

Two Bad Words: FEMEN & Feminism in Independent Ukraine

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Context

“Now when people in America think of Ukraine they will add Femen to their list of vodka, snow, and the Orange Revolution,” my friend Lilya sighed in disappointment, “I’m embarrassed of them.” The Ukrainian women’s protest group Femen has been described in reports throughout western media over the past three years, including NPR, BBC, and *The New York Times*, as a new democratic initiative resonant with the Orange Revolution. Femen’s formula is at once simple and spectacular: scantily clad topless women stage highly theatrical demonstrations to draw attention to various facets of gender inequality in Ukraine. For example, in early 2008 they protested sexism in universities by re-enacting x-rated scenes of inequality in the classroom. Media reports have seized upon these street protests as the advent of a new kind of feminism. However, this may be an overestimation of the situation and a gross mishandling of the complexity of gender issues and their development over the course of Ukraine’s independence. While the group’s leader, Anna Hutsol, has publicly stated that Femen’s main motive is to spotlight the negative impact that sex tourism and prostitution have on Ukraine, this message often seems to get overshadowed by photos highlighting the “showier” elements of the group’s nude protest tactics. As distracting as such media reports may come across, Hutsol claims that Femen’s topless protests are absolutely necessary as the quickest way to draw attention to the exploitation of Ukrainian women. Towards these ends, the group maintains a broad campaign across Russian, Ukrainian, and English language social media sites. Given the urgency and breadth of their campaign, it hardly comes as a surprise that Hutsol hopes to form Femen into a parliamentary party by 2013—Europe’s “first all-women party.” Tracking Femen in the media and on their own sites since their formation in 2008, I have observed the creative methods with which the group satirizes symbols tied to post-soviet and post-orange discourse in unexpected ways. I believe that to categorize Femen as a simple ricochet of the Orange Revolution would be to severely limit their story. In thinking best how to research the group, I decided I needed to consult with them and other feminists in Ukraine in order to better understand the landscape of their movement in light of broader gendered discourses. Through my efforts, I hope to offer a new probing of recurrent issues for feminisms of many stripes, centering my inquiry on questions concerning equality and difference. The following are my initial post-fieldwork notes toward a deepening transnational feminist discussion.

During summer 2011 I was able to devote six weeks to full-time research in Ukraine in the cities of Lviv, Kyiv, and Kharkiv thanks to support from the Ann Arbor Center for the Education of Women, the U-M Center for Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies and the Department for Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Michigan. I split my time between four weeks in Kyiv and two weeks in Kharkiv interviewing leaders in the academic, NGO, and social sectors on how they view feminist work in contemporary Ukraine; Femen’s impact on this work (if any); and in which directions future possibilities for women’s activism might go. I conducted a total of 14 face-to-face interviews with 12 individuals. Many of our discussions ended up being informal conversations in which my informants shared information about themselves as both activists and scholars. A few of our conversations also took place in small group settings due to the fact many of the women I spoke with knew each other as colleagues and, in some cases, as members of the same activist groups and/or NGOs.

Some of the major organizations involved in gender work represented by my informants were: Krona, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Salus, Alliance, IGLYO, La Strada, Gurt, and the domestic violence awareness campaign “Zalyshajsya lyudynoyu.” During my trip I was also very fortunate to meet with gender scholars Tamara Martsenyuk, Maria Dmytriyeva, Olga Plakhotnik, and Maria Mayerchyk from Kyiv-Mohiyla and Kharkiv Universities. A student from Kyiv-Mohiyla named Nadia Parfan and her fellow activist, Galina Yarmanova, were also instrumental in teaching me about their work in “Ofenzywa,” a new feminist organization in Kyiv formulated with ties to the New Left and March 8th with an emphasis on women’s labor rights. Tamara Martsenyuk also shared her own work in “Ofenzywa” and introduced me to two members of the LGBTQ organization “Insight” in Kyiv. While in Kharkiv I also met with Tatiana Isaieva, the founder and director of a new gender museum funded by the local city administration and the Global Fund for Women. Although Isaieva was careful to distance her own work from Femen’s activities, she did mention Anna Hutsol as a fellow participant in a leadership training seminar funded by the U.S. State Department several years ago.

