

Unreason as a Means to Repair the Art Institution

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ESSAY

“Personally, I call psychiatry ‘mess-up-atry.’”

With these words, Spanish-French psychiatrist François Tosquelles playfully critiques his own field in an interview for filmmaker François Pain’s 1990 documentary work *François Tosquelles. Une politique de la folie* [*François Tosquelles: A Politics of Madness*]. A pioneering figure in institutional psychotherapy, Tosquelles reimagined psychiatric institutions as participatory, creative and collaborative spaces. His work played a crucial role in shaping more humane and socially engaged approaches to mental health care, most notably influencing practices in institutional psychotherapy at La Clinique de La Borde founded in 1953 by French psychiatrist Jean Oury. Later joined by Tosquelles himself and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, La Borde became, and remains, a seminal site for implementing and refining principles that demonstrated the transformative potential of rethinking institutional care to prioritize human dignity and creativity.

François Tosquelles. *Une politique de la folie* was featured in the 2024 group exhibition *Approaching Unreason* at Palais de Tokyo in Paris. Curated by François Piron, the exhibition brought together artistic practices emerging from or inspired by mental health care institutions, especially influenced by institutional psychotherapy. The exhibition was guided by the premise that psychic diversity cannot be separated from its social and institutional contexts, showing works and experiments that, according to the exhibition text, “expand our understanding of the reasons for making art, and the ways of making it, by foregrounding the desire for self-expression of people for whom the ‘simple’ and the ‘everyday’ is anything but self-evident” (Palais de Tokyo, 2024).

In this essay, I am particularly interested in how, as framed in the exhibition text, these ways of making art operate as curatorial choices within the exhibition. *Approaching Unreason* intersected psychic diversity and artistic practice in a way I would describe as “reparative”, drawing on queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of “reparative

reading”. In her seminal essay “Reparative Reading and Paranoid Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You”—published in her 2003 essay collection *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*—Sedgwick distinguishes between paranoid and reparative positions. The paranoid position is fixated on anticipating and exposing power structures, often limiting engagement to critique and fostering an excessive fear of surprises. By contrast, the reparative position gathers fragments to create new, critical fabulations that embrace surprise, the unpredictability of human experience, and, notably, joy. As Sedgwick explains, the reparative reader is “driven by a seeking of pleasure rather than an avoidance of pain” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 147). Crucially, she frames the reparative as an active mode of engagement rather than the paranoid’s more passive critique.

In this light, I think that Tosquelles’ playful term for psychiatry, “mess-up-atry,” has a strong resonance with Sedgwick’s approach, particularly her embrace of pleasure and her assertion that “mistakes can be good rather than bad surprises” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 147).

Thus, this essay argues that both “mess-up-atry” and the concept of “unreason” in *Approaching Unreason* offer intersectional potential to challenge normative frameworks, resisting the marginalization of non-conformity. It explores how curatorial practice can embrace unreason as a transformative and reparative strategy, drawing on the intersectionality of institutional psychotherapy, queer theory, and artistic practice. Tosquelles critiques psychiatric practices that focus on control and correction, whereas, in contrast, unreason positions madness as a potential form of resistance against dominant societal structures. Poststructuralist thinkers like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari have discussed how unreason challenges psychiatric and societal norms that suppress the multiplicity of human desire and creativity. For them, unreason is not merely a site of exclusion but a potential force for liberation from repressive structures that regulate

thought and behavior.

While unreason and madness have been explored and exhibited in art history since the early mid-20th century, I argue that *Approaching Unreason* offers an example of how to move beyond merely displaying these. By coupling unreason with Sedgwick's notion of the reparative, I suggest that the exhibition frames unreason not only as an object of display, but as a curatorial strategy for transformation. Building on the radical legacy of Tosquelles as well as Sedgwick's reparative framework, I aim to shed light on how unreason—when approached reparatively—can serve as a curatorial means of repair, inviting a rethinking of the art institution. In doing so, it foregrounds the intersection between artistic practice and psychic diversity—what Tosquelles' notion of “mess-up-atry” suggests—emphasizing how curation can engage critically with institutional psychotherapy not merely as themes to be represented but as modes of knowing and being that reshape curatorial methodologies themselves.

