A little story about big issues:
an introspective account of FEMEN

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Abstract

This research contributes a detailed personal account of a FEMEN activist. It presents an autophenomenographic analysis of cultural artefacts, including a Retrospective Diary, resulting from the activity of Yelena Myshko in FEMEN between 2012 and 2014. Previously FEMEN has been used as raw material for external analysis by press and academics to fit their individual agendas. To counteract this, Myshko’s research proposes an insider perspective on FEMEN activism. She writes herself in response to academics and FEMEN leader Inna Shevchenko who ignore the contribution of FEMEN Netherlands. Myshko merges author/researcher/researched and uses evocative storytelling to provide an introspective account of sextremism, connecting it to relevant embodiment concepts that illustrate its technology of empowerment and unintended side effects.

Through an autophenomenographic analysis of her personal experience, Myshko suggests how FEMEN employs sextremism to create soldiers of feminism. Her research proposes that sextremism is an attitude, a way of life and technology of resistance. For Myshko, sextremism embodies feminist polemic that turns against patriarchy through topless protest. Through personal accounts she illustrates how she internalized this aggressive femininity during physical and mental training. Myshko argues that in protest FEMEN activists communicate to the public and mobilize new activists through feminist snap. In addition, Myshko observes that sextremism produces visual activism that internalizes feminist polemic and transforms it into figurative storytelling. Myshko explains how she reproduced sextremism through body image that made her assertive and empowered her in action.

In turn Myshko demonstrates how personal accounts of sextremist embodiment and problems encountered as a woman in the world reproduce FEMEN’s fight in the media. Myshko analysis interviews with the press where she pinpoints topical feminist issues, making FEMEN real and relevant in Western society. Myshko observes that the media appropriated the spectacle created by FEMEN Netherlands but often distorted it and bend the news to fit its own agenda. In addition, the media criticized FEMEN Netherlands for cross-passing national values and power symbols. For Myshko, sextremism is empowering but also destructive. It promotes an unapologetic self-critical attitude that accumulates collateral damage in battle. The sporadic and restrained relationships between activists does not allow intimacy. Because of the eye of the media, tenderness is perceived as weakness and is not aloud. The combination of criticism, media scrutiny and police persecution hurt Myshko’s feelings. These unresolved feelings of hurt led to resentment and disengagement from FEMEN.

Keywords

Dedicated to my grandmother Evgenia Igorevna Slenzak for igniting an “avanturist”\textsuperscript{1} spark.

\textsuperscript{1} Avanturist is a Russian word with ambiguous meaning, in this case referring to adventurer. An avanturist is conceptualized as a daredevil that had a negative connotation in Soviet society. Nowadays, the word carries both positive and negative meaning depending on the context.
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Introduction

FEMEN is an international feminist activist movement known for provocative topless protests. They fight against patriarchy in its three dominant forms, defined by FEMEN as: dictatorship, religion, and sex industry. Their visual symbols are bare breasts, power poses, flower crowns and resistance against arrest. This hyper sexualized attack is called sextremism. FEMEN actions are accompanied by official statements on their website and interviews in the press.

FEMEN was founded in Khmelnitsky, Ukraine by Anna Hutsol with two friends Sasha Shevchenko and Oksana Shachko, but moved to the capital city Kiev to pursue a broader public. Hutsol decided that there was a need for feminist activism to battle sexual exploitation of Ukrainian women. She envisioned FEMEN to fight male orientation and women’s passivity in Ukraine. Initially FEMEN activists were protesting in pink costumes and underwear but went topless after Oksana exposed her breasts and got more attention from the press in August 2009. That year Inna Shevchenko reached out to Anna and Sasha on social media and joined FEMEN. In 2011 FEMEN caught the imagination of international press with protests in Paris, Rome, and Zurich. Late August 2013 Inna, Oksana and Sasha together with Yana Zhdanova fled Ukraine fearing for their lives and freedom after physical attacks and a police raid at the Headquarters in Kiev. They applied for asylum in France and established the FEMEN Headquarters in Paris. Anna Hutsol requested asylum in Switzerland, but it was denied in March 2014.

Since the commencement of its activity in 2008, FEMEN has produced numerous protests and stories of feminist resistance. This mobilized women all over the world to produce national branches of FEMEN. I was one of them. I have been affiliated with FEMEN between 2012 and 2014 as an activist and eventually leader of FEMEN Netherlands. In 2013, at age 28, I accidentally discovered feminist courses at my local University in Utrecht. I joined a Minor in Gender Studies that led to a Master in Gender Studies at Linköping University. Disengaging from FEMEN resulted in the transition of my feminist activism from the street to academia.


A brief look at previous research suggests that it lacks an insider perspective. This is partly the fault of FEMEN leaders who describe academic feminism as an “old lady” and develop a polemic of “new feminism”. Because of this attitude the leading FEMEN activists do not study academic feminism. The emphasis is rather on “street feminism” and reactionary, real life experiences in the field. As a FEMEN activist that became a regional leader while simultaneously entering academia, I feel that I can produce knowledge about lived experience
of sextremism, a perspective that is lacking so far. In my research I examine sextremism as a process.

The main goal of my thesis is to “write myself” as suggested by Hélène Cixous (Cixous 1976). She argued that: “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard” (Cixous 1976, p. 880). In this way the subconscious will get the chance to reveal itself in full potential (Cixous 1976). My pursuit is self-reflexive and a reaction to the way FEMEN Netherlands is perceived, or rather ignored. I was triggered by two instances: a paper by Kathy Davis that mentioned a topless protest at University of Amsterdam and related it to Dolle Mina2 (Davis 2016) and an Instagram post by Inna Shevchenko promoting the 10-year anniversary party of FEMEN (Shevchenko 2018), both fail to mention the existence of FEMEN Netherlands. This made me feel invisible. I refuse to be erased by other feminists that do not see the significance of my actions.

During my engagement with FEMEN I had to internalize an aggressive femininity through participation in boot camps and protests in public space. I used my body language and personal accounts as tools to reproduce the image and story of FEMEN. The resulting narrative has been interpreted by different people in different contexts. FEMEN is predominantly analyzed through an external lens and is used as raw material by press and academics. To counteract this and transcend the image of a “stupid girl” I want to give an academic introspective account of my participation in FEMEN and research the story and image that I narrated.

In the beginning Anna Hutsol told me: “if it wasn’t published, it didn’t happen” and I treated this as a holy amendment. As the result there are numerous cultural artefacts that attest to my individual and local story of FEMEN. My archive encompasses photo protests, press releases that I wrote for protests, newspaper articles reflecting on protests, television news features, and published interviews. I would like to analyze this material with a focus on FEMEN in the Netherlands, giving a personal account of my experiences and observations of the struggle to subvert power. The focus on my own lived experience privileges subjectivity that might be read as a limitation. However, my subjectivity provides a unique insight into the life of a FEMEN activist.

In this thesis I present my research in three chapters. The first chapter Corporeal Embodiment focuses on my personal account of sextremist embodiment through analysis of my Retrospective Diary. The second chapter Mediated Embodiment explores my representation in the media locally and abroad. While the third chapter Collateral Damage presents my self-reflexive findings from analyzing painful memories. For this chapter I combine empirical material and use my Retrospective Diary as well as reflect on cultural artefacts. These chapters aim to produce a rich introspective account of my embodied experience in FEMEN.

2 Dolle Mina was a Dutch feminist activist group that conducted protests throughout the 1970’s to promote women’s right to abortion, equal pay for equal work, childcare, and access to public toilets. On 19 March 1970 in Utrecht, they held an action against a convention of female doctors featuring the slogan ‘Baas in eigen buik’ (Boss in own belly) written across their bare stomachs that to this day is remembered as the image of feminist activism in the Netherlands.
Research Questions

My research is focused on FEMEN’s technology of protest and feminist resistance called sextremism. As an activist of FEMEN I have gained lived experience of sextremism that I would like to reflect on. I want to achieve this through analyzing stories of participation in FEMEN from memory and media publications. Before sextremism I was insecure and had a negative outlook on life. FEMEN changed my life, activated me and made me into an assertive speaker. I turned from an introvert to a leader of a small group of activists, training them, taking responsibility for organising protests and speaking to the media. Looking back at my transformation, and the lasting effect this has on my attitude towards life, I want to analyze and retell my process of change. Against this background I will pose the following research questions:

How is FEMEN being produced through sextremism and how does this process affect the activist? What is sextremism? How does sextremism produce a FEMEN soldier? What problems emerge in the process? How is aggression appropriated? What does it lead to? What did sextremism mean to me and how did it transform me?

Ethics of Vulnerability

As part of the research for this thesis I wrote a Retrospective Diary and translated the newspaper, magazine and television features about my activity in FEMEN Netherlands. These documents will not be added to the thesis for publication. I refuse to publish the Retrospective Diary because it is intimate. The Retrospective Diary includes both good and bad memories and observations that I do not want to be pulled out of context and used to underpin arguments out of my control. However, I am willing to share the Retrospective Diary confidentially with interested researchers. They can contact me personally to make the arrangements for accessing, using and publishing this information. I will not include the translations of media that I used because I do not wish to infringe upon the copyright of the authors. The materials I used are summarized in the Empirical Materials section and can be accessed through archives and occasionally online. I have provided proper references that will help researchers to locate this material. In addition, I am willing to share my translations upon request.

