

Presenter: Jessica Zychowicz

Title: “Vox Populi or Meme? Femen’s Critical Reception in Kyiv”

Abstract:

This paper is based on four years of ongoing fieldwork and research into feminist activism and performance in contemporary Ukraine by several groups of activists, scholars, artists, and curators, including original interviews over time with founding members of the protest group Femen. The group’s relocation abroad to Paris in 2012 coincided with both a subsequent shift to an almost entirely virtual format and their reinventing of themselves through an aesthetic they call “sextremism.” Zeroing in on Femen’s critical reception by other activists and audiences in Kyiv, I trace how this shift continued to impact debates tied to gender and women’s rights in Ukraine in the final years of the oppressive Yanukovych regime. Arguing that Femen’s early performances utilized the empty rhetoric of utopianism in allegories of the Ukrainian state to point out its anachronisms, and its failures, in protecting the basic right to self-expression, I show how their later shift to radicalism derives from their virtual form. Where the discourses that control citizen’s bodies (biopolitics) in realtime take different forms online, Femen’s staged dystopias illustrate how violence is enacted upon the female body through grand narratives that hide gender disparity by ignoring embodied experience. Where Femen’s controversial tactics emerged from a gap between populism and the rhetoric of the state, their circulation abroad has evolved into a fierce debate on the (mis)translation of feminism, with feminism itself standing in for a range of issues. My analysis of Femen’s format and reception contributes to a wider body of work on gender and cultural commodity in political and aesthetic theory by Nancy Fraser and others (Chantal Mouffe, Piotr Piotrowski, Clare Bishop), while bringing that scholarship into conversation with previous writing on feminism in postcommunist Ukraine by scholars Oksana Kis, Tamara Martsenyuk, Vitaly Chernetsky, and anthropologists Sarah Phillips and Alexandra Hrycak.