WHERE ART AND PSYCHIC DIVERSITY INTERSECT

In the context of this essay, I use the term “psychic diversity” to refer to the spectrum of mental, emotional, and perceptual experiences that fall outside normative psychological frameworks. By using this term, I aim to foreground the value of these varied experiences—not as deficits, but as sources of insight, creativity, and resistance. Within the context of *Approaching Unreason*, psychic diversity becomes a way to articulate how unreason can be understood as a generative force within artistic practice. The phrase allows for a framing that is attuned to complexity and the dismantling of hierarchical structures of normativity.

As the director of Palais de Tokyo, Guillaume Désanges, writes in the accompanying exhibition catalogue *Cosa Mentale: Disalienating Institutions*:

The history of madness shows that it is at once a

suffering and a refuge, a pathology and a site of resistance, a poison and a remedy, a dissonance and an alliance. The inclusion of vulnerabilities and psychic differences within a cultural institution can thus be seen as a matter of enrichment as well as a reduction of inequalities. How to concretely approach this question in an establishment which has neither this purpose nor the skillset? How to avoid going no further than intentions or theory? The answer probably lies in the right blend of ambition and humility. An ambition based on the idea that mental health should create an attention that radiates throughout the entire institution. (Désanges, 2024, p. 7).

Accordingly, the museum adopts a humble, yet experimental approach intended to permeate the institution. Désanges underscores the importance of recognizing the complexity of psychic differences and urges a reconsideration of the societal and institutional structures that uphold normative frameworks through a new understanding of the art museum. A significant challenge, yet also valuable task for the art institution of today, of which *Approaching Unreason* represents a decisive step.

The exhibition opens with Danish artist Signe Frederiksen's drawing series *Ni étrange ni étranger* [*Neither strange nor foreign*]. One drawing spans an entire wall (see Figure 1); another is animated, morphing into shifting forms; others hang as smaller framed pieces. Created during her commute while working as a support teacher for children with special needs, Frederiksen's drawings began as a form of emotional release and evolved into poetic reflections on violence and control across educational, domestic, and social settings. The drawings offer an evocative and subtly unsettling introduction to the exhibition's themes of psychic experience and institutional critique.

The exhibition design avoids linearity, encouraging an open-ended navigation. Turning right, I encounter Spanish artist Dora García's *Mad Marginal Chart*, a sprawling wall drawing that explores the

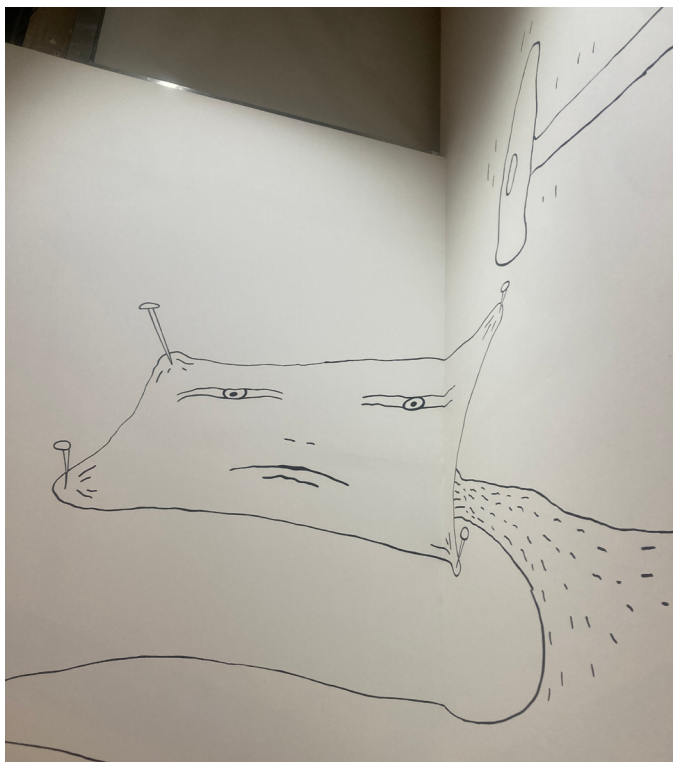


Figure 1
Signe Frederiksen, *Ni étrange ni étranger*, acrylic wall drawing, 2024. Courtesy Signe Frederiksen