Next, I would like to elaborate why I use real names of FEMEN activists in this thesis. I believe that the tradition of using real names of FEMEN activists was established by the media. Newspapers use personal details of people they interview to underpin the truthfulness of their claims. This practice validates the news. FEMEN leaders use their real names in the media. In this tradition I disclosed all personal details as a FEMEN activist. Other activists of FEMEN Netherlands also published their real names, but some of them only used their first names. Taking this into account I assume that they want to keep a level of anonymity. Using only their published first names prevents me from disclosing their full identity. However, people close to FEMEN as well as the activists themselves will be able to recognise when I am writing about them. I feel that it is important to use real names to authenticate our story and take everyone’s contribution into account, not just that of celebrated FEMEN leaders. We are real women that reproduced FEMEN in the Netherlands. In addition, I hope that including real names of activists into my thesis will spark an interest of other researchers to consider less popular stories of FEMEN.
Previous Research

Scholars have framed FEMEN as an organization founded in 2008 in Ukraine, by a group of university educated women Anna Hutsol, Alexandra Shevchenko and Oksana Shachko (Arkhipenko 2012, Kim 2013, Dominguez 2014). According to Bidder they were trained in economics, human resources, and art but had no formal background in feminism (Bidder 2011, cited in Kim 2013). In fact, they resisted against their idea of “classical feminism” as an outdated Western practice that limited itself to discussions in conference halls and libraries (Kim 2013, Dominguez 2014). Rubchak distinguished that Hutsol participated in an exchange program for women leaders organised by Northampton Community College in 2007 (Rubchak 2012). The main theoretical recourse for Hutsol was August Babel’s book Woman under Socialism (1879) where he argued that women will achieve full equality under socialism and religion will become obsolete (Kim 2013). Furthermore, FEMEN developed from evening discussions about philosophy, Marxism and post-Soviet society (Neufeld 2012, Cochrane 2013, cited in Kim 2013). The original members decided that it was crucial to break with stereotypes of “classical feminism” by making FEMEN simultaneously “sexy, feminine, and smart” (Manyueko 2013, cited in Kim 2013). Just like feminist performance artists that were their own muse, and reshaped norms around the women’s body by representing themselves (Kim 2013).

FEMEN noticed the sexualisation of Ukrainian women and identified the overwhelming participation in prostitution as symptomatic of economic, social and political inequalities (Antonova 2009, cited in Vitchers 2011). According to Vitchers high living cost, economic crisis and discriminatory hiring practices attributed to the rise of prostitution that established a stereotype of Ukrainian women as sexually available (Vitchers 2011). FEMEN noticed the reduction of Ukrainian women to their beauty, sexuality and service to men and decided to position as an alternative voice in Ukrainian society (Kim 2013). According to Kim, FEMEN perceived bare breasts as “the only remaining weapons of Ukrainian women” (Kim 2013, p. 5). FEMEN developed their actions as a form of theatre, appearing with nationally recognized symbols of Ukrainian women (Kim 2013). They became provocateurs to irritate the public because in Ukraine “no one listens to women” (Steirischerherbst 2012, cited in Kim 2013). Dominguez explained that FEMEN activists are eager to “involve their whole self to materialize the fight […] real names, unhidden faces and uncovered bodies as naked declaration of their commitment and dissent” (Dominguez 2014, p. 16).

Kim counteracted FEMEN’s claim that there was “no history of feminism” in Ukraine (Kim 2013, p. 8) by exploring local feminist history, women’s status and challenges for social change, but came to the conclusion that “women’s rights existed symbolically” in Ukrainian society (Kim 2013, p. 13) During the time of Kievan Rus from 882 to 1283, Ukrainian women were free to initiate courtship and could not be married without their consent (Rubchak 1996, cited in Kim 2013). In 1887 Kobrynska and Pchilka published Pershyi Vinok (The First Garland) an anthology of women’s writing (Koscharsky 2003, cited in Kim 2013). In addition, Ukraine had a popular feminist poet and writer Lesia Ukrainka (1871-1913), who wrote a feminist almanac (Pavlychko 1996, cited in Kim 2013).

In Soviet Union oppression of women in imperial Russia served as pretext for communism to remove gender difference and abolish the family that was remembered by Ukrainians as an attempt to erase their traditions (Kim 2013). Feminism was perceived by communists as a Western bourgeois movement (Kim 2013). In addition, the urgency for Ukrainian independence made feminism of secondary importance to women (Kim 2013). During
communism Zhenotdel (1919-1930) was responsible to guarantee formal equality of women but was abolished by Stalin who claimed that equality was achieved (Kim 2013). However, in Soviet Union women had a dual obligation as caretakers of the family and participants in the labour force (Kim 2013).

Rubchak pointed out Ukrainian women organised demonstrations against the Soviet regime even before independence was achieved in 1991 (Rubchak 2012). Feminism still had a negative image and even prominent women politicians refused to identify as such (Rubchak 2012, cited in Kim 2013). When the Soviet Union collapsed the new government emphasized the importance of the family to rebuild the nation that encouraged a pre-revolutionary traditional image of Ukrainian women (Kim 2013). Nationalists introduced the myth of Berehynia, a pagan ‘hearth mother’ that reinvented Ukraine as an ancient matriarchal society (Rubchak 2012, Kim 2013). This led to the First Wave of women activism (Rubchak 2012), that validated traditional gender roles and “equality in difference” with a focus on motherhood (Zhorzhenko 2009, cited in Kim 2013). In this milieu young women developed into the stereotype of the Barbie, reverting to this image of ideal beauty to be attractive to men (Kim 2013). This image, in combination with poor economic position of women in Ukraine, was exploited by mail order bride agencies and sex tourists (Kim 2013). Simultaneously a Second Wave of women’s activism emerged opposing post-communist and authoritarian norms with FEMEN at the lead (Rubchak 2012).

The first semi-academic article about FEMEN was of local origin, Majerchyk and Plakhotnik argued that FEMEN was a new post-colonial, post-soviet and post-revolutionary grassroots phenomenon that developed under Western influence (Majerchyk and Plakhotnik 2010, cited in Arkhipenko 2012). In opposition Dmytriyeva argued that FEMEN undermined the position of women and misused feminism (Dmytriyeva 2011, cited in Arkhipenko 2012). Arkhipenko counteracted that, although FEMEN’s actions were criticized, they raised the issues of gender inequality and level of democracy in Ukraine (Arkhipenko 2012). For Jessica Zychowicz FEMEN was promising in their earlier playful activism inspired by the Orange Revolution but argued that their movement was an illusion making unrealistic demands (Zychowicz 2015). For Rubchak, FEMEN’s shock tactic and near nudity in the street was suspicious and “not unexpectedly counterproductive” (Rubchak 2012, p. 65). According to Khrebtan-Hörhager FEMEN activists were struggling in Ukraine under prevailing Soviet asexual morality and judgemental attitude towards display of nudity (Khrebtan-Hörhager 2015).

FEMEN’s cross over to Europe marked the rebranding of their protest strategy into sextremism (Zychowicz 2015). Zychowicz claimed that the first protest demonstrating the new visual vocabulary was organised with Parisian Arab activist Safia Lebdi in front of the Eiffel Tower in August 2012 (Zychowicz 2015). FEMEN framed sextremism as “the new weapon of feminism” that contrasted the “impotent classical feminism” of the West (Arte Creative 2012, cited in Kim 2013). Zychowicz argued that FEMEN’s sextremist tactics were a caricature of speaking, writing and protesting (Zychowicz 2015).

FEMEN received a lot of criticism for their homogenous embodiment of conventional feminine beauty and sexuality that manifested in mostly white, thin, and blond activists (Zychowicz 2011, Girard 2012, cited in Kim 2013, Athanassiou and Bury 2013, O’Keefe 2014, Van den Berg 2014, Dominguez 2014, Betlemidze 2015, Natallle 2015, Valente 2015, Davis 2016). FEMEN leaders blamed the press for focussing their attention on the most attractive activists (Eileraas 2017). However, FEMEN activists experienced the bitter reception of their youthfulness and bare breasts to promote their political message as
successful in challenging societies meaning of female nudity (Dominguez 2014). As Mann pointed out “men regard [...] breasts as something she has that they want but they don’t want to have exactly. They want access” (Mann 2014, cited in Weiner 2017). Building on this Weiner argued that “Topless protests provoke objectifiers when they revoke control of this access” (Weiner 2017, p. 177). Gale expanded this by arguing that FEMEN’s invitation to take a ‘second look’ on their conventional beauty “marks the body as unattainable” and goes beyond sexualisation (Gale 2017, p. 318). However, Reestorff contested that FEMEN’s conventional beauty can be interpreted as “too recognizable and for some this recognisability disqualifies Femen as a social and feminist movement” (Reestorff 2014, p. 493). Furthermore, O’Keefe argued that “uncontested auto-sexualization” or “femenism” revealed a problematic connection between third-wave and postfeminism (O’Keefe 2014, p. 1).

