

• COVER STORY

Between the lines of your own vocabulary

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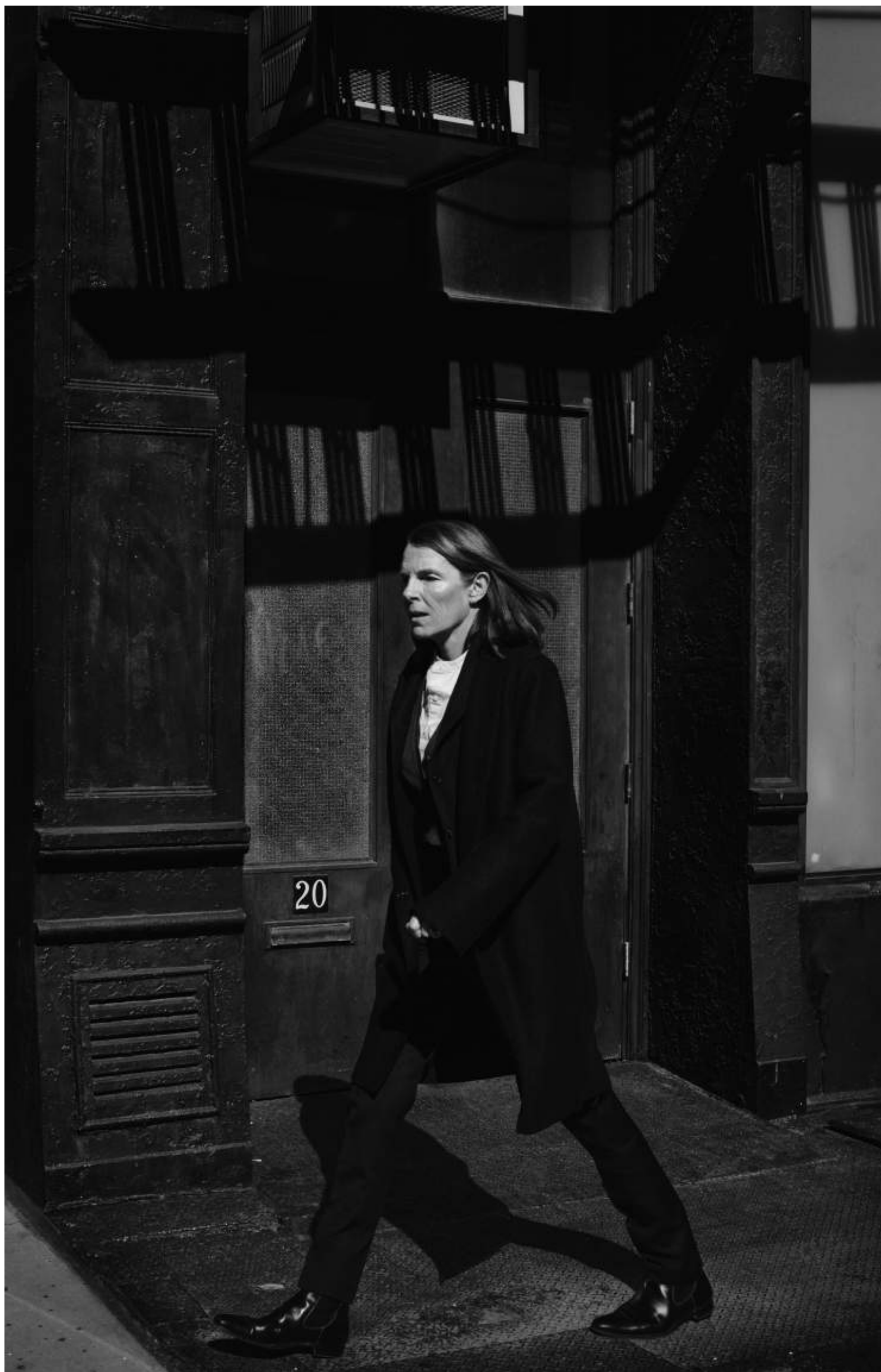
Annabelle Selldorfs almost three decades

This comprehensive wealth of experience should be thought of as a comprehensive vocabulary book and not as a collection of formulas. However, the fact that there is no space for decorative lines in it does not mean that

their architectural signature does not change slightly every now and then. The desire for continuity is combined with the internationally sought-after

