



AiA Art News-service



Carolyn Christov-Barkargiev on the opening of the Cerruti Villa and its \$600m, 'near-secret' collection

The house and collection of Turinese collector Francesco Federico Cerruti will go on show this week

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2nd May 2019 10:16 BST



Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev: "far-reaching ideas and bold commitment to artists" Photo: Giorgio Perottino

“It’s almost unbelievable,” says Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, standing in the villa that the Turinese collector Francesco Federico Cerruti built to house his art. In 2017, two years after his death, his family unexpectedly entrusted the house and Cerruti’s \$600m collection to the nearby Castello di Rivoli, the atmospheric contemporary art museum that Christov-Bakargiev leads on the outskirts of Turin.

The villa is due to open to the public on 4 May, displaying some of the near-secret collection, which includes Medieval and Baroque masterpieces, Modern paintings by Giorgio de Chirico, Francis Bacon and Andy Warhol, as well as rare books and fine objects. Meanwhile, contemporary artists including Giuseppe Penone and Camille Henrot will create new commissions for the museum that respond to the collection.

Christov-Bakargiev compares Cerruti to “the great 20th-century collectors... where there was a tradition of restituting art to the public sphere”. But it was “a strange serendipity”, she says, that this reserved bachelor and bookbinding entrepreneur built his home in the 1960s a short walk away from the then-decaying castle in the hilltop town of Rivoli. He could not have known that in 1984, after renovation by the architect Andrea Bruno, the fortress-palace of the royal house of Savoy would rise again as a temple to contemporary art.

It is another happy coincidence that, just before the launch of the Cerruti collection—billed as the first contemporary art museum to incorporate an encyclopaedic collection—Christov-Bakargiev received the Audrey Irmas Award for Curatorial Excellence from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College. Its executive director Tom Eccles observed that “her far-reaching ideas and bold commitment to artists making new and ambitious works is equally matched by her exploration of artistic histories and their representations”.

From critic to curator

Plotting the exhibition she calls “homages to the Cerruti collection”, Christov-Bakargiev is a whir-wind of energy. The Italian-American

curator and fourth director of Castello di Rivoli speaks in rapid Italian, breaking into English and occasionally, French. Her conversation is peppered with classical, philosophical, psychoanalytical and scientific references: Pyrrho, Nietzsche, Judith Butler and Niels Bohr. It comes as little surprise when she says she studied art history, literature and linguistics in Pisa, and wanted to be a poetry critic.

“But no-one was really interested in that,” she says. Her mother, an archaeologist and activist, had instilled in her a love of art. So she became an art critic instead, writing articles and reviews for *Il Giornale dell’Arte* and *Flash Art International* magazine. “In the 80s, I started interviewing artists in their studios and I realised the ‘back office’—the making of art and the preparing of exhibitions—was fascinating,” she remembers. “And I began to think I could do better than the shows I was reviewing.”

A string of major exhibitions—including *Città-Natura* across five venues in Rome in 1997, MoMA PS1’s first Greater New York quinquennial in 2000 and solo shows for Pierre Huyghe, Franz Kline and William Kentridge—would follow. Christov-Bakargiev held senior curatorial posts at MoMA PS1 in New York (1999-2001) and at Castello di Rivoli (2002-08) before she became director in 2016. But it was a run of three so-called “perennials”—the 2008 Biennale of Sydney, Documenta 13 in 2012 and the 2015 Istanbul Biennial—that brought her international recognition as a curator.

Christov-Bakargiev identifies two strengths in her curating. The first is the lesson she learned from her mother that “an object can carry stories; it is a witness to the past”. The other is her relationship with artists. She travelled to Afghanistan with Francis Alÿs between 2010 and 2014, for example, “working through the issue of what is the relationship between art and war”. At Castello di Rivoli, she commissioned Hito Steyerl to create *The City of Broken Windows* (2018; until 30 June), a video installation touching on artificial intelligence, conflict and regeneration. The Italian museum is the co-producer, along with the Tate and the Art Institute

of Chicago, of Anne Imhof's three-part performance *Sex*, which debuted at Tate Modern in London in March.

“We are in a period when the public sector is disparaged, as if it's a 20th-century remnant”

Christov-Barkargiev has a reputation for spotting talent early and likes work that “understands storytelling”. In return, artists respond to her. “They like my critical positions, my questioning,” she says. “I participate in the background as a kind of confidante and first audience response.” In her acceptance statement for the Bard College award, she advised young curators to “act with scepticism...understanding we serve the artists and no-one else”.

That is not to say that visitors do not matter. Curators are the “translators” between the artist and the audience, Christov-Barkargiev says. The collection at Castello di Rivoli is arranged in a suite of single-artist rooms, with labels out of eyeline—imagine a Rococo version of the artist-focused experience at Dia:Beacon. The current Anri Sala show (*As You Go*, until 23 June) is a powerful, immersive encounter. “I'm trying to think how to make the artworks most glorious, so that people can experience the emotion and not just the intellectual knowledge they bear,” Christov-Bakargiev says. However, she adds, “We're in a historical moment where the artist is not the primary focus of the art world.”

Shock of austerity

Today, Christov-Bakargiev's attention is no longer on biennials, but instead on the state of the public museum. Since the financial crisis of 2008, museums across Europe have felt the impact of austerity. There was shock earlier this year at the Italian government's decision to cut €1.5m from its €2m grant to Maxxi, the national contemporary art museum in Rome. Meanwhile, the number of art collectors and private museums has boomed.

“It seems as if we are in a period when the public sector is disparaged, as if it's a 20th-century remnant,” Christov-Bakargiev says. “How can it be that the National Museum of Brazil in Rio burned [in a fire caused by a faulty air-conditioning unit], when the

sale of one Modigliani would be enough to redo the electrics of every art museum on the planet?”

Fortunately, the Castello di Rivoli benefits from a core subsidy from the Piedmont regional government, smaller sums from the local authorities in Rivoli and Turin and, unlike many Italian museums, grants and sponsorships from private foundations and banks. Its building is a Unesco World Heritage site; it has an outstanding collection of Arte Povera works; and in the evening, visitors can dine at its Michelin-starred restaurant. But for all these riches, Christov-Bakargiev says, “with the market so strong, we can’t afford to buy much art”, a disparity that restricts the stories that the museum will be able to tell to future generations.

She “commends” collectors who open their own museums, but points out that their art is often held privately rather than by a charitable foundation. “If there’s a loss of wealth, the museum can’t run anymore. If someone dies, the collection goes up for auction.” Christov-Bakargiev hopes Castello di Rivoli’s partnership with the Cerruti family foundation will provide a more enduring model. “I would like us to be an example of what can be done in the 21st century. We need the collectors, the wealthy elite, to help us create the patrimony of the future.”

