

Elisabetta Povoledo, "Vaccination Can Be Relaxing. Just Ask These Museum Visitors.," *The New York Times*, May 5, 2021

The New York Times

Vaccination Can Be Relaxing. Just Ask These Museum Visitors.

A contemporary art museum joined Italy's inoculation drive last week, a way of healing the soul and the mind along with the body, its director said.

By Elisabetta Povoledo

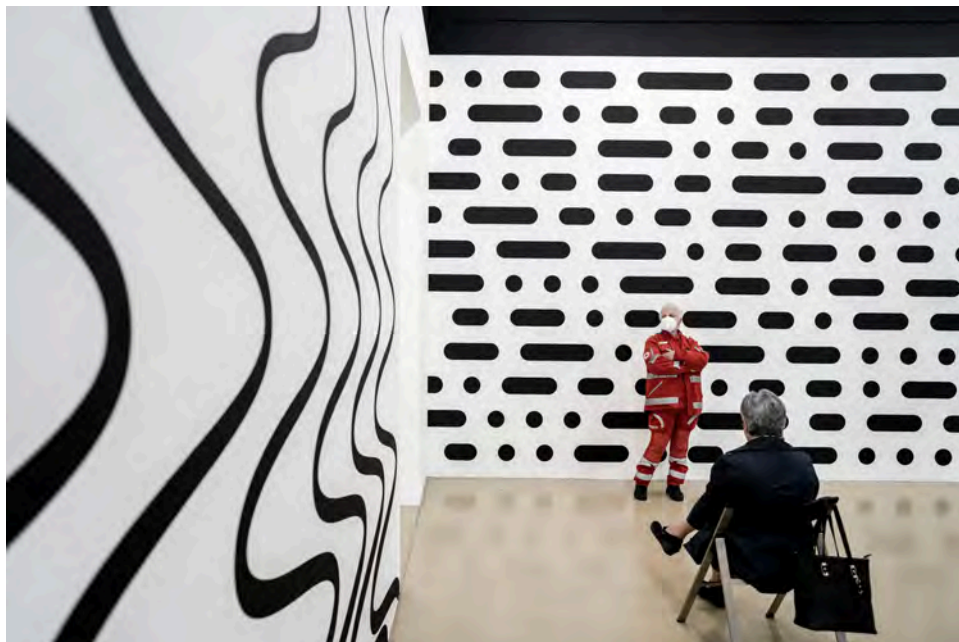
Published May 4, 2021 Updated May 5, 2021

ROME — These days, visitors to the website of one of Italy's most renowned contemporary art museums are met with a twofold invitation: "Book your visit in advance" and "Book your vaccination."

The Castello di Rivoli, once a palace owned by the Savoy dynasty, recently became one of several Italian museums to join the country's vaccine drive, following in the footsteps of cultural institutions throughout Europe.

With the rallying cry of "Art Helps," the museum near Turin has set aside its third-floor galleries for a vaccination center run by the local health authorities. During their shots, patients can enjoy the wall paintings by Claudia Comte, a Swiss artist.

Comte worked with the composer Egon Elliut to create a soundscape that evokes "a dreamlike feeling," the artist said, and lulls vaccine recipients as they move from room to room before and after the shot.



The post-vaccination waiting room. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the museum's director, sees a clear link between art and healing and pointed out that some of the first museums were former hospitals. Alessandro Grassani for The New York Times

“Art has an extraordinarily important effect on well-being,” said Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, the museum’s director. She said that she couldn’t have commissioned “a more perfect” backdrop than Comte’s works for a “space to merge the art of healing the body and the art of healing the soul and the mind,” noting that in Italian the words for “to heal” and “curator” came from the same Latin word, “curo.” In history, she said, some of the first museums were former hospitals.

Several of the first people to be vaccinated at the Castello di Rivoli last Thursday couldn’t have agreed more.

Currently, only people who live in the area served by local health authorities can get vaccinated there, like Patrizia Savoia, a retiree who lives within walking distance. “The anxiety of getting a vaccination disappeared in these beautiful rooms, surrounded by music,” she said. “It was very relaxing.”