Architect always with a great deal of curiosity.

lies that unknown



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Annabelle Selldorf's architecture is created at the crossroads of rationality and intuition. At a point where curiosity and continuity meet, but never collide uncontrollably. It is created with body and soul, but without declaring the embodiment of its own design principles to be an irrefutable credo. The architect puts it in a nutshell: her stomach and head are in constant exchange. »Looking at things rationally is important to me because I want to understand why I'm doing something and what the circumstances are like. Because in contrast to the fine arts, real conditions play a role

Look for connecting doors between the individual subject areas. If there is a risk of getting lost due to one or the other mental detour, that is not a bad thing in the case of a conversation with Annabelle Selldorf. But on the contrary. Allowing yourself to get lost in something every now and then without actually getting lost is something that characterizes both her way of speaking about her profession and the museum and gallery spaces she designs. After all, in both cases it is always about looking for approaches, circling things and finally finding the most suitable one for the situation



always plays a role in architecture.« Being aware of this also helps her to be able to take more freedom a little later in the process.
It's 12 o'clock in New York City. Annabelle Selldorf wears a white blouse, there are some objects on the sideboard behind her, which she will talk about a little later. As always, she is in a hurry, she says at the beginning of the interview. But even with the first question it becomes clear that this does not mean that she always wants to take the shortest route in her answers. Instead, she skilfully navigates through complex issues — always on the

to find perspective. But the joy that arises in her when she has summed up a thing with just one word is clearly noticeable. "It's this desire to find the exact and right way to express it — to say 100 percent of what you want to say in as few words as possible," she once explained in an interview.¹As with a circle, both exist equally with Annabelle Selldorf - the desire to get to the point - to pierce her heart, so to speak - as well as the joy that springs up in her every now and then in encircling things. About their way of building

¹ <https://www.surfacemag.com/articles/annabelle-selldorf/>
² <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/stil/architektin-annabelle-selldorf-im-portraet-18011377.html>

However, the former says much more. She herself put it this way: "Let's put it this way: I build with relatively little decor."²

BREAKTHROUGH WITH THE NEW GALLERY

Finding a common thread that runs through both our conversation and their work is not difficult. It pops up again and again and in different nooks and crannies — curiosity. In more than sufficient measure, she was also instrumental in the fact that the native of Cologne settled in New York as an architect in 1988

Selldorf born in Cologne. »Our parents dragged me and my siblings to all the museums. That was certainly not always a pleasure for us children. But apparently something got stuck,« the architect explains in an interview *the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.³ However was it by no means the case that the profession of architect immediately emerged as an absolute dream job. »As a teenager, I liked the idea of being a diplomat in the Foreign Office and living in Paris. In my naivety I imagined working in a great building for harmony and peace in the world. It is to this day that I prefer myself



made independently. "One could perhaps also describe it as naivety or a thirst for adventure," she says with that subtle sense of humor that makes you never quite sure whether a laugh is appropriate. But even before something like tension or uncertainty can arise, she usually resolves the situation herself with a hearty laugh. Incidentally, this happens much more often than one would attribute to Annabelle Selldorf at first glance. "I hope that my sense of humor will save me," she says once during the interview, and you believe her right away.

But first back to the beginning: Annabelle Selldorf was born in 1960 as the daughter of the architect and designer Herbert

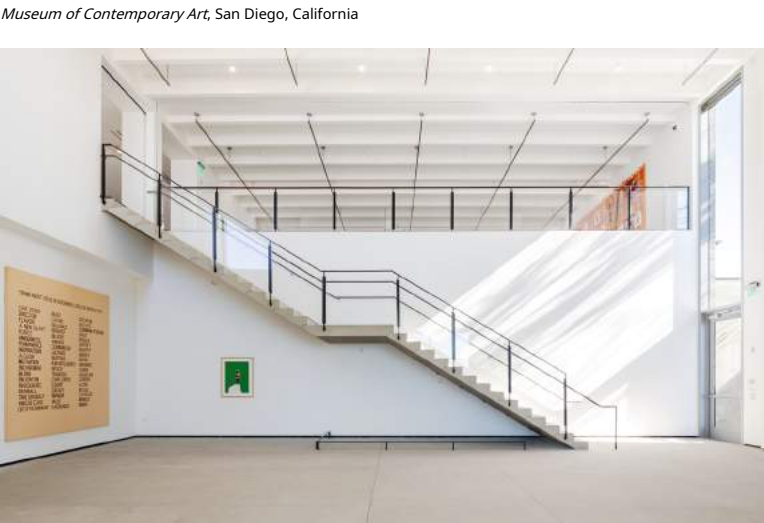
don't argue," she recalls.⁴ Still, there seemed to be a spark within her just waiting to be ignited. That finally happened in New York, where Annabelle Selldorf began studying architecture in 1979. An internship finally led her to Richard Gluckman's architectural office — at that time a key point of contact when it came to the design of museums and galleries. If you look at Selldorf Architects' project list, you can say with a clear conscience that this position is now being filled by their own company. Her first major project as a freelance architect was the design of a gallery for

