

PERFORMING PROTEST: FEMEN, NATION, AND THE MARKETING OF RESISTANCE

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Abstract

The politics of the women's protest group Femen, viewed as a media protest performance, reveal how the group has adapted the pop cultural staging of the Orange Revolution to their brand. Femen's controversial topless methods have instantiated widespread debates around the diverse meanings of feminism both in Ukraine and among global audiences after the group's move abroad in 2012. The findings in this article represent three years of ongoing research including original interviews, extensive analyses of blogs, news reports, photographs, and firsthand observations of activities by Femen and other feminist groups in Ukraine. By putting on display the dialectics of the commodification of female stereotypes, Femen's performances expose the mechanisms in the mass media branding and marketing of protest. The controversial aesthetics of the group's parodies illustrate the rhetorical limits at the intersection of local and global forms of civic expression.

Keywords: protest, new media, aesthetics, feminism, political theory

In 2008 four young Ukrainians named Anna Hutsol, Inna Shevchenko, Oksana Sashko, and Roman Zviatsky living in the city of Khmelnytskyi formed a feminist protest group. Femen has since gained notoriety worldwide for their controversial topless protests that once featured mostly street theatre, but now primarily consist of flash-mob performances circulated online. Members are mostly women in their twenties and thirties, the group lists twelve active members, and over four hundred non-active members on their website. Femen originally aimed to bring greater awareness to sex-tourism in Ukraine, though their performances now target a broad range of issues they define as patriarchal. Within Ukraine, Femen are arguably the most prominent, and also the least popular, activist group to emerge after the Orange Revolution. While theatrical displays of public dissent are hardly new to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, topless feminist protest there is nearly unprecedented. Other feminist commentators in Ukraine are ambivalent about Femen's tactics and opinions among activists and scholars' range from outright rejection, to skepticism, to tentative collaboration.

Early Femen protests often featured iconic references to politicians from the paradigmatic street protests and populist campaigns that the group's members recall from the Orange Revolution, which took place during many members' childhood years. Femen activists have staged several parodies of sex work on Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) where thousands of peaceful demonstrators camped in winter to protest an unfair election in 2004. Members have dressed up as Yulia Tymoshenko during her trial in 2011 and have mocked Putin by stealing the symbolic ballot box that he presented in Moscow before his reelection. In addition to commenting on domestic and regional politics, Femen has

also appeared at events of global prominence including the G8 leaders summit, meetings at the Vatican, and court hearings in Quebec regarding the public display of religious symbols. The group's ambiguous stance "against all dictatorship and religion" (Femen 2013) has provided them with extant rhetorical strategies through which to attach their image to news stories on causes indirectly related to civil rights. For example, they have "protested" commemorations of the Chernobyl disaster, institutional responses to the swine flu epidemic, municipal water shut offs in Kyiv, etc. In 2012 Femen relocated their headquarters from Kyiv to Paris and Berlin. The globalization of Femen's activities has manifested a global conversation around the group in which their topless performances have become a flashpoint for much deeper anxieties about national independence, gender identity, and sexual liberation.

The debates around Femen's methods have also instantiated a media fetish for the group that merits closer academic attention as an instance of public discourse on gender and globalization. Femen's blog alone has manifested an archive of mass-media representations of their feminist brand in which observers and critics may trace a range of nationally significant symbolic systems. Transnational feminist scholars have debated the role of representation in mediating dialogue on gender rights. Especially important have been critical examinations of neoliberal policies and re-entrenchments of East-West divides in the postcommunist context (Gal & Kligman 2000). Femen's visual language continues to translate, and mistranslate, across national contexts and has unleashed a battle over representation that is airing a range of gendered and racial stereotypes often perpetuated by mainstream media. Emergent conversations on the line between replicating versus overturning mainstream images of women have clustered around the Femen brand in a telling way. My aim in this article is not to propose a defense of Femen's negative reception or to abet their political intentions, but rather, to present a close analysis of the role of the mass media in their project in order to contextualize them within a broader ethical framework. Femen's symbolic capital can be developed into a platform for dialogue that is more sensitive to cultural and social differences by critically evaluating the vehicle – the mass media – through which the group stages their protest performances.

The data and analysis in this article is based on three years of ongoing research on feminism in Ukraine. My findings are based upon original interviews, analyses of blogs, court documents, news reports, photographs, and firsthand observations of activities by Femen and other feminist and LGBT activist groups in the region. I first conducted interviews with Femen leader Anna Hutsol in Kyiv in 2011 and met with former Femen member Angelina Diash, also in Kyiv, in summer 2013. I have interviewed feminist and lgbt activists from Ofenzywa and the NGOs Krona, Insight, Iglyo, and the Kharkiv Gender Museum, in addition to Ukrainian feminist scholars at Kyiv-Mohilya, Kharkiv Center for Gender Studies, and feminist activists unaffiliated with any of these groups. Major media outlets examined for this article include: The New York Times, BBC, The Atlantic, Radio Free Europe, The Huffington Post, The Guardian, Kyiv Post, Kanal 1+1, Ukrainian Pravda, The Moscow Times, Pravda, Izvestia, Correspondent, Le Monde Diplomatique, and Der Spiegel.

In the opening sections of this article I offer a theoretical framework for reading the functionality of the signs and symbols in the design and marketing of the Femen protest brand. In parts three and four, I trace the historic links in Femen's development to the discursive environment of the Orange Revolution and Anna Hutsol's background in marketing, leadership, and the ideological design of the color revolutions. Contextualizing Femen's performance rhetoric within other stagings of Ukrainian nationhood by pop performers of the same time period, I show how the former appropriates these styles for their own mythmaking of themselves as dissidents. Lastly, I provide an analysis of Femen's impact on local feminist debates, paying attention to a shift in receptions of the group after their move abroad. Reflecting on Femen's recent marketing of themselves as "sexterrorists," I reveal an impasse in their movement in which the exclusion of a plurality of women's voices from their marketing of protest has challenged their brand's unique purchase on the media. Offering a close analysis of the formal devices in Femen adapted to digital journalism and network technologies, new directions emerge in which the lived experiences of the group's members, as well as the symbolic capital they have leveraged, provide insight for transnational feminisms concerned with media stereotypes and the (mis)translation of gender ideologies across cultural paradigms.

Who are Femen?

During the period of September 2008 - 2012 Femen staged approximately fifty-five street protests. The majority of these actions took place in downtown Kyiv on Maidan Nezalezhnosti, but other significant sites in the city included: Parliament (Verkhovna Rada); SBU Headquarters; Pechersk Court; Turkish, Russian, Georgian, Saudi Arabian, and Polish Embassies; Kyiv polling stations; the Cabinet of Ministers; the Ministry of Health; the statue of Lenin on Khreshatyk, the private residence of the Ambassador of India; Olympic Stadium; and Kyiv-Boryspil International Airport. Before acquiring an office in Kyiv in 2011, Femen members met regularly to conduct planning sessions, interviews, and other activities in a privately owned café near Khreshatyk named Café Cupidon. In 2012 the group opened offices in Berlin and Paris. Hutsol has cited that their primary sources of monetary support are from private donors (Hutsol 2011). It has also been noted that the group has been funded by a musician named DJ Hell and the owner of KP Media Holding Company Jed Sunden (Prymachyk 2010). From October 2011 to the present Femen has staged approximately forty street actions outside of Ukraine. Countries where Femen's core members or women affiliated with the group staged protest-performances linked by method and symbolism include Belarus, Russia, Poland, France, Germany, Italy, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, Turkey, Tunisia, Brazil, India, and Canada. The themes of Femen's international protests have included sexual harassment policies at the Euro Cup, freedom of the press and censorship more generally, the Olympic committee's stance on Islamic law, the wearing of the veil, human trafficking, and the Catholic Church's stance on gay marriage. The slogans and titles of Femen's protests are exaggerated, depreciatory, and devoid of any actual discrediting aim. Their debut protest, "Ukraine is not a Brothel!" set the tone for later initiatives such as "Happy Dependence Day Ukraine!" "KGB Euro" and "Sex Bomb."

