

Ukrainian Women Artists in Revolutionary Times

Jessica Zychowicz, *Superfluous Women: Art, Feminism, and Revolution in Twenty-First-Century Ukraine*

University of Toronto Press, 2020, 424 pages, 66 black and white illustrations, C\$ 89.00, ISBN 978-1-487-50168-6 (hardcover) and 978-1-487-51375-7 (eBook)

Reviewed by Halyna Kohut

Since its founding in 2008, the radical Ukrainian feminist collective FEMEN has been shocking its audience with the provocative and inappropriate exposure of naked female bodies in public events and places. Unsurprisingly, the group has triggered highly negative responses, from demands to ban the collective to calls to lock up its members. The group's radical activism not only transgresses social morality but also "assaults" mass spectators, who often fail to comprehend the political aims behind the shocking artistic means, too powerful and too bizarre for their taste.

Emphasizing the common misunderstanding of early twenty-first-century Ukrainian activist art epitomized by FEMEN's performances, American scholar Jessica Zychowicz titled her book *Superfluous Women*, borrowing the catchy adjective from Ivan Turgenev's *The Diary of a Superfluous Man*. In this novel, Turgenev ponders the fate of the "lost" generation of nineteenth-century Russian noblemen, who, despite their social status and considerable intellectual and creative potential, cared only about their comfort, distancing themselves from societal problems.¹ Similarly, from the standpoint of an average viewer, the artists studied by Zychowicz seemed to be engaged in an incomprehensible and self-referential "protest for protest's sake" (5). Denying the "superfluity" of these artists,

Zychowicz argues in favor of their social effectiveness, claiming that they, in fact, were at the forefront of political processes by drawing attention to women's rights, sexual minorities' rights, and civil liberties in general. The author investigates their artistic strategies in the struggle for political and social change – particularly regarding the cultural perception of corporeality. On a more general level, the book is concerned with the social significance of art and the role of intellectuals in Ukrainian society against the backdrop of a transition that began with the 2004 pro-democratic Orange Revolution and continued into the turbulent second decade that witnessed the opening round of Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine in 2014.

The author frames her argument with numerous references to critical theory, which position her study as theoretically informed and engaging. One of the author's theoretical lenses is clearly feminist. Following Katherine Verdery and Eric Naiman, whose research dealt with the post-Soviet policies on gender and sexuality, Zychowicz studies the work of Ukrainian women artists and activists with emphasis on gender identity and women's experience.² By writing such a book, the author in a way becomes an activist herself, a participant in the struggle for women's rights and visibility. Beyond feminism, however, the study addresses a much wider range of issues of human rights, identity, and postcolonialism. As Zychowicz points out, she approaches "postcommunism as a nonclassical instance of postcoloniality, ascribing to the idea that national autonomy and feminism can coexist" (12).

The structure of the book comprises five case studies linked by a general introduction and a closing chapter. The book's first and second chapters focus on FEMEN and their radical top-

less protests against the sexual exploitation of women. The first chapter elucidates FEMEN's performances staged in public places, exploring the imagery used by the group. The second deals with the group's activity in the global digital media environment, specifically how they "employ the language of marketing and branding" to develop a critique of the commodification of women "as symbolic capital within the larger economy of entertainment and politics" (30).

The third chapter examines two series of photographs by Yevgenia Belorusets, a member of the feminist group Ofenzywa, which is known for its annual political actions during the celebrations of International Women's Day in Ukraine. Belorusets' series *Gogol Street*, 32 explores the Soviet heritage in the everyday life of post-Soviet Ukraine, by taking as an example the routine of Kyiv residents living in a dilapidated house between 2008 and 2011. Another series, titled *Own Room*, presents portraits of LGBTQ+ couples in their apartments, exploring alternative experiences of everyday life in Ukraine and exploring these quarters as spaces for the construction of gender roles.

The fourth chapter focuses on the activities of KhudRada (Arts Council), an independent group of artists, political activists, journalists, and other creative workers who joined forces to develop an experimental platform in opposition to the official art committees of Ukrainian state museums. In the example of KhudRada and the related group R.E.P. (Revolutionary Experimental Space), the author explores the issues of free speech and independent artistic expression in Ukrainian museums and educational institutions. Zychowicz spotlights the 2012 art project *Disputed Territory*, which was conceived as an ideology-free "space of life" intended to offer a place for discussion on controversial topics, but which, given the name, became a harsh prophecy of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, pointing to the fact that the Ukrainian territory has literally become "disputed."

