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## 'Bringing People to Art Is Important': Star Architect Annabelle Selldorf on Her Vital Mission

Since its inception in 1988, the foundation of Selldorf Architects is art. Multiple major museum projects are on the horizon.



Annabelle Selldorf, photographed by Stephen Kent Johnson. Courtesy of Selldorf Architects.

by **Whitney Mallett** July 10, 2024

Annabelle Selldorf is one of the art world's preeminent architects. Since she founded Selldorf Architects in 1988 at only 28 years old, she's grown it into one of the world's most sought after firms, consistently demonstrating a deep sensitivity to context, materiality, and the needs of both art and the people who engage with it.

Never showy, [Selldorf \(https://www.selldorf.com\)](https://www.selldorf.com) foregrounds functionality and elegant restraint, a sensibility explained perhaps by her German roots—she grew up in Cologne, though she's been based in New York now for over 40 years. Her notorious light touch has also, over the past decade, earned her a string of high-profile museum commissions, two of which she's poised to complete in the coming year: a redesign of the National Gallery's Sainsbury Wing, focused on making the Trafalgar Square main entrance more accessible, and an expansion of the Frick Collection in New York. She's also in the midst of revitalizing the Smithsonian American Art Museum in D.C., the first phase of which opened in September. She's also working on a new 50,000-square-foot building for the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, scheduled to open in 2027.



Aerial view of the Dani Reiss Modern and Contemporary Gallery looking northwest at the Art Gallery of Ontario.  
 Rendering: Play-Time, courtesy of Art Gallery of Ontario, Selldorf Architects, Diamond Schmitt, and Two Row Architect.

In addition to designing for major public institutions, Selldorf is often associated with commercial galleries' aspirations to shape their exhibition spaces more and more like those of museums. Since the 2000s, she's designed dozens of gallery and office spaces for David Zwirner (the dealer is a longtime friend and she also designed his East Village home and the recently-opened, 3-story Los Angeles flagship). In more recent years, her client list has grown to include other blue-chip galleries like Hauser and Wirth, Gladstone, Esther Schipper, and Thaddeus Ropac, these projects spanning New York, Los Angeles, London, and Berlin.

Along with Frank Gehry, Selldorf is the favorite architect of art collector [Maja Hoffman \(https://news.artnet.com/market/billionaire-maja-hoffmanns-private-museum-in-arles-blew-my-mind-2329498\)](https://news.artnet.com/market/billionaire-maja-hoffmanns-private-museum-in-arles-blew-my-mind-2329498), who tapped both icons to assist her in converting a 19th-century rail yard in Arles, France into the 600,000-square-foot cultural center LUMA Arles, which opened in 2021. Hoffman isn't the only collector who adores Selldorf. The Rubells recruited her to convert a former industrial warehouse in Miami into a museum to showcase their private collection. It opened in 2019. A year before, the Selldorf-designed not-for-profit Swiss Institute opened to buzzy acclaim. She transformed a three-story 1940s bank building into a visionary exhibition and community space that thoughtfully integrates into New York's East Village.



Swiss Institute New York. Photo: Nicholas Venezia, courtesy of Selldorf Architects

Selldorf's meteoric rise, however, has not been without controversy. After Selldorf Architects won the bid for the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's 46,000-square-foot expansion, critics like Mimi Zeiger stirred the pot, editorializing against any changes being made to the PoMo façade Venturi Scott Brown had added in 1996 (the site had already undergone several renovations and expansions since the institution's founding in 1941). In the end, Venturi Scott Brown's cartoonishly fat Grecian columns, which had defined the museum's exterior for 25 years, were replaced by an entrance Selldorf conceptualized with greater functionality in mind (a problem had been prospective visitors not being able to find the entrance). By the time the museum reopened in 2022, the controversy had crossed the pond to London, as just months prior Selldorf Architects had won another bid to renovate yet another space Venturi Scott Brown had designed in the 1990s, the Sainsbury Wing of London's National Gallery. Denise Scott Brown, the 92-year-old surviving principal of the husband-and-wife pair Venturi Scott Brown, widely recognized for formalizing the PostModern architecture movement, came out aggressively against Selldorf's proposed renovation, calling it "vandalism." These are harsh words considering Selldorf's renovation is fairly conventional, responding to the museum's increased traffic and changing needs.