Femen's leader Anna Hutsol, like many of Femen's members, comes from Ukraine's middle class and uses Russian and Ukrainian interchangeably. She has worked in marketing and has also received training from a U.S. Dept. of State leadership program. During the Orange Revolution she was involved with the democratic youth movements PORA and Young Rukh, formed in 1993 in response to an increasingly reactionary government. In 2009 Anna Hutsol reported to newspapers that she would run for office someday and that she would create "the largest all-women party in Europe." (Femen Livejournal 2011). In my interview with Hutsol in 2011 she was less ambitious and concrete in her goals for Femen, commenting that "since topless protest has become more difficult in Ukraine, we need to fight harder to prove that women can protest here." (Hutsol 2011). According to Article 14 Ch. 173 of the Code of Ukraine on Administrative Offence, public nudity is listed as a minor hooliganism and is punished accordingly, with a modest fine or a few days of administrative arrest. After Yanukovich entered office, Ukraine's social and political climate became increasingly conservative. In 2009 the Code was amended to allow for more frequent arrests. At that time Femen activists faced several short jail terms for their public transgressions, though they were usually only held in custody for a few hours or days and maintained a relatively benign relationship with local police. In fact, smiling policemen standing by and then calmly cuffing Femen activists became a consistent backdrop in the photos and videos of the group published online, on television, and in world newspapers. For a time, the multiple arrests and prompt release of Femen activists assisted the group more than posing any real physical threat or state barrier to further street protest. These minor arrests aided Femen's media output by facilitating their performative framing of themselves resisting various ideological regimes. In making the police appear harmless before the public, Femen mirrors prior movements in the region, such as Poland's Pomarańczowa Alternatywa, that also used street theatre to push the boundaries of "minor hooliganism" as a criminal charge. Many of these groups humorous tactics served to make police appear harmless before a generalized public, and in the process, were able to air very real public fears around state authority.

In recent years, Femen has faced more serious encounters with police. In early 2011 three Femen members were kidnapped and taken to a forest after a demonstration they held in central Minsk in which members parodied Lukashenka's repressive policies on the steps of Parliament by wearing his signature moustache and epaulettes. Femen activist Inna Shevchenko describes her thoughts while being covered in gasoline and threatened by Belarusian state secret security agents:

"I suddenly saw the huge potential of this. Maybe it's strange to say this—I know some people already think we're kamikaze—but that's why I now say I'm more of an activist than a person, because I know that tomorrow I could be killed" (Cochrane 2013).

Since that time the group has faced more criminal charges in Ukraine on several counts, including defamation of public property for cutting down a cross allegedly erected in honor of Stalin's victims. In summer of 2013 the group's office in Paris was anonymously burned. Shortly thereafter, three members, including Anna Hutsol,

were anonymously attacked and beaten on the streets of Kyiv. Femen's changing relationship with the police has coincided with a radicalization of their image and an overall reduction in the frequency of their protests in real time.

These changes in Femen's structure have also accorded with the rise of Internet use in Ukraine. An extensive social media profile and several collections of cartoons, glamour ads, leaflets, and other cultural artifacts comprise an impressive archive of the group's half-decade long history. Since their founding Femen has documented their activities on two blogs. In 2010 Femen streamlined their virtual identity by adding Facebook, Twitter, and a website with an .org address to their online presence. The group has been blocked for nudity on some social media sites. Facebook suspended their account early on, but only temporarily, and their livejournal.com blog in Russian switched to read-only in 2012. Paintings, drawings, and popular graphics by Femen member Oksana Sashko, in concert with outside artists' works, contributed to the media forums through which Femen continued to perform their movement. Over time, the group's increasing contact with the media outlets reporting on their street activities melded with the group's virtual design as they switched nearly all of their operations to five-minute flash mob photo opportunities, professional studio sessions, and extensive blog entries. Many of their "flesh mobs" began to last just long enough to create enough footage for an online campaign. Nonetheless, the length of Femen's public appearances shrunk in disproportion to their fame. International journalists began to regularly contribute texts and images to Femen's online networks, as artists and filmmakers created artworks and short documentaries about the group's activities. In more recent years, the group co-published a book with a French journalist in which they outline a radical ideology for a social movement in popular overtures to past feminist theories without any context or application (Ackerman 2013). The same year, a journalist at *The Atlantic* published a separate book based on his firsthand accounts of Femen's headquarters in Paris (Tayler 2013). This latter publication portrays Femen's core members as media laborers and underwriters; it is reported that they are paid living wages out of a fund with Inna Shevchenko being the primary PR and accounts manager fully invested in maintaining a public image based on highly reproducible media protest imagery. The contradiction between Femen's internal management, versus the external image of antiauthoritarianism they present to audiences necessitates a closer look at the group's conceptualization of politics, and their brand architecture as performers calibrated for news media platforms. The group is not registered as an NGO, party, or publicly traded entity and has not made public the sources of their funding. Anna Hutsol reported in a personal interview that the majority of their funding is from Canadian sources, though there is no verification of this; early on Hutsol reported in public interviews that private donors DJ Hell and owner of KP Media Jed Sunden had supported their activities. By no small measure, by design Femen and the mass media maintain a symbiotic relationship. Where are the political stakes in Femen's experiment as a performative public spectacle? How do they differ from other celebrities in their blending of theatre with protest?

Conversations on the politics of public nudity have expanded since the global protests of 2011. Femen's aesthetic has become a signifier for dissent that does

not signify any clear political demand. In one respect the hyperbole and even amateurish quality to Femen's slogans resemble the design of reality TV shows, in which audiences are provoked to question how much of the production is staged, versus spontaneous. The centrality of news media rhetoric to the Femen phenomenon has instantiated a larger feminist debate about the possibility of protesting the commodification of the female body through nudity. Within this broader debate, a focus on legitimacy vis-à-vis the meaning of the term feminism reveals deeper anxieties over the translation of ideas tied to gender and sexuality across national contexts.

The anger that Femen's protests have elicited expose fissures in the public discourses driving media stories that pin progress to civic idealism, and script what is considered appropriate/inappropriate behavior. Earlier feminist interventions into mass-media imagery of women engaged with images of the female body as the origin, not only the symptom, of violence toward women in society. The founders of the 1970s Los Angeles based feminist media performance collective, Ariadne: Social Art Network, claimed that: "It was violence—in the media and in society—that gave birth to feminist media art." (Lacy & Labowicz, 1985, p. 123-33). The main difference between these prior feminist mass-media activist groups, and Femen, besides geopolitical locale, is in the latter's sarcastic and overt approach to violence in which they amplify through mockery the narratives they claim to undercut. Another important difference is the group's calibration for a virtual format, which helps to maintain the gap between their populist descriptions of their movement online, versus their generally negative public reception as an actual movement representing a constituency of women.

