Seeing Flesh: Naked Body Protests and Gender Performance in Post-Soviet Ukraine

By Sarah Labahn

In attempt to understand the recent rise of naked body protests and its function in a post-Soviet public sphere, this paper explores the effectiveness of the use of naked body protests in highly politicized zones to bring about social and political change. By engaging in a literature review and drawing heavily from Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, I attempt to draw connections between how the body interacts in Ukraine's public and private sphere since the emergence of Femen in 2008. My research explores the ways in which deviant gender performances – such as the use of sextremism and hypersexualized acts in a hyper-masculine domain – have the ability to alter past meanings associated with the body. In such, the body becomes empowered through its own redefinition. Despite conflicting opinions about the effectiveness of this form of protest, this paper argues that Femen has successfully challenged conventional norms of femininity in the public sphere through its naked body protests by redefining the body as a political tool and as a site of liberation – thereby creating a space for politically active women in the traditionally masculine sphere of politics. The implications of this research provide insight into similar radical feminist movements that engage the body in overtly sexual and public ways. By understanding the body through Butler's theory of gender performance, these feminist movements can be critically understood as resistant, empowering, and liberating.

Key Terms: *Femen; Gender Performance; Naked Body Protest; Sextremism; Post-Soviet Ukraine*

In 2008, a group of young women founded a feminist topless protest group called Femen in response to the state of gender inequality that existed in Ukraine. These women have shown a new side of the breast. By analyzing Femen as a political protest group, this paper attempts to answer the following question: how effective is the use of naked body protest in highly politicized spheres to bring about social and political change in both post-conflict and conflict areas? In pursuing this research question, I will draw on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to analyze how naked body protests redefine the image of the female body in the public sphere as a political tool. Butler's theory of gender performativity argues that gender is socially constructed through various historical and cultural expectations that emphasize certain feminine and masculine traits as being acceptable. Using this theory, Femen's

sextremist tactics in bare breasted protests can be understood as a gender performance that defies traditional expectations of feminine bodily actions in the public sphere. I explore the protests strategies and images that Femen employs and how these protests have challenged conventional gender norms since 2008 and moving into the recent Euromaidan Revolution of 2013-14. During this revolution, an increase in women's participation in both supportive and combative roles demonstrates a shift away from traditional gender performances in conflict zones. Throughout this paper, I argue that Femen has successfully challenged conventional norms of femininity in the public sphere through its naked body protests by redefining the body as a political tool and as a site of liberation and choice.

The Emergence of Naked Body Protests

The exposure of women's naked bodies is nothing new. In fact, in Western capitalist societies, "scantly clothed or unclothed female bodies are commonly visible" on magazine covers, television shows, and in advertisements that become common in our day-to-day lives (Sutton 142). These images of naked or near-naked women are often sexualized and objectified to attract consumers and promote the consumption of products. The use of nudity in these instances places women on display (143). In contrast, the phenomenon of naked body protests that has recently grabbed media coverage can be understood very differently. Beginning largely in the twenty-first century, naked body protests have emerged as a new mode of feminist activism. Political activists use their bodies to dismantle the gender divide that has historically relegated the women's body to the private realm and bringing it into a highly political space that is traditionally dominated by men. In this way, the naked body can be examined "as a subject of political resistance and as an object of repression" (139). The naked or scantly clothed body is used to draw attention to female subordination through political opposition; rather than being put on display to be consumed, which perpetuates the patriarchal objectification of women's bodies, naked protests give women agency and autonomy. Through their acts, the personal – bare breasts – are made political (Butler 1988, 522). Further, the naked body is used to dismantle conventional ideas of femininity like vulnerability and passivity. By intentionally exposing women's breasts in politicized spaces, women can actually adopt values of the male naked body – virility, strength, and sexual agency (Sutton 143). One can look to examples of feminist activism like SlutWalk (O'Keefe 2014), Pussy Riot (Channell 2014, Bernstein 2013), and Femen (Channell 2014, O'Keefe 2014, Rubchak 2012, Zychowicz 2011) to further understand how sexualized protests can give women agency and autonomy in their actions. In all three of these movements, the female body is used to actively dismantle oppressive policies that have historically attempted to depoliticize the woman's body.

The SlutWalk movement developed after a police officer advised to the women present at a safety information session at York University that "if they wanted to stay safe they should avoid dressing like sluts" (O'Keefe 2). Enraged by this sexist comment, four Toronto women called upon their community to flaunt their "inner slut" and publicly denounce the officer's remark in a march that took place on April 3, 2011 with 3500 protesters present (2). Since this march, the SlutWalk movement has expanded internationally, drawing attention to rape culture, victim blaming, and patriarchal institutions that perpetuate this type of violence against women.

