

I Provoke Therefore I Am: Cross-Border Mediatizations of Femen’s “Sextremist” Protest

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This article analyzes the (re)mediations of one of the pivotal protest events of the topless female activist group Femen in Ukraine, Russia, France, and The Netherlands. We examine how the cutting down of a crucifix in downtown Kiev in 2012 by Femen became an image event and put the group on the map globally, promoting a new style of affective female activism. Providing a slightly revised version of Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory, we propose to study image events through rupture-connection-transformation processes. We examine how this image event of Femen traversed political, cultural, and ideological borders, creating a swarm of contrasting responses and transformations. Through close audio and visual analysis of networked digital artifacts, we argue that Femen ignites debates around taboo topics, creates new divisions, and bridges old divides.

Keywords: Femen, Actor-Network Theory, image events, affect, bodies.

Globally, transgressing norms and barriers of mundane digital spaces to seize the spotlight in the name of social change is gaining pertinence in the light of heightened populism, divisiveness, and reinforced borderlines. Via creative protest practices, from the #UnVioladorEnTuCamino (the rapist in your path) flesh mob song-dance (Pais, 2019) to statues wearing air masks in Chengdu, China, protesting air pollution (Brunner & DeLuca, 2019), activists are forcing us to rethink the ways in which we study activism. Modern-day activists use a special mix of skills, tactics, and resourcefulness to become forces of disruption in the spectacular seas of image-whirls, soundwaves, and incredible storyscapes in which we live.

We argue that new forms of social change have moved from rational, prolonged, concentrated actions toward transgressive bursts of protest made far-reaching through dispersed images, social media interactions, and affective drives. Inspired by the multiverses of mediatization, we offer to study social change through the processes of rupture, connection, and transformation. In this theoretical intervention, we reinterpret Bruno Latour’s (1993, 2005) Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and apply it to the concept of

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image events (DeLuca, 1999a). We provide an extended illustration of this theoretical framework through a case study of Femen, a topless female activist group that originated in Ukraine.

We are not the first to have the epiphany that Femen is an “ideal case for understanding how body rhetorics operate at multiple levels to shape social movement actions” (Chevrette & Hess, 2019, p. 417). Web searches for “Femen” yield colorful and controversial results depicting young, beautiful, topless, determined women, wearing flower wreaths, screaming, and showing bare torsos with written slogans: “Naked War,” “No Religion,” “Viva Topless Jihad,” “Guilty To Be a Woman,” “Justice Against Rapists,” “Obscene Because of You,” “Fuck Dictator,” and “In Gay We Trust,” among others.

Over the past years, several full-length documentary films have been released, books have been written, and scholarly articles have been published, all trying to explain the Femen phenomenon. Scholars have studied Femen protests as acts of feminist translation (Valente, 2015), imperialist feminism (Colpean, 2020; Ivey, 2015), empowering objectification (Weiner, 2017), and a problematic and ignorant interface between third-wave and postfeminism (O’Keefe, 2014). One scholar, Roberta Chevrette (Chevrette & Hess, 2019), even embedded herself among the Femen activists in Paris and participated in a topless protest. Chevrette and Hess (2019) provide a fascinating behind-the-scenes analysis of Femen through the participatory critical rhetoric framework. They make a fascinating case for the rhetorics of “powerful vulnerability” and “embodied solidarity” (Chevrette & Hess, 2019, p. 427).

The group has garnered growing international scholarly interest. Núñez Puente (2018) analyzed Femen in the current Spanish political context with counterhegemonic modes of representation and “awkward politics” (p. 118). Veneracion-Rallonza (2014) looks at the group from the perspectives of Philippines and India, juxtaposing it with Meira Paibis antirape protests. A UNESCO affiliate scholar, Hofmann (2019), published a side-by-side study of Femen and another France-based women’s group protesting with fake beards, who called themselves La Barbe. She argues that both groups showcase “transformative learning” and suggests that “imaged performance” has a substantial potential for feminist empowerment (pp. 73–74).

A more somber assessment of Femen as White feminism feeling its limits and compelled to resort to “pornocratic” activism for hire come from scholars of the Middle East and South Africa, such as Al-Kassim (2018, p. 127). Meanwhile, Morris (2018) suggests that Femen is deterritorializing femininity through Deleuzoguattarian and becoming animalistic. The list of intriguing scholarly studies of the controversial group continues in line with an anthropocentric focus and includes perspectives of corporeality and culture (Khrebtan-Hörhager & Kononenko, 2015), morality (Zychowicz, 2011), religion and ethics (Al-Mahadin, 2015), and mediatized activism (Reestorff, 2014, 2018).

We aim to challenge anthropocentric scholarly gazes beyond precalculated cause (Femen creating conflict) and effect (making “spreadable” images happen through affective attunement of bodies looking at them; Reestorff, 2014, p. 489). We believe there is more to this mediatized protest than cause-and-effect relationship. The processes that envelop activist bodies, their image events, and media are multidirectional, decentralized, and dependent on contingencies of affective encounters.

