

Beyond Femen: Feminist Art and Activism in 2000s Ukraine

Vira Sachenko

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Vira.Sachenko@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

Superfluous Women: Art, Feminism, and Revolution in Twenty-First-Century Ukraine is an archive showcasing the entanglements between “the vanguard” (p. 5) of the 2000s’ Ukraine, the state, and revolution. Jessica Zychowicz makes an invaluable contribution to the anglophone study of Ukrainian feminist protest and the cultural dissensus about Soviet heritage and post-*Maidan* state politics. The cultural production considered in *Superfluous Women* highlights both the ambivalence of Ukrainian society and the failures of the state’s attempts to sustain a “monopoly on ‘truth’” (p. 264).

Über Femen hinaus: Feministische Kunst und Aktivismus in der Ukraine der 2000er Jahre

German Abstract:

Superfluous Women von Jessica Zychowicz zeigt die Verstrickungen zwischen „der Vorhut“ (S. 5) der Ukraine der 2000er Jahre, dem Staat und der Revolution auf. Diese Studie über ukrainischen feministischen Protest ist ein wichtiger Beitrag zu den heutigen Diskussionen über Aktivismus vor, während und nach der Zeit der *Maidan* Protestbewegung, und über die Beziehungen zum sowjetischen Erbe. Die im Buch betrachtete kulturelle Produktion zeigt sowohl die Ambivalenz der ukrainischen Gesellschaft als auch das Scheitern der Versuche des Staates, ein „Monopol auf ‚Wahrheit‘“ (S. 264) aufrechtzuerhalten.

How to cite:

Sachenko, Vira: “Beyond Femen: Feminist Art and Activism in 2000s Ukraine [Review of: Zychowicz, Jessica: *Superfluous Women: Art, Feminism, and Revolution in Twenty-First Century Ukraine*. Toronto: UP of Toronto Press, 2020.]“ In: KULT_online 64 (2021).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2021.1248>



Beyond Femen: Feminist Art and Activism in 2000s Ukraine

Vira Sachenko

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Zychowicz, Jessica. *Superfluous Women. Art, Feminism, and Revolution in Twenty-First Century Ukraine*. Toronto: UP of Toronto Press, 2020. 424 pages, 54,49 EUR. ISBN: 978-1-4875-1374-0.

Superfluous Women: Art, Feminism, and Revolution in Twenty-First-Century Ukraine archives the work of individuals and groups active between two mass protest movements of the past decades, of 2004 and 2013–14, to which Jessica Zychowicz refers as revolutions. Acting both as “chronicler and discursive translator” (p. 26), Zychowicz makes a timely contribution to social history of the changing art and activist landscape in Ukraine suited for general and specialized readers. The book became a helpful companion for my research on contemporary Ukrainian feminisms and the cultural landscape marked by the politics of ‘transition.’ As a Ukrainian born during the Fall and based abroad since 2007, I also read the book as a discursive map of political challenges negotiated by some of my peers.

Zychowicz’s term, the *interrevolutionary generation*, names those politically active between these major protest movements and yet too young to have experienced life under state socialism or the fall of the Soviet Union. An inconsistency regarding this generalization must be clarified right away: the book’s protagonists may hardly think *like* the entire generation. Namely, they are people “positioned outside the mainstream, [inhabiting a] marginalized viewpoint” (p. 289), and also primarily living in the capital. If such were its aims, Zychowicz’s study could become a truly generational one with more reflection on how the somewhat exclusive groups (*tusovky*) relate, and conflict, with the majority within the generation and with groups outside of Kyiv. How do the fates of those who made “freer and more open uses of public space” (p. 19) intersect with those who did not, as well as those whose agenda was far from feminist?

However, the strength of the book is in both amplifying the messages of the marginal, and in taking them as a guide for the diagnosis of some of the most pressing problems of political life in Ukraine and in “postsocialist” Europe at large. The argumentative arc running through the

chapters convincingly shows that *decommunization* (the set of laws and cultural practices that aims to free Ukraine of its Soviet past) is as “a cycle of inheriting those very same Soviet practices that the idea seeks to overcome in its politics of memory” (p. 261). Zychowicz’s analysis highlights both the repressive dimensions of ‘Soviet’ mechanisms in contemporary Ukraine and the emancipatory dimensions rediscovered in ‘Soviet’ art by the new generation. It therefore not only demonstrates the “tacit agreement between the state and cultural institutions” (p. 260), but works toward disrupting the hegemonic meanings of the term ‘Soviet’ in Ukrainian public discourse and anglophone Ukrainian studies.