intersections of emancipation, poetry, and psychiatry. Composed from García's annotations on texts by Jacques Lacan and Philip K. Dick, the work blends references to Freud, Joyce, wordplay, ritornellos, and phrases like "Aus der Krankheit eine Waffe machen" [To turn illness into a weapon]. An associative logic that echoes Tosquelles' concept of *déconner*—a playful, non-linear way of engaging the psyche.

Tosquelles himself appears in François Pain and Joséphine Guattari's video works documenting life at La Borde in the exhibition, namely the documentary *François Tosquelles. Une politique de la folie* (see Figure 2). In another video, the Japanese Butoh dancer Min Tanaka performs his "dance of darkness," capturing its profound emotional resonance with the residents. The absence of doors in communal spaces is one of La Borde's ethos of openness and non-hierarchy. This principle is illustrated in a video documenting a conversation between Jean Oury, Félix Guattari, and La Borde's residents, who debate whether to install

a kitchen door after complaints about the chef, who is also a resident. Guattari argues that a door would isolate rather than resolve the conflict, affirming the value of transparency and collective problem-solving. The accompanying exhibition text highlights how Oury and Guattari's concepts—such as "the atmosphere," "collective assemblages of enunciation," "groups of agency over their own subjectivity" (Palais de Tokyo, 2024)—extended psychiatry into a holistic, relational practice. The exhibition title, *Approaching Unreason*, resonates with this vocabulary, suggesting a tentative engagement with what is often dismissed as irrational. This same ethos recurs in French artist Patrik Pion's *Objets blancs* [White objects] (see Figure 3 and Figure 4): poetic, surreal sculptures of oversized everyday objects made from crumpled blank newspapers. Originally developed in workshops with psychiatric patients, these dreamlike forms seem to challenge the apparent normalcy of reality.

Further into the exhibition's rather rhizomatic structure, Belgian filmmaker Boris Lehman's film diaries, *Ne pas stagner* [Do not stagnate], document his collaborations with residents of Le Club Antonin Artaud, a psychiatric outpatient center in Brussels.

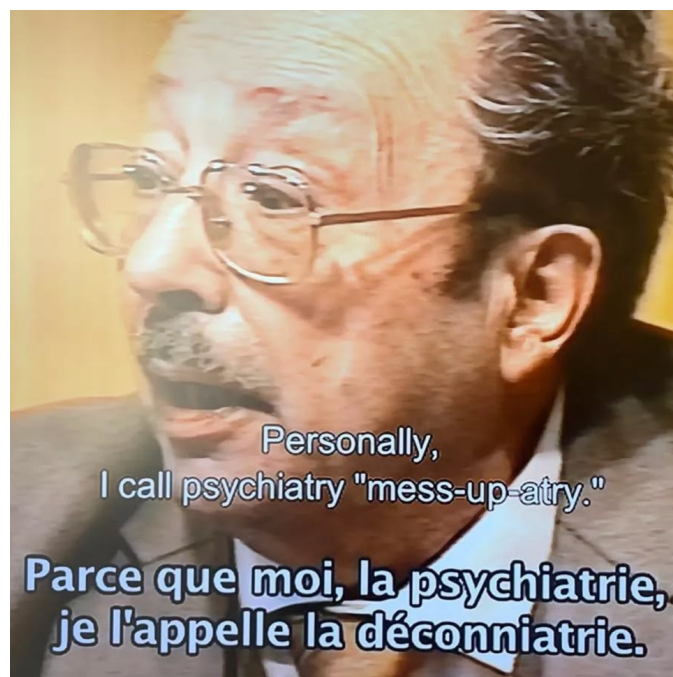


Figure 2
François Pain, Jean-Claude Pollack & Danielle Sivadon, *François Tosquelles. Une politique de la folie*, 1990, video, 54 min. Courtesy François Pain.



