HALL MEETS SELLDORF

Having designed some of the most iconic gallery spaces around the globe, ANNABELLE SELLDORF long ago became the art world's go-to architect. Now, adding major museum commissions like the Frick Collection to her portfolio, the German turned New Yorker talks to *Andy Hall* about slowly taking the reins from yesteryear's so-called starchitects

ANDY HALL
in conversation with
ANNABELLE SELLDORF

ANDY HALL: You left Germany and built your career in New York. Why was that?

—ANNABELLE SELLDORF: I hadn't gotten into architecture school in Germany, but I got into Pratt. In retrospect, I probably had to leave Germany to find my own way. Like many Germans, national identity is a difficult topic. I found myself very liberated once I landed in New York. It suited my personality. It allowed me to find my own way without the society I knew.

Your father was an architect. Is that correct?

—That's right. Interestingly, he was an architect of practice. Through the war years, he hadn't actually completed his studies, and became a licensed architect as result of having practiced for many years.

So coming to America also allowed you to...

—To leave the strong father behind? Yes.

I could see that having a father who was in the same profession you wanted to pursue might be inhibiting in some ways.

—I didn't know that at the time, but that's absolutely correct. My father died in 2012, and now I realize in how many ways I think like him, how I intuit things in the same way. But I'm also very, very different. That was a hard place to stake out. Being in America and far away from his reach was probably a strong motivator.

What's different between working in Germany and America?

—I was going to say everything is different, but that's not really true. In the age of technology and working digitally, there's more and more overlap. Certainly, when I started out as an architect, the way drawings were produced was very different. Germans were always about the tectonics, about

the *how* of building rather than inspirational design. Here at American schools, design was very much in the foreground. It's a very different way of going about architecture and design.

Bottom-up as opposed to top-down, maybe?

—In a sense. I'm sure that you have experienced that, working in Germany?

For sure. We could have a long conversation just about that. But moving along, you've become the go-to architect for art world insiders, having designed homes and galleries for many, if not most, of the world's top gallerists. How did that come about?

—I grew up in Cologne, a city that was very important in the art world. In the 1960s and 70s, there were lots of artists there—there always have been. My parents had many artist and gallery friends. There are many museums. On the weekends, we would go look at shows and so on. It was an environment that mattered to me, that interested me, as well as being something that I was used to.

When I first came to New York, I was very lucky to have friends in and around the Dia Art Foundation, and I knew a whole bunch of artists. German gallerists used to come and go all the time. I was part of that environment. My first gallery commission was for Michael Werner. He was a formidable client and critic, and somebody with whom I spent lots of time talking about spaces for art, art itself. So it was a natural development. When David Zwirner opened his gallery—we had known each other since childhood—it was only natural that he would ask if I could help him.

David opened his first gallery in New York, what, in the early or mid-1990s?

—It was probably around 1995 or something like that.

"I don't believe in style. My aesthetic is probably one of understated elegance… It's always purposeful, always more concerned with what the architecture does as opposed to what it looks like"

Michael Werner Gallery 77th street, New York, 1990

Right: The light and airy interior of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, California, part of the museum's renovation and expansion by Selldorf Architects, 2022

Opening spread: ANNABELLE SELLDORF photographed in her office by GEORGE ETHEREDGE for BLAU International

So you've always had a strong personal interest in art and, in particular, contemporary art.

—Exactly. It was a very different scene. I lived in SoHo. I had a beautiful loft. You would go see all of the galleries all the time because they were right there.

Do you still do that?

—Not as much as I would like to. Yesterday, I went to see the Lee Lozano show at Hauser and Wirth. They're just these fantastic drawings. You have to see that show.

Do you collect art?

—Sort of. Different from the way you collect art. I have a lot of art, but I feel like I accumulate art, whereas you do it with…

Oh, we're at the far end of the spectrum. We do it obsessively. But you are a collector? You acquire art for your personal enjoyment?

—Exactly. I have a lot of drawings because I'm interested in that. It makes perfect sense to me when I see a drawing to almost trace the thought. Perhaps it's because I still draw when I work. I don't draw on the computer; I can only draw on paper, so I'm very interested in that process, coming to understanding the work through that.

To come back to your practice, then, would it be correct to describe your signature style as one of understated elegance?

—I don't believe in style. My aesthetic is probably one of understated elegance. I can answer that in the affirmative. But it's always purposeful, always more concerned with what the architecture does as opposed to what it looks like.

Form following function, to use a cliché.

—I don't know that it is a cliché. But it is thinking about how function has so many different—function is

totally subjective. If you rent an apartment, there's the bedroom, there's the living room, but if you put your bed in the living room, that doesn't make it, per se, unfunctional. You are presented with ready function, yet you could interpret it differently.