The proposed view looking north at Jubilee Walk between the Sainsbury Wing and the Wilkins building at London's National Gallery. Courtesy of Selldorf Architects

I met Selldorf at her office in New York City where we sat down across from each other at a table flanked by bookshelves. She was remarkably grounded with a thoughtful demeanor, often taking moments of pause, the subtle lilt of a German accent coloring her vowels. The shelves, the chairs, her collarless greige shirt, everything in the room was minimalist and refined, unsurprisingly—but also lived in. There's a warmth and comfort in Selldorf's manner and décor that feels at odds with how her signature restraint is often described as austere. With some of her most high-profile work ever set to open soon, on the surface anyways, the architect seemed at ease

**So you have two very hotly anticipated projects that will open in the next year. The Frick and the National Gallery.**

"Today, I said to one of the partners at the office, 'I feel sad and mad.' We tried to come up with all the reasons why that would be the case. And then the partner said, 'Well, I suspect it's also that two of our biggest and most important projects are coming to an end.' I've been working on the Frick everyday for seven years. That's a long time. You all of a sudden realize that something that's been such a big part of your life is going to be somebody else's."



The Frick Collection. Courtesy of Selldorf Architects

**There's a grief almost when you close a chapter like that. When the film editor Walter Murch finishes a film, he starts translating Italian poetry. Just because he needs something to do. Otherwise it's like falling off a cliff to go from being that consumed and busy to nothing.**

"It's not just being busy. It's the anticipation, the relationships, the promise of things to come. I think a lot about why I love doing projects like this. The biggest reason is that I think museums are really important. Bringing people to art is important. The more people we can open the doors for the better. But personally, to work every day on thinking about, how thick is this handrail? How does the beam terminate? What's the lighting gonna be like? The whole of it is what makes me want to get up in the morning. The big important reasons of how you are impacting a public space, it's funny, they're not as tangible as these decisions of whether or not a handrail is going to be 3/4" thick."

**You often went to the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum (<https://www.wallraf.museum/en/the-museum/history/>) as a child. How did those early experiences influence how you approach museums today?**

"When I was a kid in Cologne, other people would go to watch a soccer game, my family would go to a museum. The habit of looking at art in the museum was very normal. We went there all the time. This museum had multiple collections from Old Master to contemporary art. The art was great, but the building was great because it did everything right. You knew where to enter. Once you entered, there was a place for your coat. There was a public space where the community could gather: it was open to a courtyard that was a former cloister. The overall space was tall and impressive but not intimidating. There was a beautiful stair with a fantastic wall where there was a Jasper Johns flag painting. As you went through the museum, there were places large and small. Daylight was a part of it. But there were places to rest. They were kind of separate from the art. They didn't try to coax the art."

I thought a lot about this when I gave the Linbury Lecture (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilkm5eKA9oI>) last year [at London's National Gallery]. When I was preparing, I realized these are all features of a classical museum, right? There is something both flexible as well as reassuring about the opportunity to choose your own path and to not get lost. You can go directly to a particular work of art that you want to see, or you can wander and explore. The more museums you go to, the more you realize, "Oh, that's how they do it." But I don't think it's formulaic. Wallraf-Richartz has its own character. Its DNA is a museum that was built just after the war, and there's a kind of sobriety about the architectural expression. That is a part of me too in the sense of that's what I grew up with."



National Gallery. Courtesy of Selldorf Architects

### Like a lean modernism?

“Yes, bordering on austere, but taking advantage of the poetry of light. A lot of what makes a museum is marginal details. My mantra is, you have to pay attention to virtually everything. You cannot take a damn thing for granted.”

### So, you came to New York from Cologne in 1980. Did you foresee that your path would end up being an architect in the art world?

“I don’t think so much in these terms. There are people who say, ‘I’m going to make a plan for the next five years.’ I find that horrifying. I don’t like to have appointments in my calendar the week after next. The reality, of course, is otherwise. But I hate it. So I didn’t have a vision of myself as an architect. I had grown up in an architecture-minded family—my father being an architect, my mother working with my father on interiors. But I had to go to school to see who architects are and why they mattered. I had no articulated ambition about any of it! I had to rope it all in one little bit at a time. I had a natural disposition toward the arts because that’s what I grew up with, and the majority of my friends were either artists or art dealers. I worked in Richard Gluckman and Fred Stelle’s office when I first started to study architecture, and they did a lot of art-related projects.”



