



SELLDORF ARCHITECTS IS BASED JUST OFF NEW YORK'S UNION SQUARE

in a loft with exposed brick ceilings, expertly curated Bernd and Hilla Becher photographs of industrial structures, and a deceptively expansive amount of space. Its most surprising feature, though, may be the hush that envelops it, even in the middle of a workday. Despite the presence of 40 or so staffers, the only noise seems to come from the occasional messenger. "We're not hysterical," says its principle, Annabelle Selldorf, sitting in her book-filled, well-proportioned office. "Everyone knows I like it calm."

Towering above its neighborhood of Chelsea art galleries, some exemplars of which Annabelle Selldorf has designed, 200 Eleventh Avenue is the architect's first foray into high-rise luxury condominium building. Photo by David Sundberg/Esto

Selldorf, an attractive, German-born blonde wearing a tailored dress and a red string on her wrist — from a Buddhist temple in Cambodia, not the Kabbalah Center — has quietly become one of the art world's go-to architects. She has proved herself equally adept at designing white-cube-style modern temples for dealers such as Gladstone Gallery and Hauser & Wirth and fashioning exhibition spaces in grand historic buildings for Acquavella Galleries and the exquisite Neue Galerie New York, the museum of 20th-century German and Austrian art founded by Ronald Lauder. She is currently at work both on David Zwirner's latest Chelsea location, a ground-up affair on West 20th Street slated for completion in 2012, and on the renovation and expansion of the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Selldorf's high-profile gallery clients include David Zwirner, Hauser & Wirth, Acquavella and, pictured here, the Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea with its 2008 installation of Anish Kapoor sculptures. Photo by Nikolas Koenig, courtesy of Trunk Archive. © Anish Kapoor

