

THE REGINATO FILES

ANNABELLE SELLDORF MAKING A HOME FOR ART

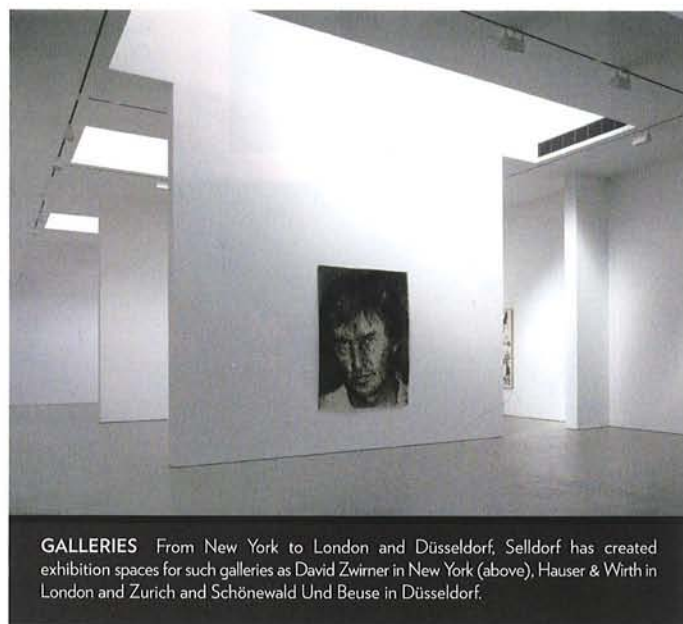
BY JAMES REGINATO

It takes some effort to catch up with Annabelle Selldorf. Today, she's just back from London, where she is designing a new gallery for Hauser & Wirth, and overseeing, at Gagosian's Britannia Street space, the installation of "Picasso: The Mediterranean Years" (a follow-up to the hit Picasso show Gagosian mounted in New York, which Selldorf also hung). Tomorrow, she is off to the remote reaches of Southern Utah, where she is designing a new Amanresorts development.



MUSEUMS Selldorf has worked on museum projects including The Neue Galerie New York: Museum for German and Austrian Art (above) and The Museum of East Asian Art in Cologne, Germany.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD EBERLE



GALLERIES From New York to London and Düsseldorf, Selldorf has created exhibition spaces for such galleries as David Zwirner in New York (above), Hauser & Wirth in London and Zurich and Schönwald Und Beuse in Düsseldorf.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NIKOLAS KOENIG

When she is at home in New York, where her 35-member firm, Selldorf Architects, is based, it's hardly easier to find her, with such projects on her desk as a major renovation of the Clark Art Institute, and the new 24,000-foot David Zwirner Gallery. When the latter opens next year, it will be but the latest significant arts space in New York upon which she has put her stamp. In addition to previous galleries for Zwirner and Wirth, she has recently completed a new Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea and renovated Acquavella's 1908 neoclassical townhouse on 79th Street. Then, of course, there is her masterful 2001 transformation of a 1908 Carrère & Hastings mansion on 86th Street into the Neue Galerie. While her current projects also include two major condominiums in Chelsea, several Abercrombie & Fitch stores, a recycling center in Brooklyn, and myriad private residences for people who prefer to remain anonymous, the German-born Selldorf has clearly become the go-to designer for the art world. Based on a conversation with Selldorf early one recent morning, it would appear that her career trajectory was inevitable.

"I always thought art was a part of everyday life," says Selldorf in her office, which is housed in a vast but hushed loft in the Flatiron district. "I grew up in Cologne, which is a city all about art, with tons of museums, churches and artists' studios. My parents were both architects, and they always took us to exhibitions."

By the mid-eighties, after moving to New York to study architecture at Pratt, she was living in a loft in Soho, then at the peak of its art epoch. "So going to galleries just became part of my routine,"

RIGHT Annabelle Selldorf, one of the art world's most sought-after architects and designers, travels the world creating inspired spaces for art.



RESIDENCES Creating livable spaces for art is a speciality for Selldorf, who has worked on residential projects around the world including this Fifth Avenue apartment in New York.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NIKOLAS KOENIG



PHOTOGRAPH BY MANOLO YLLERA



continues Selldorf, a petite, soft-spoken, blond who nonetheless projects a commanding air. With the wealth of experience she has accumulated building different types of settings dedicated to art – museums, galleries and private residences – it is interesting to hear her thoughts on the different approaches each requires.