Figure 3

Patrik Pion. View of the exhibition *Approaching Unreason*, Palais de Tokyo, 16.02–30.06.2024. Photo: Aurélien Mole

Working collectively, residents authored scripts and shaped narratives, which Lehman describes as “an instinctive, playful creation with no particular artistic or cultural intent (...) of the members of the theatre

group, a need to live a different life, to perform an authentic act” (Palais de Tokyo, 2024).

According to Sedgwick, the core distinction between paranoid and reparative reading lies in the contrast between exposing power structures and actively engaging in reparative practices. (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 137) When this distinction is translated from a reading technique to curatorial analysis, it calls for continuous re-examination of institutional practices. This, I argue, is exemplified in *Approaching Unreason’s* emphasis on process and practice—whether in the introspective journey captured in both the making and finalized work of Frederiksen’s drawings, or in the collaborative creativity and sensitivity evident in the videos and documentary works by Pain, Joséphine Guattari, and Lehman. Pion’s work stands as a testament to collective and intersectional practice, showing how the act of making art can become a process of healing. At the same time, *Objets blancs* as a finalized artwork embodies a different way of thinking—or a way of viewing the world on a different scale.



Figure 4

Patrik Pion, *Objets blancs*, 2003–2022 (*La Brosse à dents* [Toothbrush], 2016), newspaper, staples. Courtesy Patrik Pion

To me, this signals a curatorial engagement with

reparative practices, rather than merely exposing or critiquing power structures. It is an invitation to engage with unreason and to allow the potential of “mess-up-etry” to exist. In this, I argue, artistic practice and psychic diversity intersect. Through their focus on unpredictability, collaboration, and process over product, the works on view offer a glimpse into how the art institution might begin to embody an ethos of radical openness and reinvention. This is not to say that art institutions have never engaged in such practices. Other recent exhibitions—such as documenta fifteen (2022), with its emphasis on collective practices of resource-sharing, or MoMA PS1’s *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (2020–21), which foregrounded artistic practices shaped by structural vulnerability—also reflect a broader reparative sensibility in curatorial practice. *Approaching Unreason*, however, represents a sustained engagement, in which unreason itself becomes both subject matter and curatorial method. It generates a structure that is as processual and open-ended as the works it presents—an approach that resonates with Sedgwick’s reparative framework. Repairing the art institution through the intersection of psychic diversity and artistic practice involves challenging normative frameworks and recognizing the potential for enrichment through the inclusion of fragility, difference—and joy. Joy, which is powerfully present in the works described above, is not, in Sedgwick’s reparative framework, a fleeting emotion but a critical mode of engagement. It resists the paranoid fixation on exposure and instead embraces surprise, pleasure and transformation. Joy signals an openness to new ways of thinking, making, and relating—an insistence on creative abundance rather than critique alone.

By giving equal weight to the artistic process, documentation, and finalized artworks, the exhibition adopts a reparative approach to institutional critique. It invites the audience to re-imagine the art institution, not as a site that merely contains artworks, but as a sanctuary—a space that illuminates the reasons for making art, the ways of its creation, and its broader social, political, and ethical significance. This ethos is

especially clear in Lehman’s description of his workshops, which “had no particular artistic intent other than to perform an authentic act” (Palais de Tokyo, 2024). As curator and professor Nora Sternfeld points out, a defining feature of contemporary exhibition-making is the recognition that the impact—or transformative potential—of an exhibition is as vital as the exhibition itself. Exhibitions, in this view, are not static displays, but active, unfolding processes with the capacity to enact change. Applied to the art institution, this perspective calls for a departure from traditional museum models and the embrace of the disruptive potential embedded in marginalized voices.