Condit (2019) may see this as favoring contingency over telos. In her essay within the forum on "Image Politics at Twenty," she discusses the current takes and implications of the concept of image events and points to the troubling nature of this binary. The solution, in Condit's opinion, would "disown the contingency/determinism binary" and take into consideration "matter/energy/space that matters between the determined and the accident" (Condit, 2019, p. 364). So, what is the matter/energy/space between Femen and its image event of crosscutting in Kiev? We explain the matter through our elaboration on human and nonhuman assemblages in the crosscutting image event.

The analysis of various human and nonhuman matter coming together in a specifically controversial and iconoclastic way generates energy that we call forces—hence our usage of affective forces. The space plays an important role in helping human and nonhuman actors come together in a way that generates energy, which propels and multiplies the image of the event within the vast web of other assemblages. We are interested in how the network of human and nonhuman elements in Femen's pivotal 2012 event created affective drives and lasting impressions in the fleeting everyday lives of millions of Internet-connected people. In the next section, we elaborate on our theoretical intervention that will guide our analysis section.

Framework for Social Change in the Age of Image-Tsunamis

In this study, we hope to contribute to posthumanism. A ceaseless cascade of innovative technological disruptions in conjunction with proliferating ecological crises have created multiple ruptures in thinking, ushering in posthuman scholarship in multiple areas, such as social theory (Bennett, 2010; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Latour, 1993, 2005), media studies (Benkler, 2006; Hayles, 1999); animal studies (Abram, 2010; Derrida, 2008; Haraway, 2003; Massumi, 2014); and even plant studies (Irigaray & Marder, 2016; Nealon, 2015). These ruptures inspire this study, as we, along with Bennett (2010), work to trace "a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due" (p. viii). We offer to embrace the confusing incongruities of human-nonhuman assemblages and focus our attention on processes of rupture-connection-transformation as we embark on a journey of the traces left behind by image events. An assemblage frame is especially important in accounting for the political and cultural force of Femen bodies: "Bodies enhance their power in or as a heterogeneous assemblage" (Bennett, 2010, p. 23).

In a nonsystemic effort to account for the dynamics of intra-actions (Barad, 2007) among protest groups, media, and social change, we trace the processes of rupture-connection-transformation. Our theoretical intervention builds off Latour's (1993, 2005) ANT. We pivot on the junctures of visibility, sexuality, urbanity, mediatization, and affect. Each of these topics opens a line of inquiry into the study of image events.

ANT highlights how human elements are often entangled in networks with nonhuman actors that they cannot control. The word network in this theory is also illustrated by Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) conceptualization of rhizome and assemblage, later taken up by Bennett (2010), DeLanda (2006), and Massumi (1995), among others. Therefore, we use assemblages and networks interchangeably to underline their overlaps and resonances.

One of ANT's key ideas is in hyphenation between the two elements in its name, which renders them fully interchangeable. An actor may well be a network and vice versa. One part of the network may be bigger than the whole, if examined closely. For instance, the tall wooden crucifix that Femen's activist cut down is a part of this image event's assemblage but is also part of other assemblages. The material-discursive assemblages of the Ukrainian Christian Orthodox community, urbanity, and the public space of the hilltop overlooking the iconic Euromaidan—the square where Ukraine's Orange Revolution—took place in 2005. Therefore, the cross is already laden with affective forces that tie it with millions of crucifix worshippers, iconicity of Kiev's Euromaidan with its dense history, and more. Attacking this crucifix activated many of its affective forces and generated new ones, culminating in rupture processes on material and discursive levels. As we will see in the first section of the analysis, the rupture that Femen created by cutting down this crucifix amplified the image event when it became "simultaneously seized by several possible and contradictory calls for regroupings" (Latour, 2005, p. 28). In this case, the uproar of the "millions of contradictory voices about what is a group and who pertains to what" (Latour, 2005, p. 31) intensified affective forces. The crucifix and the activist cutting it down are within bigger and smaller assemblages. The multiplicity of material and discursive elements of these assemblages clash with each other, create strategic alliances, and ignite affective forces. For instance, the sexuality of the conventionally attractive topless female body is intensified by an activist's red shorts, fishnet tights, combat boots, flower headband, and the words "sextremism" and "free riot" painted prominently on the skin of her half-naked body.

