



Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 672, Interview with Weronika Kolinska

Jasmin Singer: Welcome to Our Hen House, Weronika!

Weronika Kolinska: Hello! Hi! Nice to meet you, and thank you for having me.

Jasmin: I am so excited to talk to you and to see you because I have been not only following your work for so long, but you do the designs for Our Hen House, and we all were basically jumping up and down when you said yes because your work is bright and cheerful and poignant and moving and really beautiful. So first of all, thank you for all the art you put into this world.

Weronika: Yeah. And thank you so much for working with me. I'm so glad that you're happy!

Jasmin: Oh yeah, definitely. And we will be linking in the show notes to your various sites for people who want to look at your work while we're having this chat.

So just real quick, some people might pick up a Polish accent, is that right?

Weronika: Yes. *laughs*

Jasmin: You're from Poland, but you live in Amsterdam now?

Weronika: Yeah. It's been like five years, I think now, in Amsterdam.

Jasmin: Okay. I've been to Amsterdam. I love it there.

I hear, however, that like that Warsaw is the place to be in terms of veganism. Is that your impression too?

Weronika: Yeah. Warsaw has a crazy amount of vegan restaurants. I've seen it on many lists and rankings and that is certainly true. I've been there many times and every time I go there, there's a few new places to visit. So it's really awesome. And compared to Amsterdam, Amsterdam has a lot of restaurants, but it's so many, you know, burger places.

How many burgers can you eat? It gets boring at some point.

Jasmin: I can't even remember who I was interviewing recently, but they were like, "We have enough burgers. Like we did it! Yay. And we think of something else?" That's so funny!

Weronika: Exactly!

Jasmin: I remember going to Amsterdam in like 2001. Yes. The summer of 2001.

And it was way, way, way before there was any marijuana here available legally. And I was like 22 or something and I just remember being like...I couldn't believe it. It was so exciting. And there was all this space cake everywhere, and there was like vegan space cake, even though I wasn't even vegan yet.

But anyway, so that's my little memory.

Okay, well, I'm gonna nerd out forever, but let's start with your work for Our Hen House, since that was our introduction to your work, and we'll go backwards from there.

So when we did the redesign of our website and other graphics, we really relied on you to guide us. How is it working with an organization that needs your help with brand management and logo design?

Weronika: Funnily enough, I don't do branding that much. I mostly do illustration work. Yeah, first we made the logo and I think once we got that, we went from there just trying to fit it all in a cohesive idea.

Jasmin: Right? Totally. I mean, you really succeeded at that and captured the essence and the energy of Our Hen House, and I feel like that's something that you do a lot with your work. So for our listeners who aren't familiar with your work, what kinds of illustrations do you do the most?

Weronika: Yeah, lately, I've been doing work for sanctuaries, like farm animal sanctuaries.

Which is, I would say, the coolest thing I've ever worked on, it's super rewarding. It's like you get to draw these animals that are just living their life, you know? You know they are safe. They've been rescued, you learn about their personalities and you can transfer that into the art.

Yeah, and it's great to have this peace of mind that those animals are just out there. Instead of just Googling a cow and drawing a cow, you draw THIS cow that has a name and they are cared for. It's so cool to know, you know?

And also when you're an artist and you Google reference pictures...it's really weird being a vegan and just Googling a cow, you will inevitably see some really tough to look at images of farms, even factory farms.

So it's really cool to draw these specific animals and for this purpose, to fundraise for them. That is super cool. I love it.

Jasmin: Yeah, I can imagine. So do you get to meet these animals in person when you're working on sanctuary animals, or is it a mix? Like, I imagine you're working on sanctuaries all over the world.

Weronika: Yeah, mostly in the US. So unfortunately I've never met any of those animals. I wish I did.

Jasmin: Yeah. Right? Yeah, I love that so much.

Weronika: Maybe some day.

Jasmin: Yeah, you definitely have to come out here!

I have a tattoo of a calf on my calf. And by the way, it took me many years to realize that my calf was on the calf...but it's a cow from Farm Sanctuary.

And the artist did a really great job of drawing this particular cow. And so I went to Farm Sanctuary, the one in California. It was back when they had the shelter up in Chico and I had on like a dress or something so people could see my leg and someone was like, "Oh, there's Valentino!" They looked at my leg and they were like, "Oh, I know which one that is."

So you're right. I mean there's gotta be many differences between drawing A cow and THAT cow.

Weronika: Yeah, definitely You can tell them apart very easily and they all have their specific quirks.

Jasmin: Well, so tell us about MENIMA, and I'm not sure I'm saying that right. So am I?

Weronika: I think so. I mean, we always say it in a polish accent, so it's just MENIMA. Yeah.