³<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/stil/architektin-annabelle-selldorf-im-portraet-18011377.html>

⁴<https://sz-magazin.sueddeutsche.de/kunst/annabelle-selldorf-interview-architektin-architektur-92331>



New Gallery New York, Manhattan, NYC



Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, California

the Cologne gallery owner Michael Werner. The job brought \$18,000 to her account for a total of eight months of work. But much more important to her than the money was the conscious, precise vision that she was able to learn from him. Even from today's perspective, she would not change much at the gallery.⁵ And there it is again, the love for continuity, which in the case of Annabelle Selldorf does not stand in opposition to the feeling of almost childlike curiosity, but is closely linked to it. »There are people who always need something new. I'm not like that," says Selldorf, who says she still wears the same hairstyle as when she was in high school. »I like to deal with the vocabulary that I have developed over the years, with this universe, which is also strongly characterized by curiosity. Within this framework I engage with things that I have not seen, experienced or experienced before. In the continuity of my own vocabulary, I find ways to deal with the unknown without losing my balance.« Should she nevertheless end up in a dead end, there are enough things which are extremely helpful when looking for the right way, explains the architect, pointing to the small shelf behind her desk. A stone brought from China, a picture and several photographs have found their home on the simple piece of furniture. "They are all stimuli," says Selldorf. Small springboards for the next big design.

The breakthrough happened Annabelle Selldorf in the year

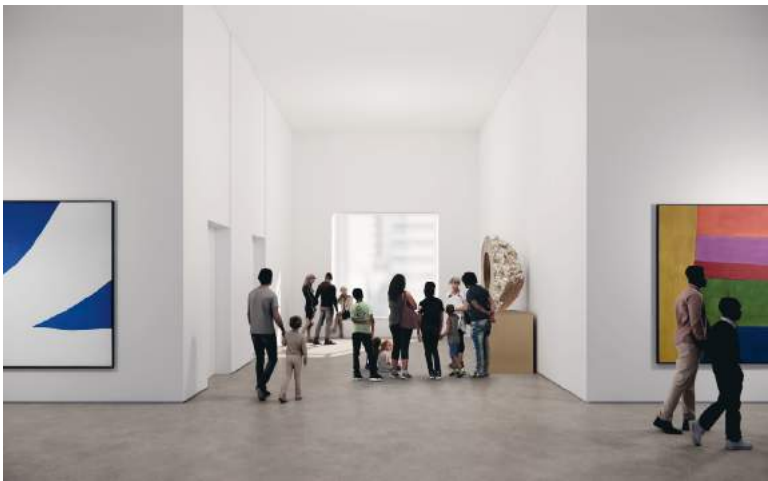
2001 — with the remodeling of a magnificent Beaux Arts mansion on Fifth Avenue in New York *new gallery*, a museum for German and Austrian art of the early 20th century funded by billionaire Ronald S. Lauder. Commissions for some of the most influential gallery owners of our time followed. Selldorf not only has a close working relationship with David Zwirner, but also a friendly relationship. The construction of his five-story gallery on 20th Street in New York is one of her most important projects. In addition, the Selldorf Architects office, which has around 70 employees, is one of the most important addresses when museums are to be renovated or expanded. Among other places in San Diego, where Annabelle Selldorf and her team directly on the Pacific situated *Museum of Contemporary Art* remodeled and expanded. In New York she drew, among other things, for the redesign of the *Frick Collection* responsible, and the expansion plans also came from her office. In London, Annabelle Selldorf is also currently renovating the entrance area of *Sainsbury's wing* be shares. This should be made more inviting and art — both literally, with the means of architecture, and figuratively — make it accessible to all. A task that Selldorf has dedicated body and soul to. In the Canadian city of Toronto, the next challenge is already waiting for the native of Cologne: her office got the

