

GOOD TEETH BITE STRONG

Conversation between Mila Panić and Adriana Tranca



In vulnerability lies strength. To feel intensely is not a sign of weakness. Empathy allows trust and unity. These are concepts we know and operate with from feminist scholars and activists like Judith Butler, bell hooks and Octavia Butler. They have turned cultural norms upside down, criticised and reimagined our worldviews, and very importantly have given us tools to break unjust conventions. From this territory comes Mila Panić's artistic practice, though her work is less aphoristic, and more experiential. In what follows we go through the artworks presented in *Good Teeth Bite Strong*, as well as Mila's inspiration and artistic process, self determination and subject constitution.

Adriana: *Good teeth bite strong: is that a Bosnian saying?*

Mila: Not really. I think it has the potential, but it's actually something I wrote on one of my drawings showing my big teeth. It's a very simple and logical sentence, but for me it's loaded with years of living in a foreign country.

The closest we have, in my mother tongue, would be translated as "You don't check the teeth of a horse you've been given (gifted)"; that comes from the practice of checking a horse's teeth to know how strong, old, and healthy it is before you buy it. I mean, this was also a practice among guest workers in the 1960s who came to Germany (see *A Seventh Man; Migrant Workers in Europe* by John Berger).

Taking a closer look at the words forming the sentence, a lot is suggested about empowerment, resilience, strength, and precarity. As an immigrant, one has the burden of being constantly on the lookout.

Let's think about teeth - they are not just for biting and feeding; they are important for being able to speak and form a language. Many sounds that come from our throats bounce off our teeth or can be produced just with the help of teeth. If you don't have teeth, it's harder to speak. Good teeth bite strong is, to me, about articulation and being able to voice yourself. Biting is many things but aggressive. Not even animals bite for fun. It's always about survival or protection. Humans, on the other hand, don't bite. It's not our usual means of attack or defence.

Adriana: As an Eastern European living in Western Europe, I find myself in a constant struggle to tame a wild tongue, to paraphrase Chicana theorist and poet Gloria Anzaldúa: never here or there, always at a crossroad, constantly under scrutiny and other-ed. Against this background, I've been thinking a lot about the artworks included in the show. Do you feel you yourself have a wild tongue?

Mila: Sure. As time is passing, I am getting tired of trying to not reproduce the image of a 'bad immigrant' and to be honest I am not such a good immigrant either. I wonder, why is an adjective added to the word immigrant and who evaluates them? Does a good immigrant make it in Germany? I have spoken on many occasions about how difficult it is to explore and express emotions, all of them, but the most interesting one for me is anger expressed in a foreign language (in my case English and German). Personally, writing jokes helped me. Constantly worrying not to offend someone, or to reproduce their white, western anxiety.

We, immigrants, self-correct and self-censor because we are afraid. Fear of being out-woked, sent back, red flagged, not good enough, pressured to perform well, etc. 'Washing' yourself through languages and expectations, I wonder how much we lose ourselves (whatever "self" means), how much we are tamed? Sometimes I don't recognize myself - am I saying something just to fit the image of a good, woke Western person, or is it really how I feel and think? I think about this a lot; as the years go by, it gets harder and harder to distinguish. Being Southeastern European is an interesting position in Western Europe. There are daily microaggressions that I notice but it's tricky to pin the exact title on those unjust behaviours. It's hard to explain this racism. It's like - we are white, but we stink, you know.

Adriana: Stand up comedy is a medium you've fairly recently incorporated in your artistic practice. How did this happen? And how do you generally deal with language in your artistic practice?



Make it in Germany; LED neon, 250 x 3cm; 2022; view: 'Cleaving the Wind into Fragments'; photo by Stefan Stark

Make it in Germany.



Suedost Paket, 2017-ongoing;
bus tire, vegetables;
view:
'Good Teeth Bite Strong'

Mila: As I mentioned, finding that outlet in the form of stand-up comedy was the best thing that happened to me in a long time. Just before that, I did a podcast called *'Broken English'* where I wanted to talk about language politics, dog whistle politics, living between two languages, and humor in the face of displacement. I've always been a very vocal person. My friends were very happy that I started doing stand-up so I could stop rambling to them. In my opinion, stand-up comedy, visual art and writing come from the same place - a spectrum of irritation, anger and madness, and I believe that what lies underneath and drives all of that is fear. These elements formed the basis for me to reshape how visitors view certain issues. If they laugh, that's proof that I'm not irrational or that I've gone mad.

Stand-up for me started during COVID times and a moment before the ongoing war in Ukraine started. I'm mentioning these particular events as they evoke quite an irritation in me. Especially in the context of the selective empathy that prevailed in Germany (I speak of Germany because I live here - but this happens in many other places). Writing these feelings down and turning them into a joke, finding an angle in which I make these feelings understandable

to others, helped me a lot to deal with and process my thoughts. To figure out why I feel unsettled.

It's also possible to think of stand-up comedy/humor as physical violence in some ways, where by violence we mean that a certain force is inflicted on someone. The joke comes as a punch - and the laughter comes as a reaction, just before we can think about why we laughed. I find that this kind of art is closer to music than to visual art in terms of the immediacy of the body's response.

Still, to me, stand-up comedy is just another medium of contemporary art. Whether using a joke or an installation, the goal is the same: to make the audience rethink social norms and question power structures. In my case, jokes seem to be my preferred language. Jokes have simply 'infected' my whole life. There is not a moment when I am not working and collecting material. Now they find their way into my drawings and exhibitions. Places where active laughter is rarely heard, but at the same time should provide a safe space and represent freedom of thought (as I write this, it already sounds like a joke, haha).