When nude protest exploded as a global trend during the events of 2011, Femen's project in Kyiv suddenly gained much wider publicity. The group responded by streamlining their online merchandising, marketing themselves as "New Amazons," and by networking with feminists beyond Ukraine's borders. The Iranian feminist activist Maryam Namazie briefly joined Femen and helped them with their initial protest activities in Paris. Her work in the group included helping to organize a calendar featuring feminist activists from several initiatives around the world, bringing together Femen and the Canadian based group Slutwalks in support of Egyptian student Aliaa Magda Elmahdy's posting of a nude photo of herself on Twitter.¹ Femen's early use of media networks to spread their name became a key element of their strategy. After Inna Shevchenko cut down a cross in Kyiv in response to Pussy Riot's "punk prayer" in the summer of 2012, the group shifted their operational epicenter from Café Cupidon in Kyiv to a former theatre in Paris. At this point, Femen redesigned their media image a second time, changing their campaign from relatively lighthearted political puns, into a militaristic idea of feminism they describe as "sextrémism" for which they have been widely criticized. The first protest to feature this image was a demonstration with the Parisian Egyptian activist Safea Lebdi and Maryam Namazie in front of the Eiffel Tower in August 2012 against the inclusion of nations practicing sharia in the Olympic Games.² Slogans painted directly on Femen activists' bodies in black warpaint featured heavily in this protest and thereafter became a regular feature of their trademark brand. Femen has since

been rightly scrutinized for their negative perspective on the wearing of the veil. In late 2012 Lebdi and Namazie publicly split with the group due to difficulties linked to the decision-making processes internal to the group. In my interview with former Femen member Angelina Diash in Kyiv in July 2013, she discussed several related issues in her experiences with Femen as one of their earliest members and, at the time, their only African-Ukrainian member. In Femen's performances, images of the body are framed within spectacles of mainstream politics through a hybrid of the commodification processes and campaigns that produce politicians and celebrities.

Sign and Symbol in the Femen Brand

Femen's street performances have emerged within and through a virtual economy of image and cultural commodity. Their scripts, costumes, and protest sites are illustrative of media apparatuses that shape the fantasies within which citizens imagine and practice national identity. Within Ukraine, Femen's performances are a spectacle stemming from a broader phenomenon that Alexandra Hrycak calls "cognitive liberation" in describing the local ideological landscape of women's activism after the Orange Revolution:

"[the] favorable shift in political opportunities, together with the public's recent experience of successful civil disobedience, might contribute in Ukraine to a cascading process of 'cognitive liberation' that would further open up the political system to new demands by groups that had previously remained politically marginal" (2010, p. 159-160).

During the initial years of Femen's existence, their parodies carved out picaresque plots from an Orange past in the political foibles, stunts, and facades they staged on the streets of Kyiv.

The dissonant codes in Femen's protests are speech acts in a visual vocabulary that parries with commercialism and its shaping of citizenship. A sign, unlike an icon, which always has a one-to-one relationship with the object it signifies, can have an indirect relationship with the object it represents. Femen manipulates the symbolic contexts within which icons and signs appear. They encode multiple layers of meaning in each sign they incorporate into their work, oftentimes creating new significations by cross-referencing the original referents of two or more distinct signs. In many cases, Femen will accomplish this linguistic play within the bounds of the language of global corporate branding. Oftentimes, Femen activists will paint icons and slogans borrowed from commercial brands on their bodies. For example, in April 2010 Femen responded from censorship from Google by painting the company's copyrighted logo onto their naked breasts and circulating the resulting image throughout the Internet. By painting Google onto their bare skin, Femen produced dissonance between the sign "Google" and its index. By changing the sign's context, Femen re-indexed the Google symbol's original meaning as a copyrighted logo for a search engine into a signifier for the commodification of the female body. The resulting image contains within it a struggle with the representation of resistance itself, with being not-quite, yet still containing residuals of the signified.

By painting brand names on bare skin, Femen conflates ownership over the body with ownership over the brand; in effect, they interrogate the ideologies that have accumulated within the brand through its circulation. It is worth noting that Google, unlike automobiles or lipstick, is a neutrally gendered product. In this instance, by painting a gender-neutral icon onto their breasts, Femen produced dissonance between the body and its commodification in social commentary on profit and enterprise. By not naming any viable cause, real platform, or pragmatic aim, Femen's topless spectacles of feminist resistance put on display the accumulation, value, profit, and exchange of women as symbolic capital in a larger economy of politics and media entertainment.

Underlying Femen's happenings are deep anxieties about branding as a modern, global language. Writing on art and industry, Teodor Adorno remarked that cultural hegemony claims its field of influence through material shored up in capital flows. Art is illusory. He clarifies the classical opposition between the material and immaterial as the central theme in all cultural production:

“Clearly the immanent semblance character of artworks cannot be freed from some degree of external imitation of reality, however latent, and therefore cannot be freed from illusion either” (1997, p. 103).

Where art always suffers from a degree of both imitation and illusion—that all art involves some element of camouflage—captures the central paradox in Femen's claiming to transcend the reification of the female body through bodily expression. Their painting of certain brands, usually involving two round “OO” shapes on their breasts displaces advertisement with all sorts of associations ranging from comedy, to erotica, to farcical plays on materialist appropriations of power, to many other frames that gesture toward the duplicity and hidden discourses in the links between advertisement and ideology. In one example, activists employed the word “Facebook” in response to the company's decision to block nudity on the group's page. This uneasy relationship between replicating and eluding advertisement can be further traced in the Femen brand itself. Femen's professionally designed, custom logo is ironic—an image of two breasts cast as a Cyrillic “Ф” (Фемен/Femen) filled in with the colors of the Ukrainian flag. As a feminist brand, Femen is positioned in a contradictory relationship with earlier feminist theory on women and capitalism where scholars have noted, along the lines of Luce Irigaray, that women are symbolically exchanged within circuits of use value and exchange value, depending on their social status (Irigaray 1985).

Transnational feminism has recently renewed interest in interrogating the critical relationship between politics and the artistic image debated by the Frankfurt School during the cultural turn of the 1970s.³ Scholars have stressed the emerging links between citizenship and electronic media in mediating post-socialist national imaginaries. Some scholars of Europe have noted that digital media has become a generative component of civic culture by liberating minority voices (Aniko Imré 2009). The search for a more critical model of the contemporary public sphere is useful for engaging a flexible notion of “the political” to account for Femen's formation and ongoing activities as a media performance that complicates

assumptions around art/politics. As public performers, Femen's protest-parodies are unconventional challenges to the affective identifications that drive ideological frameworks.⁴ Marxist-feminist theorists continue to ask whether artistic practices can play a critical role in advanced capitalist societies. Political theorist Chantal Mouffe critiques Habermas' public sphere for not taking into account the minority view and the representational conflicts (doxa) within society that can have material effects. She positions art as anterior to the majority view: "critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate" (2013). Mouffe's definition of critical art aligns with a broader school of thinking on the topic including Jacques Rancière in his claiming symbolic dissensus can provide a challenge to hegemony. Along this line, representational strategies can reveal sociocultural inequalities by estranging audiences from what may be otherwise taken for granted as a norm, revealing where such norms serve to uphold a status quo that not all are privy to. This concept of art-activism raises several additional questions regarding Femen as to the range of representations that critical art is able to foster, and the limitations and wider effects of a feminist protest brand like Femen in discourse about women in mainstream politics.

Beyond Orange—Protest After 2004

Femen activists often reflect on the Orange Revolution when narrating their personal experiences and motivations to protest. Inna Shevchenko waxed nostalgic while looking back on the Orange protests of her childhood: "I was just a girl then, but for the first time in my life I understood that we could have democracy in our country" (Tayler 2012). There are additional practical connections between Femen's founding and the ideological design of the color revolutions. The Serbian-based political consulting group CANVAS (Center for Applied Non Violent Actions and Strategies) was instrumental in coordinating the slogans, platforms, and imagery of the many youth movements involved in the rallies and events around the electoral failures that sparked each of the revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan.⁵ Georgia's Velvet Revolution, known abroad as the Rose Revolution, contributed to the aesthetic course of the revolutions that followed. Paul Manning (2007) traces how a popular cartoon series functioned to open up spaces for debate in student-led campaigns and protests. He describes the cartoons as a tactic students used to detach themselves from any formal party affiliation, calling their performative politics a "visual spectacle" of "opposing metarhetorics (and their associated logics of reception), and between rhetorics and the representational economies in which they operate" (p. 175). Though Manning points out how the symbols through which "the Georgia of Roses" came to signify a peaceful rebellion, as opposed to Georgia's violent protests in 1989, ultimately, there was nothing new to this strategy. Underlying Femen's parodies of figures, slogans, and other images associated with the Orange Revolution's more mainstream party politics and even youth movements, is a history of music, humor, street theatrics, and counter-cultural formulations. Their rather cynical, even offensive, pokes at the representational strategies deployed in the pop campaigns of the Orange Revolution are equally tied to the media spectacles that produce politics for consumers and audiences.