According to Vitchers American feminist critique on FEMEN failed to acknowledge the background of feminism in Ukraine and produced a discourse of “us vs. them” and “good feminist vs. faux feminist” (Vitchers 2011, p. 13). Van den Berg further explained that Western abiding by transnational feminist discourse, as it developed since the 1960s, created the assumption that intersectional theory is obvious knowledge or ‘common sense’ (van den Berg 2014, p. 1). Therefore, as FEMEN moved abroad their actions were criticized for a lack of intersectionality in their attempt to liberate Muslim women and sex workers while presumably denying their agency (Kim 2013, Van den Berg 2014). Hungeford claimed that FEMEN caused controversy not only for their secular rhetoric against religious, political and economic oppression, but also for employing the grotesque to subvert body shame (Hungeford 2015). In addition, Thomas and Stehling observed decontextualization of FEMEN actions on three levels: detachment of FEMEN’s action from concrete place and locality, detachment from concrete political aims and detachment from feminist claims recognising diversity among women (Thomas and Stehling 2015).

Multiple scholars raised their concerns about FEMEN’s actions that aimed at unveiling Muslim women (Savage 2013, Sultana 2013, Athanassiou & Bury 2014, Reestorff 2014, Van den Berg 2014, Al-Mahadin 2015, Betlemidze 2015, El Helou 2015, Natalie 2015, Valante 2015, Zychowicz 2015, Davis 2016) that led some to claim that FEMEN was racist (Savage 2013, Athanassiou & Bury 2014, Feministisch Verzet 2014, cited in Van den Berg 2014, El Helou 2015, Natalie 2015, Eileraas 2017), imperialist (Savage 2013), colonial (Salem 2012, cited in Athanassiou & Bury 2014, Kim 2013, Nagarajan 2013, cited in Natalie 2015, El Helou 2015, Eileraas 2017), and Islamophobic (Reestorff 2014, Valante 2015, Eileraas 2017, Salime 2017). FEMEN’s alliance with Egyptian Aliaa Elmahdy and Tunisian Amina Sboui (Tyler) was interpreted as a social assemblage between human and non-human actors such as legislative systems and Facebook (Reestorff 2014, Al-Mahadin 2015, Betlemidze 2015). However instead of acknowledging an alliance Savage connected the resulting “Topless Jihad Day” to Gayatri Spivak’s famous quote “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak 1988, cited in Savage 2013), that has since been used to describe the use of feminist tropes to validate colonial expansion and oppression (Savage 2013), such as prior American invasion of Afghanistan (Sultana 2013). El Helou argued that FEMEN’s actions were oblivious of the ongoing debates around feminism and colonialism (El Helou 2015). Athanassiou & Bury developed the argument further and suggested that FEMEN’s compliance with Western conception of Arabness “renders them ‘enforcers’ of the western nation-state’s contemporary ‘othering’ of Islam in the post-9/11 context” (Athanassiou & Bury 2014, p. 161).
Theoretical Framework

Although the domain of visual activism is broad and most likely dates to the invention of media, the term is attributed to Zanele Muholi, a lesbian artist from South Africa that uses photography to raise awareness about homosexuality (Bryan-Wilson et al. 2016). TJ Demos frames visual activism as “politically directed practices of visuality aimed at catalyzing social, political, and economic change” (Demos 2015, p. 87). Thus, for him, change emerges as the aspired outcome of visual activism.

Feminist visual activism attempts to facilitate change in line with feminist epistemology that, according to Elizabeth Anderson, is concerned with the role of gender in construction of knowledge, practices of inquiry and justification (Anderson 2017). Feminist issues often relate to the female body, but it has been argued by Elizabeth Grosz that the body is overlooked in knowledge production:

“The body has remained a blind spot in both mainstream Western philosophical thought and contemporary feminist theory. Feminism has uncritically adopted many philosophical assumptions regarding the role of the body in social, political, cultural, psychical, and sexual life and, in this sense at least, can be regarded as complicit in the misogyny that characterizes Western reason” (Grosz 1994, p. 1).

Grosz suggests counteracting this “crisis of reason” through non-reductionist accounts of the body to reposition women in the production of knowledge (Grosz 1995). Significantly for Grosz, knowledge is not a “contemplative reflection” but an activity that “does things” (Grosz 1995, p. 37). This suggests that knowledge emerges from lived experience and these accounts should be used as credible academic materials. To produce embodied knowledge, I want to work with three concepts: body image, feminist polemic and feminist snap.

The concept of “corporeal schema” was developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and interpreted as body image by Grosz (Merleau-Ponty 1962, cited in Grosz 1994). According to Grosz:

“The corporeal or postural schema of the body is what enables us to develop a practical relation to objects in the world and a psychic attachment to our bodies and body parts [...] The body is able to move, to initiate and undertake actions, because the body schema is a series, or rather a field, of possible actions, plans for action, maps of possible movements the body ‘knows’ how to perform” (Grosz 1994, p. 91-95).

Grosz reading of Merleau-Ponty suggests that alternative body image can construct new ways of behaviour that the body knows. This subverts the perception of mind as male domain and body as female domain (Grosz 1994), counteracting the popular dualism that they are mutually exclusive. In addition, it overrides the privileging of consciousness over corporeal experiences, suggesting that they are interlinked.

Amy Cuddy explored such a technology of changing the mind through the body. In the animal kingdom power and dominance are expressed through expanding and opening the body. Cuddy argues that humans do this too when they feel in power. Taking up space seems to be related to gender, as Cuddy observes, women tend to make themselves smaller in class because “women feel chronically less powerful than men” (Cuddy 2012). To solve this Cuddy decided to “fake it till you make it” (Cuddy 2012). She conducted a study where some candidates were asked to assume high power poses while others assumed low power poses for two minutes before they were proposed to gamble. As the result 86% of people in a high-power condition would gamble, versus 60% in a lower power condition. In addition, testosterone levels of high power people experienced a 20% increase, in low power people there was a 10% decrease. The cortisol level of high power people experienced a 25%
decrease, while in low power people there was a 15% increase. According to Cuddy the combination of high testosterone and low cortisol make you more assertive and less stress reactive and promotes taking risk. This explains how changing the body image works on the physiological level.

Another way to produce embodied knowledge is through a polemic that is rooted in feminist resistance. Merriam-Webster Dictionary describes polemic as “an aggressive attack on or refutation of the opinions or principles of another” and can be traced to Greek polemikos which means “warlike” or “hostile” (Merriam-Webster 2018). Feminist polemic demands change in the discussion with patriarchy on the battlefield of public opinion, therefore actively changing meaning. It has been argued by Mikhail Bakhtin that meaning is dialogic:

“The word is language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when [...] the speaker appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic expressive intention. Prior to this [...] the word does not exist in a neutral or impersonal language [...] rather it exists in other people’s mouths, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one’s own” (Bakhtin 1981 [1935], cited in Hall 1997, p. 235).

This suggests that meaning does not belong to one person, but as Stuart Hall rephrased it meaning emerges in the “give-and-take” between different speakers (Hall 1997, p. 235). Hall used this theory to underline his thesis that representation of difference and otherness is an ethical issue steeped in power dynamics (Hall 1997). Claiming words and changing their meaning as suggested by Bakhtin, is defined as transcoding by Hall (Hall 1997). Feminist polemic grounds itself in otherness and claims words from patriarchy through transcoding. It is through this technology that feminist polemic gets its power.

The last way to produce embodied knowledge that I would like to discuss is feminist snap. Sara Ahmed defines feminist snap as a sweaty concept “that comes out of a description of a body that is not at home in the world” (Ahmed 2017, p. 13). This suggests that a sweaty concept is determined by messy, lived experience. Ahmed pinpoints feminist snap as an individual or collective moment when sexism, racism, ableism or other oppressive frameworks get too much (Ahmed 2017). Here embodied knowledge is produced in the moment when a woman snaps. To uncover the source of pressure Ahmed argues to deconstruct the feminist snap and retell the story from a different perspective (Ahmed 2017). This retelling is political in nature because it strives to counteract oppression. In addition, Ahmed suggests that snap can be a communication system through which we get through to others (Ahmed 2017). Therefore, snap can be a tool to ignite resistance and mobilize women.
Methods and Materials

My aim was to derive meaning from my lived experience by going into dialogue with the cultural artefacts that I produced as an activist in FEMEN. My archive encompassed images, press releases, newspaper articles, television news features, interviews, a flower crown and a t-shirt with the slogan “Sextremism” that I wore to interviews. These cultural artefacts served as official documents of the stories I was telling during my evolution from admirer to activist and eventually leader of FEMEN Netherlands. During this time, I have internalised, embodied and reproduced the military jargon of FEMEN. This was in turn filtered by the media into newsworthy material. As suggested by Bakhtin one must take the word that emerges in dialogue and own it (Bakhtin 1935, cited in Hall 1997). Through the dialogue with cultural artefacts I attempted to derive the story that I was telling in my own words. To achieve this, I incorporated two categories of empirical material: cultural artefacts and a Retrospective Diary. I combined analysis of textual and visual media with introspective methods to uncover related memories, feelings and interpretations.

I decided to use autophenomenography because in my thesis, I approached FEMEN as a phenomenon of embodied feminist polemic called sextremism. Autophenomenography is similar to autoethnography in that it fuses author/researcher/researched “to invite readers into the text, to relive the experience rather than merely analyze it” (Allen-Collinson 2009, p. 292). But in stead of relating experiences to culture, autophenomenography uses lived experience to study a phenomenon (Allen-Collinson 2009). I used both approaches to construct my research methods.