With its mediatized, affective, and newly material potentials, the body plays a pivotal role in the processes of rupture-connection-transformation of image events, which are explicated in this study. The rhetorical, persuasive force of Femen bodies extending the realms of political protest via street performances has been eloquently elaborated on (Chevrette & Hess, 2019; Eileraas, 2014; McAlister, 2015; Reestorff, 2018; Veneracion-Rallonza, 2014). DeLuca's (1999a, 1999b) theorization of bodies as arguments for social change comes up often in some of these articles on Femen. "Corporeal performativity" (Harold, 1999, p. 66) plays a prominent role in Femen's activism, as does its subversive nudity. We contend with Berger (1972) that the naked body carries a "positive visual value" (p. 58). On the one hand, the resilience of the patriarchal gaze objectifies female nakedness. On the other hand, Femen's protesting body resituates and recontextualizes the nude's conventional figure. Femen weaponizes naked bodies and body parts that have been unrelentingly sexualized in diverse visual forms for centuries. A naked body is "unlike other symbols because the individual inhabiting that body has, presumably, some degree of agency" (Lunceford, 2012, p. 8). This agency often comes from the vulnerability of Femen bodies clashing with police officers and angry opponents (Betlemidze, 2019; Chevrette & Hess, 2019; Reestorff, 2018). The half-naked protesting body of Femen is often "in peril" (Harold & DeLuca, 2005, p. 266; Hoyt, 2016, pp. 33–54), thrown and pinned on the ground, pulled by the hair, pushed, and shoved into a police car. Survival of all this gives it power (Chevrette & Hess, 2019) and iconicity (Reestorff, 2018). With our theoretical endeavor, we extend the discussion of protesting bodies to include its assemblage politics with their strategic ruptures, connections, and transformations.

Femen effectively assembles objects, accessories, places, and "sextremist" bodies in their image events. In the analysis section, we illustrate how a Femen body-assemblage disrupted the status quo of hidden-from-surface patriarchal assemblages of Christian Eastern Orthodox, which recognizes women only if they appear as timid, docile, and servile. Such ruptures with the religious Slavic communities created new

connections with secular places that like to think of themselves as being ahead of the curve in fights for women's empowerment.

We believe that studying Femen's image event helps illuminate obscure parts of Latour's ANT to reveal the rupture-connection-transformation processes. Through the study of the adventurous travel of Femen's crosscutting image event, we can see how "certain very distant points can find themselves connected, whilst others that were neighbors are far removed from one another" (Latour, 1993, p. 170). In "connection," we analyze the contrasting remediation of Femen's crosscutting image event on French mainstream TV, with its celebratory pathos. This positive remediation illustrates rhizomatic principles of connection and heterogeneity: "Any point of a rhizome [network/assemblage] can be connected to anything other, and must be" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 7). In this rhizomatic web, interactions are "overflowing in all directions" (Latour, 2005, p. 202), defying any hidden, structural force of a central, presupposed context.

The ideas of unpredictability, decentralization, multiplicity, and dissemination (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002; Peters, 1999) continue to decenter the human subject within mediatized human-nonhuman assemblages of activism. To achieve lasting visibility, activist groups must act as mind bombs exploding with unrestrained possibilities for adventure. Thinking in terms of activist assemblage politics troubles reductionist approaches and unveils the incredibly dynamic and contingent nature of posthuman transformations "that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within" (Bennett, 2010, pp. 23–24).

Method

Posthuman ethics guided our selection of artifacts. We wanted to devote special attention to the nonhuman actors of social change. These nonhuman actors include—but are not limited to—images, comments, texts, and networks. Tracing these artifacts' adventurous travels on the Web, we noticed that they were acquiring agencies and agendas of their own. Drawing from digital research methods (Rogers, 2013), we used the Lexus-Nexus database, Google.com, Meta.ua, Rambler.ru, and Yandex.ru to search in English, Russian, Ukrainian, Dutch, and French languages. We collected over 500 news stories, blogs, and TV talk shows commenting on or covering the event of the crucifix chopping, mainly from August 2012 to January 2015. For the research of the 2012 version of the Femen official website, we used the Internet archive Wayback Machine, as the site went through a redesign and lost links to stories from 2012.

When conducting a close audiovisual analysis of an artifact, we go through it frame by frame, second-by-second, tracing ruptures, connections, and transformations. The emphasis on digital in this project excludes direct interviews with the leaders of Femen activism to avoid tilting the frame of this research, as it is aimed to bypass anthropocentrism. This posthuman shift allows for tracing the assemblage politics of Femen activism without reducing it to specific times, places, and humans. Each subsection of the analysis illustrates the process of weaving and unraveling Femen's image event: (1) Ruptures of Femen activism with traditional Christian Orthodox cultures in Ukraine and Russia; (2) Connections to the 2012 crosschopping event produced in France; and (3) transformations of the image event in Russia, The Netherlands, and Ukraine.

Case Study Analysis: Cutting Down Crucifix Engendering Affect

Rupture

We begin the analysis section with gruesome remediation of Femen's cross-sawing evening in a 25-minute *Russia Today* (2013; RT Documentary, 2016) documentary about Femen. The video begins with white text on the black screen, a "viewer discretion warning," stating that some viewers might find the content of the video offensive and unsuitable for minors. The image event of Femen activist chainsawing the crucifix appears about seven minutes into the documentary. The image's black and whiteness gives a spine-chilling air to the event as if it were a flashback to a horrible historical past.