Absurdist street theatre has a rich history in the former Eastern Bloc and Post-Soviet regions, where art – as experiment, industry, museology, lifestyle– has often functioned as a haven for reinventing the very idea of a dissident culture. In Poland in the 1980s *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa*, lead by Major Frydrych, mocked the regime by staging large scale public Soviet-style parades in which participants dressed as orange dwarves. During the economic transition period of the 1990s later on, Ukraine’s avant-garde group *Bu-Ba-Bu* staged a rock opera spoof called “Chrysler Imperial” in the Western Ukrainian city of Lviv in which participants expressed sentiments that were as skeptical of the shock of free market capitalism as they were of state authoritarianism. Both of these prior examples epitomize the development of the East European avant-garde over time and its subjecting the rhetoric of the public sphere to its own doctrines. Femen employs similar rhetorical devices. Polish art critic Piotr Piotrowski (2012) uses the term “agoraphilia,” to capture a certain anxiety, even fetishization, around the borderline between art and politics, action and thought, and the real and the existential in Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish contemporary art. In these contexts, he argues, art takes on a recursive function as artists act upon a desire to shape public life in the wake of the repressive regimes of the twentieth century. . The publicity and debates around Femen among their audiences and opponents collapses any stable genre in attempting to “read” a critical narrative into their project or account for their intentions as artists or activists (or both). Femen’s ubiquity, at first on Ukraine’s streets and newspapers, then abroad, and online has served to produce the illusion of an actual movement making realistic demands. The contexts, rhetoric, and debates of the illusion reveal shifting ideas around national belonging and transnational feminisms, and thus, the transcripts that circulate and come to constitute legitimate social and political resistance.

In an article for the nation’s industry journal *Art Ukraine*, Nataliya Tschermalykh (2012-2013) places Femen’s parodies within the context of Ukraine’s repressive anti-homosexual propaganda law and reactionary institutional practices limiting free speech. She explains the group’s aesthetic and their eventual emigration abroad as products of a neoconservative regime. The expressions of popular anger at she sees in Femen’s actions contextualize the group as symptomatic of a much broader system of oppression and censorship, which the Euromaidan demonstrations that would take place in Kyiv later that same year would make painfully apparent to global observers. Had Femen been killed or seriously imprisoned for their stunts, as Pussy Riot was, would public responses to them have changed? By contrast, Femen’s nudity and offensive behavior reveal the “moral precepts” underlying media scripts for dissidence appear hegemonic in and of themselves. Upon closer examination, their nudity makes a caricature out of the operative terms for speaking, writing, and protesting various civic interests where those terms are folded into teleological social narratives that restrict the public sphere.

It is significant that members of Femen often state in interviews that the Orange Revolution was a turning point in their lives, recalling the early 2000s with both inspiration and great disappointment (Hutsol 2011). The Orange Revolution supplied a watershed for protest in Ukraine. What was unique about the dissident culture

of the color revolutions was its production: the branding of pop celebrities that stood in for revolutionaries on mainstream stages.⁶ The playful, cartoonish visual language in Femen's feminist brand descends from the same political architecture that encompassed the slogans, imagery, songs, and celebrity figures that served to imagine an Orange moment. Femen's beginnings as a parodic retrospective of the now-faded "ideals of the Maidan," as the aims of the revolution were then popularly referred to, grew from an Orange iconography popularized during the revolution. For example, their mock reality TV show "PMS: Post-Maidan Syndrome" featured members asking random passerby in the street to undress "for the country" in a talk-show format about future directions the nation could take. The playful tone of Femen's early activities exposed the rhetorical mechanisms of the Orange moment by putting the places and slogans of those years into sharp relief with the repressive civic conditions for street activism under Yanukovych. Viewing the kitsch in Femen in these critical contexts, audiences are positioned to think about the group's image as a function of the lived experiences of its members, and in broader terms, the production of politics through media.

Hutsol has described her group's topless technique as a litmus for civil liberties: "The reaction to a nude protest is a measure of freedom in a country: we were not arrested in Switzerland, but we were almost killed in Belarus" (Neufeld 2012). The political spectrum Hutsol presupposes, with Belarus counterbalanced by Switzerland, circumscribes Femen as a non-national entity poised against a relativist notion of state repression. This reasoning is also ideologically rooted in an Orange past. In the Orange Revolution, Yanukovych's Russian-leaning party stood in sharp contrast to Yushchenko's pro-European platform as both leaders formed their bases from a highly bilingual population. Considering this fact in light of Femen's manifesto and its overstatement to "fight against all forms of oppression," Hutsol's comparative notion of civic freedom abets what cultural historian Sergiy Yekelchik (2007) has noted elsewhere with regard to the social outcomes of the Orange Revolution. In contrast to interpretations that split protesters as being for or against the "civilizations" that these two leaders apparently stood for, in actuality, very few harbored any East/West leanings, most people simply wanted greater egalitarianism.⁷ When Kuchma declared that Yanukovych had won the elections, Yushchenko swore himself into Parliament inside the Ukrainian Rada. In a textbook example of revolution, Ukraine suddenly had two sovereigns claiming the same territory. Michael McFaul (2006) has pointed out how the peaceful gatherings on the Maidan in 2004, in responding to a falsified election, resembled 1991 by affirming Ukraine's autonomy through enacting constitutional law. The Euromaidan demonstrations of 2013-14 ultimately testified further to this autonomy. Demands for a referendum on Ukraine's E.U. Accession Agreement, and then general elections, even after ousted President Yanukovych revealed the limits of his state by violently using police forces against protestors, deserves recognition as a powerful instance of Ukrainian citizens' perseverance in the democratic process.

What was unique about the Orange Revolution was the consistency and branding of its campaigns. As a relatively new nation-state, the longer-term outcomes of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine for shaping dialogue about civil

rights have been arguably more lasting than the Yushchenko's term in office and the slow dissipation of his promised reforms. Within this context, Femen's identification of themselves with the legacy of the Orange Revolution is a legitimization of their group's basic right to peaceful protest. Though Hutsol's conceptualization of her group and her own self-identification with feminism changes often, her consistently positive associations with the Orange Revolution have remained stable over time. While Femen's performative stunts have had very little direct impact on policy since their formation, their ongoing public narratives of their experiences vis-à-vis the Orange Revolution lend historical continuity to the broader changes that moment stood for.

Formed in 2008, Femen comes after the "official" story of the Orange Revolution. Many mark 2006 as the Revolution's official end, when Yushchenko introduced his former rival Yanukovych to the Supreme Rada as Prime Minister. Interviewing Hutsol in the summer of 2011, days after Yulia Tymoshenko had been put on trial for brokering a covert gas deal with Putin, she was ambivalent about the legitimacy of the mounting street protests around the trial.⁸ Hutsol informed me that Femen would be reenacting a McDonald's queue near the courthouse. Topless Femen activists would dress in fast food uniforms and yell "Free Cashier!" ("Vilna Kasa!") from atop one of the many minivans (martshrutkas) parked along the streets as makeshift barricades. The scene echoed the Orange Revolution when the youth group PORA barricaded Yanukovych's motorcade from being able to access the Parliament building. Observing the protests in downtown Kyiv around the trial for several days over the course of a week, I noted that while hundreds of demonstrators had gathered at the courthouse, nearly everyone was organized into neat camps and rows of rival parties. Except for Femen's brief interlude, nearly all of the protesters were middle aged and reflected the older Yushchenko vs. Yanukovych split from 2004. One woman I spoke with in the crowd informed me that many demonstrators in front of the courthouse were being paid for their efforts. From the opposite side of the street, where I stood among curious passersby, the scene appeared just as ambivalent as Hutsol's ironic "Vilna Kasa!" Femen's early protests, as nude spectacles on Kyiv's streets, stood in stark contrast to the visibly orchestrated nature of these other protests. Positioned as a media event for online viewers, Femen's snapshot topless stunt atop one of the parked minivans near the courthouse, and their immediate arrest, remapped in physical space where the public imaginary around what is "possible," not necessarily legible, as protest, is shaped by what is permissible to think, say, and do in public spaces.