"In museums and galleries, you try to create an environment that is calm but very focused," she says. "In a residence, when a work is going to be around you twenty-four hours, it doesn't need to be so focused. And there are other things at play, such as decorative art and furniture. Its not only about the art."

Above all, lighting issues vary between building types. "In a residence you do not want a museum-quality lighting installation," she says. "You have to have an easier hand; you don't want to over-light." Given her druthers, she prefers daylight anyway. "But you have to know how to work with it and how to modulate it, how to distinguish between northern light, and eastern, western and southern light."

"Lighting is integral to my work. It is very difficult, takes lots of experience, and often requires the most changes along the way." A good lighting consultant is crucial, she adds, and cites her frequent choice, Richard Renfro.

In most projects, Selldorf handles the interior design as well as the architecture, and is among a surprisingly small group that excels at both. "I approach space from the inside out," she says, "I like integrating interiors and architecture. Interiors occupy a different area of the brain; it's maybe more light-hearted, less rational."

She sometimes butts heads with collectors who perhaps operate too much like curators at home (think about how many seriously uncomfortable collectors' houses you have been to). "For a collector, it's often just about the work of art, not about the work of art in its space," she says. Nonetheless, she does not decorate with art. "There's a real difference," she says. "You don't usurp art for your purposes. You don't make art a useful thing."

It's a vote of confidence from many of her clients that they often ask her to help hang their collections when the job is done. "The older you get the more you know. I have learned to trust my own eye more, to be guided by how the works of art talk to each other,"



RIGHT Richmond Townhouse, a semi-detached home in London, was redesigned from the inside out for a family with an extensive contemporary art collection.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIMON LIPTON

RENDERING BY HAYES DAVIDSON, COURTESY OF YOUNG WOO & ASSOCIATES



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DURSTON SAYLOR

ABOVE RIGHT 200 Eleventh Avenue, a 19-story residential building in New York, is the firm's tallest to date.

ABOVE In Venice, Italy, Selldorf Architects restored and renovated this 13th century palazzo for Fondazione Ortazmila, an art foundation.

she says. "You have to create a distance to the object, create spaces between them. I prefer hanging sparsely, but, sometimes, say with a collection of drawings, it's alright to hang salon style."

Selldorf counsels flexibility. "Some collectors say, 'That's where I want my Polke.' But I make spaces where there are good walls, and create opportunities for works of art to find the right place. I recommend living in a place for a while before hanging art."

While Selldorf has demonstrated her deft hand working with historic buildings, she makes it clear she is a modernist. "If someone asked me to build an 18th-century *palais*, I would decline, but if you asked me to restore and renovate one, I would enjoy that. When we do a renovation, I am very interested in what the building has to offer. I don't have a stylistic axe to grind."

"On the Neue Galerie project, there was no reason not to be incredibly respectful of the building. We made interventions when they were necessary, but didn't make them into confrontations. Yet we purposely made certain interventions that make you read the building as other than a private house, which is what it was built as. Otherwise it would be cute. And cuteness is not so desirable."

At the Acquavella Gallery, her work was subtle but effective. "The Acquavella family has been there so long and they thoroughly inhabit the space," she says. "But a few years ago, they realized they hadn't done anything to it in a long time, and they were showing more contemporary art. I came in and said, 'It's all good, but you have to clean it up, bring a fresher quality to it.'" A number of "careful, almost surgical moves," as she describes them – including changing wall colours and lighting – added up. "It's the sum of many minimal interventions that make a big difference," concludes Selldorf.

Whatever the building type, there's one quality evident in every Selldorf project – restraint. It's a word she has thought much about, clearly. "Restraint means vetting, and evaluating, everything you have," she says. "You have to ask, does it belong? Is it necessary?"

But don't call Selldorf a minimalist. "Those labels don't get us very far," she cautions. "There are plenty of minimalists whose work I admire. But I like things, though I'd rather have fewer things and more quality. And I like food, wine, textures. Maybe you should say I am a sensualist."

JAMES REGINATO, FORMER FEATURES EDITOR AT *W MAGAZINE*, IS WRITING A NOVEL.