⁵<https://sz-magazin.sueddeutsche.de/kunst/annabelle-selldorf-interview-architect-architecture-92331>

⁶<https://www.architecturalrecord.com/articles/16054-newsmaker-annabelle-selldorf-takes-on-the-critics>



National Gallery, London, UK



Art Gallery of Ontario Dani Reiss Modern and Contemporary Gallery, Toronto, Canada

order for which Art Gallery of Ontario Dani Reiss Modern and Contemporary Gallery to design a building adjacent to a Frank Gehry building. Annabelle Selldorf met the Canadian-born architect in Arles in southern France, where she founded the art center of the Luma Foundation the Swiss patron Maja Hoffmann built, while Gehry designed a dazzling metal tower. This time the two, whose creative signatures could hardly be more different, meet as equals. "He said that despite the big differences, he totally trusted me," says the architect in an interview.⁶

»THE PROCESS IS THE STYLE«

When Annabelle Selldorf redesigns existing buildings, most of which have a long history, or plans and designs extensions, she wants to »penetrate the bowels of a building«. This means that she encounters a building as if she were meeting a person. »One discovers its strengths and weaknesses, enters into a dialogue with the building and its history and asks oneself what it has to do in its new form.«⁷ The fact that the result of these long, often protracted discussions occasionally met with criticism and was the subject of heated debate is in the nature of things, especially in the case of traditional buildings with a long history.