Autophenomenography is based on phenomenology that is derived from Greek phainómenon and means appearance. It studies phenomena: things as they manifest and are observed in our consciousness (Allen-Collinson 2009). Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson argues that phenomena are not separated from our experiences but in fact are at the base of our subjectivity (Allen-Collinson 2009). She grounds modern phenomenology in the work of Edmund Husserl who developed it to elaborate subjectivity of human experience that for him is at the base of all knowledge (Allen-Collinson 2009). Allen-Collinson suggests that phenomenology “provides a stance on embodiment that incorporates conceptions of bodies and action as socially and historically located, socially related and interacting from particular structural standpoints” (Allen-Collinson 2009, p. 280). Autophenomenography is the result of a phenomenological attitude that combines writing and re/presentational forms such as personal diaries, and performative, audience-interacted forms as the source of “detailed, highly personal, grounded and evocative accounts” (Allen-Collinson 2009, p. 291). Autophenomenography is subjective per definition and therefore lends itself to produce embodied knowledge.

To construct my research methods, I was inspired by Carolyn Ellis’s work on autoethnography. For Ellis the goal of autoethnography is to access and document the “moment-to-moment” specifics of a life to understand it (Ellis and Bochner 2000, p. 737). Autoethnography connects the personal to the cultural through a back and force process of introspection while uncovering a “vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations” (Ellis and Bochner 2000, p. 739). According to Ellis this can be achieved through systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall (Ellis 1991, Ellis and Bochner 2000). Ellis argues that there is a need for systematic sociological introspection because social scientists often do not consider what emotions are felt and experienced like and should study how private and social experiences merge in felt emotions (Ellis 1991). She contextualizes introspection as a “conscious awareness of
awareness or self-examination” and proposes to use it as a systematic sociological technique to explore the complex nature of emotional experience (Ellis 1991, p. 23). Ellis approaches emotional recall as follows:

“I use a process of emotional recall in which I imagine being back in the scene emotionally and physically. If you can revisit the scene emotionally, then you remember other details. The advantage of writing close to the time of the event is that it doesn’t take much effort to access lived emotions—they’re often there whether you want them to be or not. The disadvantage is that being so involved in the scene emotionally means that it’s difficult to get outside it to analyze from a cultural perspective. Yet, both of these processes, moving in and moving out, are necessary to produce an effective autoethnography. That’s why it’s good to write about an event while your feelings are still intense and then to go back to it when you’re emotionally distant” (Ellis 1999, p. 675).

Emotional recall results in scenic writing. Unfortunately, I did not keep records of my FEMEN adventure. Because my experiences are dated, and took place between 2012 and 2014, I used sociological introspection and emotional recall to reflect on cultural artefacts from my activity in FEMEN.

To produce material for my analysis I explored writing as a method of inquiry as suggested by Laurel Richardson (Richardson et al. 2005). For Richardson language is integral in creating a distinct account of reality and the Self (Richardson et al. 2005) She goes on to say that:

“Language does not ‘reflect’ social reality but rather produces meaning and creates social reality [...] Language is not the result of one’s individuality; rather, language constructs one’s subjectivity in ways that are historically and locally specific [...] Experience and memory are, thus, open to contradictory interpretations governed by social interests and prevailing discourses” (Richardson et al. 2005, pp.961-962)

This suggests that language is never innocent but is governed by personal convictions and rhetoric. In my case guided by political interests of FEMEN.

The combination of these methods resulted in a Retrospective Diary of my participation in FEMEN. I used images, press releases, newspaper articles, television news and interviews to trigger emotional recall. In this way I was able to reflect on what happened during key moments of my sextremist practice. In the process I was struggling with scenic writing because the memories were too distant. Looking at images and videos proved helpful in recalling scenes because they provided the details of the experiences I have forgotten.

In addition, I decided to reflect on my archive of cultural artefacts in alignment with Rosemarie Buikema and Marta Zarzycka who suggest that “in order to develop a feminist reading that works towards productive social change, it is necessary to understand representation as a political issue” (Buikema and Zarzycka 2011, p. 129). This is crucial in the analysis of cultural artefacts, and images, because they can be read in restricting ways. Buikema and Zarzycka suggest: “Although women are prevalent in the visual sphere, patterns of traditional gender divisions and hierarchies are still inscribed upon the female body” (Buikema and Zarzycka 2011, p. 120). To let images speak back Buikema and Zarzycka call for a plurality of approaches to place them in the broader context of their cultural, historical and geopolitical significance (Buikema and Zarzycka 2011). By combining visual analysis with introspective methods, I wanted to consider the emotional impact of images. The goal was to argue that there are embodied experiences, memories and feelings behind images. If this will be acknowledged, there is a chance to produce a deeper layer of understanding and interpretation of images and stories they tell.
During the writing process of the Retrospective Diary, I experienced a tremendous amount of Resistance as described by Steven Pressfield. Pressfield argues that it is difficult to sit down to write because we are held back by Resistance (Pressfield 2012). He defines Resistance as “the most toxic force on the planet” (Pressfield 2012, The Unlived Life) that is like an engine programmed for self-sabotage (Pressfield 2012). Resistance is any kind of self-generated and self-perpetuating distraction, even well intended, that rises from within (Pressfield 2012). To overcome Resistance the writer must become a warrior and fight the battle against it every day: “Resistance is the enemy. The battle is inside of our heads” (Pressfield 2012, p.87). Pressfield identifies fear as the source of Resistance, both the fear of failure and fear of success (Pressfield 2012). Moreover, he argues that: “Humiliation, like rejection and criticism, is the external reflection of internal Resistance” (Pressfield 2012, p.89). He distinguishes the professional from the amateur through their attitude towards external criticism: the amateur allows it to defeat him, while the professional does not let others define his reality (Pressfield 2012). To conquer Resistance, Pressfield argues that a writer needs to “turn pro” (Pressfield 2012). By adapting the attitude of a professional who acknowledges Resistance but does not let it beat him, the writer acquires ability to finish his work.

In my case Resistance had a dual meaning: Resistance as procrastination and resistance as protest. Resistance manifested in my inability to revisit cultural artefacts because of emotional blockages. To avoid sitting down to work I surrendered to procrastination rituals: sleeping till noon, shopping online at midnight, watching Russian-speaking fashion vloggers and ASMR videos on YouTube, taking long walks, stopping to work at 22:00 PM and having nightmares because I did not unwind, talking to my mother on WhatsApp, meeting with acquaintances from previous work and education, dating through Tinder and two dating websites, applying to artist open calls, jobs and PhD vacancies etc. To turn things around I used introspection and began to analyze the source of my emotional blockages. Defining the cause of my pain led to calculation of collateral damage. By battling Resistance with consistent work, I turned pro and transformed procrastination into protest being left out of the history of FEMEN.
Corporeal Embodiment

“In the beginning, there was the body, feeling of the woman’s body, feeling of joy because it is so light and free. Then there was injustice, so sharp that you feel it with your body, it immobilizes the body, hinders its movements, and then you find yourself your body’s hostage. And so you turn your body against this injustice, mobilizing every body’s cell to struggle against the patriarchy and humiliation. You tell the world: Our God is a Woman! Our Mission is Protest! Our Weapons are bare breasts! And so FEMEN is born and sextremism is set off.”

— FEMEN 2018

Sextremism fits in with feminist knowledge production as a sweaty concept defined by Ahmed (Ahmed 2017). It is both an oppositional worldview and a communication strategy to mobilize women and create an international feminist movement. Sextremism is FEMEN’s call to arms, a protest strategy and a way of life. This brand of visual activism is facilitated by physically and mentally trained political actors: FEMEN soldiers. To become soldiers, FEMEN activists train to protest. According to illustrations of Luz that decorated the walls of FEMEN Headquarters in Paris, the essential elements of a FEMEN protest are a poster, a flower crown and a slogan on the chest. In his illustrations the poster reads “FEMEN”, the slogan is “NAKED WAR” and the activist is a thin woman with long hair wearing shorts. The illustrations teach that the poster should ideally measure 60x45cm, the distance between the legs should be approximately 70-75cm, “Don’t smile, be aggressive, SCREAM”, “Stay at your place, you have the right to protest”, “Resist, continue the action till the last second”. I would like to argue that sextremism is a reproduction of feminist snap for the public. It is a spectacle of women gone wild. Screaming and resisting the police are tools to produce this image. In this chapter I will explore my experience of becoming a FEMEN activist and leader to expose how I embodied and reproduced sextremism. In addition, I will explore how sextremism changed my body image and turned me from a passive online surfer to a feminist activist.

In the summer of 2012 I was amidst a personal crisis. In 2010 I graduated from art school but was struggling to find my way between a part time job, artist unemployment benefits and government’s decision to cut them. At an information meeting for artists at the Chamber of Commerce I was told that: “There is no more space for art!” Young and inexperienced, I took it hard. I felt like I had no future and was hopeless, uninspired and lost when I came across an image of fierce FEMEN in protest (RD First encounter with FEMEN). The images that burned into my memory were from a protest in Zurich against the Ice Hockey World Championship. Instantly I connected to their active bodies, performing aggressive femininity:

“It was like a fire was lit inside of me. I felt agitated. The kind of agitation I relate to the adventurous spirit of the women in my family. In line with the aspiration of great adventure, I decided to go. [...] I surrendered to the moment and finally felt alive. A body in action, moved, exited, scared but nevertheless taking control of my life. [...] It was like I answered their call to arms” (RD First encounter with FEMEN).