Pop Culture Contexts—Chervona Ruta, Ruslana, Serdushka

Femen's early humorous street theatre capitalized on a particular, folk-inflected rhetoric that has shaped Ukraine's pop industry over the past decade. The Chervona Ruta music festival that took place in 1989 upon the founding of the youth pro-independence movement Rukh, and again in 1991, eight days before the dissolution of the Soviet regime, set a precedent for popular displays of the nation. The festival took place in Zaporizhzhia, the historic location of the Cossack host. Performers

appropriated the freedom-loving figure of the Cossack and his anachronistic qualities in drafting a myth about independence and survival to legitimize Ukraine's newly won independence as a modern nation-state (Wanner 1998). Western-style rock music, already established as a language of dissent in the Soviet Union, became the lingua franca of the festival. Religion also played a role as Orthodox priests dressed in black robes opened the night with a ceremony in the center of the stadium. Throughout these performative recoveries of a "lost" identity, participants placed preeminence on the Cossack's anachronistic qualities in reorientations of Kyiv Rus' as a western-leaning frontier to mollify present troubles by airing the Soviet past. The alternative cultural memories that festival organizers attempted to achieve provided a lasting conceptualization of national autonomy. The liminal national rhetoric they instantiated through pop, based in nostalgic images of folk culture, eventually fused with the official language of the state (Wanner, p. 140).

The different ways in which Ukrainian pop music celebrities projected national identity later on, during the Orange Revolution, pivoted on a similarly ambiguous, ethnic symbology contrasted against an undesirable Soviet past. Where Chervona Ruta's Cossacks had once "uncovered" Ukraine's lost history beyond its Soviet one, during the Orange Revolution, pop stars preached a "true Ukraine" founded in tribal history, whose democratic potentials had been suppressed over time. These performances complemented political elites' accommodating signals to the E.U. at the time, as pop artists depicted individualism, progress, and freedom differently for domestic versus Western audiences. The indigenous Carpathian styles adopted by the pop singer Ruslana in her song "Wild Dances!" for which she won the Eurovision contest in 2004 was, for the general listener, according to Marko Pavlyshyn, "a proclamation of solidarity with the prevailing values, beliefs, and practices of the civilizationally dominant West" (2006, p. 14). For domestic audiences, Pavlyshyn notes, the song approvingly distanced folk culture from "sharovaryshchyna," an ossified notion of folk life once common in socialist depictions of national culture. Ruslana's images of the Carpathians rested on a fusion of Hutsul instruments, leather costumes, and live wolves in an eroticized rendering of a "wild" frontier. Among domestic audiences, this glamorized portrayal of Western Ukrainian folkways passed muster, in part, as a familiar tale about overcoming hardship rooted in 19th c. Romantic depictions of peasant life. Ruslana's blending of 19th c. Carpathian folk culture with the Amazon myth predates Femen's combination of these two archetypes. The Amazon woman, like the Cossack, emerged within a constellation of folk inflected pop performance in Ukraine that Femen has since adopted as a liminal protest site within which they experiment with political iconicity as a commodity itself. Ruslana's caricature of folk life differs from Femen, however, in that hers is devoid of any specific references to actual events or contemporary political figures. Where pop stars associated with the Orange Revolution once reflected the heightened euphoria of that moment, seeking to merge Ukraine "with others in the culturally heterogeneous contemporary world," by contrast, Femen's protests later on are far more cynical.

Blending glamour with the grotesque, Femen's style turns on parody, and the not-quite-deliberate faux pas. The absurdism and camp in Femen's performances also

have antecedents in the singer Verkha Serduchka's experimental stage identities. Part of a broader fascination with transgender performance as a mainstream genre in Ukraine, Serduchka rose to fame quickly during the late-1990s and early 2000s. What set Serduchka apart from other stars' gender crossings was his creative use of "surzhyk," a mix of Ukrainian and Russian spoken in villages. Serduchka's usage of the vernacular in audacious skits about daily life in post-Soviet Ukraine expressed a freedom to be oneself completely in public, in contrast to the Ukrainian state's fixation on official language. Serduchka's irreverent humor purged the fetishization of an "authentic" Ukraine in the mid-2000s by presenting audiences with "a carnivalesque, liberating take on the very real cultural and political tensions caused by the imposition of political correctness" (Yekelchuk 2010, p. 219).

Added to Serduchka's liminal linguistic and gender identities is also the fact that the neoliberal nation-building projects dominating the periods leading up to and during the Orange Revolution often equated modernization with Europeanization. The polarization of Russia and Europe often features in Serduchka's humor as a superficial posturing by political elites, which indeed reflects the way many Ukrainians whom identify with both of these cultures experience the situation. Not unlike Femen, Serduchka often presupposes a wide gap between the popular voices of his characters, and the officialdom of post-Soviet statehood. However, an important difference between the public receptions of Serduchka, and Femen, is the controversy that never arose around the formers' stage persona as a transgendered citizen. The former's gender identity was less important than his national hybridity. Serduchka completely sanitized his image after protests erupted in Ukraine following his 2007 performance at Eurovision in which he sang, "I want to see . . . Russia goodbye!" lyrics that are relatively mild compared with Femen's overtly anti-Putin sentiments. The widespread acceptance, even fetishization, of Serduchka's blending of genders and languages spun around his bodily hybridity mapped onto a national hybridity that many mainstream consumers could identify with (Yekelchuk 2010). By contrast, Femen's dystopian performances of female nudity are a more radical counter-image to the optimism of the Orange Revolution.

The notion of becoming European in Yushchenko and Tymoshenko's joint campaign during the Orange Revolution argued for a "return" to Europe as a cure-all for Ukraine's domestic ills. Similar notions were reflected in Ukraine's hosting of the 2012 Euro Cup soccer championship. Femen's media stunts in 2011 during the preparations to host the Cup disrupted the utopian scripting of an equal partnership that elites signaled to Europe at the time. Femen's shows achieved another means of attention by desacralizing the branded symbols associated with the event. On tour, the group spotlighted the Euro Cup as a forerunner for sex tourism by hyperbolizing the dark undercurrents of the sex industry. While every Femen performance on their Euro Tour included symbols specific to each country they visited, each of their "shows" pitted stereotypes of the nationalism displayed by European soccer fans against a cynical caricature of Ukraine as a dangerous sexual playground. In Warsaw, two members parodied the cartoon logo of the championship, the Polish and Ukrainian hooligan twins "Vladek" and "Vladko" in a live performance of the mascots screwing, fighting, and drinking beer. The branding

of Ukraine and Poland as cartoon “twins” thus provided a point of departure from which to critique the asymmetries in Ukraine’s relationship with the E.U. Acting out these asymmetries as sexual conquest, Femen increased their visibility online by attaching their own brand to the marketing of the soccer championship.