Jasmin: Okay. We'll go with that. Tell us about it.

Weronika: So, MENIMA was created many years ago now, actually. How time flies. So it was an idea my cousin had, he's a long time vegan. He was vegan before me, which was really cool. As far as family goes, he like paved the path. So when I went vegan, everyone knew what that's about.

So it was super easy for me. So yeah, one day we were just talking and he was like, "There is no brand that does these graphic vegan tees in Poland, so let's try that."

Jasmin: Why do you feel that wearable art is a particularly effective form of activism?

Weronika: Wearable art is so cool. You don't often have the the chance to showcase a piece of art that freely, like on clothing.

Another example would be tattoos, I guess. Yeah. It's so cool to just wear a piece of art that everyone sees and they can approach you about it. They can talk to you about it. It's often a conversation starter. Even if it's not, people just see it around. It becomes normalized and maybe it just makes them think, you know? It's really cool.

Jasmin: Mm-hmm. Especially when it's beautiful, I think that can really engage someone and bring them in or when there's just a lot going on. I totally agree. I mean, there's some message wear that I'm uncomfortable wearing, but I love when it's something very engaging and very beautiful. Which actually makes me think of your work with Andy Tabar, who we absolutely love!

Weronika: Oh yeah. Shout out Andy!

Jasmin: Yeah, totally. Tell us about your work with Andy Tabar.

Weronika: Andy was actually one of the first people to approach me about vegan t-shirts specifically. It was shortly after I became vegan. I used to do a lot of designs for bands in the MySpace era. Then there was the Tumblr era.

And that was about the time I went vegan and I had this one...it was like, you could call it a comic series. Not really a series like, just a few illustrations that were inspired by a poem that was going around Tumblr. It was very viral in the vegan community. So I think maybe that's how Andy found me.

It was really fun working with him. He always had very specific ideas of what he wanted. He had all the slogans down, and he often even sent me these cute sketches he made himself of like the basic composition he was looking for. So it was super fun working with him.

We did a few designs together. It was, it was really fun.

Jasmin: And of course for people listening to this, we're talking about Compassion Co and we will link to that as well. What have been some of the most popular designs that you have made, whether with Compassion Co or with MENIMA or whatever.

Weronika: Two are very popular that I made for MENIMA, the love all animals. It's like a cow, a pig, a goat, and a rabbit. That's a very iconic one. And then another one is called Save the Ocean. It shows a sea turtle. It was inspired by the anti plastic movement. And in MENIMA, we try our hardest to minimize our plastic use.

We don't use it in packaging at all. I think a few of our hoodies may have some polyester in them, like from recycled bottles, but...and this design particularly has been stolen so many times. I found it on Wish and on Ali Express, it's horrible.

Jasmin: Oh my gosh, that's terrible.

Weronika: Yeah, and it's so ironic when you find it on Wish and it's made on a polyester t-shirt and it's like an iron on patch. Like someone found it on Pinterest and just barely removed the background and slapped it on this shirt and now sells it for five Euros. So crazy.

Jasmin: How terrible. That's awful. I mean, that's another reason why I think it's important for us to be supporting artists and getting directly from artists and small companies whenever we can.

Weronika: Yes, definitely.

Jasmin: One thing I think is interesting about your work is that it depicts animals basically realistically not cartoon-like at all.

Why is that important to you?

Weronika: Yeah, I try to do this balance between realistic, and maybe not cartoony, but just a little simplified. So, you know, cartoony animals are just, I think, harder to relate to them. It's harder to empathize because they just seem unreal. So realistic animals, and I try to portray some emotions, usually just happiness, on their faces. And I think that makes them just really more personable.

Jasmin: Yeah, no, definitely. You're exactly right. You know, I think sometimes about how children must be thinking of animals when they watch TV shows, like Curious George or Arthur, where they are of these sort of like hybrid animals and kids. And it's not who they actually meet when they go and meet an animal and I think that's too bad.

And so I love the fact that your animals are saying so much, sometimes literally with message wear, but look like an animal.

Weronika: Thank you, that is my goal. When I was a kid, I really loved Babe, Babe the pig. And that was so cool to see real animals talk. You know, so I think this is kind of a similar thing that you can really connect to the real animals.

Jasmin: Well, speaking of which, you've said that animal rights, I'm quoting you, "Animal rights means something I think we all already believe in, but we live in a world that forces us to go against that." So true. How do you account for the fact that so many people don't go vegan even though they care about animals?

Weronika: I don't know. I think it's hard to make people think about it in the first place. Like actually stop and think about what they're doing. I know it was like that for me.