This illustrates how FEMEN’s reproduction of the feminist snap triggered me to join the fight. The desire to be part of FEMEN overwhelmed me and forced me to act. I could not bare the absence of FEMEN in my life. As soon as I found out on Facebook that FEMEN activists were coming to Paris for a movie screening, I used my last money to buy a ticked to travel with Eurolines. I contacted the organisers of the event and asked to stay with them. To my surprised I arrived at the apartment of French-Arab feminist Safia Lebdi, who became known as the woman that brought FEMEN to Paris, where Anna Hutsol was sleeping. When the rest
of the activists arrived, I was invited to join in their activities. Walking down the streets of Paris I asked FEMEN leader Sasha Shevchenko: “Maybe I can write something?” Upon which she answered: “No, we need activists”. This sank into my mind and did its work.

FEMEN was not very active in the Netherlands. There was a Facebook page FEMEN Holland and its admin Elena had convinced her friend Helena to protest outside the Millionaire Fair in Amsterdanse RAI on December 8th, 2011. Helena’s topless picture with a blond wig and her eyes closed was published on the cover of Spits (‘Borsten en bobo’s’ 2011). However, it was not as powerful as original FEMEN protests and had little impact. Craving real action, I connected to FEMEN Germany that was an active group of my peers. In January 2013, I was invited by Irina to join a protest in Hamburg. I was not given any details or needed them to go. In Hamburg I took part in training and a photo shoot. During the training we learned to stand firmly grounded with our legs spread and our hands always forming fists. The fists should always be raised or in the side to keep an open body posture. For my portrait I was asked to choose a slogan to write on my naked chest and came up with ‘Big sister is watching you’ (Weeber 2013). It was my take on Orwell’s big brother, subverting the concept of omnipresent control to feminist resistance. The slogan captured FEMEN’s attitude as a “watchdog of democracy” like Inna Shevchenko calls it. In my Retrospective Diary I described that:

“I wanted to say to the world that I am alert, that I am ready for the fight against patriarchy. I am watching them and anticipate my next move” (RD Protesting in Hamburg).

The photo shoot resulted in promotional material that celebrated my commitment to FEMEN. My first FEMEN training culminated in a protest at Herbertstrasse in Hamburg. We went to the red-light district to protest topless with torches. It was freezing cold, but nobody hesitated. When the protest started I was fiddling with my torch. Pieces of the fabric melted off and dropped on my hand:

“I was struggling for a few minutes to assume my fearless action pose as I was ignoring the pain. There was no time for that. I swiped the melting fabric off my hand and resumed to scream slogans with the rest” (RD Protesting in Hamburg).

The power poses that we rehearsed pulled me through the protest. Enduring the cold barely dressed, made me into a fighter. Later I reflected on this experience in an interview under the alias Olga:

“I regained power, agency through my body, through the protest […] also confidence through the fact that you act, but also when you learn to protest, to scream. For me it was the first time that I screamed, at the training. And now I have a voice, but I did not know I was not conscious of my voice. […] So you become conscious of what you can make or which power poses can make your body look powerful and because of that, you also become powerful” (Dominguez 2014, p.12).

This suggests that power poses create an alternative body image that allows to feel and act more powerful. Being topless in the process adds another dimension. It is radical vulnerability used as a weapon. Undressing in public breaks the rules and promotes a rebellious attitude. This in turn is empowering.

After Germany I was struggling with work and got fired after two weeks when I changed jobs. This made me insecure again and I spend a few moths depressed in bed. I did not want to work anymore, but there was still opportunity to study. So, I applied for a master’s degree in Fashion Strategy at ArtEZ University of the Arts and was granted a student loan by DUO. Now that I had financial freedom, FEMEN was the first thing on my mind. I was following the FEMEN website when a picture of their political advisor Victor Svyatski appeared with a
badly bruised face. Activists in Ukraine were attempting a protest against Russian president Putin, who was planning to visit celebration of 1025 years since establishment of Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, but they were repressed by the police in ingenious ways. I had to act and organised a protest through Facebook together with Elena, Helena and Jilvi. As location Elena chose the Homomonument because it was Gay Pride Celebration in Amsterdam. To organise the press, I reached out to a photographer that I met at Amsterdam Fashion Week and he introduced me to a photo journalist that worked for AT5. When I told the photo journalist about the protest, he said that he would think about taking pictures after reading the press release:

“So I went home and wrote a press release for the first time in my life. I remember sitting behind my computer in the middle of the night. Tired and tense but filled with purpose. I was devoted to make this protest work. At 01:50 AM I sent out the press release, to the photographer, press contacts I had and any other newspaper I could find online” (RD Homomonument).

In the press release I connected urgent political events in Russia and Ukraine to FEMEN in a personal way. It was painfully serious to me. I was enveloped by these political events like they were my personal problems.

“During the action I was the one screaming the loudest and changing the slogans while the others followed me. After the action I was approached by the media. I am not sure how I emerged as the leader, it just happened. But there I was talking to the press. My words from the interviews and press release were used to describe our action in the newspapers the next day” (RD Homomonument).

In the evening I received an email from FEMEN leader Inna Shevchenko. She asked how we organised the press and invited me for a boot camp in Paris the next week. I felt that it was now or never, because the memory of a recent fire at FEMEN Headquarters made me feel like all this could end abruptly (RD Homomonument). Again, I was mobilized by an image, this time of the burning Headquarters. That evening I booked a ticket to Paris with Eurolines again.

The first evening in Paris, Marguerite asked me to go for a run with her. I did not do sports, and this was the first time in my life that I went running at night:

“For a moment I wanted to quit but realised I would not find my way back. I had no idea where I was. The streets were dark and badly lit and men were everywhere. Their presence was intimidating. [...] When we turned around I felt new strength emerging out of nowhere. I felt light and agile, active and in control” (RD FEMEN boot camp in Paris).

During the run, I overcame my insecurities and emerged victorious. The next day more FEMEN members arrived and we went running the same route Marguerite and I took.

“I felt like I had an advantage over the other activists because now I could run confident of my ability. Because of my experience the day before I knew I can do it. For the activists that never ran before it was too much to handle. Some of them stopped and walked back to the Headquarters. To me that missed the point. I was fully aware that the running was an endurance exercise that had to be overcome to become FEMEN” (RD FEMEN boot camp in Paris).

Back at the Headquarters the training intensified. We had to do a lot of sit-ups, push-ups and some visually complicated exercises. We laid flat on our backs next to each other while someone walked across our stomachs. Then we proceeded with the action training and police detention role play. We were taught how to scream slogans and practiced how to execute a topless action. The next day the press attended the training:

“It had to be perfect, nothing could go wrong. There should be no weakness. I was pumped. Wearing evening make-up, I ran across the streets of Paris with an
international group of FEMEN activists. By now I was in pain because of daily running. But the show must go on. I put on a poker face and went with it” (RD FEMEN boot camp in Paris).

By then I had internalized the self-critical attitude towards weakness. In fact, weakness was taboo. It was not talked about but was implicit throughout all the exercises. Although there were moments that aloud nonchalance, all of us kept an air of seriousness.

The last night of the boot camp Andromak insisted everybody got matching tattoos. She chose the word freedom in Russian to put on the rib where FEMEN leaders have it, that strategically connects being topless to freedom (RD FEMEN boot camp in Paris). In addition, I asked Andromak to tattoo the FEMEN logo on my wrist:

“I wanted to brand my fist, so it would always be accompanied by the FEMEN logo. [...] Getting those tattoos made the moment very special for me. Now I had something to remember how I became FEMEN. Now I would never forget that I am a strong, adventurous woman. I wanted to remember this every time I look at my tattoo” (RD FEMEN boot camp in Paris).

I was excited about getting the logo tattooed but Inna Shevchenko came by and rolled her eyes (RD FEMEN boot camp in Paris). Of course, Inna knows better than anyone what it is like to have FEMEN tattoos that will stay with you forever. She has a huge tattoo of a flower crown across her stomach so that she will never lose it in action.

Through the training in Hamburg and Paris I learned to embody resistance and decided to put it to the test at the protest in front of the Ukrainian Embassy in The Hague. The protest went on for several minutes before the police arrived:

“I turned my head to Julka and said ‘Bingo’ [...] I decided to stop when I was out of sight of the photographers in the police van. But until they put me there I was fiercely resisting. I was focussed on keeping my power pose in synchronicity with the police. Their movements complemented mine. [...] I was surrounded by three policemen and a policewoman who were holding me down and trying to wrap me into a blanket. It covered my naked chest and the slogan ‘Stop Dictaterror’. I was balancing my weight on one leg trying to stand my ground. [...] My facial expression was filled with anger. I was shouting at the top of my lungs” (RD Ukrainian Embassy).

Every time I look at this picture I get a rush of energy. Seeing my feminist snap in action is extremely empowering.

