humanities and History Prize 2021.

Taking this as their basis, the two curators propose an exhibition in which they bring documentary materials into dialogue with an outstanding series of artworks, documents and films, some 700 items in total.

The documentation on display, much of it shown for the first time, comprises a wide variety of materials: photographs, postcards, posters, magazines, books, letters and reports, as well as films and publications made in hospital contexts all narrate the route taken by Francesc Tosquelles from the 1930s onwards.

The art works included in the show are linked to surrealist avant-garde authors such as the book by Paul Éluard illustrated by Gérard Vulliamy, Tristan Tzara’s book illustrated by Joan Miró, and the work of Antonin Artaud, Henri Michaux, Brassai and Léon Schwarz-Abrys. It also features objects produced by patients at Saint-Alban Hospital, from the Lausanne Art Brut Collection and other private collections.

The exhibition’s historical progress around these cultural productions is punctuated by contemporary works and newly created projects, such as the film by Mireia Sallarès and works by Alejandra Riera, Roger Bernat, Angela Melitopoulos, Maurizio Lazzarato and Perejaume.

The exhibition is completed by a programme of debates, audiovisuals, and educational and family activities.

The title of the exhibition is a reference to Lautréamont’s words that inspired the surrealists to defend the random nature of beauty. “As beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table.” With the expression “like a sewing machine in a wheat field”, Tosquelles sums up his practice as an openness to the unforeseen, born of the links between unconnected, seemingly contradictory realities, situated in a familiar context, linked to the land and to work: the field of wheat.

Francesc Tosquelles. Like a Sewing Machine in a Wheat Field is a coproduction of the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, in collaboration with Les Abattoirs. Musée FRAC Occitanie in Toulouse.

The exhibition will be presented in adapted versions at Les Abattoirs. Musée FRAC Occitanie, Toulouse (until 6 March 2022); the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, Barcelona (8 April–28 August 2022); the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid (27 September 2022–end March 2023), and the American Folk Art Museum in New York (April–October 2023).
SECTORS OF THE EXHIBITION

The voice of Francesc Tosquelles runs throughout the exhibition. As it advances chronologically through his life and work, the psychiatrist’s oral testimony accompanies visitors as he talks about the topics that interested him: the peasantry, Stalin, the fear that madmen arouse in psychiatrists, and many others.

The places of Tosquelles

The exhibition opens with the interactive installation Untitled by Roger Bernat, based on the film archive of the hospital at Saint-Alban, films to which visitors will be able to add a soundtrack.

Psychiatry and politics

Francesc Tosquelles, who came to psychoanalysis between the end of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera and the coup of General Franco in 1936, and who was also a militant with the Bloc Obre i Camperol (BOC, Workers and Peasants Bloc), which in 1935 merged with the Partit Obre d’Unificació Marxista (POUM, Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification), used psychoanalysis and Marxism to transform the asylums that had been handed down by 19th century psychiatry.

In order to cure patients, Tosquelles considered it necessary to treat the whole hospital as a sick body and to change its authoritarian unconscious of internment, trapped in bureaucratic inertia and immobility.

This section of the exhibition presents a series of documents such as posters from the Second Republic and the Spanish Civil War, cultural and psychiatric journals in which Tosquelles published articles, and photographs illustrating this first period of his professional activity.

A situated psychiatry

This section reviews the various places where Tosquelles worked: the Pere Mata private insane asylum for the upper bourgeoisie in Reus; field hospitals in houses expropriated during the Spanish Civil War in Aragon and Extremadura; an improvised psychiatric service in the precarious conditions of the Republican exile camp in Septfonds, and the rural hospital of Saint-Alban, in one of the most impoverished areas of France.

In all of them, Tosquelles’ transformative practice involved caring not only for the inmates, but also for the medical community: psychiatrists, nurses, caregivers and nuns, as well as involving in the care process non-professional team members who were part of civil society.

As well as a variety of documents about these places and experiences, this section includes a showing of the film Història potencial de Francesc Tosquelles by Mireia Sellarès, a theatrical recreation of the letter that Tosquelles wrote to Stalin.

Saint-Alban, the filmed revolution

The major transformation that took place at Saint-Alban Hospital between 1940 and 1962—the period during which Tosquelles worked there—has become a model for explaining the foundations of institutional psychotherapy. One of the distinguishing features of the Tosquelles period was the coincidence in the same place of clinical innovations, avant-garde cultural production and anti-fascist political activity in what is known as an ensemble thérapeutique: a situation in which relations between everyone—and between everything—replace the mechanisms of containment traditionally exercised by the walls of the asylum.
This section is the heart of the exhibition, coinciding with the longest period of Tosquelles' biography, during which he put his innovations in the field of psychiatry into practice. It contains one of the highlights of the exhibition: the three reels of film that Tosquelles made at Saint-Alban hospital, presented at the Fourth Congress of Psychotherapy in Barcelona in 1958, constituting a valuable testimony of his vision of psychiatric work.