The close ties within gender studies and activism communities in Ukraine became a consistent theme across nearly all of the conversations I had this summer. Despite the tightly knit nature of gender work in Ukraine, at times it was difficult to schedule meetings. One limiting factor to my research was the time of year in which I conducted these interviews. Anna Hutsol was initially unable to meet with me in July due to a trip to Crimea that she had planned for herself and several members of Femen. Luckily, Hutsol and I were eventually able to meet in August in Kyiv in the bar-restaurant near Maidan Nezalezhnosti that she calls her “office” due to the many meetings she holds there with Femen’s activists. I owe a great deal to everyone who took the time to discuss Femen, feminism, and their own work with me both in person and online.

Nearly all of the individuals I interviewed indicated growing concerns about how the rhetoric of Ukraine’s women’s rights movement would be received by western audiences unfamiliar with the post-soviet context. In an important sense, my respondents’ concerns correlate with the observations that some scholars have pointed out in work on the impact of international NGOs on local Ukrainian activists in the 1990s (Hrycak 2006, Phillips 2008). Large NGOs, mostly funded by the E.U., continue to support the majority of research and social projects on pre-defined notions of “gender” and “women” in Ukraine. Differentiation, described by Sarah D. Phillips as a process in which activists and the state prioritize, and respond to, socio-political issues within a shifting distribution of needs across varied populations, continues to shape the funding structures of social projects in Ukraine. With this dynamic in mind, it may be worth remembering, while some of the activists in Phillips’ study were able to position themselves as agents of differentiation, other projects lost funding within a shifting social and economic stratification that privileged western donors’ predefined discourses of need. These privileged discourses were those that tended to table more localized articulations of need for projects that more directly resonated with the priorities of western funding agencies (Phillips 2008). In my observations this summer, the efforts of grassroots activist groups like “Ofenzywa” and organizations like “Insight” in Kyiv that work across sectors and utilize social media have introduced fresh dimensions to the potential for women’s activism, as well as LGBTQ rights, based on more locally-scaled definitions of need.¹ Many of the women I spoke with, most notably those from the group “Ofenzywa,” emphasized their attempt to delineate the unique concerns of Ukrainian women by representing their interests in transnational conversations operating within a federation of NGOs and academic institutions.

Despite Femen's ability to draw attention to an issue, their global iconicity in media networks has both highlighted and fractured the idea of a cohesive feminist movement in Ukraine. As I met with several scholars and activists and asked each of them about Femen, their increasingly contradictory stances toward the group made me think more deeply about the reach of Femen's publicity. While our conversations touched upon the "local" in Femen's performances in reference to the national symbolic, I became more interested in how Femen interacts with their audience: how they view other feminists and how feminists view them, and in what ways they mobilize artistic convention to canvass for their campaign. With the group's self-fashioning in mind, my research questions centered on the visual and technological cultures Femen employs to disseminate their performances to a mass audience. Instead of approaching Femen as a categorically "feminist" group linked to a "wave" of new activism as I'd begun thinking about them when I first read about their formation in 2008, I started to explore their agency as provocateurs. I mean provocateurs in the sense that Femen's activities almost always reflect a concerted effort to attract attention for the sake of attention. This summer I began to wonder whether in Ukraine's increasingly conservative climate, projects like Femen that prioritize visibility by going beyond "acceptable" feminist practices that cohere with 2nd and 3rd wave feminist theory might produce valuable tension and expand our expectations of what we think of as feminist action.² Encountering resistance to the idea that Femen might be read as a feminist avant-garde, I asked several Ukrainian intellectuals why Femen's controversial, topless protests should necessarily compromise the group's integrity as part of a wider movement? To a degree, Femen's artistic "spectacle" and very clever use of political parody, combined with their social capital in both street and new media contexts, renders them unprecedented as a protest group in the classical liberal sense.

In furthering my project, I ask: What would it mean to stop arguing over whether Femen's members are "good" feminists, and instead, to consider them critically as a performance group with a political constituency? In the following, I examine the implications of approaching Femen this way, drawing preliminary conclusions about Anna Hutsol's project as an experiment in both political performance and the forging of new leadership styles. I also address the body image at work in Femen's protests as theoretically at odds with notions of female emancipation and how this image might be re-conceptualized as an offshoot of the group's performance strategy. In considering Femen beyond exhibitionism, Hutsol's example may simply be an attempt to form leaders from a new generation while also, perhaps inadvertently, provoking greater pluralism within feminist studies and practices in Ukraine.