In addition to body language, shouting is crucial in the embodiment of protest. At the boot camp that I organised in Utrecht to pass my knowledge to the local activists, I emphasized that screaming can be the only tool when you have no opportunity to put on a flower crown or hold a poster (RD Reproducing the FEMEN boot camp). During the training I taught Helena and Julka the basics of audibility on video:

“One, two, three, FEMEN; I shout with my fists clenched, one hand aiming at the ground and the other towards the sky. [...] Throughout the exercises I explain that we should avoid a high pitch voice. I call it ‘the same frequency as the wind’ because shrill voices get filtered out just like wind noise. So in order to be heard on video we have to create a deeper sound by making our voice low and breathe from the abdomen” (RD Reproducing the FEMEN boot camp).

I urged the activists to scream in unison and only support one word out of a slogan when they were tired, so they would not “swallow words” (RD Reproducing the FEMEN boot camp). To prepare the activists for battle I approached them and screamed in their faces. I kept changing
slogans to train them to be alert and secretly to save my face because I was struggling to keep up. But I persevered because I was devoted to produce FEMEN soldiers.

FEMEN defines sextremism as the result of turning the body against injustice and humiliation caused by patriarchy. The autophenomenographic evidence that I produced above shows how I was mobilized to embody and reproduce sextremism through feminist snap. In the beginning I was triggered by images of FEMEN protest to join their fight. Active bodies, performing aggressive femininity sparked my imagination. In a split second I changed from a desperate person without a future into an inspired feminist that was taking action. The FEMEN image mobilized me and brought me to unfamiliar places to meet strangers that changed my life. Twice I overcame difficult periods in my life by travelling abroad to participate in FEMEN training. Through training in Hamburg and Paris I learned to run, scream, protest topless and resist the police. This paved the way for embodied resistance and assertive action. First, I took part in actions organised by others but gradually shown initiative and emerged as a local leader. Although I experienced the lack of action in FEMEN Holland, I reached out to FEMEN leaders and brought their knowledge to the Netherlands. My desire for FEMEN emerged as a productive force of change. Following the example of FEMEN leaders I took responsibility for organising actions, talking to the press and training other activists. This demonstrates how FEMEN creates soldiers by changing the body image through personal example. The leaders embody sextremism through their proactive attitude and inspire followers to act.
Mediated Embodiment

“FEMEN movement stands to the principles of openess and commitment to media to ensure maximum coverage of its revolutionary and advocacy activities in mass media.”

– FEMEN 2018

FEMEN reproduces an aggressive femininity, a feminist snap. Political, strong and provocative, meticulously crafted and well thought through, although accompanying slogans often result from sporadic brainstorming. The sharp irony of the moment adds to the overall rebellious image. FEMEN takes visual activism to the streets where it appropriates ambiguous symbols. In fact, ambiguity emerges as a tool to trigger thinking and facilitate change. This visual feminist polemic is aimed at patriarchy in its dominant forms: dictatorship, religion and sex industry. FEMEN promotes new ways of behaviour through physical and mental training. Its body image is called sextremism and it produces soldiers of feminism. This body image is created through power poses based on widespread legs, straight posture and solid arm positions with clenched fists. With these tools sextremism promotes assertive action and speech. It claims to be “new feminism”, arguing that provocation and street action are more urgent and relevant than academic feminism. FEMEN actions are often spectacles of feminist snap that captivate the imagination of press and public who want to know everything about it. However, the media often transforms the spectacle into something else that fits its own agenda. In this chapter I will analyze how the media filtered my feminist polemic and feminist snap into newsworthy material.

The first interview I gave as FEMEN was published in Het Parool on June 1st, 2013. It was featured as an appendix to a larger article about FEMEN. Maxime Smit interviewed FEMEN leader Sasha Shevchenko who mentioned that I was an activist from the Netherlands. I gave the interview because I felt responsible to talk about FEMEN in support of the greater good. The article published my full name, age, occupation, place of birth, place of residence and picture for the first time. Apparently, this established me as an expert in the field because other journalists contacted me through social media afterwards. Initially I did not want to become the leader of FEMEN Netherlands because I was not convinced that I can pull it off and felt that local activists were not angry enough (Smit June 2013). Nonetheless I emerged as a spokeswoman of FEMEN Netherlands after the Homomonument action because nobody else wanted to take the role (de Ruiter 2013). I became a leader because I wanted to have FEMEN in my life, even if I had to take all responsibility. However, by March 2014 it was published that I was the former face of FEMEN in the Netherlands next to an interview about my experience of the Revolution following EuroMaidan (van Rossum 2014).

Although I was aware of what a FEMEN activist should talk about through my observation of FEMEN leaders Inna Shevchenko and Sasha Shevchenko, I did not realise what I was getting myself into. Of course, I was responsible for giving my personal information to the press, but I was not fully aware of the consequences. Some journalists even went so far as to publish my relationship status. One article made a guy that I was dating into a perfect and understanding boyfriend (Bemelman 2013). However, this was a misrepresentation and the journalist refused to edit the interview after it was published. So, the next time I was asked about my relationship status, I answered:

“I don’t want to be judged for my relationship status, because that does not say anything about my value as a woman” (Beumer 2013).

I refused to play the relationship game as means to validate my activism. My new-found assertiveness came through during interviews:
“At her arrival nothing reminds that Yelena Myshko (28) is a leader of a feminist and activist movement. Huddled cycling through the rain, petite, looking around from under her cap where she supposed to be. As soon as she walks in, this changes. The cap goes off, the back straightens, clear gray-blue eyes are looking sharp and Yelena begins to talk, even before the first question is asked” (Nagtegaal 2013).

This illustrates a clash of expectations about my frail physique and activism. However, I did not let it stop me and was on a mission to clarify FEMEN’s cause. In another interview I denounced that it is about the naked breasts even before the interview began (Pertijs 2013). On both occasions I was described as an active speaker. I did not wait for the journalist’s permission to talk, because I knew what needed to be said.

I established myself as a generational feminist to accentuate that FEMEN is my destiny. I indicated that I come from a well educated and feminist family (de Vries 2013). When I was asked what I see in the mirror, I answered:

“I see a strong woman. In myself I see facial features of women I owe my fighting spirit to: my mother, my grandmother, my great grandmother [...] I greet them every day when I look into my eyes. They remind me of who I am what I have been through and give me strength to shape the future” (Beumer 2013).

In this way I painted a picture of generational strife for independence. In her article Ashley Doogan reinforced that I come from a line of feminist blood:

“The grandma of my grandma was rich and married against the will of her family with a poor man. I think that is a pretty feminist move for that time; to determine yourself whom you marry, regardless of social status” (Doogan 2017).

My maternal background forms a big part of my identity and is the reason why I was attracted to FEMEN. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, when I saw a sextremist protest for the first time it agitated me and aligned with the “adventurous spirit of the women in my family” that mobilized me to travel to Paris to meet FEMEN (RD First encounter with FEMEN).

Sometimes I was asked to justify that FEMEN is not only for pretty girls (de Vries 2013, Bemelman 2013, de Ruiter 2013), while at the same time I was reproducing the beautiful, white, thin, and able bodied FEMEN image through my own appearance. In my early 20th I used to be a model and had done a few topless photo shoots with male photographers. I agreed to topless pictures because I thought it was part of modelling, but in reality, I was used for my naivety (Bemelman 2013, Doogan 2017):

“I saw the topless protests as claiming my body anew. It’s my body and my body is sexual when I decide, not when a man decides” (Doogan 2017).

In this way I indicated that I reclaimed my nudity and sexuality through topless protest. My body was not intended as an object of lust, it was a weapon. In another article I further politicized my body:

“My body is my banner that cannot be taken away from me by guards and police” (Beumer 2013).

This highlights that my naked chest was a protest tool. To add weight to my convictions some journalists used the FEMEN logo on my wrist that accompanied my fist (Pertijs 2013). Even after disengaging from FEMEN I defend my body art because it is reminiscent of how I became a feminist (Doogan 2017).

One of popular stories featured in the press was my experience with misogyny in Ukraine. I was encouraged to tell this story by Sasha Shevchenko. It was based on my encounters with men as an intern in Kiev in 2009. I generalized two different accounts of men trying to offer
me money for sex on the street into one story (Smit June 2013, Kist 2013, de Vries 2013, Renout 2013, Doogan 2017):

“I understand where FEMEN comes from. [...] There are no clear borders between prostitution and being a woman” (Smit 2013).

“If you wear a short skirt on the street there, men try to buy you because they think you are a whore” (Kist 2013).

Journalists must have been eager to publish this story because it reproduces Ukraine as lagging behind the progressive West, as if misogyny is obsolete here.

The press often portrayed me as a rebel without a cause because I did not have a job. The first article published a description of myself as a typical 20 something in a quarter life crisis that graduated but cannot find work (Smit June 2013). Trajectum underlined that I was a student with an unusual volunteer job however struggling to fit into society because I was looking for fitting work for three years before I encountered FEMEN (Bemelman 2013). In addition, FNVB Magazine published a detailed story about my brief work experience:

“At my job there were all kinds of problems: failure to comply with the collective labor agreement, manipulation of employees. I had to tolerate this not to jeopardize my temporary employment contract. In the best case my job only gave me an income. But I want to do meaningful work that is more fulfilling than just a paycheck. Show people something, make them think and activate them. I could not get all of this out of my job. I had a period when I was really unhappy. I was searching for what I can and what I want. Eventually I chose not to adjust my lifestyle to my job but my job to my lifestyle. I stopped in retail and went back to school to do a master. Next to that I focused on FEMEN Netherlands” (Nagtegaal 2013).