Going abroad, Femen adopted a system of operations resembling a franchise by streamlining their social media presence and merchandising. The Ukrainian folk flower garlands, red boots, and blue-and-yellow colors of the Ukrainian flag defining their brand architecture came to serve as templates for rotating colors and images from other national contexts in their logo and slogans. As Femen’s European caper catapulted the group into world presses, the group continued to manage the status and shape of that popularity. Olga Plakhotnik and Mariya Mayerchuk have remarked on their interviews with Anna Hutsol that, “the measure of a successful Femen action is a popular action.” (2012). As celebrity activists, Femen extends and plays upon individual fantasies and anxieties about collective identities; and thus, perhaps expectedly so, critical receptions of the group have remained highly unstable.

Feedback Loops—Femen’s Internationalization and Contested Feminism

The internationalization of Femen’s campaign has proceeded in three main phases since the group’s activities connected with the Euro Cup. The first phase occurred after the women’s protest performance group Pussy Riot’s “punk prayer” against Putin’s regime in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior on February 21, 2012. The following October, the day of Pussy Riot’s verdict, Femen activist Inna Shevchenko cut down a large wooden cross in central Kyiv constructed by the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church on public land to memorialize victims of Stalin’s policies. Femen claimed theirs was an act of solidarity with Pussy Riot in protesting the Russian Federation’s sentencing of the female collective to two years in prison for “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred.” Pussy Riot member Maria Alekhina replied by pointing to key differences between her group and Femen, “we may share the same immediate appearances and general stance against authoritarianism, but we look at feminism differently, especially in our actions. We have never stripped and never will. The recent action in cutting down the cross, unfortunately, does not create any feeling of solidarity” (Masyuk 2012). Where Pussy Riot’s action aimed to symbolically unravel the unification of church and state in Russia, Femen’s material desecration of the cross as a civic symbol discursively diffused the act across three signifiers: the nation, an abstract female body performed by Shevchenko standing in the position of the cross she destroyed, and the missing persecuted Soviet bodies that the original cross apparently represented.

By contrast, the sacrificial bodies represented by Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alekhina, and Yekaterina Samutsevich in the Pussy Riot case have manifested in the live violence inscribed upon them by the ongoing state and public rituals around their punishment. The systematic purging and affirmation of authority in the Pussy Riot trial, as opposed to Femen’s act, signified the three women’s bodies

as both objects of violence and sites of resistance. Anya Bernstein has argued these points within the context of Russian public discourse on the body and its sanctity/profanation as an extension of the church-state nexus:

“the sovereign power sacrifices Pussy Riot to the narod, the opposition sacrifices them to the government, and the narod performs an apotropaic sacrifice while longing for a sublime sovereign power” (2013).

The untranslatability of “narod,” meaning both nation and people, but also containing the mythic quality of both of these concepts, functioned on the level of collective sacrifice in the Pussy Riot case. Where Pussy Riot’s “punk prayer” concentrated general anger at a defective regime, Shevchenko’s act generalized that anger to an individual instance of transgression against the Ukrainian state as surrogate for “all religion and patriarchy” (Femen 2013). The ontological difference between these two acts renders the second less threatening to any actual political hierarchy in its performative overtures to authority. Far lighter punishment has been leveraged on Femen than on Pussy Riot. After the cross incident, Inna Shevchenko was forced to emigrate to Paris, though the group was able to continue their operations abroad with intermittent activity in Ukraine.

The second major phase of Femen’s global push began in Paris, where they set up a “feminist training camp” and reframed their ideological positioning in a campaign they termed “sextremism.” Their initial activities in Paris involved a partnership with Iranian-born activist Maryam Namazie and Safea Lebdi, though both split with the group later on. In late 2012 fierce public backlash erupted in response to Femen’s anti-Islamic stance and their targeting of the mandatory wearing of the veil and the inclusion of nations practicing sharia law in the lineup for the Sochi Olympic Games. As their image grew ever more radical, anonymous participants began joining in their photographed activities. Their growing number of followers on social media expanded their rhetorical ability to enter global news media streams on any number of topics. In May 2013 a trial was held in Tunisia involving a young woman associated with Femen named Amina Tyler for posting nude photos of herself on Twitter. Femen activists protested topless outside the central courthouse in Tunis. The event went nearly unnoticed. By this point, it became clear that Femen’s “sextremism” had severed them from their original Ukrainian context and gained them many opponents. A Facebook group entitled Muslim Women Against Femen formed in response to Femen’s controversial imagery equating patriarchal systems across cultural contexts. Many argued that the group’s “sextremism” played into imperialist ideologies about “rescuing” Muslim women by glossing over specifics in actual debates about banning the veil. The group’s depictions of Muslim women’s struggles lost them credibility in the eyes of journalists who reported on all aspects of their triangulation by women-of-color feminists, whose voices were not represented in the anti-Islamic rhetoric Femen proffered. The situation proved that the language of the Femen brand was not calibrated or expressive enough to capture a symbolic backlash. Femen came to an impasse in their purchase on the media.

The third chapter of Femen’s saga began in summer of 2013. In late August, Femen’s Paris headquarters were burned by an unidentified source. The group

posted online that the Ukrainian secret services (SBU) had increased monitoring around their activities. A few weeks later, Anna Hutsol, Alexandra Shevchenko, and Roman Zviatsky were physically assaulted and beaten on the streets of Kyiv by unknown men they claimed were connected with state security services. The assaulted members were taken into custody and promptly released. Soon thereafter, the group publicized that Roman Zviatsky had been masterminding their activities in an abusive exercise of power. They then announced plans to cease all activity in Ukraine (Interfax-Ukraine 2013). The high level of violence directed at Femen, coupled with the group's maintaining a very ambiguous relationship to domestic politics in their native Ukraine, only served to further position the group within the global mass media at a pivotal juncture in Ukraine's history. Yanukovych's decision to begin the process of E.U. accession in November 2013 had long coincided with an overall increase in the domestic monitoring and targeting of protest activity in Ukraine. Based on the present analysis one of two outcomes seems likely in Femen's case: either the group will continue to maintain their toehold in the media as a radical performance based group within the entertainment industry abroad; or, they will make a concerted effort to politically legitimize their image, possibly by working with other social activists on Ukrainian focused projects. The second outcome would entail greater transparency to a wider constituency and the group's openly coming to terms with their feminist critics. This second route might mean risking the group's publicity as a brand name, potentially dissolving their spectacle of protest and its circulation, both resting upon the feedback loops in the marketing of politics within the mechanisms of the mass-media.

Transnational Feminist Vocabularies: Limitations and Opportunities

The political and social fissures around Femen in Ukrainian society have manifested dissent over more deeply embedded local discourses on gender. My ongoing interviews with feminist scholars and activists in Ukraine over time have revealed shifting opinions on the group after their move abroad. The consensus among feminist scholars on Femen has moved in the direction of viewing the group as performance-based and unmoored from local valences of the political spectrum (Tchermalykh 2012).⁹ Considering the notion of "the political" in Femen's subversive media stunts, the group's performances conflate the idea of feminism in the realm of *realpolitik*, where the very idea of "good" and "bad" feminism gets folded into other economic and social development agendas. Their foibles in promoting and/or undermining any consistent gender ideology are symptomatic of deeper conflicts in society. They have provided points of contention for transnational dialogue about gender in Ukraine, where local terminologies differ from Western notions of equality and difference. Where scholars have pointed out that neoliberal discourses have overlooked women in the shift to a market economy, it is exigent that transnational feminisms continue to take into account the full range of possible meanings of alternatives that do not fit familiar, linear narratives of progress (Phillips 2008). It may be less useful to categorize Femen as feminist or not, than to critique their strategies as calibrated for the spheres of media and pop.