The fifth chapter is devoted to the activities of the Visual Culture Research Center at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. Established in 2008, this project united scholars and artists in a collaborative effort to study the intersection of art and politics in Ukraine. The author pays particular attention to art projects by Vlada Ralko, Cynthia Gutierrez, and Zhanna Kadyrova, who explored the afterlife of the "inherited" Soviet sculptures, such as Lenin monuments, in a present-day democratic society with a free-market economy.

In conclusion, the author pictures the Maidan Revolution as a polysemic democratic space that drew together people of different political views to struggle against the autocratic regime and shares her own experience of the rebellious square shortly after the revolutionary events of 2014. Zychowicz emphasizes the Maidan's role as a trigger in the artists' turn to activism, and highlights the impact of these artists on the Ukrainian revolutionary transformations during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, expressing the hope that her study will provide "blueprints for interpreting the intersection of art and politics in a civic vocabulary about power, self-expression, and the body" (288).

Superfluous Women is rich in material and thoughtful interpretations. Yet some of its underlying assumptions must be called into question. Consider the author's introductory references to a wide range of Russian writers, such as Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Alexander Pushkin, as well as her numerous associations between Ukrainian female artists and characters from Russian literature, such as Dostoevsky's Grushenka, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, or the heroines of Ludmila Petrushevskaya and Lyudmila Ulitskaya. This kind of literary contextualization seems both arbitrary and to run counter to the cultural reality of twenty-first-century Ukraine. Obviously, neither Dostoevsky nor Tolstoy played any role in the genealogy of Ukrainian activist groups like FEMEN

or R.E.P. Against the author's good intentions, these comparisons stem from and resonate with the discourse of Russian colonialism that treats Ukraine as an integral part of the imperialist construct of the "russky mir" (Russian world).

My second concern is disciplinary in kind. On the one hand, the art-historical aspect by all means holds a dominant position in this multidisciplinary book. The word "art" is given an honorable place in the title; all projects discussed are contextualized within the art-historical canon. For example, when writing about FEMEN, Zychowicz finds the sources of their imagery in Alphonse Mucha's sexualized representations of East European women, and compares their performances to those of the Viennese Actionists who used their bodies to oppose Nazism, as well as to the performances in which Marina Abramović opposed the aestheticization of the female body in art. Writing about Yevgenia Belorusets' photographs, the author compares them to the photography of Alexander Rodchenko in the 1920s, pointing to their shared compositional characteristics such as similar depth of field and angular perspective, as well as geometric shapes of urban buildings. However, a wide range of more revealing comparisons, especially from feminist art, clearly is missing. Aligning FEMEN with VALIE EXPORT and Carolee Schneemann (both mentioned only in passing), with Yoko Ono, Martha Rosler, Shirin Neshat, the Guerilla Girls, and many others would help to better understand how this Ukrainian collective is linked to the global feminist art movement. Zychowicz could have also paid more attention to the centuries-old controversy around female nakedness in art, especially in relation to the activist feminist art which weaponizes the traditional iconography and setting of the female erotic nude.

The same applies to the issue of the politicization of art, a tendency towards which activist art clearly leans. Turning to specific cases of Ukrainian activist art practices, the author only

touches upon one of the most important art-historical debates on the intersection between art and politics. Although Zychowicz cites such an influential thinker as Chantal Mouffe, a broader excursion into this discourse would have been beneficial. It is well known that Walter Benjamin spoke in favor of the politicization of art, claiming that this process gives agency to the masses. He contrasted it with the process of the aestheticization of politics employed by oppressive regimes in order to substitute artful distraction for withheld political rights. Even today, many conservative voices are still questioning the artistic value of activist artworks, accusing activist artists of agitprop, of resorting to non-artistic, hence illegitimate, means, and of ditching art in favor of politics in general.³ Elaborating these points with a view to the book's Ukrainian material could have reinforced the argument for activist art as a legitimate art form.

Another controversy arises from the book's feminist essentialism.⁴ The main criterion by which the author selects the artists for her story is their life experience as women. On the one hand, this is a right thing to do because women artists are an underrepresented group in the art world; they deserve more attention and focus. On the other hand, however, selection based on gender identity does not always work. In the case of FEMEN, an exclusively female art movement that utilizes the naked female body as its ultimate aesthetic and political tool, the emphasis on gender identity is obviously justified. Yet in the case of Vlada Ralko, to cite just one example, national rather than gender identity comes to forefront. Moreover, in the case of women artists from the KhudRada and the Visual Culture Research Center, their work is entangled with that of the male members of these groups, and the separation seems unjustified.