Although in this case FEMEN emerged as a way to take control of my life and contribute to the greater good of society, I came across as an idealist that avoids conventional work.

In the interviews I was often asked to explain FEMEN’s relevance for the Netherlands. I was honest that FEMEN Netherlands was a small group of women without clear goals but gave my reasons why we should be active. The work force was the first thing on my mind, where starters struggle to keep contracts and interns are being exploited (Smit June 2013). In another article I argued that Dutch people are not critical enough because of the welfare and women often think they do not have to fight for anything anymore (de Vries 2013). However Dutch women encounter problems when they eventually decide to have children and try to combine this with a career, battling expensive childcare and holes in the resume. Although it is the general impression that female emancipation is completed in the Netherlands, my main arguments were the exploitation of women in the workforce and sex industry:

“Women are still not equal to men at work. If a Dutch woman wants to make a career she has to act like a man. In addition Dutch women, just like in the rest of the Western world, are reduced to objects of lust. With the worst outcomes the porno industry, prostitution and sex trafficking” (Kist 2013).

In this article my feminist polemic was loud and clear. However sometimes I agreed that Dutch women have a good life in comparison to other places. I envisioned that Dutch women could be role models and inspire oppressed women to stand up for themselves (Nagtegaal 2013). I think this resonated with the journalist because it hit the Dutch philanthropic vein.

Occasionally FEMEN Netherlands was portrayed in alignment with Dutch values such as tolerance, freedom of speech and the right to protest (‘Geen wodka, wel blote borsten op Gay Pride’ 2013, Smit July 2013, de Vries 2013, van Rossum 2013, Renout 2013, ‘Bloot protest en een kiekje’ 2013, ‘Ludiek protest tijdens rijtour’ 2013, Beumer 2013, Bemelman 2013, de
Ruiter 2013, Spuiten en Slikken 2013). The Homomonument action was painted as a friendly protest in support of oppressed minorities in Russia (Smit July 2013). However, as FEMEN Netherlands became more critical in targeting national events such as Prinsjesdag and Nationale Synode, we were ridiculed for cross-passing Dutch values. A news item at national TV featured compromising scenes of my arrest while I screamed FEMEN in a trance:

“And this, this is not allowed on Prinsjesdag. [...] What seemed to pass smoothly, there were two arrests of, according to the police, two half naked women, that caused a brief moment of unrest. [...] If you demonstrate near the Golden Carriage than you might fill in that you will get arrested” (NOS op 3 September 17th, 2013).

The news did not seem to appreciate my feminist snap because it targeted an event of national value. On another occasion the newspaper Trouw leaked the announcement about an intended protest at Nationale Synode from the press release. The press made news about this protest on three occasions during the day; first they announced that FEMEN was coming to Nationale Synode, then they announced that FEMEN was not coming because attention was achieved, finally they discussed POW News intervention at Nationale Synode with hired models to represent FEMEN (Nationale Synode is een PowNed een stap voor 2013). The following day Trouw published an interview that attempted to discredit the protest:

“First the feminist action group FEMEN wanted to come to Nationale Synode with their naked breastprotest. Because, they emailed, the church oppresses women and homosexuals. When the action was leaked by Trouw, FEMEN moved the protest from Dordrecht to Utrecht. To the Dom church, one of the most progressive churches of the Netherlands, with a female pastor and homosexuals in church functions” (van Beek 2013).

We relocated to the Dom church because it has traces of 1566 iconoclasm by Protestants against the Catholic Church featuring statues with smashed faces. Our fighting spirit and strategic change of location were not celebrated in this case because we dared to critique Dutch symbols of power. Although the press could not suppress our feminist polemic because of freedom of speech, they tried to discredit it through ridicule.

While in the Netherlands I had a face, a name, and was telling my own story, abroad my media representation was anonymous. There, I was just one of many activists surrounding the FEMEN leaders that took the stage. During my first trip to Paris I was filmed walking on the streets with FEMEN leaders and French-Arab feminists Safia Lebdi and Loubna Méliane, throwing my fist up in the air under Sacré-Cœur to mark that sextremism has arrived (Sarret 2012). During the protest in Hamburg I was in the front row near FEMEN leader Sasha Shevchenko, so that I made it into most of the pictures (‘Femen in Herbertstraße Nackt-Protest und Fackelzug gegen Prostitution’ 2013, ‘Femen: Nackt-Proteste in der Herbertstraße’ 2013). The following day Hamburg Bild published a general impression of Herbertstrasse protest (Wilkens 2013), and Sasha was interviewed by Zeit to elaborate our motives (Fetz 2013). Back in Paris all eyes were on FEMEN leader Inna Shevchenko. In 2013 during my first visit to the Headquarters I was filmed for a documentary, where my line was:

“I represent FEMEN Netherlands” (Femen: Naked War 2014 [22:54]).

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3 Prinsjesdag is a Dutch ritualistic event that used to celebrate the birthday of Princes of Orange, organised yearly on the third Tuesday in September. On this day the state government comprised of Eerste Kamer and Tweede Kamer presents the ‘throne speech’ that includes the government policy for the coming year. The event features a riding tour of the Golden Carriage with the current monarch of the Netherlands from Palace Noordeinde to the Ridderzaal in the courtyard of The Hague.

4 Nationale Synode is a Dutch Christian convention that takes place yearly since 2010 in De Grote Kerk in Dordrecht. The event is inspired by the Synode of Dordrecht, a convention of the Reformed Church that took place in 1618-1619.
In 2014 on my second visit to the Paris Headquarters I was filmed during the training as part of the group, while Inna did the talking (France: Here's how Femen prepare for topless action 2014 [0:09, 0:46] A l'intérieur du nouveau QG de Femen 2014 [0:44, 1:36]). To unwind and make some money FEMEN organised a party that was heavily guarded by police on the street because of threats of far right and religious extremists. Despite of that I was featured dancing the night away as one of the girls with flower crowns (FEMEN Inauguration sous tension du nouveau QG français / Clichy (92) France 20 avril 2014 [13:42-14:10]). On the last day of the boot camp we held a protest with all attending activists, and I was documented as one of the soldiers marching against Marine Le Pen as Inna provided the voiceover again (Femen activists rally against French far-right in Paris 2014 [0:06, 0:18, 0:22], Femen hold topless protest outside National Front campaign launch 2014 [0:01]).

Both dialogue and representation of otherness are tools wielded by FEMEN to promote its feminist polemic. FEMEN trademarks its own otherness as originally Ukrainian feminist movement that emerged without a theoretic background, out of personal struggle of young women. I have been retelling FEMEN stories through my personal accounts. Imbuing my body image with sextremism influenced my attitude and translated into figurative storytelling. Changing my posture from huddled to straight during an interview made me into an assertive speaker. Making a fist to show off the tattoo on my wrist added spunk to my embodiment of FEMEN. In alignment with FEMEN's devotion to media I surrendered myself to public opinion. I embodied FEMEN through personal accounts of lived experience. My full details were regularly published to validate FEMEN in the Netherlands. Often my Ukrainian ethnicity and female gender served to colour my activism. I was not fully aware of the consequences of sharing my personal information with the press, however in the process I emerged as a political storyteller. I established myself as a generational feminist destined to become FEMEN. My encounter with misogyny in Ukraine became the background of my activism. I shared my story of reclaiming nudity through topless protest from being exploited in modelling. My experience at work illustrated problems of starters on the job market. I pointed out that being a woman emerges as a problem when you decide to combine children with a career and was critical about the sexualisation of women in Western society. Through confrontation with press I learned to speak in opposition to validate my activism in Dutch context. Despite my compliance to produce embodied political stories, the press often represented me as a rebel without a cause because I did not have a job. They treated FEMEN as productive or counterproductive whenever it suited the picture of Netherlands as a progressive country. This diverted attention from personal empowerment. While abroad I was robbed of my individual identity and served as a pawn in the FEMEN game.
Collateral Damage

“Sometimes we are just the collateral damage in someone else’s war against themselves.”
– Eden 2018

When I began to revisit the cultural artefacts remaining from my activity in FEMEN, I experienced a lot of Resistance. I was putting off my visual analysis until the last moment, and when I finally got myself together, I could not handle it:

“I am hit by a wave of emotions and turn off the video. ‘I just can’t watch this!’ [...] because I just cannot help feeling sorry for myself” (Myshko 2018).

This observation emerged from watching the Prinsjesdag detention scene while reading and talking to Alma Persson about repair work in the military (Persson 2012). Persson noted how soldiers in the military used comforting and ego-boosting stories to repair their broken masculinity after an exercise with pepper spray that made them cry in front of each other (Persson 2012). I disengaged from FEMEN because of strong feelings of confusion but also hurt. Through Persson’s article I realised that male bonding allows tenderness. As FEMEN soldiers we could not afford this because it was perceived as weak. This emotional restriction caused a self-critical attitude supported by criticism of FEMEN leaders, press and public. In our discussion of my emotional blockage towards the cultural artefacts of FEMEN, Persson observed “your image of FEMEN activist was damaged” (Persson 2018). Converted to military jargon this is collateral damage: “injury inflicted on something other than an intended target” (Merriam-Webster 2018). In this case my feminist polemic and feminist snap unintentionally turned against me and hurt my feelings. Looking back at my experiences, I would like to argue that some damage is beyond repair and has lasting effect. In this chapter I would like to reflect on the events that discredited my actions and led me to disengage from FEMEN.

