



ON A WEEKDAY MORNING in late December, Annabelle Selldorf is giving me a virtual tour of her New York apartment, her blue-gray eyes peering from a laptop on a steel desk in the corner of her living room.

Selldorf is filling me in over Zoom from her house in Maine, where the white-paneled walls behind her are almost indistinguishable from the snow outside. “I joke that I used to take pictures of buildings, but now I take pictures of trees,” she says, stealing a look out the window.

The last time she was in the city, in October, was for the opening of the Hauser & Wirth mega-gallery that her firm, Selldorf Architects, designed on West 22nd Street. She didn’t stay long. For almost a year she’s been living on 700 Acre Island, a forested speck in Penobscot Bay where her partner, Tom Outerbridge, who works in the recycling industry, has family ties. She spends most days online with colleagues, meeting with clients and reviewing drawings. “If you had asked me last March if we are a collaborative shop, I would have said absolutely, that’s the very center of how we do what we do,” she says. “But it’s so much more magnified now. We all hold the pencil, so to speak.”

Since moving to New York in 1980 from her hometown of Cologne, Germany, Selldorf, 60, has built a thriving practice, with 65 employees and an array of work that spans four continents. She’s developed a reputation as the art world’s architect, attuned to the needs of artists and audiences, as well as the many professionals who fall in between. For example, dealers: A tally of her private townhouse clients—among them Zwirner, Gladstone, Wirth, Gagolian, Van de Weghe, Skarstedt—reads like a billionaire’s shopping list at Art Basel. Her 1997 plan to de-frill a Fifth Avenue mansion for Ronald Lauder—the result being the Neue Galerie museum of Austrian and German expressionism, which opened in 2001—set her museum career in motion.

“I’ve worked on art-related projects since early days,” Selldorf says. “Art is the thing that stimulates, inspires and informs in ways that sort of activate this part of the brain.” Other types of projects have also engaged her: a primary school, a resort and spa, a recycling plant, a Venetian palazzo. And developers have routinely come knocking with condo projects, one of the most recent a manila-colored tower with recessed windows that looms over the site of the old Bowlmor Lanes in Greenwich Village, a few blocks from her own deco-era building.

Her apartment, which faces north, has none of the co-op’s coveted views of Washington Square Park and Wall Street. With its marble tile floors and cross-cultural buffet of art and objects, it could be a house museum in a minor European city. Just inside the front door is a wire chair sculpture by Franz West, cradling a yellowed German newspaper on its seat; a Joseph Beuys felt suit hangs beside it, across from a tubular steel chair with flaking turquoise paint, a street find that Selldorf spirited up in the paneled elevator. She gravitates to the human figure in most of the art she collects. Alongside empyrean works by Donald Judd or Suzan Frecon, there’s a soulful, circa 11th-century Khmer bodhisattva, a Navajo ceremonial mask or

The Elements of Selldorf

Architect Annabelle Selldorf, whose projects now range well beyond the art-world commissions she’s famous for, has fashioned a home that is serene but never boring.

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SINGULAR SENSATIONS
Opposite: Selldorf in her living room, framed by a Donald Judd wall piece and a Venini lamp. This page: A desk and chair, both of Selldorf’s design, with a 1950s Italian lamp. Atop the pedestal and hanging on the back wall, Franz West’s *Home Element*.

a pair of intimate photographic self-portraits by Francesca Woodman, all composed around comfortable, unobtrusive furniture from Vica, a tightly edited collection of basics designed by Selldorf.

Most of these pieces arrived with her, although Outerbridge, who moved in with her in 2012, brought along a collection of 20th-century pottery by Japanese master Shōji Hamada and his circle, including the British pioneer Bernard Leach. It's lined up in the dining area opposite a Seussian Venini lamp from the 1950s. Now and then, Selldorf will shift some things around by a few inches and marvel at the difference.

"Life is hectic, abrasive, full, colorful, messy, contradictory and all that good stuff," she says with palpable longing. "I like to create a space where I can feel calm but that is very, very different from boring." She sharpens her pencil. "In other words, it's not like one beige mass of things that don't challenge you or that don't stimulate you."