The Body Question

During my fieldwork I conducted interviews with a variety of women who participate in Femen and the Ukrainian feminist movement at large. In each interview, I broached the question of how to square the fact that nearly all of Femen's active members resemble runway models. Indeed, there is substantial debate among Ukrainian feminists about the body image being portrayed in Femen's protests. The result of my attempt to find an explanation for Femen's approach led to very little consensus among the Ukrainian scholars I spoke with on this issue. Some have argued that Femen's strategy deliberately targets the male gaze in an attempt to increase the visibility of feminist issues among those populations least likely to problematize sex tourism. Those in support of this view assert that Femen employs the female body as a tool for

resistance, posturing for a consumerist audience the denigrated image of that audience's consumption (Mayerchuk 2010, Rubchak 2011, Lisyutkina 2011). Others argue along the lines of Audre Lorde from a position familiar to feminist theorists concerned with women of color; that the oppressed cannot dismantle their master's house with the tools of the master. The "tools of the master" in these approximations identify Femen's idealized sex appeal as a gesture guided by patriarchal hierarchies (Gapova and Soroka 2011, Dmytriyeva 2011). Although rhetorically quite close to postcolonial discourse about race, Femen's complicated racial undertones have yet to be directly discussed.

And yet, race is a paradigmatic site where a more nuanced view of Femen could be made possible. When formulating questions about racialized bodies, the viability of Femen's project becomes even more contingent upon interpretive practices. By one logic, Femen's privileging of a white body ideal as the banner of women's freedom negates systemic change by excluding all others. To be fair, there is one African-Ukrainian member in Femen,³ and although this member does not participate in Femen's street protests, her particular decision may be due to the need to avoid unwanted negative attention and possible assault. Also to the group's credit, last year Femen introduced an online "body art" photography campaign in which this member of color and another, very pregnant, activist posed in photographs alongside the now famous activist-personalities, Oleksandra and Inna Shevchenko. By way of social media, these two "alternative" bodies—a black woman and a pregnant woman—entered Femen's aesthetic and extended the group's discursive potential as an inclusive movement. This initiative may be read as a possible concession to those who criticize the group's privileging of a singular body image. However, it is also notable that these two participants nonetheless still occupy a posture suggesting sexual desire; both resemble pop stars with striking looks well matched to the group's attractive coterie. In many ways, Femen's attempt to problematize race through conventional sex appeal only further subjugates the minority position by reinforcing dominant consumerist appetites. Although there does remain the possibility that this recent body art initiative could widen to become an inclusive space for all body types, thus far, the campaign's emphasis on an ideal remains dangerously close to the tokenism displayed toward ethnic minorities and others throughout mainstream media.⁴

All the same, even though Femen does adopt much of the gender stereotyping prevalent in mainstream marketing, their ultimate incentive seems to trump personal profit and enterprise. In thinking deeply about the body question, I would put forth that the fact Femen's protesters are almost exclusively chic, white women in their early twenties becomes less inimical if we consider how they *typecast themselves* into role-playing an oppressed female ideal in a theatre of the absurd. It would then follow that the ways in which Femen props up their typecast characters in public domains—on the streets and online—politicizes their aesthetic by underscoring the fact that women in general are typecast into certain roles. In other words, Femen's "stagings" in which they juxtapose lithe female bodies with dramatic scenes of violence could be understood as a mimetic technique with high emotional impact through which to convey the power inequalities between genders.

No doubt, in asking whether we can understand Femen this way, we also risk condoning the group's reception among those viewers upon whom the subtleties of Femen's project may be lost. It is significant that within their re-enactment of conditions of exploitation, a good portion of Femen's audience seemingly remains blind to the limits of the stage. Analyzing comments from their online followers, who are predominantly male, reveals that there are indeed glaring limitations to using the female body as a "transmission of ideas" within a populist

framework (Mayerchyk 2010). In many online forums, the group remains exhibitionist and easily interpreted as a reinforcement of the commercial bias that the only bodies worth putting on display are those belonging to young, lanky blondes. We might ask ourselves, then, why a “display” is necessary at all? It very well may be that Femen’s decision to foreground their movement through select bodies furthers the hyper-real elements of performance-parody by ironically propping up a simulacrum of gender ideals in unexpected contexts. It is this framing of the “perfect” female body, held sacred by society, with laughter and shame that makes Femen controversial; and perhaps, also lends them a shred of political legitimacy beyond allegations that their actions merely comprise cheap showmanship or reactionary antics.