All in all, the study of the FEMEN protests is the strongest part of Zychowicz's book. *Superfluous Women* can stimulate further research of this movement, which, having gained



1 FEMEN, *Stop Putin's War*, March 6, 2022, Paris, Champ de Mars

worldwide prominence, continues its struggle today. The current situation in Ukraine actualizes FEMEN's early anti-Putin and anti-Russian projects, and their current protests in support of Ukraine (fig. 1) are drawing the world's attention to the colonial implications of the "Russian world" ideology, broadening the horizons of public perceptivity at the intersection of art and politics. In this regard, the book may also serve as a revolutionary's manual for artists and activists looking for effective ways to fight for social change. In particular, it highlights the use of eroticism, pornography, stereotyping, cultural products marketing, marches, manifestos, debates, blogging, and other appealing strategies.

Superfluous Women offers a valuable new contribution to the scarce English-language bibliography on contemporary Ukrainian art activism.⁵ The demand for such studies increases as Ukraine's politics and culture draw more attention on the global scale. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has sparked

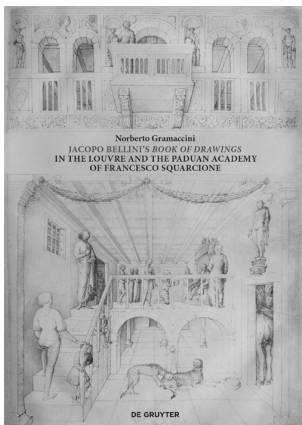
worldwide interest in Ukrainian history and culture, Zychowicz's book gains an even more important role. Drawing attention to the protest spirit evident in Ukrainian society since the early 2000s as the consequence of the rejection of its bigger neighbor's imperial ideology and aggression, the book reveals the artistic antecedents of Ukraine's resistance against the Russian invasion in 2022.

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- 1 Ivan Turgenev, *Dnevnik lishnego cheloveka*, in: *Otechestvennye zapiski* 69, 1850, no. 4, 323–352.
- 2 Cf. Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*, Princeton 1996; Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology*, Princeton 1997.
- 3 For a primer on this discussion, see Amy Mullin, *Feminist Art and the Political Imagination*, in: *Hypatia* 18, 2003, no. 4, 189–213.
- 4 At this point it is important to acknowledge that “feminist theories are always courting essentialism,” as Amelia Jones put it – just like any other politically motivated methodology that focuses on the issues of a particular social group. Amelia Jones, *Essentialism, Feminism, and Art: Spaces Where Woman “Oozes Away,”* in: Hilary Robinson and Maria Elena Buszek (eds.), *A Companion to Feminist Art*, Chichester 2019, 157–179, here 159.
- 5 Sarah D. Phillips, *Women’s Social Activism in the New Ukraine: Development and the Politics of Differentiation*, Bloomington 2008; Maria Mayerchuk and Olga Plakhotnik, *The Radical FEMEN and the New Women’s Activism*, in: *Krytyka* 2010, no. 11–12, 157–158; Olenka Dmytryk, “I’m a Feminist Therefore...”: The Art of Gender and Sexual Dissent in 2010s Ukraine and Russia, in: *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies* 2, 2016, no. 1, 137–178; Nazar Kozak, *Art Embedded into Protest: Staging the Ukrainian Maidan*, in: *Art Journal* 76, 2017, no. 1, 8–27; idem, *Art Resistance against Russia’s “Non-Invasion” of Ukraine*, in: *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 9, 2022, no. 1, 67–104; Olena Martynyuk, *Gardens of Tolerance: Ukrainian Women Artists Reflect the War in the Donbas*, in: *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 9, 2022, no. 1, 139–176.

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JACOPO BELLINI'S BOOK OF DRAWINGS IN THE LOUVRE



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The RF 1475–1556 Louvre Album is universally regarded as a corpus of drawings that was executed by the Venetian painter Jacopo Bellini. The album's trajectory prior to coming into the possession of the Bellini family is elucidated in the present book. Based on Norberto Gramaccini's interpretation, it was the Paduan painter Francesco Squarcione who was the mastermind and financier behind the drawings. The preparatory work had actually been delegated to his most gifted pupils, among them Andrea Mantegna, Jacopo Bellini's future son-in-law. The drawing's topics—anatomy, perspective, archeology, mythology, contemporary chronicles, and zoology—were part of the teaching program of an art academy established by Squarcione in the 1440s, famous in its day, which provided crucial impulses for the training of artists in the modern era.