Above the head of Shevchenko, two black straps tied to the cross stretch out of the shot, framing and accentuating the activist's figure. In the next two-second (7:17–7:18) medium close-up shot, Inna's torso—from the left side—appears on the screen with a blurry circle imposed to cover her bare chest as she actively continues to saw the cross. The marking of the word "sextremism" is partially hidden under her long hair and the blurry circle of censorship. In the next extreme long shot, Shevchenko saws down the cross. The cross falls, revealing the busy urban view of downtown Kiev. At the sound of the cross hitting the ground, Femen activists, who are holding the black straps tied to the cross, and journalists, who are recording the event, step back, distancing themselves from Shevchenko and the fallen cross. In the next moment, Inna raises her hands, holding the chainsaw that is still in motion. This image comes up in multiple media accounts, in full color, and mostly without censorship of the nipples.

Because of the grayscale visual of this *Russia Today* (2013) documentary, most of the image's background appears much more fluid and homogenous than in the color version of the same event. Overall, fluidity and natural framing with the black straps above the activist show her and the censorship mark on her body more prominently. "The mark's ontological instability is a double and conflicting condition" (Elkins, 1998, p. 42). This mark of censorship serves as a signal of a potentially offensive visual and acts as an assemblage. This assemblage generates new marks, blends with the surrounding marks, and tries to subjugate the activist's body by attempting to prevent it from reclaiming its sexuality in the name of the fight against religious patriarchy. With homogenous space, the censoring mark itself appears as a symptom of rupture between the activism and the competing orthodox Christian discourse showcased in the documentary and viewers' comments.

The complex web of affective ruptures between Femen activism and the orthodox discourse is traceable to the aspects of Christian places' bodily sensations and powers. As Sennett (1994) explains, for Christians, places of martyrs and victims carry immense power, which, according to the Christian ideology, are not meant to be challenged by human flesh. The intensity of such actions is strengthened if conducted by half-naked eastern European women in Christian Orthodox cultures, which have been used extensively to discipline and punish women if they dared to step beyond the permitted boundaries of submissive passivity: "Obedience, ethics of care, and the virtue of never exhausting patience" of women (Khrebtan-Hörhager & Gordiyenko, 2012, p. 39) continue to be valorized in Russian and Ukrainian contexts. There is a robust patriarchal alliance between the state and religion (Hashamova, Holmgren, & Lipovetsky, 2016).

State leaders regularly pay tribute to the religious places of worship in front of cameras and journalists, thereby signifying the forces of religious objects such as the crucifix.

By cutting the Christian cross, Femen violated the cultural and religious norm by flipping the hierarchical binary between the religious place of worship and female flesh. Thus, becoming iconoclast, Femen generated "fresh icons, rejuvenated mediators" (Latour, 2002, p. 17). With this action, Femen set up a new game where "provocateurs and those they provoke are playing cat and mouse" (Latour, 2002, p. 29). A short interview with Ukrainian writer and journalist Oles Buzina, right after the black-and-white censored depiction of the cross-sawing event, emphasized this cat-and-mouse game of acts and rhetoric: "When the girls went ahead and cut down the cross, they let themselves down for good. I think that if they wanted to go to the West, they meant to cut down the cross" (*Russia Today*, 2013, 7:25).

Christian Orthodox religion structures every aspect of political, social, and economic life in Russia and Ukraine. Hence, it should not be surprising that a half-naked woman who chops down a crucifix creates multiple ruptures. The act of chopping down the cross alone does not achieve the same effect without Shevchenko's outfit. Her naked torso is inscribed with the English-language slogan "Free Riot" and "Sextrimism" across her chest and arms. Her short red shorts and black boots create an appearance that the Orthodox Church considers vulgar and unacceptable in the proximity of sites and objects of worship. Shevchenko's outfit intensified the desire of Orthodox Christian community representatives to attack the image. Thus, Femen's image event entered the "the sphere of offending, violent, or sacrificial image, the object of iconoclasm" (Mitchell, 2005, p. 74).

This affective reaction is easy to find in the comments and blog entries dedicated to this image event, using various profanities against the activists, threatening God's wrath, and physical destruction. Here is a moderate example of such comments: "The cross was installed in dedication to the victims of hunger and political repressions in Ukraine. I cannot wrap my head around, [*sic*] how could anyone raise a hand against this holiness" (Nechiporenko, 2012, para. 2). Others comment that they pray for the judgment day to come faster for Femen and its witches. Many Ukrainian and Russian journalists and bloggers, who frame this event as a deliberate rupture of Ukraine's traditional Orthodox Christian culture, are trying to impose a fixed meaning to the image of cross-chopping. Some bloggers and journalists, such as Oles Buzina, label the crosschopping image as a clear sign of Inna's desire to emigrate from Ukraine and to expand the movement of Femen internationally (*Russia Today*, 2013).