While in Kyiv, I was fortunate enough to interview Femen’s leader, Anna Hutsol, about her group and their ideas. Anticipating my ambivalence on the issue, when I asked her if women with nonstandard bodies might join Femen’s street actions, Hutsol replied with an anecdote:

There’s an older woman who supports us. She’s 68 and a mother of one of our activists. I was surprised when she came to me and told me, “When my neighbors ask, ‘Olga how are you not ashamed?’ I reply them that I am doing something for my country while they just sit on a bench all day and do nothing. I tell them that they are the ones who should be ashamed.” Many elderly people give us their support and tell us that if they were younger they would participate in our protests. The idea that older people can’t protest because our protesters have to have a certain beauty only, well, this isn’t true. Strong women can’t be timid in Ukraine. Considering the prejudice that an old body is not as beautiful as at 16; well, there are neighbors, relatives, etc. who think old women can’t yell at protests or involve their grandkids in them. And to face all of this is to face more prejudice than if you are 20, 22, 25, or 26 because at that age you might have nothing to lose. (Interview and translation by the author, August 22, 2011)

Most telling here is not that Femen’s leader claims to invite anyone to protest, but that she is concerned with keeping alive the interest to do so. In my interview with her, Hutsol identified the factors that exclude non-ideal bodies from her protests as stemming from larger socio-cultural issues in Ukraine, rather than the structure of Femen itself. The critical edge to this rhetorical strategy preserves Femen’s self-positioning as an opposition group, while refusing accountability for their dependence on a sleek public image connected with the exclusive nature of their day-to-day activities (the group has a PR manager, fan page, and does endorsements). By limiting the “cast” of performers in the show to a slim, trim troupe of 20 or so, Hutsol preserves their celebrity status and bolsters their marketability. This in turn personalizes their protests in a way that reinforces their iconicity at the expense of reifying and branding feminism as a product, to be sold rather than accessed in open dialogue. This begs the question: can Femen copyright what belongs, or at least should belong, to every woman— that is, feminism?

One effect of Femen’s controversial and hyper-populist self-positioning within the media has provided a heuristic through which others engaged in gender work in Ukraine are now re-investigating the limits and possibilities of the term “feminism” in the Ukrainian context. According to Maria Mayerchyk and Olga Plakhotnik, the authors of the article that first sparked the controversy over Femen in *Krytyka*, these debates are taking place at a crucial breaking point in scholarship. In their view, the heated discussion over Femen illustrates a deeper polarization between the left and right within the academy. For those on the far left, Femen is doing little

more than selling their bodies for a profit (there is also speculation the group receives support from clandestine sources). For those on the right, Femen denigrates the nation by overturning national symbols and supporting anti-clerical efforts. On both sides the arguments skeptical of Femen's rights to feminism seem to be at base an estimation of losses: lost theoretical cohesion, lost gender equality, and lost interventions in policymaking.

Despite these estimates, all seem to agree that, on an important level, Femen's sex-charged image is a response to a growing neo-conservative strain in post-socialist society. Anna Hutsol conveys a similar notion in her reply to the political right:

Some say we are sexist because they believe the use of a woman's body is something shameful, forbidden, something that should remain for men's eyes only. To this I say: this is my body. To me this is not sexism at all, for me, in this way, freedom is no longer forbidden. (Interview and translation by the author, August 22, 2011)

From Hutsol's perspective, it would seem that the female body constitutes the ultimate litmus test for freedom. Embedded within her words is a conundrum between "sexism" and "shame," illustrating her take on the paradox between public and private ownership over the female body. Now familiar territory in feminist theory, this paradox constitutes the core of the debates around Femen. This may be why many of the conversations I had about the group returned to the same question that also dominates the critical material on Femen to date: "Is Femen feminist?" As my discussions continued to develop, both with self-identifying feminists and those who reject the term, the idea of labeling Femen as "feminist" became less interesting and less relevant. One of the activists from "Ofenzywa" I spoke with posed an invaluable rhetorical question: "Why do so many of the debates around Femen lead to fighting over a marginal title? Over who gets to be a 'feminist' and who does not?" From a cynic's standpoint, we might consider Gramsci's intellectual and his property in response to this question. The central point here is that intellectuals secure power for themselves by competing for ownership over concepts that maintain cultural hegemony. By the same token, intellectuals are also forced into competition over the ideas that they believe should, for ethical reasons, become hegemonic. Perhaps not readily apparent, I think this activist's observation of competing "feminisms" may positively respond to nuances in the Ukrainian context in ways that account for its multiple pasts; perhaps the least complex categories of analysis being post-colonial and post-revolutionary.