I think asking all of the critical questions about what makes something functional is when architecture is at its best. So yes, form follows functions, absolutely, but function needs definition. It's not a fixed term.

Do you have a set of guiding principles that you follow when undertaking a new project?

—Absolutely. Right now, we are working on a number of institutional projects, and it has brought to the forefront of my mind that you should think about how a person experiences space and how you want them to experience it, that you consider where they come from, and translate that into a path, a path of experience. At the Frick, I could only understand the project once I was able to fully put myself in the position of the visitor experiencing the building with a certain set of requirements. And in a way, that dictates the process.

There are many paths in a given project. If we're talking about a museum, there is the path of art, the path of installation, the path of conservation, and the more you understand what the prerequisites are for each and what you want the experience to be, the more readily form begins to appear. Then, needless to say, there are overlays of biases that one might have acquired over time, or memories that come into play. Does that make sense?

That makes total sense. Which of your projects are you most proud of, looking back?

—I'm like a child that way. I'm always the proudest of the thing I'm working on now, or that I have just accomplished. I'm incredibly proud of having finished the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, which took a long time, some six years or so. I think it turned out to be a really wonderful museum. But one of the first projects, Michael Werner's gallery, still brings a smile to my face when I think of it. I loved it so much.

Is that the gallery they still have on the Upper East Side in New York?

—No, but it was also on the Upper East Side, 21 East 67th Street—a very small gallery above what was then Colnaghi. It was the first proper gallery I did. I thought through absolutely every last square inch and was single-minded in a way. That's probably a little bit how I still am, except that now the teams are larger, the process is more collaborative, and the overall voyage of a project is a different one.

"'Has being a woman impacted your career?' I get asked this question frequently, and the glibbest answer I can give you is that I don't know, because I've never been a man"

Installation view of Diana Thater's *The Sky is Unfolding Under You* at David Zwirner Gallery, 43 Greene Street, New York, 2001

Right: David Zwirner working alongside Angela Choon and Hanna Schouwink at the front desk of 43 Greene Street, New York, c. 1995

Back then, it was just me making every drawing, going to the site every day, convincing Michael Werner that this was the right thing to do, convincing the contractors that this was the right thing to do. And that really, really mattered to me and shaped how I think about things.

I could imagine Michael might not have been the easiest of clients. I have enormous respect for Michael, but he is—how should I say...?
—A strong character.

A person with very strong opinions about things, yes. I now feel I have to ask to you, what was your biggest professional disappointment, something that maybe didn't happen, or didn't happen the way you wanted it to happen? Or maybe you don't have any of those.

—Oh, I think everybody has disappointments, but I cannot conjure up a particular project that I was disappointed with.

Architecture is a funny profession. It's one where you have to have a huge amount of patience, a huge amount of passion. It involves large amounts of people—teams, consultants, clients, builders. It's a long, long process. So when I describe the design of a gallery and the sense that I owned each aspect of it, that's a very important feeling.

Nowadays, we have an office of, I don't know, 70, 75 people. We participate in competitions—though, I'm always hesitant to enter them because it's so emotionally wearing. There's so much time and effort that goes into it. By the time that you take it on and think something through and understand the complexities, there's a very strong sense of ownership. Then the sadness and disappointment if you don't win the competition is really tough.

I could understand that. That makes total sense. You've anticipated my next question. I've met quite a few well-known architects, and they all struck me as being intensely competitive. Would you agree with that, and would you consider yourself to be competitive?
—I do agree with that, but probably in the same way that every profession is competitive to an extent. In architecture, there's that competition system. It's like a dogfight. How do you wind up people to make the most dramatic presentation? I've lost competitions to people where I've thought: "Well, if you were inviting so-and-so to a competition and that person won, you'd never want what I would deliver to a project. Why put me through it?" But you don't always know that. People like Renzo Piano don't participate in competitions for that reason.

Interesting. I hadn't really thought about that. Architectural competitions are very much a feature of the business, but I guess you can elect to participate or not.

—Well, in Europe, it's much more extreme than it is here. You can elect not to participate, but then you elect not to participate in the game. Large institutional projects, by and large, are awarded as the result of some kind of competition, and if you choose not to enter, you can continue staying in your little pod and work for yourself.

Has being a woman impacted your career for better or for worse, or don't you think about it?

—I get asked this question frequently, and the glibbest answer I can give you is that I don't know, because I've never been a man.

Well, that's a good response.

