

# In Conversation

## Annabelle Selldorf with Derek Blasberg

Annabelle Selldorf is a New York-based architect who's aesthetic touch has reached all over Manhattan, from her renovation of the Neue Galerie to Brooklyn's largest recycling center, the Sunset Park Material Recovery Facility, which was recognized by Mayor Bloomberg in 2010. She collaborated with Curator Massimiliano Gioni, on the central exhibition of the 2013 Venice Biennale, and for Frieze Masters designed the temporary structure that housed the fair. She was born in Cologne, Germany, and attended New York's Pratt University for her undergraduate degree, and Syracuse University Florence, Italy, for her masters in architecture. In her interview with Derek Blasberg, she explains why she doesn't like the word *Minimalism* and that what appeals to her in looking for art is the process by which it's created.

**DEREK BLASBERG** Let's start at the beginning. When did you know you wanted to be an architect?

**ANNABELLE SELLDORF** Some people like to say they knew what they wanted to be when they were a child, but it wasn't that easy for me. My father was an architect, so when I was a child I thought the profession required a lot of work, there wasn't a lot of money involved, and that it's often tough going—so that is not what I wanted to do when I was little. But, later, when the time came for me to decide what I wanted to do with my life, my father wisely suggested that I do an internship on a construction site. And I loved it. I began to understand that it is what makes architecture very different than other arts. Architects work with people who make things, and people who need things, and there is the effort of a team and many objectives. That deeply impressed me. That felt like something I wanted to do. It's interesting because there are all kinds of architects, but for me what makes it all come together is how it impacts everyone. It has to do with people. My job is not the lonely act of creating,



it's making it come together and working with many other people.

**DB** An artist once told me that one's creative work is defined in their childhood, either re-creating it or rebelling against it. Do you agree with that?

**AS** Totally. I look at pictures of myself when I was a kid, and I look totally the same. I was very clear on how I would dress and totally clear on what my room looked like. I was super specific. I couldn't go to sleep if I didn't feel that my room looked good. Does that sound ridiculous?

**DB** Absolutely not! And, you see that order in your work. Tell me: Are there descriptive words that you're drawn to when either talking about architecture or your work? *Minimalism* comes up a lot when someone Googles you, for example.

**AS** No. That's the short answer.

**DB** And what's the long answer?

**AS** I don't like descriptive words very much, because they're so limiting. When people think that our work is Minimal, I want to say that's not what it's all about. There is a depth and complexity to what we do that reveals itself over a longer period of time. It's best captured as a revelation. It's an interesting question because what you're asking is how do we talk about the work, and why we do it. That's a process that never stops. Learning to verbalize the work is something that I am still learning as well.

**DB** And on the flip side of this question, are there any other words that you don't like?

**AS** There are plenty of words I don't like! In fact, I have a notebook full of words that I don't like. Which is why perhaps it's better to think of comparisons in other ways. If you listen to the *Goldberg Variations*, there's a power of clarity that is overwhelming. In literature, I would find an analogy to the wonderings of W. G. Sebald. I look to find these words and analogies, but for us the vocabulary is visual.

**DB** You've been very busy in New York. There are two apartment buildings on the High Line, several gallery spaces, and residential properties. Is New York a town on which you've always wanted to make your mark?

**AS** As you know, I am German, and I think Germans are best taken out of their country. And what better place to throw someone into than New York? New York is fantastic for me. You can be out there, and you can be anonymous. You can do a lot or a little. New York is a center, and it's where I work, but it's not the only place I work. I work in Europe, on the West Coast, but the city is terrific for an office like mine. Like-minded people come together in the city's pace and energy that I wouldn't want to miss.

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**DB** My favorite work in New York that you've done is the Sunset Park Recycling Facility in Brooklyn. What an unexpected and marvelous thing.

**AS** It's a job that we pursued and campaigned for. That didn't just happen for us. Architecture, in a way, is a public profession. And the recycling facility is really meaningful to the public realm. I think it's very important to do those kinds of projects.

**DB** But even psychologically, I think it's an interesting concept. So many people associate your brand of architecture with re-creating something new. And this is literally a recycling plant.

**AS** What's so interesting is that this company does scrap metal and metal recycling, and I learned while working on this project that metal recycling has been around forever. The value of recycling is something many people think is new, but it's not. So, in a funny way, for me this was tangible to say, this is how we think of the world: There is sort of a context that we refer to, and it makes the whole thing more human.

**DB** Is there a type of project that you like to do? For example, is a museum more exciting than an apartment?

**AS** I think that you should never do work that doesn't challenge you. It's not so much that there's a typology that's more challenging, but they're driven by the conditions and the context that you find or set out for yourself. If you design a closet, that can be wildly complicated. For me, my attitude is that I want to conquer the complexities and move forward. There are some people that go around and around problems, but I confront them head on. I'm interested in mastering the challenge and then moving past it.

**DB** I took a psychology class that explained that the way a person confronts a roadblock in a path tells us something about their personality. Some people go around it, some people go over it, some people turn around and go the other way. You go right through the problem.

**AS** I like that, it's a nice way of putting it. And yes, there can be many roadblocks, and you have to go through each one.

**DB** How does artwork influence your design process?

**AS** What kind of art inspires me? That's

difficult to answer in one sentence. I think what's interesting for me when it comes to art is answering the question why and how a particular work comes about. The creation is the inspiration. I ask myself, what does this work do? Whether it's respect to space or content, you ask, is this how they've gone about creating their message? Take Richard Serra: His work never ends. It's all about pushing the fundamental questions. It's not all about form. His is a never-ending conversation, and I find that interesting.

**DB** Are you drawn to a variety of types of art? Or do you find yourself, for the lack of a word you dislike less, drawn to more Minimalist works?

**AS** Like something Baroque? Oh, of course I am. Therein lies the crux of what I like. It's about the richness and complexity underneath something, and that materializes in many different forms. Look, Venice is one of my favorite cities. Venice is an endless discovery, and somehow it's the messiness of life that I think is so thrilling.

**DB** Is there one job as an architect that you want to do in your life?

**AS** I want to do them all! I read an interview once where an architect said their dream job was to do an airport. I remember thinking that was not how I would answer that question. I want to do things that mean something. I want to make places for people. Yes, lots of people pass through airports and that experience should be as pleasant as possible, but the transient nature of the experience is not something I am personally interested in. I prefer to work on projects that make, perhaps, a more lasting impact.

**DB** Is there a system of questions that you ask yourself before starting a project?

**AS** When I encounter a new project, I let it sink in and try to figure out how I'm going to approach it. I take a step back and say, what is that about? How does it make sense? There has to be some sort of thesis at the bottom of it, which is often very hard to articulate. Every time I do it, I feel like I'm a teenager trying to explore the meaning of life. In my mind, there has to be clarity and coherence and a path that tells me why I'm doing things. It's never just about what you see, it has to be more than that. It's the same question every time, but a different answer.