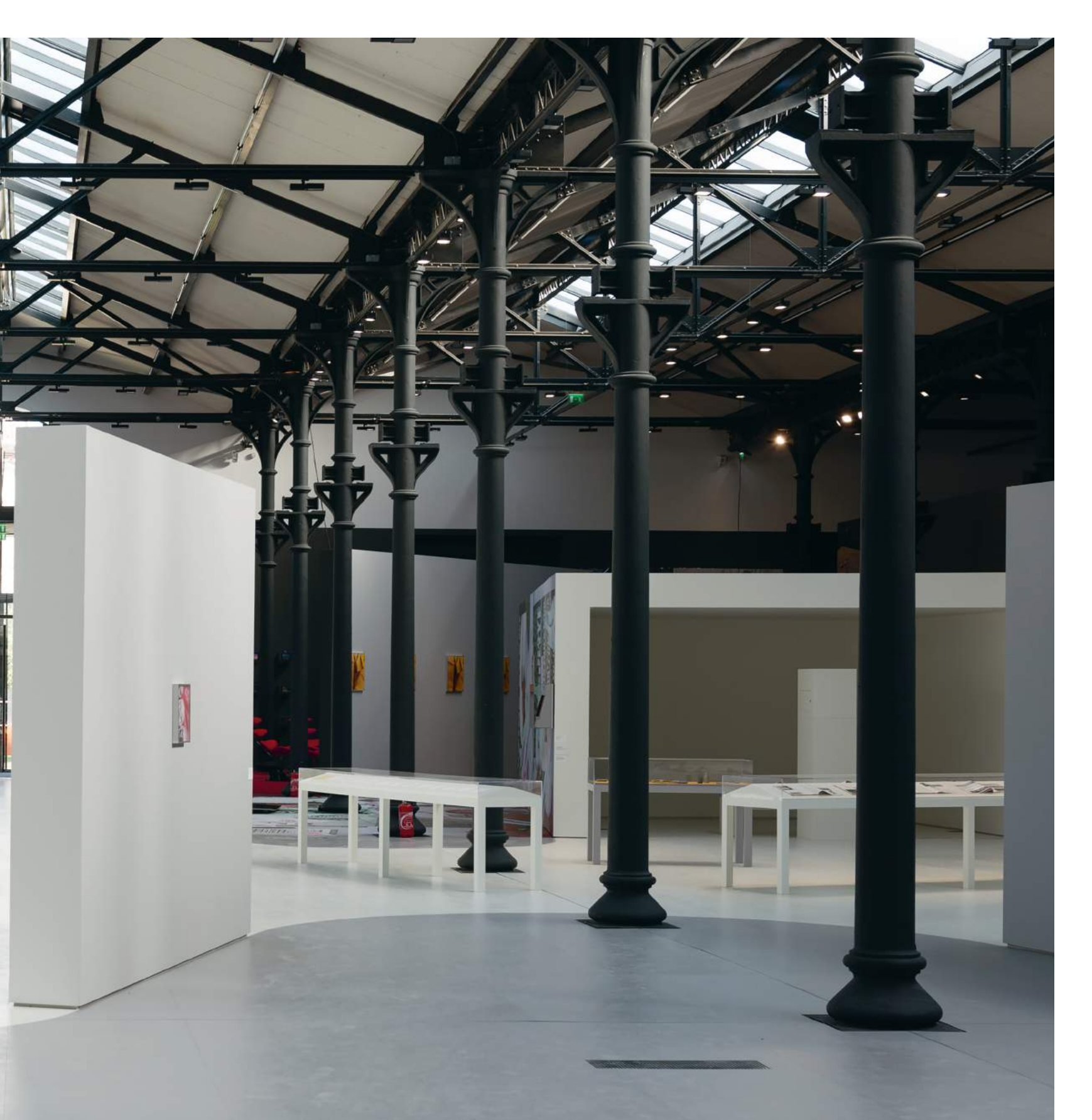
Luma Foundation, Arles, France



⁷ https://www.selldorf.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Claudia-Bodin_Stille-Grosse_ART_November-2022_Combined.pdf



Exhibition »Systematically Open? New Forms for Contemporary Image Production.« Kunstzentrum der *Luma Foundation* in Arles, France—the client is the Swiss patron Maja Hoffmann.





»The older I get, the more convinced I am that architecture is legitimated by the people who experience and use it. That doesn't mean, however, that form isn't also important — it's still part of the architecture. But I think it's much more important to think about why certain things are designed this way or that way - and always relate these considerations to the people who will deal with them later.«

Does this people-oriented approach to your job go hand in hand with a form of creative restraint? »I see it not so much as reticence, but rather as a desire to experience the different ways people experience and perceive things,« Annabelle Selldorf replies without much ado. In the past, the clear language of form and the cool elegance of her designs repeatedly ensured that Selldorf's works were compared to so-called experiential architecture and, as a result, were pigeonholed as minimalism. The architect herself sees it differently: "I don't like being categorized because my vocabulary isn't based on a formula, we develop our projects step by step. you could maybe say that in a way I'm interested in normality because the history of architecture and design is so incredibly long and I find it incredibly interesting how continuity works. If a certain material is no longer perceived as relevant today, I find it exciting to deal with it and find new ways of using it.« The architecture critic Ian Volner described it as follows: »The process, to some extent, is the style .«8th

At the beginning of her career, she struggled with being told time and again that she didn't have a clear handwriting, but today she sees things much more calmly. For them, it is not the wow factor that is decisive, but the lasting impression that a building leaves on the people who use it. Her buildings are not boring, but invite you to linger in them for a long time. The calm that they radiate would create the freedom that art spaces need above all in order to fulfill their tasks well. With Annabelle Selldorf, clear forms meet balanced proportions, a clever use of light and an exceptionally sensitive use of materials. Ian Volner sums up the Selldorf philosophy as follows: »In an age of skepticism, the firm's is an architecture of circumspect beauty. A formalism against formalism: the lyrical giving way to the logical, or vice versa.«8th

»In the more than 30 years that my company has existed, there has not been a single year in which boredom or disinterest has diminished the joy of work. Which doesn't mean it's always fun — by no means. But I know that if I were bored, I would give up this job immediately and rather read books«, is Annabelle Selldorf's answer to the question of whether she had ever felt the same. "Besides, I don't believe in getting somewhere. Although me

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If I'm possibly on the right path, I'm not immune to one day finding myself in the fog or on a steep slope.« Even thoughts that one would probably classify as »impostor syndrome« are her companions from time to time. »Even after more than 30 years in the profession, I sometimes think to myself: I was lucky that nobody noticed how little I actually know. However, it is true that getting older brings at least one good thing with it: I now know what I can do, what I am talking about, and I am convinced of my position.« All the well-known artists would probably sign that too, for that Annabelle Selldorf has already worked on. The architect with a special eye for light and proportions has already been admired by David Salle, Cindy Sherman and Jeff Koons commissioned. As a human being, the latter was "as intangible as mercury".⁹