If I stop smiling they will see how angry I am; selfportraits,spray; 2023; view: 'Good Teeth Bite Strong'

Suedost Paket, 2017-ongoing;
bus tire, soil; exhibition view:
'Good Teeth Bite Strong'



I like the idea of being loud in these spaces and making other people laugh. The audience in galleries and institutions is more challenging and more restricted than in a comedy club. An important part of stand-up, of course, is the element of night. It's harder to lie in the evening. You're more tired and brakes, moral and physical, are looser. The night has always been reserved for "shameful" activities whatever that may be for you - and certainly laughing at something you shouldn't even think about at 2 p.m., let alone say out loud, is one of those things.

Adriana: Dealing with frustration, with injustice and mistreatment through humour has a long history, from ancient Greece to the Renaissance, to the Guerilla Girls. Bringing stand up comedy into the realm of contemporary art, or the other way around, is quite innovative. You do seem to be very comfortable transgressing the traditional separation of life from art, blend one into the other, while never oversimplifying.

Make it in Germany (2022) reappropriates a German official immigration website's catchphrase recruiting skilled workers, while the same officials make it impossible

for immigrants to live in Germany. It sounds funny, but when one has to live through these situations, it's definitely not funny anymore. So how do you deal with exhaustion?

Mila: A few years ago I felt really exhausted ... and started thinking about what would happen if I gave up on trying to stay here. What was I so afraid of? Is it the return to Bosnia that I am afraid of, and if so, why am I under the impression that a better life is possible anywhere other than Bosnia? At that time, I started working on the project *Return/ing* (2023) and talked to colleagues and friends who had the same feelings and worries, and some of them even went back to their home country. The more I worked on it, the more issues and topics opened up in the field of return migration - reasons for leaving, fear of returning, precarious working conditions, the evolution of living conditions in the country of origin and destination - and all of this is told through very intimate stories. Talking about it and getting to the bottom of it helps with exhaustion.



Adriana: If I were to describe your work, and you as a person, with one word it would definitely be unapologetic. Do you find that to be accurate?

Mila: I am not uncomfortable hearing that word. I think many would describe me that way. Straight-forward, honest and unapologetic. I'm not very good at conveying stories or opinions in a gentle way. Circling around and not going straight to the point makes me uncomfortable and gives me anxiety. The work *If I stop smiling, they will see how angry I am* (2020-ongoing) was a way to express many opinions and experiences. I usually would write thoughts or observations on my self-portraits that might be considered rude or too direct but also funny and ironic. It felt safer to present them this way, and I felt relieved. Of course, that was a bit before I started doing stand up - which opened a wider door to my expression. Now I use my comedy punchlines and write them on my self portraits. In this form they do not come across as funny, but as serious premises.

Adriana: How do you choose the items for the *Südost Paket* (2017 - ongoing)? Are they always the same?

Mila: I choose the objects by feeling. Items that remind me of home, or funny stories and events that I have seen or heard about trips and smuggling with buses from Bosnia. These objects became a personification of our identity and folklore, and together with the bus tire they are like a monument for me. A monument to the microcosm that gets created in the bus during the 20-24 hours of crossing the border (physically and morally) while traveling from Bosnia to Germany and vice versa. Many things happen on that bus. A lot of fear, anxiety, sadness, smuggling of simple goods and knowledge in some way, but also laughter, excitement and solidarity - depending on the direction of the bus.

Adriana: What are you currently researching or working on?

Mila: In the coming year I will dedicate more time to the writing process and performing stand up. I want to explore the language of humour in different social contexts.

Adriana: What punchline would you end this conversation with?

Mila: TschüÜüÜüss





Just bewteen us; stand up comedy
'All Images Will Disapear, One Day'
Autostrada Biennale, 2023





Madness; window intervention, shadow, 2023; view: 'Good Teeth Bite Strong'

Mila Panić is a Bosnian-born artist and stand-up comedian based in Berlin. She is the host of *Broken English*, a podcast exploring the politics of language and the question of how it is to live between two or more languages. She is the co-founder of the collective and association Fully Funded Residencies e.V. that provides an overview of paid opportunities for all cultural workers, as well as for the exchange of experiences and critical reflection on artist in residence programs.

Mila Panić is the winner of ZVONO Young Visual Artist Award of Bosnia and Herzegovina for 2020, and recipient of several international scholarships.

Mila has exhibited internationally: Autostrada Bienalle, Prizren, Kosovo (2023), Galerie im Saalbau, Berlin (2023), 59.October Salon (Belgrade Biennale) (2022), Mediterranea 19 Young Artists Biennale, San Marino, Italy (2021) a.o.

Adriana Tranca is an independent curator, researcher and writer. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Linguistics and one in Art History from the University of Bucharest and a Master of Fine Arts in Curating from Goldsmiths, University of London. Currently Adriana works as a freelance curator at E-WERK Luckenwalde, where she is involved in several projects.

Notably, she has co-founded CURRENTS, an electronic music festival that combines contemporary art and live electronic music, showcasing both established and emerging artists. Adriana's curatorial practice is socially engaged, as evidenced by her involvement in organizing *Speculative Properties* (2023), a protest exhibition against real estate speculation in Berlin-Kreuzberg that forced artists out of their studios - a project that attracted the attention of the Berlin Senate. She has recently contributed to an artist book by Šejla Kamerić, published by Distanz Verlag.