Art, or Business and Politics

Anna Hutsol's background in marketing is evident in Femen's media-based format, namely their affinity for social networks, the blogosphere, and savvy documentaries. Yet despite her cutting-edge combination of new media and creativity in the name of deeply troubling social issues, during my conversation with her, Hutsol admitted to being disengaged with feminist theory, history, and cultural studies— all spaces she associates with "the academy." It would seem that for Femen, engineering the term "feminist" is less of an occupation concerned with the theoretical implications of gender differentiation and equality, than it is a masquerade without a systemic vocabulary. Perhaps reason for concern, Hutsol's disregard for openly discussing sexuality and gender with knowledge experts in these areas undermines her intervention in the intellectual work being done in these fields. At the same time, to her credit, Hutsol's leadership

is something to be admired, even if she is unusual in her approach to feminist practices. At only 27 years old, she has managed to hold her group together in adverse contexts for over three years. At base, her philosophy is democratic. At its most complex, Hutsol grapples with leadership, asking how to shape new leaders from within a generation whose experience drastically differs from that of its parents'. By the same token, her publicizing of Ukrainian legislation adversely affecting women has also facilitated academic feminisms in Ukraine, if only in ironically provoking a call for greater pluralism. For example, Femen cooperated with other feminist and gender-rights activist groups "Ofenzywa," "Insight" and anarchofeminists to gain access to and protest at the Fourth National Congress of Bioethics on April 10, 2010 in which the National Academy of Sciences, the Ministry of Health, and Ukrainian church leaders convened to discuss the nation's pending ban on abortion. Nearly all of the women I spoke with cited this particular moment of cooperation between feminist groups as an example of plurality within the women's rights movement in Ukraine.

Of course, the micro-publics of feminist thought in Ukraine that differ due to disparate regional histories and project funding structures present their own challenges to a unified movement (Rewakowicz 2009). Given these structures, this may partly be why when I asked her about the term feminism, Anna Hutsol distinguished herself by replying that she is not a feminist in the classical sense:⁵

As for feminism, I think this question belongs to researchers and historians. I think I generally agree with those dear people who say that women have rights, for example, that I have a right to protest. Whether rights are radical or not radical, justified or unjustified, is a different question altogether. People like myself who say women have the right to do what they want are in a way feminist, slightly so, but feminist. (Interview and translation by the author, August 22, 2011)

Situating herself outside of institutional knowledge, Hutsol makes an important claim for her group's autonomy. Perhaps her indifference lends us a new category of analysis in which we might consider what it means for Femen to engage by also disengaging. Due to the highly sophisticated rhetorical design of Femen's "actions" or "happenings," I find it valuable to explore Femen as Hutsol explains them—as somewhere between performance and the market: "I think if you can sell cookies in this way [through mass appeal] why not also push for social issues using the same method? I don't see anything wrong with that" (Hutsol in Mayerchik 2010). At once entertaining and imposing, Hutsol's marketing strategy is indeed novel in that it has held the international media circuit's attention for so long. Femen is now a brand name, despite the fact that very little legislation has changed as the result of their direct action. It is no wonder some have begun asking whether the group lies far enough outside the market not to be swayed by material incentive. However, considering that most of Femen's members are from the educated classes, and the motivations by which some of them, such as Oleksandra Shevchenko, have given up other job opportunities for Femen, indicates the presence of incentives far deeper than mere financial gain (Shevchenko was dismissed from her newspaper desk job for protesting with Femen). There is speculation that the group receives the majority of its support from a large media group called KP Media. Yet, when I asked Hutsol about funding, she firmly replied that nearly all of Femen's monetary support is donated, many from international "fans," especially

among the Ukrainian Canadian diaspora. In my future research, I would like to learn more about the specific types and sources of support that the group relies on.