Critiquing Femen in this way involves shifting conversation away from the state as representational entity, toward media technologies, globalization, and the roles that these factors play in advancing and manipulating messages about rights and freedoms. One starting point is to return to prior assessments of the public transformations brought on by mass-media in the shift to postcommunism outlined in the early nineties, if only to remain ever vigilant as the speed and quantity of information increases online that “the apparent plurality and openness of mass media veil the fact that certain issues remain undiscussed, some perspectives suppressed” (Gail & Kligman 2000, p. 3). Initial debates about Femen by Ukrainian feminist scholars in Krytyka in late 2011 and early 2012 took account of some of these issues by contextualizing the group within the etymology of feminism in the shift from Soviet to Post-Soviet regimes (Gapova & Soroka 2011; Dmitreyevna 2011; Lisyutkina 2011). Some underlined Femen’s value in bringing visibility to important concerns about sex tourism, but pointed out the group’s rhetorical limits as a political coalition alien to other feminist projects in Ukraine (Rubchak 2011; Rubchak 2012). Others classified the group as spectacle without any practical social application, but at the same time were ambivalent about the group’s puns on local stereotypes as a way of airing the very idea of feminism in the post-Soviet context (Mayerchuk & Plakhotnik, 2012).

Since these early assessments of Femen, the group’s global symbolic capital has developed as a site in which the invisible antagonism between official, versus popular voices in the media within and about the post-Soviet context has become more apparent. Interviews conducted over the following years with Ukrainian social activists of the younger generation concerned with a range of civil rights issues, not all immediately tied to gender and feminism, reveal a stated concern with a lack of critical attention to social causes within the region (Tchermalykh July 2013). In our information paradigm, in which the accrual of capital through the economy of images and text online rapidly transverses national borders, Femen’s reverting attention to themselves in a controversial, and especially in terms of their appropriation of a mainstream body image, particularly unorthodox “feminist” manner synthesizes local protest experiences, mass publicity, and irony in an illusion of their own popularity. This would seem, in and of itself, the core structure of their performance. Staging appearances of massive proportion, throughout their existence, the group has been reported on as being larger than life. It has been estimated Femen has 5,000 members, 300 of them active, across 10 countries (Tayler 2013). The outright disavowal of Femen by international critics has served another role: regardless of the group’s actual size or stated intentions, the anger in the wake of their acts has radicalized networks of skeptics and activists, many of whom have taken to task the meaning of the terms feminism and gender on their own terms.¹⁰

Agata Pyzik contextualizes Femen’s inappropriate linking of Islam with oppressive patriarchy as an instance of misrecognition and miscommunication in a much longer story of complex East-West cultural relations (2013, p. 141).¹¹ She locates Femen within a much broader, overarching analysis of the extremity of the post-Soviet context and, in her view, its relegation to unimportance by the West. Pyzik’s

intervention into the debate is informed by her own position as a Polish immigrant living in the UK. Femen's (mis)identification of women's own agency within Islam mistakenly reproduces an impoverished message of suspicion of Western hegemony and its mythologized divisions between East and West. A powerful critique can be unfolded out from this particular observation when thinking about Femen in terms of media activism. If Femen performs as "rescuing" Muslim women, it is because the West, for its missionizing attitudes about democratizing the Arab world throughout the 2000s, when Femen formed, has created the conditions for this critique. The affinities Femen assumes by overidentifying with the subject-position of Muslim women has produced images that resemble similar photos circulated at the time of the Iraq war. This is not to lend Femen a free pass for their social offenses, but only to sound a note of empathy and irony in light of the deeper discourses of which their shock tactics are symptomatic.

Activists I have spoken with in Ukraine concerned with gender issues are ambivalent as to whether Femen has contributed to ameliorating Ukrainian women's actual daily lives, though many agree the group has made a lasting impression in world news. Some have found that social tolerance toward gender minorities has decreased in Ukraine, with an increase in visible LGBT and feminist activism in the period since the Orange Revolution (Martsenyuk 2013). The situation is also likely due to the effects of Yanukovych's repressive regime and the marriage and reproductive policy debates that had taken place as target issues in the lead-up to the next election cycle. In 2013, protests erupted on both the left and right around the legislation of an anti-gay propaganda law. Artists and intellectuals have come under fire in Ukraine as well, with increasing shutdowns and targeting of museum exhibits featuring LGBT and feminist themes by activists and officials associated with the far right.¹² Some women's initiatives are less concerned with specific policies, and are more focused on generating forums for professional development. In 2009 feminist Oksana Kis' drafted a letter to reduce the stigmatization of women's hiring and employment practices in the professional, business, education and government sectors. Mobilizations around International Women's Day by the Kyiv-based feminist group *Ofenzywa* have also continually put pressure on fair labor practices. In the city of Kharkiv the Museum of Women's History and Gender Movements has pioneered efforts to create new archival databases in the historiography of women's experiences in the 20th century and regularly partners with researchers, activists, and social workers (Isaieva 2011).

Transnational dialogue about Femen could help to instantiate more intersectional critiques of media representations across cultural and national contexts. In July 2013, I met with former Femen member Angelina Diash in Kyiv. Diash is a university student, a theatre performer, an actress, and university student originally from Khmelnytsky, the same city as Anna Hutsol, where she was recruited to join Femen by members Inna and Sasha Shevchenko in 2009. Diash is African-Ukrainian and informed me that she experiences constant harassment by local police and passersby for the color of her skin, stating that, "the situation is especially difficult because Ukrainian is my native language, I was born here." (Diash pers.comm 2013). When I asked her why she decided to join Femen, she replied, "I saw a chance to

fight racism, to find justice for women because they should be equal to men, and a community I could belong to.” While Femen gave her a sheltered space for engaging politics, that space was limited: “Everyone would sit around trying to decide what an action would look like and then Anna Hutsol would create it her way with Zviatsky.” In late 2011 Diash left Femen, narrating her choice to do so by expressing that Femen filled a time and a place in her life in which she needed to escape the “constant psychological pressure” she faces as a racial minority in Ukraine. Her personal narrative is a powerful testament to her own agency: she was able to successfully maneuver her life opportunities by joining Femen, but strengthened her individual convictions by eventually choosing to leave the group in order to apply the skills she gained there to new experiences in other venues.

Since their formation in 2009, Femen’s pop underpinnings have come under increased scrutiny, even as the national symbolism in their image has receded. Feminist scholars have vocalized concerns about Femen’s topless images being poised for the male gaze, noting where the transmission of a social message through female nudity risks being lost on consumers. An important exchange of information is being channeled through the Femen “brand” as a platform for debate about the meanings of feminism within the venue of the mass media. In one example, several months after Femen’s foray in Warsaw, a Polish art-activist group named *The Krasnals!* posed as actual prostitutes disgruntled with Femen for stealing their business (*The Krasnals!* 2013). Activists created Femen-style photographs featuring a large phallus, dressed in revealing workers’ overalls, and held signs with slogans such as “Poland Welcomes You!” The photos were circulated online and news outlets reported on the event as a protest by actual prostitutes. The dissonance, or “slippage” between image and word in *The Krasnals!* copycat protest played upon the language of Femen’s brand and its limited applicability to actual sociopolitical struggles. Nevertheless, public receptions of Femen, of which *The Krasnals!* hoax is but one example, evidence two critical outcomes of the former’s overall experiment: increased discussion around the asymmetrical branding and transmission of protest by the mass media for consumption; and second, awareness of the subsumption of minority issues into sleek mainstream campaigning that Femen’s “feminist brand” makes visible.¹³ It remains to be seen how Femen’s symbolic capital might evolve future backdrops for more critical commentary on media representations of women by participants, audiences, and critics ambivalent about the group.