Visitors will also find many other materials, such as photographs and documents of the conference at which the film was presented. At this point, the exhibition includes works of art and literature created around the hospital, such as the book by Paul Éluard, illustrated by Gérard Vulliamy, the book by Tristan Tzara, illustrated by Joan Miró, and the film made there by the cinema director Mario Ruspoli. They will also see an installation by Alejandra Riera linking the geography of the hospital at Saint-Alban and La Borde clinic, two important places in the history of institutional psychotherapy.

Representations of insanity: from the asylum to the museum

In the first half of the 20th century, the work of inpatients in psychiatric hospitals received unwonted attention, to the point of being considered study material, diagnostic evidence and collector’s items.

Inside the Saint-Alban hospital, the objects produced by this work were part of a healing process or an exchange economy. Once outside, however, they were understood as artifacts for cultural critique. Now, these objects are conserved in monographic museums of what is known as art brut, segregated from other forms of art and the contexts in which they arose, giving rise to the urgent need for a debate as to the forms of restitution this legacy calls for.

This section contains a selection of art brut (a concept coined by Jean Dubuffet to define the art created by people with no artistic training, such as psychiatric patients, prisoners, marginalized people or children), as well as drawings, paintings and objects by artists linked to Saint-Alban: Marguerite Sivins, Auguste Forestier, Aimable Jayet and Benjamin Arneval. Among the creators of art brut, Dubuffet included three Spanish artists, exiled Republicans, marginalized by their status as politically defeated: Joaquim Vicens Gironella, Miguel Hernández and José García Tella.

End-of-the-world delirium

From the 1930s up until the end of the 1940s, the idea of the end of the world was very much present in the field of culture and in the experiences of generations marked by the increasing warmongering that pervaded the time.

While Francesc Tosquelles and Jean Oury worked together at Saint-Alban, the delirium of the end of the world became embodied in the sick, in an experience that was at once real and typical of psychosis.

In 1948, Tosquelles devoted his doctoral thesis to the lived experience of the end of the world, by means of a clinical and literary journey that went from Gérard de Nerval to Antonin Artaud, to whom the artist Nancy Spero later dedicated a series of works about violence, the word and silence. The exhibition expands critical and visual reflection on the end of the world with films by Abel Gance and Eugène Deslaw, and the engravings, drawings and paintings of Gérard Vulliamy, son-in-law of Paul Éluard, who spent some time at Saint-Alban in 1945.
Feet, cinema and collective life

In around 1947, Tosquelles formulated an idea to which he referred for the rest of his life: shifting the cognitive experience, often located in the brain, to the feet. “When we walk through the world,” he said, “what counts is not the head, it is the feet. Knowing where you step.”

The content of this section revolves around this idea of Tosquelles, in which the feet take over protagonism from the brain. It includes works by artists such as Jacques-André Boiffard, Salvador Dalí, Antoni Tàpies, Perejaume and François Pain based on the importance of the feet or reflecting on the concept of walking. This section is completed by the work carried out by Tosquelles with autistic children. The installation Assemblages by Angela Melitopoulos closes the section.

Frantz Fanon and Francesc Tosquelles: from antifascism to decolonization

The French West Indian psychiatrist, writer and anti-colonial thinker Frantz Fanon worked with Tosquelles as resident doctor at Saint-Alban from April 1952 to August 1953. For those 16 months, they shared the experience of institutional psychotherapy with a series of practices that combined sociotherapy and the occupational therapy carried out in workshops and the inpatients’ club, involving theatre, press and assemblies to write the hospital newspaper, among other activities.

In 1953, Fanon became head of service at the Algerian hospital in Blida-Joinville, where, with the Muslim patients, he developed the lessons of Saint-Alban while engaging with the National Liberation Front, which was decisive in the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962).

Various documents take visitors on a journey through Frantz Fanon’s experience in Algeria. This section closes with the work by artist Mohamed Bourouissa, The Whispering of Ghosts.

Return to Catalonia: passing on Tosquelles

Despite his full professional employment in France, in the late sixties Tosquelles returned to Catalonia to continue, at the Pere Mata Institute, many of the initiatives he had implemented in Saint-Alban, at annual conferences of psychiatric interest, working groups, and the “cassette groups” and the patients’ club.

Tosquelles died in Granges-sur-Lot on 25 September 1994. His death coincided with the disappearance of psychiatry as an independent discipline and its integration as a branch of medicine. As a result, the legacy of Tosquelles in Catalonia and Spain has not been passed on.

The exhibition closes with the collection of cassettes that the staff of the Pere Mata Institute and Francesc Tosquelles recorded in the last 30 years of his life, along with his conceptual maps or quadres de paret, conserved in the library of the Pere Mata University Hospital. The audiovisual trptic Déconnaissance, by Angela Melitopoulos, dedicated to the Catalan psychiatrist, sends visitors on their way with a narrative of his life, put together by Tosquelles himself.
GENERAL INFORMATION

Dates and times
From 8 April to 28 August 2022
Open Tuesdays to Sundays and public holidays from 11:00 to 20:00
Closed on Mondays except public holidays

Venue
Gallery 3 of the CCCB

Prices
6 € / 4 € concessions
Sundays from 15:00 to 20:00, free subject to prior reservation
Concessions and free admission

High resolution images of the exhibition from the CCCB’s digital press room

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