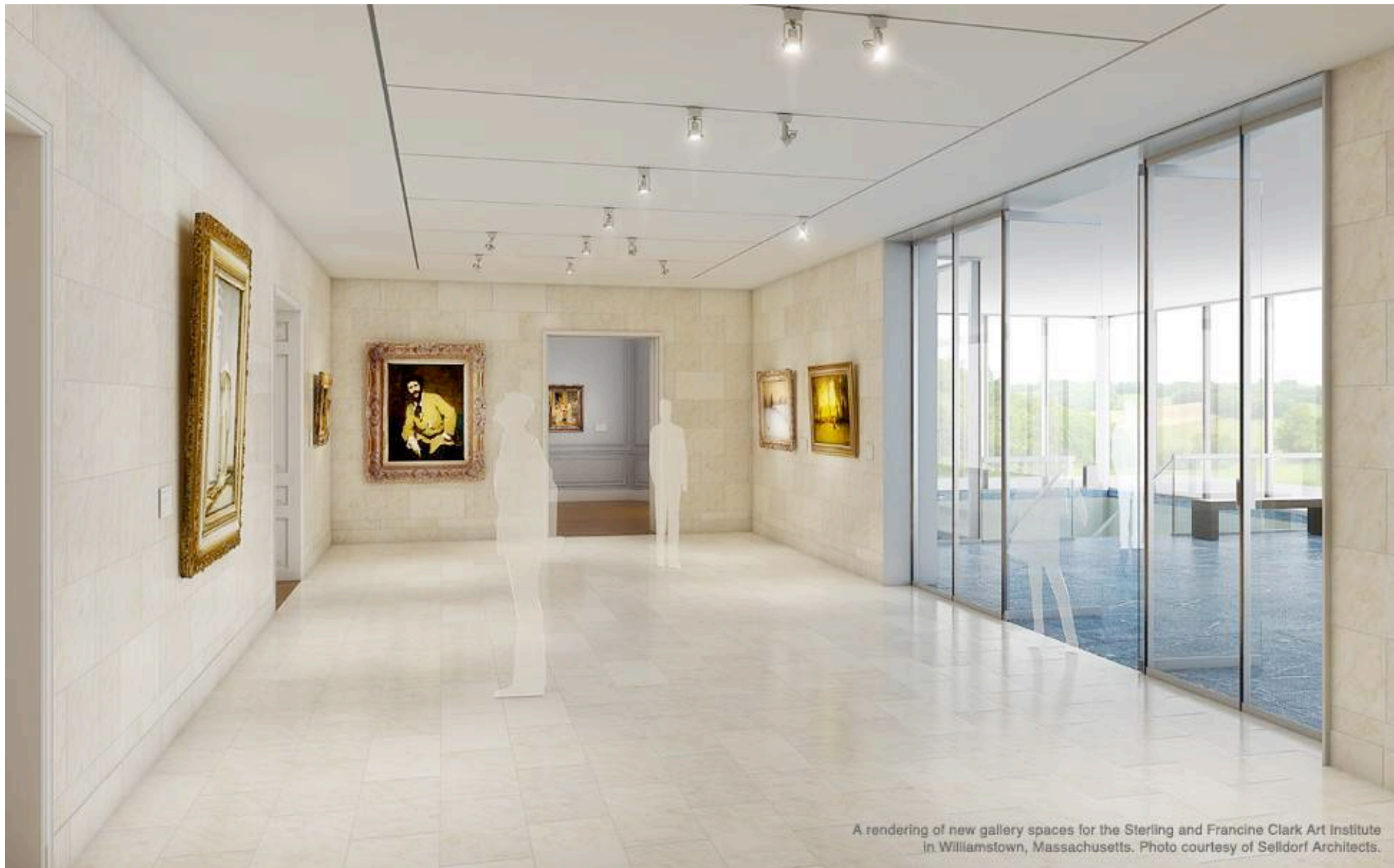




The living room of a London townhouse features an Indonesian sandstone-tiled floor and a red leather armchair, which is a prototype designed by the architect's father, Herbert Selldorf. Photo by Simon Upton/The Interior Archive

But Selldorf is not one to limit herself. The firm is getting buzz for commissions as diverse as a recycling facility in Brooklyn and a luxury condo in Chelsea with a car elevator enabling residents to park their rides just outside their duplexes. She is also responsible for Abercrombie & Fitch's retail look and for a slew of private homes. "My favorite project is every project," she says diplomatically. The thread, she adds, is the philosophy that the work be "informed by purpose, by function, by common sense, upon which you layer much more sensual, creative, open thinking. If it was all about utilitarian purpose, you would curtail bigger ideas." While Selldorf does not preach any single aesthetic message, she has developed a Modernist style that allows for rich materials and even adornment. For 200 Eleventh Avenue, the Chelsea condo, instead of yet another all-glass tower, she created a three-story terra-cotta base that harkens to old New York. Her output, like her office, does not scream.

Selldorf came to architecture naturally. Her father was an architect in Cologne, and her mother, an interior and furniture designer. Selldorf's paternal grandmother, an autodidact known for her excellent taste, was also an interior and furniture designer. "After the war when people were redoing their houses she started a company," Selldorf says. "It represented a certain optimism, I think. There is this desire to make something. It's renewing."



A rendering of new gallery spaces for the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Photo courtesy of Selldorf Architects.



Despite the family history, Selldorf says she considered “every other occupation” first. Architecture, she explains, is a hard field, rife with cost, regulation, technical and psychological issues. “You have to defend your ideas and compel the client with your ideas. You have to have an enormous amount of persistence. I saw that in my father’s practice.” On top of all that, she claims to have been a mediocre student in high school. “The idea of having to study hard was not at all appealing to me as a teenager.”

On her inaugural visit to New York, at age 19, she became fascinated with big cities. “I was overwhelmed by the energy and diversity, by the fact that you could be totally anonymous yet intimate with the city,” she says. She landed an internship in Manhattan the following summer and never again strayed from architecture. (She also rarely strayed from New York, earning her B.A. from the Pratt Institute before heading to Syracuse University’s M.A. program in Florence, Italy.)

Selldorf worked for Richard Gluckman, another art-world favorite, and Fox & Fowle before striking out on her own less than two years after she finished graduate school and after a freelance gig renovating an Upper West Side couple’s kitchen. Asked if quitting her job was a scary move, she replies with a small smile, “You don’t know what you don’t know. I thought if I could do projects, I would have time during the day to go to museums, go to galleries. It sort of spelled freedom.” She pauses. “It’s a different kind of freedom.”

The business grew gradually. She says, “I sort of picked up people along the way,” as she found herself with more assignments than she could handle herself. The projects themselves grew in complexity, which Selldorf says enabled her to understand every aspect of the field over time. “I’m systematic by nature, or, like many architects, there’s a systematic side of me — the German side — and then the more intuitive, less regimented side.”