—But now I'm old enough to know that of course it has made a difference. I'm also old enough now for people not to pat me on my rear end. Certainly, though, the kind of condescending and belittling attitudes that go along with the treatment of young women have found no exception in architecture. And without talking out of school, of course that was my experience. But having said that, at times people would be helpful because that vulnerable young thing needed support.

I think that the business situation has changed very much. There are many, many more women in the field. More women than men graduate from architecture school, but fewer women than men enter the profession as licensed architects. That's very much a societal thing, and that still has a long way to go.

To achieve the sort of success that you've achieved?

—There are all kinds of successes. I don't think that everybody is made to be as hard-wearing as I am. You're asking if I am competitive. Yes, I'm competitive. Not excessively so, but I do work very hard.

What are your views on what has been dubbed the "starchitect phenomenon," especially as it relates to museums? It seems when some institution decides they're going to build a new facility, they want to have an internationally recognized brand-name architect be involved in it. That's my impression. People comment on this all the time. Do you have any thoughts on that?

—I have a lot of thoughts on that. It's a very interesting thing that I believe is changing a little bit. I don't know exactly when it started, but there was a time when museums had to make a large gesture that could be supported by a few wealthy patrons. And that was less to do with expertise than with brand. Some great, interesting buildings have come about as a result, and also some really terrible ones.

But I think there are now more people who are more interested in what the outcome is vis-à-vis the visitors' experience and the opportunities for exhibition. I would say I am the next generation that differentiates work not as a result of large gesture. Am I a starchitect? No. I'm just relatively well known because I've been doing one particular thing for a long time, and as a result, I've acquired a certain amount of expertise. I really, really think that expertise is useful and significant. There are many people out there who nowadays think: "Expertise, that was yesterday's thing. Expertise is not necessary, because you can just google the problem and find an adequate answer." Or: "Expertise is held by consultants. You need a young architect with fresh ideas." Is that right or wrong? I don't know. There is probably some way in the middle. Of course, we want younger people who are less well known, who don't produce the same thing over and again.

Museum of Contemporary
Art San Diego, 2022

I dare say for myself that we never do the same thing. We always start from scratch to appropriately take inventory of the specific conditions of a particular place. But what we bring when we start a new project is, of course, knowing how certain things matter, any number of things that are similar in every institution. To that extent, I think expertise helps, but…

What…?

—But so much for starchitects.

From a design perspective, what are your favorite museums? I'm not talking about ones you've designed, but other architect-designed museums.

—Oh, there are so many. If we're talking about the modern realm rather than…

Let's constrain ourselves to, I don't know, the past 30 or 40 years, say.

—The Calouste Gulbenkian in Lisbon. The Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin is just always something that feels like…

It's just been renovated?

—Yes. I really appreciate how carefully and how thoughtfully Chipperfield's team has approached that topic. It's a fantastic museum. There is, of course, the Menil in Houston that is absolutely wonderful.

I always cite that as my favorite interaction between art and architecture. The contents are so special.

—I know.

There's a dialogue going on between the two.

—The Kimbell in Fort Worth is a place that just never ceases to amaze me. Then the two Louis Kahn museums at Yale, the Yale University Art Gallery and the Yale Center for British Art—they're both just phenomenal buildings and places to look at art in.

I have to ask you now, what are your least favorite museums? You don't have to answer that if you don't want to.

—My least favorite museum? I would have to think about that for a little bit. Actually, let's not go there!

Do you have favorite and least favorite landmark buildings in New York City?

—There are many buildings that I love. It may come as no surprise to you that I love the Seagram Building and Lever House and the Pepsi-Cola Building, that corridor on Park Avenue that just represents the best of what used to be called the international style. But I really love a great many buildings that are perhaps not superstars. There is a building by Louis Sullivan on Bleecker Street that I think is just a fine, fine piece of architecture. Architects know it, but not necessarily everybody.

> "There are all kinds of successes. I don't think that everybody is made to be as hard-wearing as I am. You're asking if I am competitive. Yes, I'm competitive. Not excessively so, but I do work very hard"

I'll have to look out for it when we're next in that part of the city.

—You will immediately see what I mean. It's just so beautifully proportioned, and such a fine building. What else comes to mind? It often happens to me that I walk around some place and, all of a sudden, I take note of a building that's particularly beautifully balanced or elegantly proportioned. There is a Lescaze building downtown on White Street. You wouldn't even notice until you do, and then there it is, and it's just a beautifully proportioned, modern structure.

Which of your architectural peers or forebearers do you particularly admire?

—I could do it in alphabetical order because I'm looking at my library while I sit here.

Fair enough.

—I might start with Gunnar Asplund. I would definitely think of Alvar Aalto. And now we're on to B. There's Barragán. Oh, we can't go through my entire library. There are so many. Of course, there's always Mies.