Pussy Riot uses similar political protest tactics in Russia to draw attention to the patriarchal nature of its current regime. Pussy Riot's feminism "is rooted in an understanding of global patriarchy"

which is embodied in Russia's current political regime under President Vladimir Putin and the lack of women's rights (Channell 612). Founded in 2011, one of their most famous protests came one year later when five women members walked into Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior, dressed in bright coloured sleeveless dresses, neon tights, and their signature balaclava ski masks to perform a punk song. The lyrics criticized "the close relations between the Russian Patriarch Kirill and President Vladimir Putin, and the Orthodox Church's conservative anti-woman and anti-LGBTQ rhetoric" (Bernstein 220). Through these highly politicized protests, the bodies of members of Pussy Riot become "vital sites for the enactment of sovereignty" (222). Pussy Riot uses sexualized language and bodies to dismantle the apolitical assumption of women's bodies.

Finally, looking at the Ukrainian founded activist group Femen, it is possible to draw similarities between both the performative protests of SlutWalk and Pussy Riot. Femen is perhaps the most radical of the three groups and has slowly become an international force to be reckoned with. Founded in 2008 by four women living in Kyiv, Zychowicz states that "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" (Zychowicz 215). Their main goal is to "undermine the fundamental institutes of patriarchy – dictatorship, sex-industry, and church" (*FEMEN*). Femen's ideology is sextremism which is defined on their website as "female sexuality rebelling against patriarchy and embodied in the extremal political direct action events" to deconstruct patriarchal understandings of female sexuality (*FEMEN*). Like both SlutWalk and Pussy Riot, Femen politicizes its members through sexualized and provocative protests to call upon the institutions that perpetuate patriarchal subordination of women.

Looking briefly at the protests tactics of SlutWalk, Pussy Riot, and Femen, it is clear that the body has become a highly politicized locale that is used to draw attention to patriarchal institutions and practices that continue to subordinate women. Although I will only be focusing on Femen as a case study throughout this paper, naked body protests are proving to be a controversial and highly mediatized mode of resistance internationally. In this light, it is important to consider why nakedness – although not a new phenomenon – becomes less accepted when it is employed as a means of social and political resistance. Unsurprisingly, naked body protest is controversial and is seen by some as feminist and by others as anti-feminist.

Naked body protests can be best theorized using Butler's gender performativity. According to Butler (1988, 1990), "gender is in no way a stable identity" but is socially constructed through different historical and cultural understandings of gender and what it means to perform femininity and masculinity according to these expectations (Butler 1988, 519). Through the repetitive "bodily gestures, movements, and enactments," gender performance either conforms to gender norms or defies these norms (519). The use of naked body protests challenges traditional understandings that place women in a subordinate position to men in the private sphere and ultimately restrict their participation in the public arena. On the one side of the debate, scholars like Zychowicz (2011) and O'Keefe (2014) understand these performances as conforming to patriarchal norms of femininity. O'Keefe states that these performances indicate "the uncritical embodiment of hegemonic, heteronormative corporealities that are unquestionably rooted within patriarchal and capitalist values" (O'Keefe 5). From this perspective, women's bodies – the majority of Femen activists are slim, fit, attractive, and sexualized – are

simultaneously depoliticized while reinforcing the female body as a site of objectification rather than of agency and autonomy. Femininity remains rooted in sexualized and patriarchal norms and the actors become the objects for male gaze rather than subjects of their political aims. These scholars see naked body protests as reinforcing gender norms. On the other side of the debate, the hypersexualized female body in a masculine sphere calls into question broader historical issues like women's inequality in attempt to dismantle the structures that support sexism. While it is true that the body is gazed upon by an audience, the body is seen as a political tool because of its nuanced relationship in the public sphere. It is their performance that politicizes their bodies. By engaging with this theory, I argue that Femen's protests can be characterized as political feminist movements because of their ability to disrupt traditional gender expectations.

Dismantling Private/Public Divide in Post-Soviet Ukraine

Politicizing the personal is achieved in two ways: first by dismantling gender binaries that relegate women to the private sphere and men to the public; and second by taking these broken binaries and feminizing the public sphere. Butler argues that "the body is understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities" (Butler 1988, 521). This quotation suggests that gender performance is based on particular gender expectations that vary across time and place. Historically, women's feminine characteristics like being caring, nurturing, weak, and passive, relegated her to the duties of the private sphere. On the other hand, with masculine characteristics like being aggressive, strong, protective, and active, men were relegated to roles in the public sphere. This dichotomy assumes that an individual's sex is indicative of their gender role. Looking at gender in Ukraine, it is important to understand how gender equality has changed overtime. During the Soviet period, all women officially had equal rights and were granted equal access to employment and education. However, in post-Soviet Ukraine (Ukraine's independence came in 1991), gender inequality became a widespread issue and women's access to equal opportunities in employment and education was limited (Kozloff).