I considered myself an animal lover since I was a kid. I was really small, I loved bugs, observing bugs and watching David Attenborough documentaries.

But I also grew up in a small village where people farmed animals. So it was very normalized. It was like some animals are wild and they are to be admired. And some are pets that we love and then some are just okay to eat for some reason. You know? And we don't even think that all of those animals have the same emotional life and cognitive abilities, you know? They all feel pain in the same way.

Jasmin: So what changed? So you're growing up in a little village, you, like the rest of the world, are starting to put animals in different categories of the ones we love and the ones we eat. When did the light turn on for you?

Weronika: It was in 2011, exactly, when I got with my partner. He was already vegetarian. I wasn't.

So it was like we didn't really discuss this. We were like, we just differ in that way, you know? So live and let live. And one day I just read, I stumbled upon this cookbook and it had this long intro about why is vegetarianism so great. And I read it and it was like all of the arguments that I heard my partner say in many conversations with his friends.

But when I saw this all together, it like finally it made sense, you know? And it really convinced me. So then I went vegetarian and since suddenly that was a new thing we had in common, we started talking about it a lot. And I remember I bought a book, it wasn't by Peter Singer, but it was like a collection of essays that he...

Jasmin: It was a collection of essays that he had been involved in somehow so it reflected his work?

Weronika: Yeah, so I started reading that and there was this chapter about egg production. And I read it and I discussed it with my partner and we were like, "This is horrific. We cannot eat eggs anymore."

You know, like if we wanna be consistent we just cannot do it any longer. And it was also the height of the Gary Yourofski popularity. I don't know if you're familiar. So we also saw this famous lecture he gave and that also convinced us.

Jasmin: So funny to me when people go from asleep to awake, I'm endlessly fascinated.

Weronika: Yeah, it's crazy. It's like you hear these things so many times and just one day it clicks. It's crazy.

Jasmin: I mean, that gives me a lot of hope, honestly. Even the fact that your partner wasn't even leaning in too strongly with you and he was just existing and you overheard conversations.

Sometimes people do want to go a little bit more in your face than that, and that's fine, I'm not judging. I just think it's interesting that sometimes all you need to do is be yourself.

And there's this thought process in like 12 steps, like AA and things like that, that if someone wants to get a sponsor, the way that they find the sponsor is that they look for someone who has something that they want, like an attitude that they want or something like that. And I feel like vegans are just a bunch of walking sponsors, basically. Like, "You want what I have? Cool. I'm here for when you wanna chat about!"

Weronika: Yeah. It's really cool. I'm really a big advocate of doing your thing and leading by example and answering when people ask, not necessarily preaching when they don't ask. And it's so interesting to think that sometimes people don't even take part in the conversation, they just listen on the side and they hear all of that and it just like marinates inside their head. One day, maybe finally it'll click.

Jasmin: Yeah, totally. Just like tempeh, needs to marinate or it's gonna taste like crap. It took me a very long time to realize that! *both laugh*

Anyway, another issue that you are passionate about is fast fashion. Tell us about your feelings about fast fashion .

Weronika: So, since the pandemic, I feel like fast fashion, especially brands like Shein and Wish got so big because everyone was in lockdown, everyone was shopping online.

So when we think fast fashion, I think most of us think about H&M or Zara and now, I feel like those brands already try to do better because they were around for so long and got so much criticism. Of course there's a lot of greenwashing that comes into this. That's a whole other topic.

But yeah, while those brands are trying to do better, then there's Shein that is the biggest retailer right now and they are very secretive about their process. It's just so crazy how their clothes are extremely cheap. They make so much of them. I think they create even thousands of new products per day, and they can respond to trends in like a week. They can whip out a totally new design and start selling it.

So they are really following trends. And because the clothes are so cheap, people can buy more of them and they can treat the clothes as more disposable. So a lot of those clothes end up in landfills, of course. And these kinds of prices, they wouldn't be able to sell these clothes so cheap if it wasn't for very bad quality materials. Mostly plastic materials and of course using sweat shops and horrible labor conditions.

Jasmin: Yeah, I mean, one of my favorite parts about being vegan, aside from the fact that I get to live in accordance with my values, is how many other issues that touch on veganism are opened up to me. And I remember learning about fast fashion and it felt similar to when I learned about what happened to animals.

Like when I learned about what happened to animals, I suddenly saw animal cruelty everywhere, like the corner hot dog stand and you know, every single restaurant I was passing. And when I learned about fast fashion, it was kind of similar. I am sometimes surprised by the fact that like some people just sort of start an end at veganism.

They don't think about other issues. Like what do you think? Do you think that these are related?

