

Zychowicz, Jessica. *Superfluous Women: Art, Feminism, and Revolution in Twenty-First-Century Ukraine*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. Illustrations. 424 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4875-0168-6.

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In 1991, Ukraine gained independence after the fall of the Soviet Union. What followed were two revolutions: The Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Maidan Revolution of Dignity in 2014. Focusing on the young generation of post-Soviet art-activists “who actively resisted the unravelling of the reforms promised during the Orange Revolution by protesting where they believed the state viewed their particular interests to be dispensable” (5), scholar Jessica Zychowicz’s *Superfluous Women: Art, Feminism, and Revolution in Twenty-First Century Ukraine* considers the politics of the body during and after Ukraine’s protest movements. This aim is reflected in the book’s title, *Superfluous Women*, which is derived from author Ivan Turgenev’s “superfluous man.” Zychowicz states, “The title of this book is an ironic reference to the common sidelining of women’s needs and experiences evident throughout periods of uncertainty, including postcommunism” (4).

From the outset, Zychowicz sets an enormous task for herself, piecing together methodologies from multiple disciplines including “history, anthropology, literature, and art criticism” (7). The author utilizes self-conducted interviews as well as her own photographs to compile an array of original material that collectively spans over “...fifteen years of studying and traveling to Ukraine, and over eight years of research on this specific project” (22). The author also incorporates postcolonial theory throughout the book, placing gender and sexuality as a stand in for postcoloniality and human rights more broadly. The use of postcolonial feminism stands to critique “intersections of nation and gender” (42), in consideration of the legacy of institutional injustices embedded within the post-Soviet state as a site of postcolonialism.

Interpreted through a close reading of artists, art organizations, and arts collectives, *Superfluous Women* is linked by several key intersecting concepts including post-Sovietness, nostalgia, and commodity exchange. The author places focus on the Ukrainian feminist-activists group Femen (chapters 1 and 2) and Ofenzywa (chapter 3); curatorial collectives; HudRada and REP

(Revolutionary and Experimental Space) (chapter 4), the Visual Culture Research Center (VCRC), artists Alevtyna Kakhidze and Vlada Ralko, and artworks responding to statues of Lenin in public spaces (chapter 5).

“Young people in Ukraine do not remember the fall of the Soviet Union. Neither do I” (3). In her opening line, Zychowicz points to the difficulty of the past’s relationship with the present. The past is something unknown, yet familiar; an inherited thing one is left to contend with. The author also reveals her own position and proximity to the material, as she counts herself among the young generation. Self-identification can prove complicated and uneasy, producing moments when the author’s intimacy with the material reads as uncritical. However, personal recollection occasionally proves to be a welcomed addition, demonstrating the solidarity the author shares with the art-activists whose work she describes.

While the author builds on an impressive collection of source material, there is a sense of discontinuity that leaves the reader to infer their own connections between the comparative cases. An example comes from the first chapter in which the author aims to “provide a better context for understanding these protest-performance scripts” (15), placing Femen within the lineage of performance by drawing parallels between the group and “happenings” (absurdist performances popular throughout the 1960s and ‘70s) in the United States, Poland, and Ukraine. Considering the number of avant-garde groups that used similar absurdist tactics and the author’s frequent reference to this period, the incorporation of happenings is opaque.

Despite this, Zychowicz makes a compelling argument regarding Femen’s commercial strategies with relation to their anti-sex tourism message, extrapolating on the role media plays. Homing in on the virtual nature of Femen’s performances and considering their relationship with commodity exchange in a transnational context, she uses a comparative method to discuss Pussy Riot, a feminist activist group who Zychowicz suggests are comparable to Femen in their protest-activist-performance approach. This juxtaposition generated several insightful observations about the “corporatization” of feminist protests, particularly with regards to how Femen’s nudity rendered them both idiosyncratic and unviable in an international market. The author concludes that “...audiences worldwide were more willing to accept the corporatization of feminist protest in the case of Pussy Riot members who fed into the neoliberal sale of their brand, whereas Femen’s

performance of nudity simply could not be assimilated into the capitalist marketplace in the same way” (83).

A dominant discourse throughout *Superfluous Women* is post-Soviet nostalgia, in which the Soviet past is at times depicted as distinct from the present and, at others, portrayed as being one and the same. The slippages between the shared identity between post-Soviet and Soviet are evident in Zychowicz’s analyses of two projects by photographer and former Ofenzywa member, Yevgenia Belorusets. These include a photo series (*32 Gogol St*) and exhibition (*A Space One’s Own*, 2018), with artworks and manifestos from the Soviet avant-garde, demonstrating how the artist refashioned avant-garde strategies to critique nostalgic post-Sovietness. The characterization of nostalgia, however, proves to be limited in its lack of engagement with diverse source material, omitting the possibility for a more nuanced interpretation.

The two final chapters describe a state in perpetual transition, underscored by the implication that Ukraine is unable to move past its own historical condition; a state in suspension. Chapter four centers on two curatorial collectives; HudRada and REP (Revolutionary and Experimental Space), both of which question institutional frameworks, challenging official state culture and censorship. This chapter proves productive in demonstrating how biopolitics disrupt institutional parameters, neatly tying in with previous chapters and expanding on the body as a locus for dissent.

The final chapter describes artistic production in the post-revolutionary period. Tracing the work of the Visual Culture Research Center (VCRC), artists Alevtyna Kakhidze and Vlada Ralko, and artworks responding to statues of Lenin in public spaces, this chapter expands on the previous ones in its consideration of how artists and art organizations grapple with their inherited Soviet history.

The expansiveness of the material makes *Superfluous Women* a great resource for a less-informed reader interested in an overview of art and protest in Ukraine. The book is thoroughly researched, as the author’s long-standing work with the material shines through. Zychowicz does an excellent job defining the complicated nature of the term *feminism* in Ukraine, underlining the fluidity of terminology across borders. *Superfluous Women* contributes an original cache of original source material and challenges a solely Ukrainian context by demonstrating the tension between the local and the international, both bold and productive contributions to the field of Slavic studies.