If not business, then is Femen's experiment one of performance? Political performativity? Some scholars have recently suggested that Femen used to be more rooted in performance art, but that the group's vision has devolved and become fragmented. Although nearly all of Femen's protests dealt with sex tourism in 2008 and 2009, in 2010 they began protesting issues indirectly related to Ukrainian women: the Chernobyl commemoration, the stoning of a Muslim woman, and the Japanese earthquake, to name a few. Viewing the trajectory of Femen's format, there is also a striking turn in 2010 in which they began outsourcing much of their street-performance actions to textual and photographic representations of "protest" on their blog, Facebook, and Twitter accounts. Ten minute street-performances in real-time were traded for five-second photo ops that the group could frame with comments and disseminate in virtual space. With the rise of Femen's global popularity corresponding directly with the rise of Internet use in Ukraine, I would suggest that the group has adapted their format to fit the shifting nature of their audience. While it may be true that the diffuse themes of their protest-performances in virtual time have, on the surface, somewhat splintered their original platform, it may still be too early to tell whether this fragmentation will lead to futility. There is also a likely possibility that this shift could re-consolidate Femen's emphasis on Ukrainian sex tourism if they are able to conceptually link their performances back to this theme without over-reaching, or over-catering to their now extensive global network.

It would seem, then, quite useful to depart from post-soviet political analyses that might classify Femen as a liberal social movement; especially twentieth century definitions of protest that tend to view "resistance" as individuals reacting to an ordered structure, as civil society confronting a corrupt state. I hold that studies in transnational feminism would gain methodological ground by doing away with the temptation to contextualize Femen's feminist potential against a monolithic state, the state serving as an allegory for patriarchy. Although Femen's political incentives⁶ may align with one understanding of protest as resistance, a wider definition of politics could help us account for the more nuanced aspects of the group's project. It may be more productive to think of Femen as partisan only in the sense that their aesthetics constitute their politics. In other words, the group's ownership over a recognizable set of images and icons signals change in those images' tension with more dominant institutional structures. In turn, the dominant order being one which expresses itself through aesthetic arrangement; or cultural hegemony that may be undermined by overturning, defacing, or estranging the mainstream images constructed to maintain order (Ranci re 2010). This is a key distinction from other readings of Femen that reverse this relationship and argue the following: that Femen's politics (primarily the criminalization of sex tourism) determine the form of their protests; that carnivalesque performance somehow best fits the post-soviet matrix in which glam-feminism is the only way to draw attention to an issue. As this line of argument goes, the aspects that make Femen shocking somehow apportion the logical outcome of an organic east-west social paradox. By contrast, a valuable question at stake in Femen's case may be less about authenticity and more about affiliation. For Femen, demonstrated collaboration with the academy, including academic feminism, detracts from their social agency as provocateurs. Femen's parody fosters their indifference.

The approach to glam-feminism as an index of organic authenticity falls short, considering that the anti-bourgeois codes in glam-parody are also global signs in a much broader, worldwide anti-capitalist movement. True, there are aspects of Femen that localize their glam-

parody, namely those that highlight the sex trade in Ukraine and the paradox of the nation's soviet-orange-european juncture. In Femen's glam-protest, it may be that the design precedes the outcome in a fine interweave of performance with politics. If it is true that all politics constitute the performativity of an imagined public, then Femen's greatest impact may not be in the issues they target. Rather, their discursive intervention may lie more in the hyper-publics they design on the streets and online, with their protest narrative continually modified by participants. In this understanding of the group, the line between fiction and reality is consciously manipulated.

In each performance, Femen reinforces their overall aesthetic; part of this aesthetic is that their costumes, slogans, and internet postings are all methodically designed to *look* spontaneous, to *appear* organic. In every stunt, Femen furthers their recognizable sense of humor through a range of genres, characters, and costumes, all the while engaging a set of signature issues in an evolving play on current affairs. Meanwhile, the glamorous, sexed-up aspects of Femen's movement serve to broaden their digestibility, both affixing and underlining their longer, more critical, narrative. Downplaying their mass-appeal, Hutsol notes the deep ideological well embedded in Femen's project:

Nothing will change if women remain timid and quiet. In principle our ideas, our protests, are full of ideology and philosophy. A philosophy of life. Men who are looking for something like a show or a cabaret can go see those, but we're doing something else. We're involved in protest. (Interview and translation by the author, August 22, 2011)