Before moving to her current place, she lived in a bare-bones loft on Mercer Street. One day she had a visit from Hedi Kravis, the first wife of financier Henry Kravis, a talented interior designer and a good friend. "Hedi said something like, 'I really think that you're too old to live like this and you have to find a doorman building.' And I said, 'I am not that kind of uptown person, and it's not really my taste.'"

In 1997, the same year as Kravis's sudden death from cancer at 49, Selldorf was working on an apartment renovation in a lower Fifth Avenue building when her friend's comment swam back into her head. Here was a palatial lobby, a mailroom and an oak desk teeming with uniformed porters and doormen. But the floors above bordered on funky, with claustrophobic hallways true to the building's origins as a short-stay hotel with a decidedly bohemian character. Selldorf was charmed and bought a one-bedroom, tearing out the shag carpeting to expose a concrete subfloor and living with a few odds and ends until a crate with some key pieces arrived from her parents in Cologne. In 2008, when an adjacent one-bedroom came on the market, she bought that, too. She combined the living rooms to create a loftlike salon and laid the marble floors, but a general air of un-fanciness still presides. "I like to create space," she says. "In some ways it's about doing less, rather than doing more."

She made one major exception. For years, she had suffered with a cramped kitchen and an oven mounted above the refrigerator, which meant climbing a ladder every time she wanted to bake or broil. "Needless to say, I really didn't use it very often," she says. A roomy open kitchen and dining area are now slotted in beside the living room; she and Outerbridge eat at home most nights at a glass-top dining table designed by her father, also an architect.

"It's a restrained version of herself," art dealer Gordon VeneKlasen, co-owner of the Michael Werner Gallery and a longtime friend of Selldorf's, says of the apartment. "It's very much the way she lives. You sit a certain way, you read a book a certain way." But it's not the whole story, he adds. "That marble floor is a very wild idea. It's almost too eccentric. She couldn't convince a client to do it. But it explains her perfectly. Everybody thinks that Annabelle is very much

SMOOTH MOVES
Venetian glass,
Chinese furniture
and a mix of ancient
and modern art in
Selldorf's living
room, composed
around tables and
seating from her
own Vica collection.
The chess set be-
longs to her partner,
Tom Outerbridge.





a purist, and she is, spatially—but tastewise, a place like Venice is as influential for her as it is for anybody.”

“Ever since I was a kid,” Selldorf says, “I attached so much meaning to objects and material things. But at the same time, I’m also intensely aware that they’re just things.” It’s been an ongoing discovery. During her loft-living years, she fell in love with Ming-dynasty furniture—disciplined in form, sensuous in materials, ingeniously crafted. She bought a table and two chairs in London only to find out a few years later that they were unpedigreed and essentially glorified firewood. (The man who broke it to her, British scholar-dealer Nicholas Grindley, has been helping her get her bearings, and she now owns a handful of exceptional pieces, like the huanghuali-wood daybed in the living room.)

“It was interesting,” Selldorf says of the experience. “Because you don’t just have good taste. You may be interested in something, but then you have to learn, and look, and look more.”

Selldorf appears ready to do all that in her city uniform of sharply tailored suits. She hails from the same soil as Jil Sander, another soft-voiced purveyor of aesthetic rightness—whom she slightly resembles and whose clothes she’s worn on and off for 30 years—but she’s always resisted stylistic labels, personally and professionally.

“People are often categorized as working within a particular tradition, as a modernist or as a traditionalist or as a revivalist or as a deconstructivist or a minimalist,” she says. “I’m not very interested in that. But I’m really interested in understanding where things come from, what effects they have on the contemporary situation and how we grapple with that.”