Installation view of Yayoi Kusama's 2019 exhibition, *Every Day I Pray for Love* at David Zwirner New York's West Chelsea gallery space, designed by Selldorf Architects

Right: ANNABELLE SELLDORF photographed in her office by GEORGE ETHEREDGE for BLAU International

"I love many buildings that are perhaps not superstars. There is a building by Louis Sullivan on Bleecker Street that I think is a fine, fine piece of architecture. Architects know it, but not everybody"

But then there's a whole series of wonderful architecture that is probably defined most by Adolf Loos and Louis Kahn, and Louis Kahn and Louis Kahn.

There was that amazing movie, *My Architect*, made about Louis Kahn, I think, a few years ago. Did you see that?

—That's right. Of course, yes. I was actually thinking that I want to see that again because it was such an elegiac movie. Then there's, of course, Carlo Scarpa, one cannot forget. But the list goes on.

Does it ever happen that you decline or discontinue a project because you don't like the goals or sensibility of the client?

—Yes. It doesn't happen often, because you really try to understand ahead of time what you're getting yourself into, mostly because projects last a long time and you become intensely involved with the client. And if you're not aligned in the beginning, it's very, very hard to find common ground later on.

We were actually just talking about that at the office yesterday. We do a lot of art-related private commissions, exhibitions, but we also work with developers. We've done a number of residential apartment buildings. Certainly, not every architect likes to work with developers, and I understand why, because it's a sort of commercial enterprise, right? To me, the upside is if you make a good residential building, it contributes not only to the people who live there, but it becomes part of the urban fabric that everybody appreciates. So when we take on commercial projects like that, I make very sure that it's a developer I know I can work with.

Not all about the bottom line.

—Exactly.

We live in an increasingly politicized world. Have you, or would you, decline a commission for ethical or political reasons? I assume if you were asked to build a museum in Russia today, you might think twice about doing it. That's the line of thinking I have.

—It gets more fine-grained than that. I remember that some years ago, through an acquaintance, I was asked to do a large building for a super political action committee, a conservative super PAC, and truthfully, I didn't fully understand what I was being—who the client was. I had a really exhilarating, fun conversation with the person who asked us to consider taking on the commission. It wasn't until afterwards—when I talked with our general manager, who said, "You don't know who that is?"—that I had to sort of climb out of the situation. It was like: "Oh, well, we're really too busy right now. We can't follow through on this." Anyway, that was funny.

And what was it about certain shows that made them good in your opinion?

—I think it is the clarity of intent and the quality of material paired with a notion about how that content is disseminated with rhythm and understanding, or an expectation of how someone who isn't intensely familiar with the material will be able to see it, absorb it, enjoy it, learn from it. If that sounds general, it's not. It's actually the opposite. I like shows that are very specific and very intentional, rather than dramatic.

That seems to be a description that takes us back to where we began, and that's your signature approach when it comes to architecture too.

—I think that's right. It's specificity.

It's not a grand, bombastic gesture but a functionally driven aesthetic.

—I like to dispense with all the unnecessary stuff.

You mentioned you've worked on apartment buildings, and I know that not all of your commissions have been connected to museums or the art world. What are some other of these projects that you've been involved in?

—A project that was very instrumental for me, of course, was the recycling facility in Brooklyn, for Sims Metal Management.

Did I read an article about that some years ago in the *New Yorker* magazine?

—You probably read something in the *New Yorker*, but Michael Kimmelman wrote a very long, beautiful story about it in the *New York Times*.

Oh, maybe that was what I remember.

—That, of course, is an infrastructural project which is, in its nature, very different.

It's hard to think of something further afield from designing a museum than doing something like that.

—Yes, but I think about it in the same way. My process in designing it was not dissimilar to thinking about, I don't know, the Frick Collection. They look very different, but they're entirely generated as a result of thinking about what the project has to accomplish, and thinking about how proportion and structure inform a visitor's or a worker's daily experience. I would say that it's always people-centric, what we do, and then there's the research and knowledge that you acquire when you learn about something like recycling.

Thinking to the future, what would be your dream commission?

—What would be my dream commission? I'm working on some dream commissions right now. We're working on the National Gallery in London. I stand there in Trafalgar Square, and I'm just truly delighted to be able to be a part of this project. On the other end of the spectrum, we're also working in Toronto at the Art Gallery of Ontario, producing an addition with new gallery space, but that in its own way is also a little bit of a dream project. I love working with art, so doing a freestanding new museum that can answer to all of the expectations that art can bring to people, I think that's just always sort of central to my heart. I know that sounds a little bit trite, but there it is.