The quest of those who wish to fix the meaning and to make the event transparent does not consider the processes of the image event itself. Still, over time, they solidified the history behind the object being chopped. According to media accounts, the cross was installed during Ukraine's 2004–2005 Orange Revolution in memory of the victims of communism. One of the numerous commentators on the RFERL article, Vitaliy from Kiev, on the second day of the event, wrote: "It is a monument [dedicated] to victims, to three million Ukrainians, who have died of artificially created hunger by a Stalin mode in 1933" (Vitaliy, 2012). A headline, "Ukrainian Sluts Pledged Support to their Moscow Colleagues by Destroying the Prostration Cross in Kiev" (Sevastopol.su, 2012), stands out with its aggressive tone and represents most of the event's virtual audience. Femen are "not only dummies but also provocateurs. Their support of Pussy Riot was a sad mistake, meaning that they sawed not the right cross," reads YK1's (2012) comment. All

these people and the nonhuman extensions of them on the Web in the forms of media articles and comments illustrate the ruptures created by Femen's image event. In our theorization, these ruptures are crucial for sustaining, multiplying, and expanding the reach of Femen's activism. These ruptures create actor-network, not based on the well-calibrated actions of the group but by becoming "the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it" (Latour, 2005, p. 46).

During her Skype-mediated participation in the Ukrainian TV talk show *Ukraine Talks* (Sukhanov & Efimov, 2012), Shevchenko admits that augmented media and public attention was the goal of Femen: "We did not want people loving or supporting us. All we wanted is to stir the debate, which is happening in this TV show." At the time of this TV show, Inna was already in Paris, far from the "powerless power of social inertia" (Latour, 2005, p. 85) in mediatized Ukraine. This "social inertia" hides "the real causes of social inequalities" (Latour, 2005, p. 85). Thus, on the one hand, we have the cross-sawing image event transfixed in negative contexts in media, which ruptures overwhelmingly religious or courteous-to-religion society into groups of people with various affective responses to Femen's activism. On the other hand, we have the sets of visually triggered controversies and debates over religion, the place of women in society, and the ethics of protest (Sukhanov & Efimov, 2012).

Connection

To illustrate how the cross-sawing image event generated connections, we offer its remediation on the mainstream French talk show *On n'est pas couché* (2014). Before going into a detailed description, we can see the stark contrast on the colorful censorship-free image on the French TV show and the censored black-and-white image aired on *Russia Today*. This contrast signifies the crucial aspect of the triad (rupture-connection-transformation) process of social change.

In this video of *On n'est pas couché* (2014), a TV talk show, we see approximately three-fourths of the screen filled with color, an uncensored, moving image of a young topless Femen activist who is about to saw a cross in Kiev. On the right side, about one-fourth of the screen is taken up with a close-up frontal shot of Inna Shevchenko with her long blond hair, dressed in a white Femen T-shirt and flower-headband, sitting with her gaze fixed to the left. Inna is watching herself as she is going to cut the cross in Kiev about a year earlier. The video is projected on a large screen in the talk show studio, which was filled with dozens of people who cheerfully applauded to Inna as she walked in under upbeat music accompaniment.

This TV show aired on June 15, 2013, almost a year after Shevchenko's rapturous image event in Kiev. By this time, Shevchenko had fled Ukraine under death threats, persecution for hooliganism and desecration of a religious site, and a looming prison sentence of at least five years. The talk show host has an approving tone as he introduces Shevchenko. His introduction intrigues the audience as he mentions the new controversy Femen has been entangled in, this time in Tunis. Before asking Inna questions, he asks if she can speak in French, to which she responds in English: "I am working on it" (*On n'est pas couché*, 2014, 1:24) All of Shevchenko's responses are English, translated synchronously into French. In an almost 40-minute segment dedicated entirely to Femen, Inna tells how she helped start the movement, became a criminal in Ukraine, and found asylum in France and a new home for the Femen movement. A few minutes

after the introduction and Inna's responses, the video showing her cutting down the cross is projected on the large studio screen.

We hear Kiev's urban traffic noise lost in a cacophony of quick camera-clicking sounds. Shevchenko silently crosses herself in an Orthodox Christian way, as she is kneeling in the three-fourth angle medium close-up color shot. Still knelt, with her back to the cross, she bows in front of the cameras as she finishes crossing in a Christian Orthodox way. Meanwhile, in the background, another Femen activist ties a black strap to the cross. Through a quick white-flash dissolve cut, we see Inna's back behind the back of another Femen activist in a gray pullover, holding the strap tied to the cross. The other Femen activist is standing farther in the back, holding the other end of the belt tied to the cross. Inna's figure appears framed by the two black straps above her head. As she turns on the chainsaw, the camera pans up to reveal the crucifix on the wooden cross and downtown Kiev in the background. In the next quick white-flash, dissolved close-up shot of Inna, we see her struggling to cut the cross, which is twice as thick as her torso that bears a slogan: "Free Riot." It is censorship-free but partially hidden under her loose hair. As the cross falls with a heavy thud in the next extreme long shot, Shevchenko victoriously raises her hands, holding the chainsaw.