Weronika: A lot of us as vegans care about the wellbeing of animals, and if you care about the wellbeing of animals, you probably care about human rights and environmental issues. So yeah, I think it's very much connected and we should care about those things.

Everyone should care about these things.

Jasmin: Yeah. I mean, it's also hopeful to remember that there was a time when we didn't know, and it's a good, for me anyway, it's a good ego check. Like, "Okay, well there are still a lot of things I don't know yet and things are going to evolve." But it was Maya Angelou who said, "When you know better, you do better."

And I think that that is a philosophy that we could all stand to live by. But I wanna get back to your work and your art specifically. You've been able to do a lot of animal rights related art, and there are people all over the world who are wearing your designs or they have them hung up. What would you say you still have yet to do as an artist that you want to do?

Weronika: I know I would love to reach more people and I've been trying lately to make my art, at least some of it, with the specific purpose of reaching the most amount of people.

It might sound silly because it's all about Instagram algorithms.

Jasmin: No, it doesn't sound silly. It sounds exactly like the way you should be thinking right now if you wanna grow your small business. Instagram algorithms are unfortunately things we need to know about.

Weronika: Yeah, exactly. So for years I've been drawing animals, all kinds of animals, just for the sake of drawing them because I enjoyed it and it's like a process of admiration, you could say, to just draw these animals. But lately I've been, I've been thinking about it and I've been like "It's nice, but it's not relatable to people. It's not something that they would like to share." So I've been incorporating more vegan slogans into it so that people have something to agree with and they know what the purpose of this artwork is, and they wanna share it around.

Jasmin: Yeah. Well, I think that's great. Do you have any tips for any up and coming artists who want to take their drawings and sort of put them out into the world?

Weronika: If you're an up and coming artist, I would say draw a lot! *laughs* That's the first step, right?

If you draw a lot, you certainly develop your style naturally and if you wanna share your art, try...I'm not a good example of that, but I would say try as many platforms as you can. Which I don't do, but it's do as I say, not as I do, right? *laughs*

Jasmin: Well, it's true. Like a lot of people will ask me, you know, "How do I become a writer?"

And I'm like, "Well, you write!" And so I like that you were talking about, if you wanna be an artist draw. And it's so funny because like there have been

times in my own career where I have just felt like, “Ugh, why is nothing happening with my career?” and this and that. And I realize, “Oh, I’m a writer, but I don't actually write every day.

I mean, this was in the past. And I'm like, “Wait, I have to start writing if I think of myself as a writer.” So whatever you fancy yourself, I think the point is, are you doing it?

Weronika: Yes. And as creatives, we often...it's easy to do things we know, but in today's day and age, we have to chase these trends. You know?

So like for me, I love drawing these intricate ink drawings, like on paper. But I just noticed, yeah, you can look at it and appreciate it, but there's no specific message attached to it. So I try to make the message the focal point instead of just the technique. That's it, you know?

Jasmin: Well, your activism is showing . . I think that's the difference... Well, from where I sit, that seems to be the difference between, you know, just in an artist and an artist activist. I mean, you're bringing it with you everywhere you go. So what are you working on these days that you're excited about?

Weronika: Mostly on sanctuary designs. I don't have any new, unique projects.

Jasmin: YET!

Weronika: Yeah! At the moment.

Jasmin: I'm happy that you're joining us here because I sort of think everyone already knows who you are, but that's because sometimes people become so big in my head because I love their work so much that I just assume everyone knows who they are.

So like, if anyone's listening to this and you have a project and you need an incredible artist to help you bring it to life, you know, Weronika's your person. So Weronika, before we go, and I hope you'll stay on with me to chat with the flock for our bonus content...I'd love to know from your vantage point, like what gives you hope and where do you hope that we're going as a society?

Weronika: What gives me hope, I think, is the fact that people are not evil or bad, mostly ignorant. If you see them doing something bad, it's mostly out of ignorance. So we can all work together to spread awareness and try to make people care about the issues we care about and do better.

Jasmin: Beautiful. Thank you so much for joining us. Please tell our listeners how they can find you online and support your efforts.

Weronika: Yeah, you can find me on, mainly Instagram, @W.Kolinska, that may be a hard one.

Jasmin: We will definitely link to that. And I think it's pretty easy. It's how it sounds, although I guess I'll point out that you're Weronika with a W for dumb Americans like me who are listening.

Weronika: Umm, not dumb, just ignorant.

Jasmin: Ignorant Americans, okay. Thank you for the clarification.

Alright. Well Weronika, thank you so much for joining us. I'm an even bigger fan now, and I look forward to staying on top of your incredible work.

Weronika: Thank you so much. It was a pleasure.