Ukraine became an independent state on August 24, 1991 with the signing of the Act of Declaration of Independence Ukraine. For many people, independence was celebrated, but for women, the time to celebrate did not come for many years later. Along with the state's newfound independence, widespread corruption and numerous cases of abuse created an environment unfit for women's participation in the political sphere (Rubchak 57). And despite the enactment of multiple laws like the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Law on Equal Rights and Opportunities both signed in 2001, state and family violence littered across the country (60). It was not until the Law on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men that was introduced and later enforced in January 2006 that gender inequality was finally recognized. This was the first time in Ukrainian history that a legal definition of discrimination based on sex had been introduced – although its "implementation remains elusive" (Rubchak 60).

When four young girls created a feminist protest group in 2008, it was in response to the state of gender inequality that persisted throughout Ukraine. Femen is said to have come together "in an attempt to counter the lack of women activists in Ukrainian society, and what they saw as the passive role often assumed by women" (O'Keefe 9). At this time, Femen addressed issues such as sex-tourism,

prostitution, and women's rights but moving into 2010, their protests became more provocative through topless rallies covering a wider range of political issues (Arhipenko 2). In her article "Reconsidering the Conventional Private/Public Dichotomy: Examining the Femen Movement through the Arendtian Lens of the Social," Viktoriya Arkhipenko argues that Femen's scandalous and provocative protests disrupts the patriarchal divide that has historically relegated women to the private sphere and men to the public based on an individual's assumed feminine and masculine characteristics. By entering into the public sphere as formerly private actors, Femen has successfully feminized the public through their ongoing gender performances. By bringing the intimate body into the public sphere, Femen simultaneously dismantles the dichotomy between private and public and also creates a new feminized space within an old masculine space.

The Drag of Sextremism

In many ways, Femen's theatrical protests can be related to the performances of drag. Butler suggests that drag "plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed" (Butler 1990, 137). Although the majority of the members in Femen are women and they are performing as hyper-feminized and hypersexualized subjects, they are acting in a masculine sphere of protest, which, much like drag, alters particular understandings and expectations associated with gender. O'Keefe describes the women of Femen as:

The public face of Femen consists of roughly forty topless activists who resemble high-fashion models in appearance – mostly white, with long blonde hair, able-bodied, conventionally attractive, with striking facial features and toned, slender, hairless bodies that make them statuesque figures (O'Keefe 8).

She continues to write:

These theatrical topless protests, which they brand as 'sextremism,' often include women who are heavily made up, wearing bright red lipstick, and if their bottoms and genitals are clothed it is often in fishnets, hot pants or shorts that go below the pubic bone. High heels and other clothing associated with sexual appeal is also common adornment (O'Keefe 9).

These two descriptions match the image of an ideal female body in a patriarchal society. Much like drag, which is a man or woman dressing as the opposite sex to perform an alternative gender identity, Femen activists are performing an alternative form of gender identity as well. Through this act, "women's enacting nakedness on their own terms and for their own political ends may disrupt dominant notions that depict women's bodies as passive, powerless, or as sexual objects for sale" (Sutton 145). Females performing as females demonstrate a recognition of what the ideal image of femininity is perceived to look like, but they are parodying this image through the politicization of their bodies. In this manner, women's bodies become active, empowered, and subjects to be consumed critically.

More than their bodies alone, the symbols and tactics that Femen engages with are crucial to their brand. The flower crown is worn as a symbol of femininity and proud insubmission: a crown of heroism. The body markings are considered "the truth delivered by the body by means of nudity and the

meanings inscribed on it.” The Cyrillic letter ф is the shape similar to women’s breasts that are the key symbol of the Femen movement (*FEMEN*). The slogan “My Body Is My Weapon!” along with their sextremist tactics, Femen has been dragged through the streets of Ukraine, quite literally. Their website states that their protests are an...

...Unsanctioned format of the sextremism events represents the historical right of woman to make her protest anywhere at any time and not to concern her action with the patriarchal law-enforcing structures. ... Sextremism is a non-violence but highly aggressive form of provocation; it is an all-powerful demoralizing weapon undermining the foundations of the old political ethics and rotten patriarchal culture (*FEMEN*).