This remediation on a popular French TV channel and Shevchenko's participation in its live discussion signposts Femen's newly forming and multiplying connection in France and Europe. It also demonstrates how the cross-sawing image event continues to have its own life even after several years. Such images have "a parallel existence to the social life of their human hosts, and to the world of objects that they represent" (Mitchell, 2005, p. 93). On the double screens of *On n'est pas couché*, Inna is juxtaposed with the remediation of herself from the past image event. This remediated image event is out of her control. It has a life of its own, amplified and multiplied across the public screens of different sizes and platforms.

Affective forces generated by the intra-action (Barad, 2007) of various human and nonhuman actors culminate in simultaneous ruptures and connections, which further propel the image event. One of the most evident sparks of affective forces is in Inna Shevchenko's strategic subversion of the norms of female depictions in mass media and advertising. These norms of femininity, researched by Goffman (1979) and elaborated on since then by other scholars, still hold in numerous instances where women appear as sexually attractive, but passive and docile. Bordo (1997), building off Goffman's work, claims that in the contemporary visualized and mediatized environment, "the rules for femininity have come to be culturally transmitted more and more through standardized visual images" (p. 94). Femen adheres to the norms of conventionally attractive appearance but explicitly diverges from the expected actions for women of similar sexualized appearance.

Most women in Western mass media and advertisements still tend to demonstrate their "feminine touch" by "using their fingers and hands to trace the outlines of an object or to cradle or to caress its surface" (Goffman, 1979, p. 16). In the cross-sawing event, Inna Shevchenko fixates her aggressive gaze on the religious object and uses her hands not to caress but to destroy the crucifix. These actions subvert the norms of "licensed withdrawal" or of "mentally drifting away" (Goffman, 1979, p. 65), evident in multiple advertising images depicting women of similar appearance as the Femen activist in this image event. Contrary to advertising norms, the activist's facial expression is aggressive and determined.

To subvert the norms mentioned above, the Femen activist creates strategic alliances with the religious object, fishnet tights, red shorts, free-flowing blond hair, slogans written on her bare torso, cameras, and journalists, among other human and nonhuman elements. Femen engages in "situated practices" (Alaimo, 2008, p. 253), strategically deploying assemblages of human and nonhuman actors to attack patriarchal principles collectively. The relation of a public place with the main actor of the chainsawing creates "a gendered dissonance" (Betlemidze, 2015, p. 376), claiming women's rights to be visible in urban, public, and religious spaces on her terms, asserting her expansion beyond domesticity (Sennett, 1994; Woodward, 2015).

Looking at uncensored remediation of Kiev's cross-sawing event in *On n'est pas couché*, it is easy to single out Shevchenko's body as the main weapon and activist tool. It is not just the body, but also the strategic alignments of various human and nonhuman elements within and around the assemblages of the activist's body that make the image event possible through rupture-connection-transformation. Human and nonhuman elements come alive through their intra-action (Barad, 2007) within the images that capture and multiply them. DeLuca (2006) suggests that images are "Deleuzian bodies," which are beyond the binary of "a subject dominating an object, but a relationship of simultaneous becoming" (p. 88).

In their processes of becoming, subjects and objects of activism acquire rhetorical forces through glances that situate them (Casey, 2004). The reversibility of their positions marks this process of situating subjects and objects. In the case of multilingual and multitemporal (re)mediation of Shevchenko cutting down the cross, the image of her activism often acts as a live subject that has its own "appetites, needs, demands, drives" (Mitchell, 2005, p. 40). It may well be the desire and the agency of this image (not the activist's) that is stirring debates, bringing Shevchenko to various TV shows similar to *On n'est pas couché* among other actions and developments.

Bringing is the aspect of sexuality, which is so salient in Femen's activism that we can see the efficiency in the symbiotic relationship between the activist's "sextremist" body and media. Here, sex and sexuality are abstracted from purely biological constrains (Parisi, 2004). Femen's "sextremist" image event is an assemblage of "a hypersensorial perception unleashing new capacities of a body to be affected and to act" (Parisi, 2004, pp. 166-167). Such an image shows the contingency of meanings and contexts put into motion by affective forces. The intensity of the affective forces can be gauged by the transformations it produces.