VENI,
VIDI,
VICA

The above-mentioned security regarding her own work also contributed to the fact that Annabelle Selldorf has increasingly devoted herself to the furniture company Vica, founded by her grandmother Vica-Marie, in recent years. "I realized that this plant will eventually die if I don't take care of it. Vica has always been an exciting thing for me because designing pieces of furniture allows me to participate on a different scale



Herbert Armchair, Cyrus Dresser and star Lamp by Vica by Annabelle Selldorf

objects to deal with. It's a bit as if another part of my brain is being addressed and it's a nice counterpoint to the often lengthy architectural work," explains the architect, who in the course of this also asked herself why, given the abundance of existing design studios and Furniture companies need another company. »Similar to architecture, I thought that I could make a contribution that is different. Even if it's only marginally different, it's precisely that marginality that interests me." So there was that one moment, Annabelle Selldorf continues, when she decided to revamp the entire collection and reassess its validity. The furniture company was also renamed from »Vica« to »Vica by Annabelle Selldorf«. »Not an easy decision«, as the *New Yorker* by choice notes. "Of course, in this context you ask yourself what role you play in your own family and whether such a change might be presumptuous," she says. Ultimately, however, it was an almost cleansing process, at the end of which was: "It's okay."

Annabelle Selldorf never met her grandmother, a former opera singer who tried to gain a foothold in furniture design after the end of the Second World War. "She must have been a really interesting person who put her three children through the war with a lot of energy and then started to study interior design, although she never learned it

has. She was best known for her good taste and energetic statements. My father always said that I was very like her.«

As a child, she herself was shaped by two character traits that seemed contradictory at first glance, the architect recalls in a calm voice, which always conveys the promise of a story. »I was both very anxious and very energetic as a child. Concerned, but also demanding. And that's still true. Sometimes I feel like you



Vica Light — originally designed for the showrooms of *New Gallery New York*.

not really changed in certain things. Of course that's only true to a limited extent.« And here too - albeit in a slightly different form - the constant interplay of continuity and curiosity reappears. After a short pause she adds: »I have always preferred to make decisions for myself. If there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's that I care deeply about my own compass to follow. But I don't ask anyone else to do the same."

Can you remember a piece of furniture that immediately catapults you back to your childhood? "There is," Annabelle Selldorf answers like a shot from a gun. »An armchair from our collection, the *Herbert* named after my father, who also designed it. I believe that the chair used to

Helmut was called. For me, however, it has been called for a long time *Herbert*.« The architect describes the armchair as a simple and delicate, but at the same time very comfortable piece of furniture. "In a way, the proportions of this chair represent ours

entire collection. Looking back, I would say he played a pivotal role in the decision to reinstate Vica. Everything I associate visually and emotionally with this armchair is part of the company and our collection.«

one last thought-sprung — a final connecting door between childhood and the present, architecture and interior design, continuity and curiosity — brings us back to the design of art spaces. »The demands on galleries have changed a lot«, holds

Annabelle Selldorf. »There is a larger, much more international audience that grasps what is at stake more quickly, draws comparisons more quickly and recognizes structures more quickly. Doing justice to this without losing individuality and humanity is one of the major tasks of our time. I can still remember that we practically helped build the first gallery for David Zwirner ourselves.« She pauses for a moment and then adds, laughing: »Okay, that might be a bit of an exaggeration, but not by much.«

Sound totally grounded? So is the architect. But it wouldn't be Annabelle Selldorf if she didn't like to break with expectations every now and then. "It wasn't that long ago that I had a lesson on the trapeze. An exciting experience because you are confronted with your fears, the sense of adventure and the desire to do something you have never experienced before at the same time. That was really exciting.« Before we say goodbye again, she adds with an almost childishly mischievous smile on her face: »But I don't know if I would do it a second time.« In a nutshell — say: »with relatively little decor« — one could say: Curiosity meets continuity meets rationality meets intuition. Because all this is in a meeting with Annabelle Selldorf.