“You have to have an enormous amount of persistence,” Selldorf says of her chosen profession, architecture.
Photo by Manolo Yllera

Michael Werner Gallery was her first art-world client. "I was really passionate about that project," she recalls. In addition to the many galleries she has since added to her CV, she has also designed exhibitions of Picasso, Monet and Rauschenberg for Gagosian. Selldorf has a nice collection herself — which she self-deprecatingly attributes to the length of time she's been acquiring objects. "I'm just old," she says, though she is only 51. While she has paintings and sculptures, her primary area of interest is drawings, from a wide range of periods. She has, for example, a sculpture and drawings by the quirky contemporary Austrian artist Franz West as well as a couple of Dutch Old Master paintings. "I don't think I'm a collector. I'm an assembler." By her definition, a collector employs a method, whereas she simply buys what she likes, often pieces with a sense of humor.

One of the biggest appeals of art-related projects, she notes, is the clientele. "I enjoy working with people who are visual," she explains. "I find it very difficult to work with people who are not visual because it's hard to imagine how you cannot be."



A Selldorf-designed loft at Urban Glass House in New York, features Florence Knoll sofas, a vintage leather daybed, a steel-and-glass coffee table and a photograph, at left, by Candida Höfer. Photo by Simon Upton/The Interior Archive

The apartments at 200 Eleventh Avenue feature views of the Hudson River and private elevator landings for residents' cars. Photo by David Sundberg/Esto





At the same time, architecture is more complex than what's on the surface. "People think that architecture is just what you see," she says. "But it's not that easy. It's not just about what it looks like." (Even the car elevator, she notes, was conceived not as a gimmick but as a solution to the problem of the building having a small footprint: The turning radius for cars in an underground garage would have been too tight.) "I'm really interested in space — proportion, light, structure, circulation," Selldorf continues. "They're in a way very pure architectural subjects."

While she is quick to note that every project is different, she concedes that displaying art requires "good walls." But she adds, "there is such a thing as too long." She pays careful attention to placement of doors and windows, and to "how you enter and move around a space." The design process, though, is as much intuitive as rational. "I'll find myself looking at a plan and saying it's not working — I can't find a center balance."

Selldorf updated a Beaux Arts mansion on Fifth Avenue for the Neue Galerie, which houses Ronald Lauder's extraordinary collection of Austrian and German art. Photo by Todd Eberle

Every architect has dealt with a nightmare client or two, though Selldorf, ever discreet, is loathe to share details. The worst clients, she does acknowledge, try to control the “wrong things” or “can’t make a decision because there are so many other voices in their head,” and she admits she has on rare occasion fired a client. She is quick to add, “I’m always terribly pleased when someone wants to work with us, and I fundamentally like people.” She also claims to enjoy collaboration — up to a point. “Design is not a democratic process,” she says. “At some point, someone has to lead.”

The recession, Selldorf says, has left clients a little more careful about their money and their decisions. Still, her firm’s agenda is overflowing. In addition to Zwirner — about which she is tight-lipped, other than to note, “I think the façade is very interesting” — 2012 will see the opening of the Sims Municipal Recycling Facility on a pier in Gowanus Bay, Brooklyn. The corrugated metal and galvanized steel building, in a setting of natural vegetation and with a visitor center, is surprisingly beautiful. It’s easily her “most consciously sustainable project” to date.

The Sunset Park Materials Recycling Facility is set to open in Brooklyn in 2012. Photo courtesy of Selldorf Architects



Selidorf's cool and comfortable interiors of a Greenwich Village apartment. Photo by Manolo Yllera