Sextremism, then, can be understood as a provocative form of protest that attempts to capture the gaze of a public audience. Although these protests are considered non-violent, the aggressive nature of the protests themselves is extremely masculine. Butler states that “the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction” (Butler 1990, 141). This suggests that the failure to abide by traditional gender norms is what transforms the meaning of gender. As discussed above, gender is being performed on a day-to-day basis according to cultural and historical understandings of what gender *should* look like. But when gender performances are de-formed, re-shaped, and then repeated, these norms start to break down. Femen uses hypersexualized images which conform to the heteronormative ideal woman and places them in a hyper-masculinized political sphere. Indeed, the personal becomes political (Butler 1988, 522). Moving forward, I will discuss how Femen’s ideology and images have created a new space for the participation of women in the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution.

“Women on the Maidan Don’t Just Make Sandwiches”

Femen played a significant role during the Euromaidan Revolution including multiple protests that took place all across Ukraine as well as on an international platform. Many of which became highly theatrical in their protests against Russian President Vladimir Putin’s occupation of Crimea and the bloodshed he was accused of causing. The events of Euromaidan took place from November 21, 2013 to February 22, 2014 “in efforts to oust the corrupt and discredited president Viktor Yanukovich and his administration” (Phillips 415) and continued to unravel into the Crimean Crisis later in 2014. Demonstrations and civil unrest began in Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kyiv (which translates into Independence Square) demanding the resignation of President Yanukovich as well as closer integration with the European Union. Topics of corruption, the abuse of state power, and human rights violations all fueled the protests. And rest assured, Femen played a role in these protests by painting “STOP PUTIN’S WAR” in black across their chests, by pouring red wine of their chests to signify the loss of Ukrainian lives at the hands of Putin, and also protesting against Yanukovich’s administration. However, more than just Femen’s role on Euromaidan, masses of clothed women filled the square.

Women’s role in the public sphere continued to expand along with the highly political Femen protests. I maintain that Femen’s gender performances have transformed the political arena to a space that is more accepting of women’s participation. Many scholars and journalists have pointed to the

masses of women who lined the streets of Kyiv during the Euromaidan Revolution. More than being a protest against corruption, Phillips states that it became a “space for citizens to negotiate new strategies for articulation of rights” – particularly in the case of women’s rights (Phillips 415). Phillips describes the conflict in the following light:

Maidanivtsi (Maidaners) hailed from all sectors of society, all age groups, and all political affiliations – elderly and children, urban and rural, among them leftists, feminists, nationalists, and LGBT activists. Maidan was (among other things) a protest against corruption, the mind-boggling scale of self-enrichment of the political elite, widespread societal anomic, and, later, police violence (415).

Throughout her article, Phillips maintains that Euromaidan created a new space for women’s participation, expanding women’s role in the public sphere alongside men in conflict. This is a stark change to women’s roles in past conflict like the Orange Revolution¹ (November 2004-January 2005) when women performed a supportive role because of their understanding of gender in post-Soviet Ukraine. Not only was protest considered “ineffective” and “counterintuitive” to women’s groups at this time (Hrycak 215), but their domestic role took priority because for the fathers, husbands, and sons who protested during the Orange Revolution; “they needed to be fed, they needed to be kept clean, and they needed a change of clothes” (216). Since this time, Femen’s radical protest tactics and the politicization of the personal has transformed conflict zones like Euromaidan into a sphere for men and women. No longer do women feel the need to only occupy a supportive role.

During conflict, men are typically the ones occupying more active and public roles including protesting, fighting, and killing. In contrast, women traditionally occupy more supportive and domestic roles like caring for children or their husbands in the private realm. Much like Femen’s progress in dismantling these two spheres both during and outside of conflict, the participation of women on the Maidan transformed gender roles. Like Femen, these women “violate the boundary between the traditionally male space of the street and female world of the household” (Arkhipenko 5). Although women continued to occupy supportive roles in the private sphere and many times “were not regarded as complete, responsible persons, whereas a man, even a minor, may decide to risk injury or death for the sake of the homeland” (Phillips 416), women “donned gas masks, helmets, padded vests and camouflage jackets while fighting alongside men. In addition, women even prepared Molotov cocktails and brought them to the front lines. What is more, a women’s brigade trained women in self-defence tactics” (Kozloff). Women cheered out: “Women on the Maidan don’t just make sandwiches, they also build barricades. Glory to the Heroes!” and “Today we are shouting that Yanukovych is not just evil, he’s a very specific evil, which we call patriarchy. We are inviting all of you, men and women... to protest not just Yanukovych but the evil system that he represents. So we say Down with Yanukovych! Down with