Filling out medical history forms, surrounded by the installation. Alessandro Grassani for The New York Times



Medical staff waiting for arrivals. The artist and a composer created a soundscape for the vaccine hub. Alessandro Grassani for The New York Times



Giulia Isabel Prestianni, an 18-year-old student, was eligible to be vaccinated because her grandfather, who has health problems, lives with her family. “It felt nothing like a hospital. It was very welcoming with the music, more relaxing,” she said. Alessandro Grassani for The New York Times

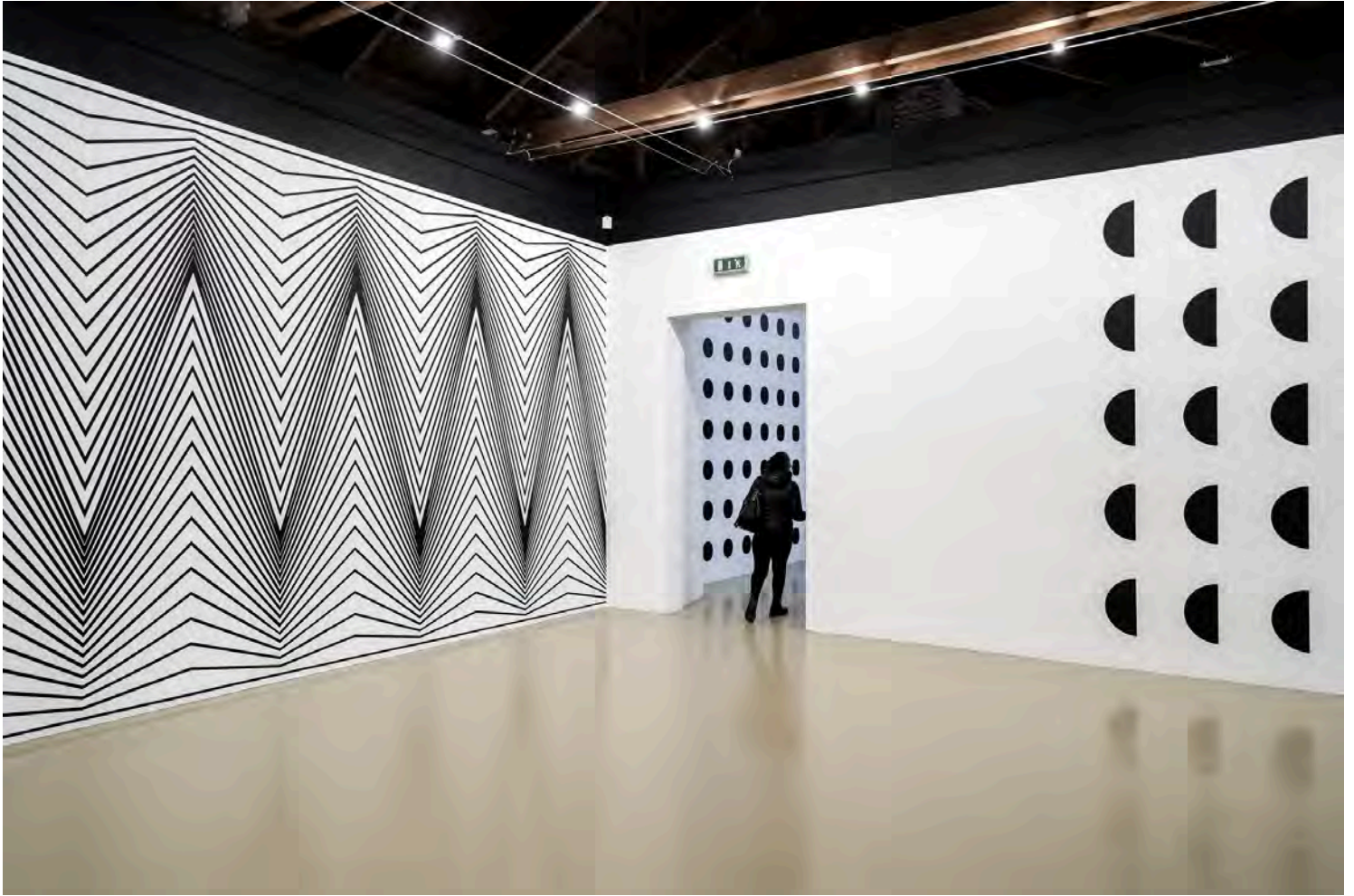
Comte’s show — “How to Grow and Still Stay the Same Shape” — opened in the fall of 2019 and was supposed to close in February last year. Instead, the gigantic wall paintings, in part inspired by some of the building’s 18th-century decorative motifs, have become “the longest-running show in the history of the Castello,” Christov-Bakargiev said.

