# Interview with Verena Michelitsch, Designer and Art Director

Verena Michelitsch is a freelance designer and art director from Austria, currently based in New York. She works on branding, illustration and art direction for clients in the fashion, arts and technology sectors for big names like Apple, Nasa, Facebook, Red Bull, The Smithsonian and Opening Ceremony. She recently visited the Shillington New York campus for an industry guest lecture, sharing her amazing work with us and experience working as a freelancer.

Read on for her complete interview to learn about her favorite projects to date, tips for working with clients as a freelancer and her side project being the editor for the magazine on sleeping habits called Sand & Such.

**Tell us about your creative journey. At what point did you decide to become a designer?**

I always loved drawing and crafts as a kid and grew up in a family of photographers. Luckily a creative career was something that my parents supported and after studying Arts History in Graz, Austria, I switched to studying a program called Information Design which was basically a mix of communication and exhibition design. I loved it immediately and started taking on freelance work on the side pretty early, around 19.

**What do you find most challenging about being a designer and what do you love the most?**

Sharing work with a client for the first time still feels vulnerable sometimes, especially when I’m personally excited or very attached to the work. What I love most about being a designer is that it really doesn’t feel like work to me. I’m always excited about walking over to my studio space and starting the day.

**What are the most important skills for a designer to have?**

*To be open to keep on growing, iterating and learning.*

Listen carefully to feedback from all sides and filter out the most valuable points. Also, create boundaries and have a strong foundation and reasoning behind the work you present. These days it’s not that hard to make things look good quickly and on a superficial level. The work that I find most interesting reflects the inherent character of a brand / product / matter in a particular way.

**You’ve worked for some big studios in your design career—Sid Lee, RoAndCo, Pentagram and Sagmeister. What made you decide to go solo and focus entirely on your freelance business?**

I’ve freelanced on the side while studying at the university and started my freelance business right after college, mainly because I got selected for an artist-in-residency program in my hometown. I worked on different projects, mainly editorial and exhibition design for a year and then joined some friends to start a little studio in Graz, Austria. My first full-time job was in New York, a few years after that. It felt natural to go back to working as an independent designer.

My typical day starts with coffee on the couch, checking emails and then walking over to my studio space which is luckily just a 10-minute walk. I do more organizational work in the morning (emails, estimates, invoices) and more design work in the afternoon but there’s no real structure to my day. I just work on whatever needs my attention first. I have a bunch of side projects (a sleep blog) and try to make use of the tools that we have in our workspace at ado (laser cutter! riso printer!) for personal projects.

**How did you go about finding new clients and marketing yourself?**

I am lucky that I rarely reach out to get work these days. I get most inquiries through my website or Instagram. I used

LinkedIn when I first moved to New York and it is helpful to find people within organizations. Working not Working is great for designers because you can show your work and it is specifically made for creatives.

**Tell us about your favorite projects and process.**

Last year I started working with gossamer, a weed lifestyle publication. It’s been so much fun to work on the editorial assignment together with Kristina Bartosova. I worked on the creative and art direction for every shoot and illustration series of the magazine, as well as editorial design for the magazine. We received all the copy and had to come up with visual ideas for each story, along with a graphic and typographic system for the magazine. We’re currently working on Volume 3 which we’re very excited about.

**In your lecture, you offered some great reflection from your experience working with clients. What was the most important lesson that you learned along the way?**

I think to ask for help, advice, feedback and to establish boundaries, especially when you're working on your own. For a long time, I thought I have to be able to do or know everything within every given timeframe.

> *It's important to push back if requests deteriorate the quality of the design work.*

**What is your proudest career achievement to date?**

One of the most special experiences was doing art direction

for a big global photoshoot for Facebook in 2015. We traveled the world and shot a campaign for specific regional markets.

It was such an immense experience to meet people and to learn about specific cultural cues that had to be reflected in the art direction and photography we created. I learned a lot and changed the way I look and think about images forever. I think my family was proud when I worked for big-name companies like Apple or Google.

**You started a fun fruit and vegetable themed photographic collaboration with another creative called Tutti Frutti Studio. Tell us how this came about. Do you think personal projects are important for a creative?**

I did a shoot for a client with fruits as props. I was so into it that I wanted to elaborate more on creating collage-like images with fruit. I asked my friend Alex Proba and my sister if they want to spend a day playing around with fruit and we came up with Madebytuttifrutti.

**What is inspiring you at the moment?**

New materials—researching sustainable or biodegradable materials, especially for packaging.

**Big thanks to Verena for coming to speak at our New York campus! Be sure to check out her website and follow her on Instagram for regular updates.**

**Shillington has welcomed many amazing creatives to our**

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https://www.shillingtoneducation.com/blog/interview-verena-michelitsch-designer-art-director/