In 2019, Selldorf collaborated with artist Rachel Feinstein on the design of her retrospective at the Jewish Museum, *Rachel Feinstein: Maiden, Mother, Crone*. The floor plan, divided into four parts, included evocations of a park, a stately home, an altar and a womb, inside of which a pair of rounded, ovary-shaped sculpture niches were tucked at two corners. Feinstein was enchanted. The design became a scaffold for the work, she says; Selldorf was “extremely aware of the tiny little featherlike feelings that come from whatever an artistic instinct might be like. A very delicate little vibrational feeling,” Feinstein says. One night, Feinstein and her husband, the painter John Currin, had the architect over for an elaborate dinner that involved a different alcohol pairing for every course, with the expected results. “We all got very, very drunk,” Feinstein recalls. “This idea of someone with her suits and being an architect, this whole thing about control—well, you realize she just loves to have a good time.”

For the past six months, Selldorf’s idea of a good time has been working with the Smithsonian American Art Museum on a reinstatement of its permanent collection. The project has involved a reappraisal of what it means for art to be “American” today—a map of the narratives left unwritten, the voices still unheard. From her home in Maine, she’s been in intensive conversation with curators who are developing a hybrid installation, part themed, part chronological, that will take into account a more inclusive view.



STRIKE A POSE
In the entryway, a Joseph Beuys felt suit hangs near a Franz West wire sculpture beneath framed drawings. Opposite, clockwise from top left: The guest room; an 18th-century Italian inlaid desk in the living room; a Venini lamp beside a Chinese cabinet in the kitchen; assorted contemporary drawings in the entryway.



The project aligns with the kind of deep-dive institutional work the studio has been seeking out for the past decade. Selldorf and her five partners—three women, two men—spend a lot of time talking about their goals and how to move from here to there. Projects farther afield have gradually flowed in: the Mwabwinda School in southern Zambia; a library for Brown University; Steinway Hall, a Manhattan piano showroom and recital hall; the Qianlong Garden Interpretation Center, which will open this fall beneath a pagoda roof inside Beijing’s Forbidden City.

“I think the work is subtle, and it’s not for everybody,” concedes partner Lisa Green, who joined the practice in 2010 from the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, where she was assistant director focusing on institutional planning. “It’s sometimes challenging to be seen and heard in a kind of request-for-proposal world, and in a competition world, where a lot of that [public] work is achieved.”

In any case, the museum and gallery projects that introduced Selldorf to the world keep coming. The design phase is underway on a renovation and a new building for the Shaker Museum in Chatham, New York, and a 75,000-square-foot expansion of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego (MCASD) will open in spring 2022. Sara Lopergolo, the partner in charge, notes that the MCASD project, as with all the firm’s endeavors, will be “about finding that essence and that calm in the architecture, for the people who would inhabit it and for the passerby.”

For Selldorf, pushing back against reductive ways

of thinking—about labels, about who architecture should be by and for and what it should accomplish—is an unacknowledged superpower. “Architecture is a funny profession,” she says. “It’s an endless number of things to think about and resolve. For me, it’s really about keeping people at the center.”

This spring, New York’s Frick Collection will break ground on Selldorf Architects’ design for a long-delayed renovation that will make its Gilded Age cache of Vermeers and plump-bottomed Bouchers more accessible. Ian Wardropper, the Frick’s director, helped steer the selection process among 40 competing firms, and Selldorf’s collaborative ethos wasn’t lost on him. “One of the things I loved about Annabelle’s presentation, and clearly the trustees did too, was that it wasn’t just about her, you know? Her colleagues presented as well. When you know there’s chemistry in a firm, you also feel there’s going to be chemistry with you as the client. That’s proven true.”

As an amuse-bouche to its East 70th Street campus, the museum will soon open Frick Madison, three floors of temporary galleries inside Marcel Breuer’s 1966 Whitney Museum of American Art building (and lately home to the Met Breuer). Selldorf was tapped for the job of mediating between the Breuer’s granite-outfitted brutalism and the Frick’s beaux-arts bacchanal. Wardropper calls their design process “kind of like a vacation” after the five-year run-up to construction a few blocks away.

Selldorf is ready for a little New York reality. “The few times that I’ve been in the city, I walk around and it’s like, ‘Wow! What a marvelous place,’” she says. ●