

## [Razor on Zychowicz, 'Superfluous Women: Art, Feminism, and Revolution in Twenty-First-Century Ukraine'](#)

Review published on Friday, April 30, 2021

**Jessica Zychowicz.** *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.

**Reviewed by** Sasha Razor (Museum of Russian Culture, San Francisco) **Published on** H-SHERA (April, 2021) **Commissioned by** Hanna Chuchvaha (University of Calgary)

**Printable Version:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=56079>

Jessica Zychowicz's *Superfluous Women: Art, Feminism, and Revolution in Twenty-First Century Ukraine* is dedicated to the work of Ukraine's young generation of artists and activists who became active on the arts scene in the period between the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity of 2014. The introduction states the project's central concern as showing "how protest becomes meaningful, particularly where aesthetic exchanges between activists and audiences rhetorically frame the body as an ideological site in public speech" (p. 7). "Superfluous women" here is an ironic allusion to "superfluous men," the term popularized by the nineteenth-century Russian prose writer Ivan Turgenev. Feminism is indeed the dominant theoretical approach informing this study. Its additional methodological frames include "literature by anthropologists and sociologists working on gender in postcommunism," as well as the author's participatory observations (p. 25).

Chapter 1, "Performing Protest: Sexual Dissent Reinvented," claims to "supply a local history of public dissent and [examine] parody in performances by Femen" (p. 21). Femen is a feminist collective founded in Ukraine in 2008, self-described on their website as "an international women's movement of brave topless female activists painted with the [sic] slogans and crowned with flowers." [1] In particular, the chapter features the author's interview with the group's founder, Anna Hutsol, reviews the existing literature on the group, and promises to contextualize Femen's performances on three intersecting planes: "as a wry retrospective or spectacle of the Orange Revolution; as a parody of the branding of the nation...; and as a pun on feminism itself" (pp. 31-32). These goals, however, get somewhat diffused by the multidirectional discussion of the various contexts of Femen's cultural production, with several sections advancing topics worthy of a separate monographic study, from Romanticism and Taras Shevchenko to Ukrainian pop culture. But the analysis itself does not scale to a nuanced contextualization of the group's place in Ukrainian cultural production of the past decade, while the extensive excursus into Alphonse Mucha's representations of women, the action from Pomarańczowa's *Alternatywa* in Wrocław, Poland, or Czech New Wave films seem extrinsic to the analysis of the group.

Chapter 2 comes closer to discussing the pivotal questions of Femen's work that a researcher familiar with the group might have by focusing on "representational strategies within these performances in the context of international mass media technologies" (p. 16). In particular, the chapter covers the group's relationship with the Russian feminist protest group Pussy Riot. It comes to the conclusion

that, unlike Pussy Riot, whose “trajectory was fueled by Western governments’ grievances around Putinism, Femen could not earn such credentials, arguably because their image contained more explicit references to Western patriarchy and hegemony,” while “the group’s aesthetics collapsed into a parody of their own activism” (p. 95). The chapter also covers the group’s critical reception in Ukraine and a theoretical contextualization of Femen’s work, rightfully mentioning Ukrainian scholars’ consensus on Femen as “carnavalesque performers without any local ties” (p. 120). Among other factors that influenced the group’s reception, the author mentions the group’s “false sense of universalism,” its particular, racist take on Islam, and the (mis)identification of women’s agency within Islam, while the audience finds itself opposed to “the same news scripts that the Femen sextremist image interpolates” (pp. 126, 98). All in all, the chapter advances a complex argument contextualizing Femen’s activism from an international perspective and challenging the group’s ethical frameworks.

Chapter 3 turns to work of a militant feminist group that originated within the Ukrainian academic milieu. Feminist Ofenzyva (Offensive) was founded by gender scholars from Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and Kharkiv University in 2010 and terminated its activity in 2014 on the grounds of “not wanting to be a part of the commercial institution of art and activism” (p. 189).[2] The next sixty-five pages are dedicated to a detailed discussion of Ofenzyva’s initiatives and a close reading of two major series of images by photographer and author Yevgenia Belorusets who was a member of Ofenzyva at the time but, curiously, does not indicate any affiliation with the group on her current website.[3] All in all, Zychowicz offers a valuable account of the existence of the rather marginal group whose online presence is limited to a WordPress website and a dozen articles in the press.[4] Her readings of Belorusets’s series are perceptive and nuanced, but the forty-something pages dedicated to their discussion seem somewhat excessive. Additionally, given Ofenzyva’s tendency to inscribe themselves in the cultural scene by using revolutionary narratives as a life-building strategy, the group’s legacy should be interpreted with a degree of caution.