Underlining her group's uniqueness, Hutsol is careful to distinguish Femen from mass-entertainment by underscoring their political core. In one sense, considering that much "resistance" during the soviet era took the form of oblique humor (Kenney 2002), Femen's play on 20th century protest icons⁷ and Ukrainian national symbols cuts against the grain of a solidified national identity. Put another way, approaching Femen as an avant-garde group that satirizes mass-entertainment (the line between art and protest being blurry) allows for a more global contextualization of their politics. Femen's art being anti-nationalist, anti-capitalist, and anti-hegemonic, their topless satire has set the precedent for copycat protests localized in urban centers as disparate as Detroit, London, Toronto, and Moscow.⁸

PMS: Post-Maidan Syndrome

While I was researching Femen this August, Yulia Tymoshenko, Ukraine's first female Prime Minister and popular leader of the Orange Revolution, was arrested for not "behaving in court." The arrest soon led to charges by President Yanukovich that Tymoshenko had brokered an underhanded gas deal with Putin during her time in office. Following statements issued by high-level officials in E.U. and U.S. diplomatic missions to Ukraine petitioning for more transparency in Ukraine's judicial process, I also watched as Femen caught the tailwind of Tymoshenko's press to further their own interpretation of the event. With characteristic timeliness and creativity, Anna Hutsol criticized the former Prime Minister's construction as a martyred opposition leader in a satirical open letter to the Ukrainian Ministry of Justice. The letter's ambiguous rhetoric diffuses support for Tymoshenko's "false" saintly image as a strategic position reinforced by Tymoshenko herself, the Ministry, the media, and the public.

Mockingly, Hutsol's letter offers Tymoshenko a job as a Femen activist with compensation commensurate with other activists: a low quality of life in a crumbling dorm room. The document concludes with the proclamation that a Lukyanivka prison cell would provide Tymoshenko with better care than a life of truly attempting to serve the public good. This clever twist on the letter's seemingly inviting tone rhetorically foregrounds Femen activists as public representatives, offset by the double exposure of Tymoshenko as the arch-villain of direct democracy. In line with popular sentiment, Hutsol's letter also implies that Tymoshenko is incapable of anything more than agitprop, and it is therefore a stark reply to the west's coverage of the trial as the persecution of a pre-existing liberal order in Ukraine.

Hutsol's conflicting characterization of Tymoshenko was instantly posted on websites throughout the world and commented on by users within a day of the trial's commencement. Femen's critical response to the trial, coupled with the range and speed of the letter's transmission to their global following, illustrates how the group has become a global conduit for information about Ukrainian politics for audiences seeking a perspective outside mainstream channels. For thousands of their followers, Femen has become a recognized source for reports on Ukrainian life and culture, even in cases where the issues at hand may not always directly relate to the struggle for women's rights. Not coincidentally, three weeks into Tymoshenko's trial, two of Femen's members landed in the same prison complex as Tymoshenko herself. The group had been indicted on Independence Day after protesting "censorship" by scything a large flowerbed on official state property.

Observing all of this up close, I revisited the questions I saw poorly answered in western media: is Femen really a post-orange phenomenon? Do they constitute some identifiable form of resistance? While I am still not entirely sure how to answer these questions, I feel the need to advocate for alternate approaches to them, approaches that go beyond conventional understandings of protest as a means to an end. Perhaps in the case of Femen, the crucial power struggle at stake here cannot be articulated within a typology of resistance, but in understanding the modes in which they elude and stoke debate in the interest of retaining their following.

In recent months, the group has turned more and more of its attention toward alleviating social apathy and stagnation. Hutsol explains this new direction as her response to the ways she thinks complacency weakens society and blinds women by subjugating their interests to nation-building projects. Her latest endeavor consists of an abridged reality t.v. series of short videos called "PMS: Post-Maidan Syndrome" (Livejournal August 18, 2011). As the name suggests, the videos lampoon national anxieties surrounding the Orange Revolution via anxieties about sex. Each video features Femen's leading star activist, Oleksandra Shevchenko, as she provokes random passersby in Kyiv to undress "for their country." The series includes men and women of all ages, but features a fully-clothed Shevchenko in the central role: a celebrity smiling at every moment, even when some of her subjects angrily yell at her for having "prostituted" herself in the name of false values. Femen's street actions in these videos extend their virtual satire into a representation of real life, providing a meta-analysis in which more "traditional" resistance strategies (i.e. social mobilization via marches, petitions, etc.) are discarded for the theatrical, suspended play on their audiences' expectations that has made Femen famous. In order to maximize their opportunities to generate satire through scandal, Femen times and shapes their protest-performances with key junctures in the development of Ukrainian national identity. In doing so, they draw out the uncomfortable contradictions in attempting to come to terms with a simultaneously post-colonial and post-revolutionary past.