CURATING FROM THE MARGINS

Approaching Unreason seamlessly blends documentary material with artworks, making no hierarchical distinctions between the two. Notably, many of the artworks originate from workshops, conversations, or experiences rooted in institutional psychotherapy. In this context, Felix Guattari’s influence seems to permeate much of the exhibition, extending beyond his work at La Borde. Walking through the exhibition feels, as previously mentioned, almost rhizomatic in its choreography.

The “rhizome,” a concept introduced by Deleuze and Guattari in their 1975 book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*—and later defined in their key work *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* from 1980—proposes a non-hierarchical and interconnected mode of thinking, knowing, and being. In *Approaching Unreason*, this rhizomatic structure is not merely aesthetic—it actively generates dialogue between the works, forming a network of meaning and affect rather than isolating and elevating individual pieces. Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “a minor literature” reflects their belief that revolutionary energies and transformative ideas emerge not from dominant institutions, but from the margins—those excluded from or positioned outside mainstream social, cultural, and political structures. These marginal positions, often marked by reduced visibility or

power, become potent sources for challenging normative narratives and imagining alternative futures.

In this spirit, curator and art historian Helen Molesworth argues that rhizomatic approaches enable feminist, non-hierarchical curation that resists traditional art historical and institutional logics (Molesworth, 2010). Building on this, I argue that Piron, the curator of *Approaching Unreason*, adopts a similarly non-hierarchical logic—one that exemplifies how curatorial strategies can elevate overlooked or marginalized contributors. This is especially evident in how documentary material and artworks are placed in dialogue, enabling multiple, fragmentary perspectives to surface. In my experience of the exhibition, this curatorial logic allows the residents of La Borde and Le Club Antonin Artaud to emerge not as peripheral subjects in the video works, but as some of the most vital artistic practitioners within the exhibition.

Approaching Unreason suggests that what is often perceived as “unreason” holds the potential to generate new forms of creativity and connection. It argues—both in content and curatorial method—that unreason resists the imposition of a singular, rational framework for defining and managing mental health. Positioned as both subject and curatorial method, unreason opens up a space for reimagining creativity and practice in institutional settings. It gestures towards more inclusive, expansive models of engagement—ones that welcome uncertainty and unreason.

In a Danish context, one historically marginalized artist who fully embraced unreason is Overtaci (1929-1985). “Overtaci” is a wordplay on the Danish “Overtossen” [Chief Lunatic]—a name the artist gave himself. He spent most of his life in psychiatric care, where he developed a distinct artistic practice exploring themes of identity, transformation, and inner worlds. His works are now part of the collection of Museum Overtaci, and in 2017, Kunsthall Charlottenborg hosted his first institutional exhibition—an exhibition that I argue represented the opposite of a reparative curatorial approach to

unreason.

Titled *Overtaci and the Art of Madness*, the exhibition’s framing suggested that madness is something to be put on display: the art of madness. Overtaci’s artworks were presented as display items, rather than inviting the audience to enter or engage with the world that was Overtaci’s. As Kasper Bonnén wrote in a review of the exhibition in 2017:

It is difficult to understand Overtaci’s work without feeling the gentleness he felt for his works, the conversations he had with them. In this exhibition I cannot see and feel the practice that the artist actually lived, a practice that intervened in space and time, defying more rational and objective outlooks on the world. I would like to have seen his home-made tools, his small objects, pipe bowls, amulets, papier-mâché spirits—all these things that were to him living beings with whom he lived, held conversations, kissed. He even took them out on bike rides when he was allowed to (...) In this sense, the installation can seem rather like a post-colonial jaunt into the lands of the mad—like a display of objects robbed of their home and habitat. (Bonnén, 2017, p. 3)

In relation to this view, I want to again call attention to the importance of joy, which is so vital to Sedgwick and the reparative. If one is to understand the art world of Overtaci, or the concept of “mess-up-atory” and what Tosquelles brought to La Borde—as seen in the video works that documented life there—I believe joy is key and essential to curatorial practice as a whole today.