Titled “Museum of Congresses: Biopolitics of the Self in Kyiv’s R.E.P. and HudRada Visual Art Collectives,” chapter 4 examines how these two major Ukrainian curatorial collectives experimented with “extra-judicial and unofficial contexts” while pushing “what one is permitted to say in order to extend what one is capable of imagining and speaking” (pp. 18, 240). Founded in 2004, R.E.P. (Revolutionary Experimental Space) is an art group well known outside Ukraine for representing the country at international exhibitions of contemporary art. Founded in 2009, HudRada (Arts Council) is a group of Ukrainian artists, activists, and intellectuals from all spheres of culture that currently counts nineteen members, including the above-mentioned Belorusets.[5] In particular, the chapter covers three exhibitions—*Ukrainian Body* (2012), *Draftsmen’s Congress* (2013) and its section titled *Disputed Territory* (2013), and *Great and Grand* (2013)—and discusses a number of artworks from 2000 to 2018. The close readings of art in this chapter offer a number of useful insights into how the Ukrainian art scene responded to the country’s political predicament, while the focus on body and biopolitics lends itself to a particularly productive discussion. At the same time, frequent digressions into twentieth-century intellectual history via shifting discursive and theoretical frames stymie rather than aid the reader’s effort. It can also be argued that the gender ratio of the artists discussed in this chapter—eight male artists versus two females—undermines the goal asserted in the book’s title.

The fifth and final chapter, “Bad Myth: Picturing Intergenerational Experiences of Revolution and War,” ponders how the inter-revolutionary generation responded to the war and political violence

following the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine. It focuses on the grand narratives about the war and the revolution that are “rooted in ideological myths that were invented and monopolized by the Soviet regime” but that are also informed by the myth of the dissident who “plays with the law of opposites dictating the internal logic of authoritarian states” (p. 247). The following three subchapters examine various facets of the post-2014 art narratives. “Urban Spaces as Medium for Aesthetic Experiment” discusses a biennial event called The School of Kyiv.[6] It looks at how this event documented the intergenerational reception of Soviet-era monuments, museums, and architecture. Another subchapter, “Nonconformist Women - an Unofficial Archive,” includes a discussion of Alevtina Kakhidze’s and Vlada Ralko’s artwork, while the last discussion of this chapter dwells on the function of Vladimir Lenin statues in the post-Maidan era. All in all, the chapter eloquently amplifies voices of the post-2004 generation of artists who are simultaneously processing the violent legacies of their time and the time before theirs and formulating the art frameworks of the future. The gender ratio of this chapter tilts in favor of women, featuring the work of five female artists in total.

It is also important to state that although the book opens a new discussion in the field of Ukrainian studies, it does not chart the post-2004 generation of Ukrainian political artists and activists in its entirety but rather launches the process sometimes described in scholarship by the preposition “toward.” The particular discussion pertaining to the generation appears as late as page 196, defining it as “artists who put themselves in confrontation with political authorities, sometimes endangering their bodies and/or their artwork in the process” in an “attempt to cut against the mass culture in Ukraine.” Given the book’s apparent focus on women, what remains generally unclear is how many women made political art between the revolutions and what works their corpus entails except for those addressed on its pages. Since art as a focus is also declared in the title, art historians might find the inclusion of two entire chapters on Femen, a group that is arguably external to the contemporary art scene in Ukraine, not entirely convincing. Finally, the last two chapters succeed in discussing major groups, exhibitions, and art events following the Orange Revolution but do not offer an overarching analysis of the broader intersections between revolution, art, and feminism. This is, however, understandable. Given the temporal proximity of the events in question, it might still be early for such analysis to emerge.

In the end, *Superfluous Women* is clearly a labor of empathy and solidarity with Ukrainians, and the inter-revolutionary generation in particular. As a path-blazing study on the topic, it should be valued as the result of a decade’s worth of intellectual production, which included numerous research trips and prolonged periods of work in the region, amassing an archive, as well as the work of cultural diplomacy, translating and representing Ukrainian artists and activists in the West. Eloquently written, the book also bears the genre memory of a travel diary, and the authorial digressions about Zychowicz’s personal experiences in the region were among my favorite moments as a reader. This unique feature of introducing the self to the narrative might even foreshadow future academic trends, because, after all, scholarship and activism are no longer foreign to each other, let alone antithetical. If anything, Zychowicz’s study resonates with the new pressing concerns in the field of the post-Soviet and East-Central European studies that will be responding to the regional threat of authoritarianism in the decade to come.

## Notes

[1]. “About Us,” FEMEN, <https://femen.org/about-us/> (accessed March 20, 2021).

[2]. Zychowicz transliterates the name as Ofenzywa, but the proper transliteration is Ofenzyva.

[3]. For more, see "About," Yevgenia Belorusets, <http://belorusets.com/info/about> (accessed March 20, 2021).

[4]. For more, see Feministychna Ofenzyva, <https://ofenzyva.wordpress.com/> (accessed March 20, 2021).

[5]. For more, see "About HudRada," Hudrada, <https://hudrada.tumblr.com/About%20Hudrada> (accessed March 20, 2021).

[6]. The School of Kyiv is an independent project organized in partnership with VCRC (Kyiv's Visual Culture Research Center) in 2015-16. For more, see The School of Kyiv, <http://theschoolofkyiv.org/> (accessed March 20, 2021).

**Citation:** Sasha Razor. Review of Zychowicz, Jessica, *Superfluous Women: Art, Feminism, and Revolution in Twenty-First-Century Ukraine*. H-SHERA, H-Net Reviews. April, 2021. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56079>

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