Despite the many social stigmas that surround feminism in the Ukrainian context, Anna Hutsol has now amassed an arsenal of social capital with which she is able simultaneously to advocate for human rights and seemingly irrelevant statements with equal ardor. Perhaps this ability to retain a constituency is her greatest political achievement to date.⁹ And, while Femen's unorthodox tactics may unwittingly bar them from co-operating with other groups, including some LGBTQ activists who see Femen as a distraction, their intervention in gender activism cannot be ignored. Although rushing to label Femen "feminist" right away as many media outlets have done—or to reject them outright—would seem to conform to our instincts as feminist thinkers, I think this approach undercuts the more interesting nuances of their story. Perhaps we have a lot left to learn from Femen as their movement changes and they learn from themselves; continuing to embed their words, their images, and their bodies in history.

In conclusion, observing the development of different strands of feminisms in Ukraine, some pressing questions with much broader implications remain. Has the divide between the academy and grassroots initiatives become greater than the divide between nations in dialogue about women? How well does building iconicity around a social issue translate that issue to a mass audience? Are there limits to the performativity of politics, and at which point might the form of a campaign overtake its content? By what ethical standards and negotiations do we attest to the term feminism and is there room for Femen?

In the coming years, I plan to grapple with and build upon these questions, keeping Femen at the forefront of my investigation into feminist discourse and the implications that arise when considering them as a performance group with a political constituency. In the relatively short term, I intend to visit Ukraine next March (2012) to observe how Femen and other groups like "Ofenzywa" mobilize around March 8th, International Women's Day. Luck and funds withstanding, I also hope to spend a more extended period of time in Kyiv next year interacting with, documenting, and observing Femen's actions as they unfold. With an eye turned toward Ukraine's global context, my ultimate aim is to help sustain a conversation about feminism through the prism of activism that spans both academic disciplines and international borders.

¹ "Ofenzywa," a feminist organization with close ties to Kyiv-Mohiyla Academy, was founded in 2011 partly toward the reinvigoration of March 8th as a political movement. "Insight," also based in Kyiv, was founded in 2008 and focuses on sexuality, gender, and transgender education and stigma-reduction projects.

² Olga Plakhotnik and Maria Mayerchyk at the Kharkiv Center for Gender Studies characterized Femen's outdoor protests as both an extension of street activism during the Orange Revolution and an interrogation of the public/private divide in gendered thinking.

³ Angelina Diash joined Femen in 2010. See Starr (2010).

⁴ The online body art campaign features a contest in which viewers may vote for their favorite pair of painted breasts from a set of photographs of Femen's activists.

⁵ While her ambivalent response to the term feminism might also be read as post-feminist, given the unique history of feminism under socialism, it may be more accurate to consider Hutsol's response as an attempt to highlight her generation's particular challenge in reclaiming the idea.

⁶ Anna Hutsol has openly claimed that Femen will register as a party in the 2012 elections, although in my recent interview with her she stated that a “lack of funds” may prevent them from doing so (August 22, 2011).

⁷ Oleksandra Shevchenko and two other activists were featured on the cover of a men’s magazine in underwear boasting the icon from the Rolling Stones’ Forty Licks tour. The trio posed in a stance identical to the Black Panthers’ 1972 Olympic salute. The costume for most of Femen’s protests—a traditional Ukrainian flower headdress (vinnichuk) alongside torn jeans, ratty t-shirts, and peace signs—juxtaposes an old symbol of maidenhood with the unbound energy of a “wild child” of the 1960s to challenge, revise, and revive the Ukrainian national idea.

⁸ A Russian version of Femen sprang up in early 2011, but was publicly denounced by Anna Hutsol as a right-wing puppet movement in support of Putin with no connection to her own group. The Russian art group “Voyna” has been compared to Femen in their artistic approach to politics; however, the Ukrainian group “Hudrada” might be a closer analog. The new international phenomenon of “Slutwalks” also adopts a performative aesthetic-protest in which participants dress in revealing clothing to protest against explaining rape through a woman’s appearance. These marches began on April 3, 2011 in Toronto, Canada and have spread throughout the world.

⁹ Olga Plakhotnik and Maria Mayerchuk have aptly noted that for Femen, “A successful protest is a popular protest” (Mayerchuk and Plakhotnik 2010).

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