Transformations

The large chainsaw in motion is generating sawdust as it is cutting a tall wooden cross. Behind the gray-red chainsaw stands a young, blond, topless woman with huge breasts, red parted lips, long hair, and a small red-flower headband with multiple long, colorful ribbons flying in all directions. Behind the woman and the cross, there is an orange light illumination, and Femen is typed in a cartoonish grassy-green font narrowing in the distance. When hovering over the image with a mouse, the image parts enlarge and reveal more details. Of all four T-shirt designs referencing the cross-sawing event in Kiev, this one has the most dramatic look. T-shirts with this design were sold on the neatly organized Femen shop, a section of their glossy website, Femen.org. In October 2014, this "Handmade T-Shirt Sextremizm" cost \$39.90, almost half of its original price because of the "final sale 50% off" discount. This particular T-shirt is no longer available

on the Femen shop, but its digital version can be found on Pinterest (Yana Kaisheva, n.d.). There are new remediations of Femen's cross-sawing image event that appear on T-shirts, coffee mugs, totes, and other merchandise. In this remediation, Shevchenko looks less like a caricature and more like a minimalist drawing depicting a saint. In this image, topless Inna is holding a chainsaw with black gloves as she did in the original footage of the 2012 crosscutting evening in Kiev. Her torso is free of slogans, but the words "HOLY WAR" are imprinted on the chainsaw blade. The image is an airy, sleek drawing in black, white, and light skin pastel colors, where Inna appears looking up with a calm, determined gaze. We will not detail other merchandise, such as cups, caps, and activist-signed boob-prints that are sold on this website, since it is beyond our current focus in this study. However, we should point out that Femen members in their media interviews and social networking posts frequently reference the Femen online shop and their online donation link as a means of financial support and development. "Handmade T-Shirt Sextremizm," as well as the "Holy War" merchandise demonstrate the image event's transformations. The image is transformed and "acting in transformative fashion" (Burnett, 2004, p. 59). In this activism merchandise, we see not only Inna Shevchenko transformed into a drawing, but also Femen allies transforming into potential customers or turning potential customers into activism supporters. It may be a random guy who stumbles upon a caricature of the image event on Pinterest, or a supporter of the movement who buys a coffee mug with an image of topless Inna with the "Holy War" chainsaw. They probably will not know the specific rapturous context this image event acquired in Ukraine or with a broader Christian Orthodox community or how it got people debating taboo topics about women's place in society and politics. What matters is that, wherever this image event travels, it will carry potentials of generating new affective forces as it contacts other objects and bodies prone to such sparks.

Femen's crosschopping event had intensive translations in Russia, where four crosses were cut down. Even though Femen, on its website and social media, was urging its followers to cut crosses to "save Russia" ("Cut Down," 2012), the crosses' actual cutting should not be rendered as a mere cause-effect relation. Looking at the translations of the cross-sawing event into similar actions in Russia through the perspective of the rupture-connection-transformation lens helps us see intricate details of Russia's small-scale social change processes, affective reactions in local broadcast and online media, the hybridity of opinions, and further extensions of Femen's network.

The debates about cutting down crosses in Russia generated several hundred stories, posts, and comments. Vadim Karasyov, director of the Institute of Global Strategies in Kiev, says: "If these events were in Germany or some other secular places, there would not be such a storm in the mainstream societies [of Russia and Ukraine]" (VelykaPolityka [Great Politics], 2012, 34:15). Karasyov's comment proved correct. Further transformation of the image event extended Femen's activism into The Netherlands. The group was invited to chainsaw crosses specially installed for them on a stage as part of the GOGBOT festival. The festival helped stage another iteration of the Kiev image event in support of Pussy Riot. It performed a festive, fun-loving, and playful tone as they chopped down crosses, accompanied by music and without fear of being arrested for the desecration of religious objects.

The news section on Femen's website dedicated a post to Femen's participation in the GOGBOT Festival. This page provides multiple pictures taken from various angles and distances where topless Femen members have "FREE RIOT" and "sextremism" slogans painted across their torsos. Their bodies

glitter under the stage lighting as they talk into microphones, saw crosses, and pleasantly react to audience applause. To help viewers with the meaning-gathering, Femen provided a caption to Holland's eclectic image event:

Last night sexy sawflies Femen took their chain saws and broke the patriarchal silence of the town Enshede, Holland. Femen activists with their anti-religious performance opened the second day of the eighth Dutch art-GOGBOT Festival, dedicated to the group Pussy Riot. Under the stage Sextremists of Femen cut down three art-crosses. The performance got full support of the audience of the Festival. The cross-crashing workshop was preceded by a speech of activist Inna Shevchenko. She compared crosses to splinters that are in a body of society. Inna called everyone to take chainsaws as surgeon's scalpels and to help democracy. Femen are going to continue to destroy religious idols that support developing of patriarchy in the world. ("Cross Crashing," 2012)

This verbal attempt of Femen to fix the meaning of their visual protest in Holland did not work for traditional Christian Orthodox communities, for whom Femen's action was a flagrant blasphemy. Tatiana, who commented on the news story about cross-sawing in Holland, demonstrates the breadth and rhetorical force of Femen's visual spectrum: "Someday, these dummies will get crushed quite literally. But, god, forbid that they would do this [saw crosses] in Siberia . . . We are waiting for this to happen [to get revenge]" (Tatiana, 2012). This comment is an example of an oppositional translation of the Dutch cross-sawing event, which itself was a translation of the Ukrainian cross-sawing event. This comment also shows how Femen establishes its mode of existence "by way of the other" (Latour, 2011, p. 17), in this case—an angry Siberian commentator.