¹ The Orange Revolution began in the fall of 2004 when more than twenty percent of the adult Ukrainian population protested against election fraud that occurred during that year’s presidential elections. The revolution emerged when authorities under the Leonid Kuchma presidency (1994-2005) attempted to steal the election despite the fact that the polls demonstrated strong support for the leader of the opposition and former prime minister, Viktor Yushchenko. In attempt to keep Yushchenko out of the presidential office however, Kuchma hand-picked Yanukovych as his successor. In response to this outright state corruption, citizens brought to the streets sporting orange – the colour of Yushchenko’s campaign – to resist the dirty election. However, during this conflict, the role of women was extremely limited despite an increase in women’s organizations devoted since Ukraine’s independence in 1991. See Hrycak 2009.

Patriarchy!” (Phillips 416). From the images and descriptions of women on the square to the topics and language that they engaged with, both these examples demonstrate the underlying purpose for women’s participation in the violent events, proving that women challenged gender stereotypes in overtly visible and performative ways.

The appearance between members of Femen and their radical bare-breasts protests is shockingly different from the images of the full-clothed and armoured mothers and daughters of Euromaidan². This being said, their roles were not so different from one another. Both groups of women protested against the corruption and abuse of state power that was evident within Yanukovych’s administration. Both groups of women stood for the advancement of women’s rights in the future state of Ukraine. Both groups of women performed in a traditionally masculine and political sphere, holding their own weight and marking their place in the events of the revolution. Importantly, women’s participation during Euromaidan has changed the role of women during conflict in Ukraine.

Going Topless for Equality

Throughout this paper I have discussed the ways in which Femen has dismantled gender stereotypes and the dichotomy between private and public spheres through their bare-breasted protests. Nakedness in the public sphere gives women the ability to reclaim the female body as an active figure and to challenge the authority of patriarchal boundaries that once restricted these bodies (Sutton 146). Although women’s equality existed during the Soviet era, Ukraine’s shift to independence eliminated past opportunities that were once granted to women. Despite some improvements during the mid-2000s with legislative changes, the implementation of these legislations remained inadequate to many degrees. As a result, Femen emerged out of a need to dismantle traditional gender roles that limited women’s opportunities and to feminize an otherwise masculine public sphere. By engaging with Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, Femen’s theatrical protests illustrate the importance of bare breasted protest and women’s participation during conflicts like the Euromaidan Revolution. Women’s participation during the events of Euromaidan, demonstrate how traditional gender roles in times of conflict have shifted over time in Ukraine.

O’Keefe notes that “the gendered body in protest can be used to manipulate, challenge and seize the power that seeks to confine and define it” (O’Keefe 4). By exposing new dimensions of the female body, Femen has manipulated and challenged patriarchal norms that once governed it. And, as mentioned earlier, other feminist protest groups like Pussy Riot and SlutWalk are also engaging the female body with alternative understandings of gender performance and gender identity. Returning to Butler’s theory, she states that “there are political acts which are deliberate and instrumental actions of political organizing, resistance collective intervention with the broad aim of instating a more just set of social and political relations” (Butler 1988 523). In this vein, naked body and other bodily based protests become politicized in their acts with the broad aim of instating a more just society. For Pussy Riot, this just society challenges political institutions that reinforce patriarchal structures; for SlutWalk, this just society similarly challenges state institutions that place blame on victims without warrant; and for Femen, a just society is the dismantling of dictatorship, patriarchy, and sexism. While there has been little evidence to suggest these performances have brought about radical legislative changes, they have

² See Images in Appendix

reengaged women to participate more actively in the public sphere and become subjects of their political goals.

Exposing the influence of bare-breasted protests beyond Ukraine, Femen serves as an interesting case study to examine because their protests are so controversial and can be applied to many different societies and the ways in which nakedness is consumed. In popular culture, it is clear that bare breasts, busts, nipples, and cleavage are not offensive when displayed across large billboards and mounted on the side of busses. However, once these breasts become deliberate politicized locales that provoke critical thought rather than images for pleasurable consumption, their desirability is literally stripped away. Femen's breasts are deemed offensive because of the political message that is written across them; the space in which they are occupying; the gender norms that they are dismantling. And by making people flinch or double take, it is clear that their gender performances and gender resistance are working. While many argue that their bare-breasted protests are replicating patriarchal images of women and ultimately, what men want to see, I argue that their bodies are successfully used as political tools to deliberately bring what is traditionally considered private and intimate into the public. Femen has successfully done this by de-forming, re-shaping, and repeating their new gender performances. In such, the exposed body has slowly redefined itself as a resistant, empowered, and liberated site of protest.

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Appendix

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