A 2013 Ad Reinhardt exhibition at David Zwirner 20th Street.  
Photo: Courtesy of David Zwirner Gallery

**I read that you met David Zwirner in the 80s. Was that through being out and about in the art world?**

“No, I knew David’s sister in Cologne, and I met him at a carnival party in New York. David and I were really young. Carnival is in every town in Germany where they celebrate for two or three days and get totally wasted and run around in costumes. Some people are really into it. I never particularly was. There were a bunch of artists there.”

**Was he an art dealer yet?**

“No, not for a long time. If I said that we were in the same circles, that’s not even really true. But once you know somebody, you know them, right? And then you run into them in a bar, and then at an opening.”



Michael Werner Gallery 67th Street. Photo: Wolfgang Wesener, courtesy of Selldorf Architects

**In 1990, you designed your first space for exhibiting art, an uptown gallery for Michael Werner.**

“Looking back, it was the first time that I made very specific decisions about what I wanted. And they weren’t separate from what Michael Werner wanted. But he let me make them. Essentially, I produced a set of design drawings. And then I took him through, and he said, okay. He trusted that I had the sensibility and the wherewithal to think it all through. We had analogies to what we wanted it to feel like and to look like. But the challenge was that nobody told me what to do. I had to decide everything. And everything mattered. If you have very little gesture in the expression of your space, then you have to be sure that every dimension is correct according to the rules you set up. Once you create a set of expectations and ensuing rules, you have to be able to live up to them because why make them otherwise? Random is not good enough.

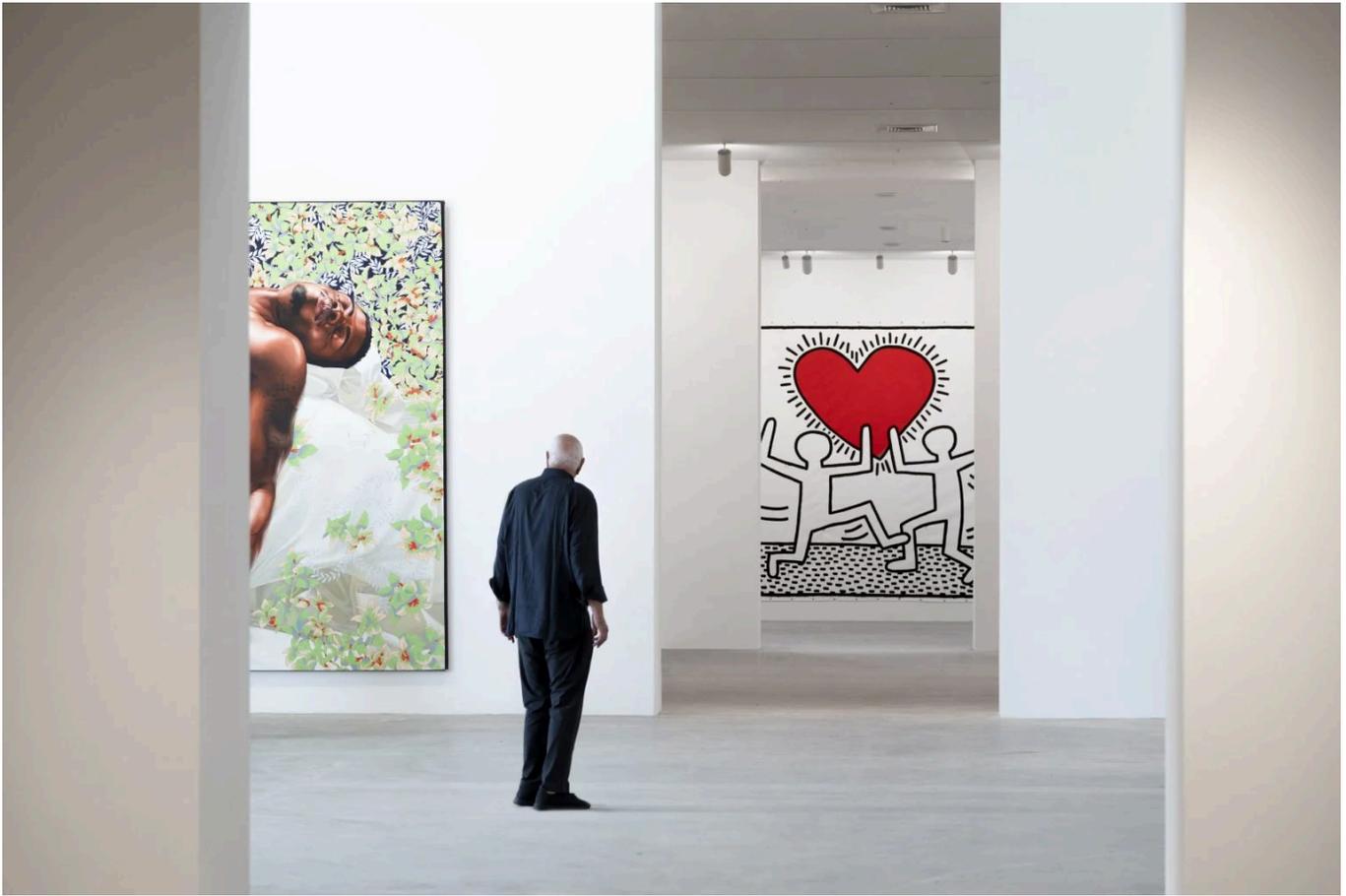
Working for Michael was very interesting because I don’t know many people who are as visually acute as he is. In a weird way, this was the first adult job. I understood that other people who were visually experienced were going to think about whether this made sense or not. And that gallery was beautiful! It was very small, but it had personality and character. The decisions I make are always specific to the person and the circumstances. Akin to portraiture or biography, you circle around what you imagine, and then there is a space that looks like the client. It’s not something that is just a brilliant inspiration. It’s work. It’s thinking. It’s trying to understand who, what, why.”