Conclusion

Femen employs camp and simulacrum within satires cast in the mass media and its internal logics of erotic identification, alienation, and consumption. Formulaic to the culture markets in which the group first arose, Femen simultaneously adopts and parodies the folk-inflected rhetoric inherited from Ukrainian pop performances dating prior to the Orange Revolution. Their deferral of signs plays upon conventional pop culture by airing audiences’ fantasies and fears around protest, state authority, and national belonging. Symbolically, Femen’s performances unfold on two intersecting planes: as a wry retrospective of the pitfalls of the Orange Revolution, and as a pun on feminism that, in the group’s controversial displays

of the female body, exposes the underlying cultural mythologies that differentiate women from men, and East from West, in competing discourses which signify progress differently. The group's more recent shift to a "sextremist" image and their internationalization in virtual space has extended Femen's politics from commentary on Ukrainian women's rights, to global contestations over the meaning of the term feminism. The group's protest aesthetic may be observed across feedback loops in which audiences contest what feminist protest "should" or "could" look like by replicating, rejecting, and mocking Femen's aesthetic in word and image. Thus, the group's format and aesthetic vocabulary contains problematic aspects when considered as an actual social movement. As a feminist brand, however, Femen manifests how dissidence itself has become a commodity in the contemporary sociopolitical environment driven by images, icons, and mass information.

Femen's false sense of universalism certainly deserves critique, and yet it would be a grave mistake for critics to completely overlook the deeper cultural divides within Femen's story. Dismissing the group's members entirely outright as naïve, or their experiences as silly happenstance, reinforces the subjugating categories that replicate patterns of condescension by Western and antifeminist critics, and thus only perpetuates the traps that are so antithetical to transnational dialogue about gender. The colonial gaze that falls upon those regions that were once, not so long ago, referred to as "the second world" is still pervasive within the stories circulated through consumer media and the scripting and production of dissidence in narratives that serve to justify Western hegemony. Perhaps the lesson to be gained from the Femen phenomenon is what it can offer us as a litmus for debate about citizenship as a function of media. Looking past Femen's smoke and mirrors as a broad political organization in order to see them for what they are offstage, a handful of young women with sharp marketing technology skills, begs further critique. Are the twin risks to the free flow of information and creative debate greater than Femen's offensive jabs, their dark humor, reactionary sloganeering, and their twisted overtures to human rights? To be critical of gender and feminist issues in the face of growing corporate media, perhaps we need to think twice when Femen conveys to their audiences, even while alienating them, that no one is listening. Paying close attention to Femen's branding can help parse out the rhetorical limits of Femen's problematic commodification of their own bodies, while still avoiding replicating the pervasive condescension toward "non-Western" societies so pervasive in the marketing and production of protest for mass media. There is no easy route for the kind of double-edged analysis I am suggesting. For now, I believe it worthwhile to begin to consider Femen as symptomatic of the Orange revolutionary moment in which they arose, a moment whose effects may no longer be unfolding as silence around pressing issues, but as too much noise. An information war is now taking place alongside the violent battles in East Ukraine. For global scholars and activists concerned with civic and human rights infringements of all sorts, we will need to work even harder to nuance the terms of public debate by and about women if we are to transcend divisive categories of identity—if we are to insist on peace.

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Notes

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² Slutwalks began in April 2011 in Toronto, Canada as a street demonstration in which participants dress in revealing clothing to protest against explaining rape through a woman's appearance (Slutwalks 2011). The idea has since spread to several countries. Co-founder Sonya JF Barnett from Toronto designed the calendar in which Femen activist Alena Magelat posed alongside activists from a range of other groups in response to the controversy over Aliaa Magda Elmahdy (Namazie 2012).

³ Saeed Lebdii is a founding member of the French women's rights organization Ni Putes, Ni Soumises.

⁴ For example, Nancy Fraser's (2013) reevaluation of neoliberal discourses and Second-Wave feminism in which she examines the role economics has played in suspending cultural specificities within "the political" in contemporary feminist conditionings of global solidarities that transcend national borders.

⁵ Claire Bishop gives a detailed overview of the art commodity in European visual culture post-1989, examining the search for artistic equivalents for political positions and the collective creative process in light of different imaginings of citizenship (2012). Russian critic Alek D. Epstein places Pussy Riot in a similar vein of critique, asking how action, agency, and audience function in emerging performances that aim to collapse conventional frames for public speech.

⁶ CANVAS has since come under scrutiny as having provided consulting and branding in the Arab Spring and for receiving financial support from private multinational corporations invested in by Western governments (Rosenberg, 2011).

⁷ Ruslana, Grynholly, Okean Elzy, Mandre and others contributed to a common aesthetic of Ukrainian independence based upon a diverse blend of 19th century folkways, European jazz, myths and legends from Kyivan Rus', Orthodox liturgical music, and other genres that remain distinct from, or disassociated from the Soviet period.

⁸ Yekelchuk claims political elites' campaigns in the lead-up to the Orange Revolution adopted ethnic models when beneficial to solidifying their power bases. By contrast, he argues, nation-builders in Parliament and voters on the left and right wanted democratic reforms which embraced civic models over ethnic ones. In late 2000 a set of private tapes brought to light Kuchma's fraudulent and criminal behavior. In February 2001, protestors formed a small movement called "Ukraine Without Kuchma!" After Tymoshenko joined the anti-Kuchma movement, other oligarchs in parliament soon engineered her dismissal, however, she later emerged as a charismatic populist leader and went on to establish her party, BYuT. Yushchenko remained Prime Minister until April 2001 due to a coalition of oligarchs and communists in Parliament working in his favor. Both of these two leaders would go on to unite the Orange opposition (Yekelchuk 2007).

⁹ Tymoshenko remained imprisoned under Ukrainian jurisdiction from 2011-2014, despite large-scale Western governmental and NGOs' grievances over her sentence. Ongoing domestic protests by Ukrainian citizens achieved little in changing the course of her internment. In autumn of 2013, Tymoshenko issued a public statement that she would be willing to accede her Ukrainian citizenship if this would lift the obstacle that her jail term then posed for Ukraine-E.U. integration. She was eventually released as part of a broader set of negotiations in the wake of the events of the Euromaidan. This move became part of a larger process of creating an interim government over which Poroshenko would be elected to reside.

¹⁰ In summer of 2013 a far-right radical group calling themselves Hommen adopted Femen's aesthetic to stage an anti-same-sex marriage rally in the streets of Paris, evidencing further how Femen's aesthetic circulates distinct from the actual political demands and platforms that usually accompany the divisions between right-leaning and left-leaning policies directly concerning gender issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and fair hiring practices.

¹¹ The most well known example is Pussy Riot's punk prayer performance inside Moscow's Christ the Saviour Cathedral on February 21, 2012. The location and the lyrics of Pussy Riot's song "Mother of God, Drive Putin Away" mirrored Femen's earlier protest in front of Christ the Saviour on December 9, 2011, in which they dressed in burlap peasant costume pants and held posters reading "God Chase Away the King" and "God Get Rid of the Tsar."

¹² Pyzik writes, "it seems a typical case of mutual misunderstanding, with each side blind to each other's concerns: Femen doesn't see racism behind their calling patriarchy 'Arab,' and the Western pro-underprivileged women of color feminists see in Femen only the distasteful theatre of naked boobs, which overlooks their needs, not seeing how they remain blind to the postcommunist reality Femen represent" (p.141). I would add that for the misunderstanding to become clear on all sides, Femen's members would need to open dialogue, which would thus break the "fourth wall" of their media spectacle.

¹³ The first step in a wave of artistic censorship occurred with the banning of the Visual Cultures Research Center (VCRC) from Kyiv-Mohilya Academy in 2011 by University President Sergiy Kvit for the contemporary local art exhibit Ukrainian Body. This act of censorship sparked street protests and international petitions for intellectual freedom. The VCRC temporarily relocated to the historical Kino Zhovten' (October Cinema), but lost their residency there in summer of 2013. The future of the group remains unknown.

¹⁴ The Guardian, The Atlantic, The New York Times, Kyiv Post, The Moscow Times, Pravda and many other Western and Russian media outlets reported on Femen in 2009-2011 as the piedmont of feminism in Ukraine. Subsequent reports on the group overturned this notion; many instantiated debates on whether or not Femen is able to transmit a feminist message through their displays of the female body in mainstream media.

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