I began writing this essay shortly after visiting the exhibition at Palais de Tokyo in spring 2024, where I introduced Sedgwick’s emphasis on the value of joy. It feels significant, then, that as I finish this text in the spring of 2025, Palais de Tokyo’s seasonal theme, as introduced in Désanges’ editorial, is “Collective Joy” (Désanges, 2025).

I thus sense a reparative curatorial turn emerging that does not only involve rethinking how unreason

is presented, but also how it can function as a curatorial method for transformation. By integrating Sedgwick's reparative framework as both an analytical tool and curatorial practice, my approach in this essay aims to introduce a subtle yet significant shift in academic discourse—one that brings attention to the reparative potential within curatorial practice. As a curator engaged in questions and methods of fragility and joy, I see this exhibition not only as a case study but also as an invitation to imagine how reparative approaches might transform institutions from within. Unreason as an intersectional and curatorial method may not hold all the answers, but it offers a place to begin. Within this context, *Approaching Unreason* can be seen as a starting point for exploring the potential for transformation—through its structural openness as well as its thematic focus on unreason.

Inspired by the conversation between Félix Guattari, Jean Oury, and the residents of La Borde about the

significance of La Borde's no-doors policy, perhaps the next step for Palais de Tokyo is to embrace even more radical openness, continuing the legacy of La Borde's no-doors policy not just in space but in method. This raises broader questions for art institutions more generally: how might they move beyond display to address the deeper, structural changes required within systems that often remain opaque and self-protective?

Approaching Unreason was on view at Palais de Tokyo from 16 February to 30 June 2024, curated by François Piron, showing works by Accroc, Carla Adra, Astéréotypie, Agathe Boulanger, Centre Familial de Jeunes, Michel François, Signe Frederiksen, Dora García, Generativ Process, Tania Gheerbrant, Jules Lagrange, Joséphine Guattari, Boris Lehman & Club Antonin, Artaud, François Pain, Patrik Pion, Abdeslam Ziou Ziou & Sofiane Byari.

[1] For a comprehensive understanding of the curatorial research, see the Palais de Tokyo's official website or refer to *Cosa Mentale: Disalienating Institutions* (Palais de Tokyo, 2024), Issue 37 of P.L.S. *The Magazine of the Palais de Tokyo*.

[2] See explanation of my use of the term in the next section.

[3] In her book *Disalienation: Politics, Philosophy, and Radical Psychiatry in Postwar France*, scholar of French intellectual history, Camille Robcis, recounts that between 1940 and 1945, 40,000 patients died in French psychiatric hospitals due to the Vichy regime's neglectful policy of "soft extermination." Yet in Saint-Alban-sur-Limagnole in central France, one hospital—led by François Tosquelles—defied this trajectory. With help from local residents, the staff stockpiled food to sustain patients and began reimagining psychiatric care. This collective effort marked the birth of institutional psychotherapy, a movement that would go on to shape postwar French thought.

[4] See Foucault, M. (2006). *Madness and civilization: A history of insanity in the age of reason* (R. Howard, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1961); Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1983). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (R. Hurley, M. Seem, & H. R. Lane, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1972); Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1980).

[5] See Sternfeld, N. (2016). "Inside the post-representative museum." In C. Mörsch, A. Sachs, & T. Sieber (Eds.), *Contemporary curating and museum education* (pp. 175–186). transcript publishing. Sternfeld writes: "The last couple of years have seen a quick succession of 'turns' in advanced exhibition theories and curatorial practices, which have expanded the functions of the exhibition space. There was the turn towards education, to discourse, to performativity, to dance and to activism. Often, they were intertwined. What do all of these developments have in common? They no longer understand exhibitions as sites for the presentation of precious objects and for the representation of objective values. Rather their focus lies on the creation of possibilities, on social as well as bodily experiences, unexpected encounters and shifting interrogations in which the unplannable is of more importance than precise hanging design. Exhibitions turn into spaces of action."

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