Michael Werner Gallery 67th Street. Photo: Wolfgang Wesener, courtesy of Selldorf Architects

**You're sometimes associated with this idea that in recent decades, commercial galleries have changed to look more like museums. Looking back to this 1990 project, do you feel there have been really grand changes to what the commercial gallery wants to look like?**

"I think that the business of the art world has changed. It's so much bigger, and it's so much more professional. That notwithstanding, I still enjoy that the spaces we make for galleries express the personality of the dealer. I can't tell you exactly what the difference is between a space I design for David Zwirner and a space for Hauser and Wirth, but it's a totally different point of departure, and I believe that I can contribute to each being their best. You learn so much over so many years about the issues that are germane to every gallery. But then there's this last little thing you can't put your finger on that makes the difference. People bemoan the white cube. Okay, paint it grey! Whatever. You're still going to have to build walls that have plywood on them so that you can hang works."



The Rubell Museum. Photo: Nicholas Venezia, courtesy of Selldorf Architects

**There has been a rise of private museums in the past 20 years or so. Some of which you've worked on like Rubell and LUMA Arles.**

"What the Rubell and LUMA Arles have in common is that the people that they're built for truly love art. In different ways, both thrive on doing things that are experimental. The experience that I have had with private museums is that working with a group of people that is not-too-big, makes for a really interesting exchange and it's what creates personality. Like the bigger the institution, the more process. And this process entails that everybody is being asked everything and everybody has an opinion. Sometimes I feel like, well if everybody has a say, what do you need me for? It really matters to understand what the needs and circumstances are, but the process of coming to a solution has to be built on mutual trust that enables the person who visions and draws to deliver that. If you squelch that little bit of creative process, nothing good can ever come. You can question everything until the cows come home."

**Analysis paralysis.**

"That's exactly what it is. By the time that I am confronted with everybody else's idea, I find myself thinking, yeah, you could do that. Maybe that's not so bad. It's like, too many people is too many people."



Luma Arles. Courtesy of Selldorf Architects

**You've had projects in dialogue with Frank Gehry twice now—with LUMA Arles and now with the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.**

"At the AGO, we're adding something like 50,000 square feet, and our building will sit alongside Frank's building. Frank's is bright blue and there's a staircase coming out of its belly. And there's another later building on the adjacent site—the Ontario College of Art and Design by Will Alsop—that's also very gestural. They are both animated, strong spaces. Then we're adding a very, taut rectangle—or a bit more than a rectangle. I showed it to Frank. We knew each other from Arles—I can't say we worked together in Arles because he was doing his building and I was doing mine—but he's always been very nice to me. Both of us appreciate that we are so different and that we aren't competing. And so when this came to pass [in Toronto] that was the attitude he took. He said, 'I'm not worried. It'll be great.'"