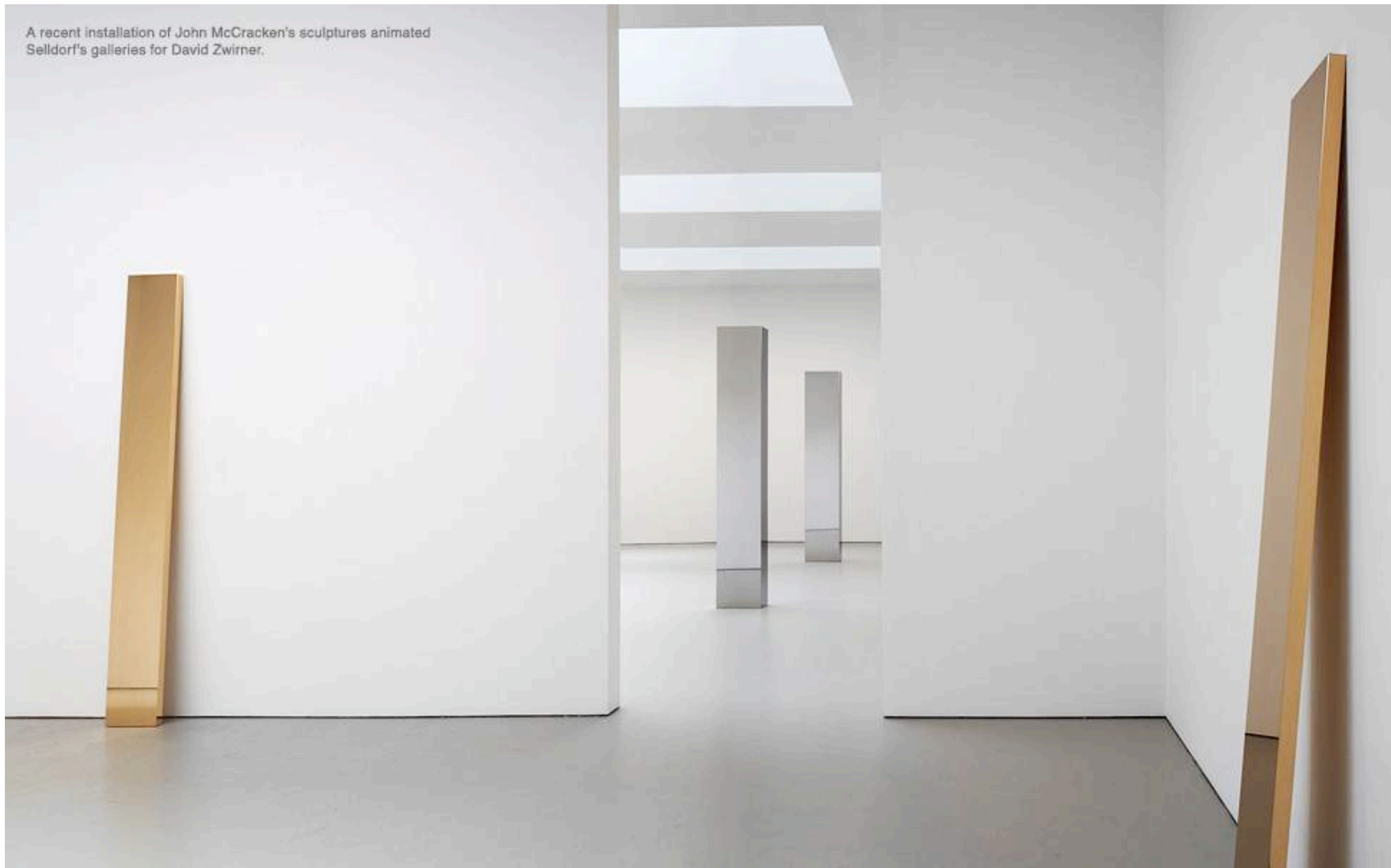


Vica, Selldorf's furniture line, includes the Round Chair, above, made of blackened hard wood, and the glass-topped 90 Degree Coffee Table, right, available in patinated brass or satin stainless steel.



Architecture, she admits, is inherently not sustainable. "It's a big conflict," she says. "I'm a big believer in reusing materials. That's perhaps a lame defense. Consciousness is perhaps the best path. The alternative is to do nothing. That doesn't get us there either." Her furniture line, Vica (the name is a nod to her grandmother's business), is another gesture toward creating lasting products. Modern and timeless in feel, Vica is also more delicately proportioned than most of what's on the market today. "A lot of furniture you buy today is very big," Selldorf says. "It's not a function of people being bigger. It's a function of the inexplicable desire to say bigger is better."

A recent installation of John McCracken's sculptures animated
Seldorf's galleries for David Zwirner.



“**T**he chair I’m sitting in is a chair my father designed in the sixties,” she continues. “I like this chair because it very elegantly supports you and doesn’t make much of a statement.” She insists even a tall man would be comfortable in it. Even in a huge house, Selldorf insists, oversize furniture is a mistake, making people feel far apart even when seated ostensibly in the same conversation area. “You’re like, ‘HELLO!’ Intimacy can’t happen.”

Selldorf is inarguably at a stellar moment in her career, but she can’t resist a gentle dig at herself. “I feel like I know only a little bit about architecture,” she says, “and I’ve dedicated my life to it.”



Portrait by Dean Kaufman