The show that was supposed to take its place, by the Nigerian-born, Antwerp-based artist Otobong Nkanga, has been delayed until late September. The artist was “extremely collaborative,” Christov-Bakargiev said. “I called her thinking, ‘What’s she going to say?’ And she was super happy, and ‘Are you kidding? I am so happy the spaces are being used for a vaccination center.’”

Speaking from Madrid, where she was installing a show at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza that opens next week, Comte said she was happy that her artwork was having a double life. “I love to imagine people entering and really having this immersive and total audiovisual experience,” she said.

A performance piece that Comte had planned for the Rivoli show had been canceled because of the pandemic. So, she saw the people coming to be vaccinated against the backdrop of her wall paintings as “activating the space in a more complete and more meaningful way,” she said.

“What artists should do is speak for our time,” she added. “It’s right on point.”



Comte’s show was supposed to close last year. Instead, the gigantic wall paintings became “the longest-running show in the history of the Castello,” the museum director said. Alessandro Grassani for The New York Times



“It was a very striking experience,” said Marco Bottaro, above, an office worker who lives in nearby Grugliasco.
Alessandro Grassani for The New York Times



Patrizia Savoia, a retiree who lives in walking distance, said, “The anxiety of getting a vaccination disappeared in these beautiful rooms, surrounded by music.” Alessandro Grassani for The New York Times

Marco Bottaro, an office worker who lives in Grugliasco, a nearby town, received a vaccine last Thursday. “It was a very striking experience,” Bottaro said. Even though he is only 27, he was eligible because he lives with his father, who has health problems. Like many who grew up not far from the Castello, he visited often on school trips. “With the time we’re living in today, when people are worried in general, arriving at Rivoli and finding a relaxing environment was great,” he said.

Christov-Bakargiev said she had the idea to use the museum in this way after the death of Fiorenzo Alfieri, the museum’s chairman. He died of Covid last December, when the museum was closed. Attendance last year was down by 70 percent, and the museum lost a million euros, Christov-Bakargiev said. “I thought that if the museum has to be closed to the public, at least we can be of service to the community and of service to resolving the pandemic,” she said.



The Castello di Rivoli in Turin. Other museums across Italy have joined the vaccination drive, too. Alessandro Grassani for The New York Times

It took several months — mostly because of a vaccine shortage, she said — until the hub finally opened on April 29. In the meantime, other Italian museums joined the drive. In Naples, for example, shots are given at the city’s contemporary museum, Madre, which set up a special display featuring artworks from the collection; the city’s citizens are also being called to get vaccinated at the Museum and Royal Park Capodimonte with the slogan: “Let yourself be infected by beauty.”

In Milan, inoculations are being administered in the shadow of Anselm Kiefer’s imposing installation “Seven Celestial Towers” at the Pirelli HangarBicocca.

Rivoli’s mayor, Andrea Tragaoli, said he was keen to vaccinate as many people as possible and that the museum was a welcome addition to the city’s hospital, the other hub. “The Castello is known all over the world. It’s a source of pride for us,” he said.

The center operates on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, with about 100 people vaccinated each day. Those who are vaccinated can visit the rest of the museum free of charge.

Staff at the Castello have been trained to be especially welcoming to those coming to the hub because they might feel anxious, Christov-Bakargiev said. “We want people to feel like they are contributing to a larger cause, which is the collective and social cause of getting out of this pandemic,” she said.