The architect Annabelle Selldorf. Photo: Ralph Mecke, courtesy of Selldorf Architects

**I can't help but ask you about the friction you've had with Denise Scott Brown. Maybe it's a terrible transition because it emphasizes the contrast, but there's this parallel that's hard to ignore. In the span of a decade you ended up leading two museum projects with a link to Frank Gehry and two museum projects with a link to Venturi Scott Brown.**

"I think it's too bad that Denise Scott Brown wasn't really interested in real dialogue. She had all the time in the world to lecture me on her way of thinking. But she wasn't very interested in the things that actually had little to do with me and the work we do, but the reasons for this work on the buildings coming into being in the first place. Why did La Jolla need to expand galleries? Because they didn't have enough space to display their permanent collection while having special exhibitions. What Venturi Scott Brown did with the Axline Court was design a space in which you couldn't show art, and I don't think they meant to show art there. But she never cared to understand what the purpose of the museum was. I have always felt that we enabled a space of theirs that previously didn't fulfill its purpose, and made it a much better space. Not by changing it, but by repositioning it. It now functions much more as a sort of community space. I can honestly say that I never had any disrespect for their work there. I can probably also say that I didn't think it was a fantastic work of architecture. But I've respected it for the

many reasons why one would be really considerate about a colleague's work. Contrary to how Venturi Scott Brown was not very considerate with the work that they tore down. That was a significant office, Mosher Drew, who had worked on the museum previously. To my knowledge Venturi Scott Brown didn't have any doubt in just tearing down what was there before. But how it went down I, of course, don't know."



Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. Photo: Nicholas Venezia, courtesy of Selldorf Architects

"Then fast forward to the National Gallery. For a very long time, Denise Scott Brown didn't have equal billing with her husband. She didn't get the Pritzker Prize. I think she is angry and disappointed about those things. I totally understand that. She's very smart, funny, knowledgeable, and charming. I liked her, I still like her. I'm really just sorry that she never recognized the real reasons why these changes came about. I spent a lot of time thinking about how to be sensitive. By the time that it's all said and done, it's not so much about Selldorf Architects. It's all about making the Sainsbury Wing the best it can be. It will be the main entrance to the National Gallery, and it will be welcoming for people. It will allow people to figure out, can they take the stairs or find the elevator? It will have materiality that is a lot more subtle and generous. It will have daylight. There will be a lot more room because we eliminated a bookshop. When Venturi Scott Brown was given the program for the building 30 years ago, it was much more restrictive. It has come to pass that so many more people come into the museum now. And so many more people have so many more needs. I really hope that somehow or other she can recognize that we did a good thing. And if not, I still think it's a good thing we did. I grew up wanting to please everybody, but at a certain point..."

**You can't please everybody.**

"Nope."



Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. Photo: Nicholas Venezia, courtesy of Selldorf Architects

**As with the controversies that erupted around both of these projects, I feel like people were hating on you for being almost “too tasteful.”**

“It’s terrible, right? If somebody says you’re too tasteful, it means that you’re not provocative. It implies that you’re uninteresting. That you’re boring. That everybody else is already ahead of you with much more interesting things. But then there is the saying, you can’t argue about taste, you have it or you don’t. If I were to use that as a counter, then I would be an elitist jerk. Which you also don’t want to be. We think so much more these days about applying one’s biases and judgments with all the conversations around equity and colonized cultural legacy. We now know that there were plenty of women artists around. But they didn’t often have the chance to make full careers. There was a Dutch painter, Rachel Ruysch. We are working on the staging of an exhibition of her work at the Toledo Museum of Art and her life story was super interesting. I’m a woman and I’m really interested in understanding why women respond in certain ways. And that links to the idea of tastefulness. I like to please. I like to obey. I am tasteful. I am afraid. I’m all of those things. But not without wanting to shake it up and find my own level of value, priority, and passion. It’s a lifelong quest, and everybody has a slightly different way of going about it. There are days now when I think ‘done’ and then there are other days where it’s like ‘I’ve only just gotten started.’”