Such examples show that transformation does not happen once and in one place, but everywhere, near or far, and now or then. The multiplicity of transformations the image event demonstrates are the multitude of ways of seeing and being. As Berger (1972) says, seeing establishes our place in the world: "We explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it" (p. 7). What one sees through the lenses of a religious person in a Christian Orthodox community is ruptures. These ruptures are necessary for connections to extend Femen's "rhetorical actualizations" (Abel, 2007, p. 192) into transformations in other parts of the world:

The visible is never in an isolated image or in something outside of images, but in the montage of image, a transformation of images, a cross-cutting view, a progression, a formatting, a networking. Of course, the phenomenon never appears on the image, yet it becomes visible in that which is transformed, transported, deformed from one image to the next, one point of view or perspective to the next. (Latour & Hermant, 1998, p. 29)

We presented these different rhetorical actualizations in the examples of Russian, Ukrainian, Dutch, and French remediations of Femen's crosscutting event. These remediations demonstrate how the intensity of Femen's affective forces amplify and multiply the protest into different iterations, propelling the activist causes across time and space yielding contrasting transformations.

In Lieu of Conclusion

In a world with multiple truths, with polyvalent events and unfolding margins, the study of the rupture-connection-transformation process is a way that people can understand social change. These movements' challenges and advantages stem from the Web-enhanced flat and uneven distribution of affective forces. In an extended radio program—*Beyond Barriers/Cultural Diary*, Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, Moscow bureau journalist Dmitry Vorlchok discusses Femen's protest actions with culture and politics experts (Volchek, 2012). Although most of them see Femen as a degrading phenomenon, each of them admits that the group earned unprecedented levels of media coverage in the history of activism in Ukraine. Listening to their discussion, the importance of rupture comes to mind: "It is no longer possible to distinguish an actor from the allies which make it strong" (Latour, 1993, p. 174). The people who spend hours criticizing Femen unwittingly become their allies. Femen's fiercest opponents are making them stronger just by discussing them and drawing attention to them.

The trend of cross-sawing stirred discussions about Femen being "good or bad" on Russian and Ukrainian language TV channels, which served as "trials of strength" (Latour, 1993, p. 158) for Femen. Along with their opponents, Femen started to gain supporters. "I think they are a group of sincere and desperate women," said famous Russian journalist Alexander Nevzorov (2012, 00.15). He believes that Femen's sincere women were fed up with the religious demagoguery and decided to rebel against it. According to him, religion in Russia is an "abscess, which Pussy Riot helped open up" (VelykaPolityka, 2012, 3:41). He parallels religious rigidities in Russia and Ukraine: "The question of religion was always an unquestionable, taboo theme, which thanks to those provocative girls opened up for public discussions" (VelykaPolityka, 2012, 3:28). As Femen leader Inna Shevchenko says in the documentary, "If people were not reacting, then our protests would be pointless" (Larsson, 2013).

Alexander Nevzorov (2012), Pavel Sheremet, Dmitry Bykov (Sukhanov & Efimov, 2012), and others become Femen allies because of their intense affective responses. Opponents and supporters turned into allies of Femen represent multimodal, material-discursive transformations of Femen's image events. Latour (1993) describes this condition as a flat ontology:

There is enough room. There is empty space. Lots of empty space. There is no longer an above and a below. Nothing can be place in a hierarchy. The activity of those who rank is made transparent and occupies little space. There is no more filling in between networks, and the work of those who do this padding takes up little room. There is no more totality, so nothing is left over. It seems to me that life is better this way. (p. 191)

Although Femen's transgressive bodies have traveled the world both in person and via social media, their founding image emerged out of the non-Western contexts of Ukraine, Russia, and the Christian Orthodox Church on these countries. By examining rupture-connection-transformation processes, we enrich our understanding of how social media activism manifests locally and how such local manifestations echo, complement, and subvert global trends. Condit (2019) suggests that "material forces tend to be arrayed probabilistically, rather than either deterministically or with pure contingency" (p. 364). She calls for "a multimodal materialism" that considers "the similarities and differences of energy/matter as it is differently

arranged in bodies, discourses, and elsewhere" (Condit, 2019, p. 365). We offer this study as a way of illustrating the multimodal materialism of Femen's crosscutting image event. We explained how the protest of Femen and the media networks and material-discursive assemblages coconstruct themselves and each other through a rupture-connection-transformation triad process. Femen indeed is a part of a significant trend of social movements around the globe, which are moving from rational, physical, prolonged, concentrated actions. They emerge from posthuman assemblages, amplified through multiplying images, social media interactions, and affective drives with transgressive bursts.

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