Chapters one and two are dedicated to the ‘sextremist’ group Femen, its history, its critical reception in Ukraine and internationally. Zychowicz shows that, despite the notorious absence of political vision and strategy, two referents consistently appearing in Femen’s performances, women and the state, allowing us to view Femen as a kind of “litmus” (p. 45) on democratic ethos, the problem of domination of the female body, and the place of the Ukrainian female body within Occidental phantasies about Europe’s East. In chapter two, Zychowicz analyzes some of the outcomes of Femen’s aggressive digital strategies in the transnational outlook. She points to the transit of ideas from Femen to the Canadian feminist initiative Slutwalks and Russian protest music group Pussy Riot, as well as tries to contextualize the allegations of racism directed at Femen by multiple groups (Les Antigonnes and Hommen, The Krasnals! And Muslim Women Against Femen) for its crude universalism and attempts to perform as Muslim women.

Chapter three discusses the feminist collective Ofenzywa. Zychowicz details some of the dissensus on the meanings of feminism in Ukraine, including Ofenzywa’s split during the Maidan protests in 2014. The chapter examines the struggle for space and livelihoods of Ukraine’s economically or politically marginalized inhabitants through the photographic work by one of Ofenzywa’s members, Yevgenia Beloruset. Beloruset’s photography is shown to facilitate re-calling the fragments of the persistent Soviet materiality in the backdrop of contemporary Ukrainian life and inspire an analysis of the role of the private sphere of the home in the current political regime.

In chapter four the focus shifts from everyday life to the institutional setting of the museum and the work of Kyiv artistic and activist collectives HudRada and Revolutionary Experimental

Space (REP) who have gained prominence by attempting to reinvigorate public access to state museums. The chapter features an analysis of HudRada's interactive exhibit "Draftsmen's Congress" at Ukraine's National Art Museums in the summer of 2013. Zychowicz centers her analysis on the resilience and solidarity of the groups in the face of precarity, arguing that the exhibit "manifests the imaginary and unfulfilled possibilities that were opened up by two revolutions [...] that were [...]co-opted by elites" (p. 199).

Chapter five sketches out the precarious landscape of art and activism during the Russian occupation and war in Eastern Ukraine and the ongoing deliberations on how *Maidan* is to be memorialized. Zychowicz explores the meanings of art and dissidence in times of war by analyzing the forms of free association in the practices of the Visual Culture Research Center (VCRC) and the #SaveKyivModernism movement against the demolition of Soviet architectural masterpieces.

The book opens a dialogue on the role of Ukrainian feminist movements in transnational feminist politics by drawing parallels to many, although mostly European, artists. The extensive discussion of Femen nevertheless also points to some missed opportunities for intervention. Trying to practice a compassionate reading, Zychowicz sometimes leaves the reader with abstract statements, such as that Femen's politics are seen as "a controversial trace within public discourse" (p. 67). But, in "airing audiences' fantasies and fears," where are Femen's own, and how are they informing and limiting the group's potential? How exactly are they discursively positioned between "modernism's origins in masculinist notions of linear progress" (p. 56) and the Ukrainian feminist stance against old romanticism (p. 62), and what in fact unites the two? Zychowicz both acknowledges the "privilege" the group gave to "Europeaness" and tries to reflect on the global dynamics, within which Femen's "overidentification" with Muslim women could be a "symptomatic of deeper conditions – the mutual stereotyping that can occur [...] at cultural crossroads" (p. 126). This sympathetic analysis could have been strengthened by a more thorough discussion of how exactly the "digital media networks of the West" are also culpable for "creating the conditions" (p. 122) for Femen's apparent racism and islamophobia, as well as of how Eastern European feminists come to serve as "accomplices of the colonial project of power underlying the emergence of modernity" (Manuela Boatcă *Global Inequalities Beyond Occidentalism*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015, p. 219). In stressing what Serene J. Khader refers to as the "nonideal" (*Decolonizing Universalism. A Transnational Feminist Ethic*. Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 6) conditions of colonization that Femen is subject to, Zychowicz's approach risks stripping Femen members both of responsibility and capacity for choice.

Admittedly, maintaining the position of researcher both inside and outside the discourses she studies is notoriously difficult, as overt critique may itself be quickly viewed as a colonizing gesture. Zychowicz engages with her research partners graciously, not only by translating their art and activism to a reader who may not know Ukrainian or Russian, but also by working her artistic interlocutors into the broader social and aesthetic movements in Ukrainian, Soviet, and global history. As such, this book introduces many important urban struggles going on in Ukrainian art and activism to an anglophone audience, which could enable international solidarities to emerge. Although it does not fully abandon the democratization framework, this study nevertheless problematizes the story that accompanies Ukraine's dependent status in the economy of foreign aid and power, articulating many of the important challenges that the "society of the superfluous" (p. 279) grapples with. It documents the artistic revolution that is "ongoing in Kyiv," marking it as the site of creation of new answers to some of the problems which the anglophone discourses on "postsocialism" and "former East" (p. 288) both target and create.