My first damaging encounter was being censored on TV. Before the interview for television newscast NOS op 3 about the scandal that a man was leader of FEMEN, journalist Thomas Spekschoor asked me to avoid the word patriarchy because the viewers would not understand (NOS op 3 September 5th, 2013). In that moment I felt like Jim Morrison portrayed by Val Kilmer in the movie The Doors (1991), when he was asked by a representative of The Ed Sullivan Show not to sing “Girl, we couldn’t get much higher” because that refers to smoking weed and that was indecent at the time. Instead the representative proposed to sing “Girl we couldn’t get much better”. Of course, Jim Morrison rebelled and sang “Girl, we couldn’t get much higher, YEAH!” during the live broadcast. However, Jim Morrison was a man, and I did not have the balls. I was flabbergasted and felt torn between staying true to my feminist polemic and getting exposure for it. I felt like I had no choice but to swallow the word patriarchy and somehow pulled through the interview. However, FEMEN cannot be explained without its enemy.

On another occasion I was interviewed by Trouw in an attempt to discredit my protest aimed at a church convention Nationale Synode in Dordrecht. This time they published the word readers would not understand:

“We demand the total rejection of patriarchy. Feminism and religion don’t go together. Every religion sees women as second-rate creatures” (Van Beek 2013).

On this occasion the controversial word underlined the ridiculousness of FEMEN’s claims, because it is popular belief that patriarchy is an outdated term. At some point the journalist asked me something about secularism and I had to admit that I did not know what it meant. This made me feel stupid, as if I did not know what I was talking about. Absurdly enough I
was not demanding secularism but was criticising the church as a patriarchal institution where men speak, and women perform (Femen over de Dordtse synode 2013). However, the journalist chose to publish my defeat:

“Maybe the Dutch church won in this case. They saved their face; on the radio the spokesman of the Nationale Synode said that the church is open to everyone, even to us. ‘God is sweet, we are sweet to women’ – beautiful. But again, it was a man speaking. I don’t hear the women. So long our protest has a point” (Van Beek 2013).

Although I felt defeated, I tried to save my face by turning the conversation back around to my initial claim. However, my feminist polemic was exposed for its blind rage. This was the only article that fully uncensored my feminist polemic to use it against me.

So far, I was accumulating collateral damage through language, but things got physical when FEMEN Netherlands targeted national events that were heavily guarded by police. During the protest at Prinsjesdag I was arrested and surrounded by at least fifteen policemen. They dragged me away from the riding tour of King Willem Alexander, held me down and shielded me from the public with police bicycles (FEMEN door politie over Plein gesleurd, Prinsjesdag 2013). I kept screaming protest slogans and performing a feminist snap for a half an hour, before they dragged me into a side street where a change of guard took place and I was held down by two policewomen (‘Politie houdt blote activisten aan langs route Gouden Koets’ 2013). The change to policewomen was undermining my claim to “stop budget cuts and invest in women” because apparently women work for the police. I perceived this like their way of saying that emancipation is complete, and women do not need activism. Looking back at the pictures and videos of this protest is petrifying. In contrast with the overwhelming presence of the police my frail body looks helpless. The only thing that peeks through the police and bicycle barricade is my shrill voice. Although I was protesting with my voice despite restriction of movement until I was put into a police van, I cannot override the feeling of defeat.

The event that exposed the Netherlands as a police state to me and made a lasting dent in my perception of freedom, was the Nationale Synode at Grote Kerk in Dordrecht. Although the protest did not take place there because Trouw leaked the news in the morning, the mere announcement that FEMEN was coming triggered a media hysteria and overwhelming presence of police. In my mind I connected the hysteria to the picture I uploaded at night as header of the FEMEN Facebook page that featured raging activists in underwear holding torches (RD Nationale Synode). Captivated by FEMEN’s feminist snap, the media made news about the action on three occasions during the day. Eventually POW News grabbed the opportunity to conduct an experiment and hired three models to attempt to enter the highly guarded church. As a side effect they filmed the occupation of the church and patrolling police dogs (POW News 2013). I remember coming across a picture of police patrolling around the church in groups of four: two policemen and two policewomen. But the police dogs made it feel like a medieval witch hunt. In the POW News episode, the three models representing FEMEN were at first denied entry to the church. Then a representative of the church came out and invited the girls inside on the condition they would sit next to him. Watching that news episode made me feel extremely irritated about the innocence about his patronising behaviour (RD Nationale Synode). The church representative told the news that there were many beautiful women in the church, but the camera showed predominantly old men (POW News 2013). The ironic thing was that POW News celebrated freedom of speech and provocation, taking a pun at the serious consequences the protest had for me. POW News discredited FEMEN’s protest because they proved that women could enter the church after all. Although to me it was clear that FEMEN was not aloud to enter on its own terms.
The sharpness of wit, responsiveness and risk accompanying FEMEN activity was exciting to me. However, the pressure to perform mentally and physically proved too much for others and I was gradually losing activists. Elena disengaged because she did not receive approval of FEMEN leaders after the action she co-organised at Homomonument. In addition, she claimed that her private Facebook and Twitter accounts were under permanent hacker attacks. Because of this she felt like she could not work and so her life and income were in danger. She took down the Facebook page and email address of FEMEN Holland because she had “invented” that name and did not want FEMEN to use it. Helena disengaged after the FEMEN boot camp in Utrecht. We were training for two days, one of which was filmed for a television program (Spuiten en Slikken 2013). After the TV crew left we were discussing future actions and Helena pointed out Prinsjesdag as an urgent target. During the conversation I mentioned that Anna Hutsol told me: “So you can be a leader if you want but you should pick the pretty ones for actions” (RD Reproducing the FEMEN boot camp). This triggered a sudden response from Helena, and she quit at the spot. Jilvi was next. After the Homomonument protest she did not participate in the training and protests at Ukrainian Embassy and Prinsjesdag, so Julka and I assumed that Jilvi lost interest in FEMEN. However, she came around and expressed her sympathy to conduct an action. The night before in Amsterdam, I was doing a photo shoot with Julka for the online campaign against prostitution. Jilvi called to get the details about the Nationale Synode protest we would do in the morning. I was secretive on the phone because I was worried our action would be found out by the police. Jilvi was demanding an explanation of the outcome because she thought we were going to hurt people (RD Nationale Synode). Julka and I were so upset and shocked by her suspicion of violence that we decided to do the action without her. I did not see Jilvi again although we emailed back and force in May 2014. Julka joined FEMEN before I went to the boot camp in Paris and was by my side until the end. I began to think about disengaging from FEMEN after Julka expressed that she had enough of my critical dominance. At that point she was helping me to manage FEMEN Netherlands Gmail and social media accounts. I got mad that Julka was engaging with a high school student who wanted to do a presentation about FEMEN, because in my mind that was a waste of time. I was aiming only at mainstream press exposure.

Eventually I snapped under pressure of disapproval of FEMEN leaders. First, I was disappointed that Anna Hutsol criticized my protest at Prinsjesdag. According to Hutsol the result was a mess, there was no clear picture of me reaching the target, just struggling with the police. Although I chickened out and did not jump on the Golden Carriage of King Willem Alexander, a picture of me with a fist in the air accompanied by two policemen was published on the second page of the special issue of Algemeen Dagblad about Prinsjesdag (‘Ludiek protest tijdens rijtour’ 2013). The title proclaimed it a “ludiek protest” that earned its meaning through the Provo movement that conducted playful provocations of established order in the Netherlands during 1960s. However non-of our actions could recuperate the damage done by the documentary by Kitty Green that exposed Victor Svyatski as the tyrannical leader of FEMEN (Ukraine is not a Brothel 2013):

“It was a shock to us. We did not get information about the movie in advance from Ukraine […] Our trust has been violated. We thought Svyatski was just an advisor” (Smit September 2013).

Provo was a Dutch provocation group that formed in 1965 and was active in Amsterdam for two years. The name Provo was derived from provocation and their practice was rooted in anarchism. During their activity the Provo’s organized events to disturb the public order and agitate law enforcement to break its own rules. Provo’s have been criticized as provocation in the name of provocation and seemingly pointless, however through their actions they revealed the hypocrisy of the established order.
I repeated myself to NOS op 3 where it was suggested that my reaction was based on the description Svyatski gave of FEMEN activists:

“These women are weak. They don’t have a strong character. They don’t even have the wish to be strong. Instead they subject themselves, they have no spine and they are not punctual” (NOS op 3 September 5th, 2013).

I had to defend myself against the scandal without having seen the movie. During the Q&A about Ukraine is Not a Brothel at IDFA in Amsterdam, Inna Shevchenko claimed that FEMEN movement broke free from Svyatski when she moved the headquarters to Paris. She continued that new branches of FEMEN were opening all over the world, however when the interviewer attempted to say that there was a chapter in Amsterdam she ignored him and continued that the movement was developing without men (Extended Q&A Ukraine Is Not a Brothel 2013 [1:05-1:40]). This was a blow to FEMEN Netherlands, while we needed her support to regain our trust and credibility.

Finally, I disengaged because of personal disenchantment with FEMEN leaders. Things that I brushed off before, suddenly were weighing down on me. I recalled that Sasha Shevchenko told Irina from FEMEN Germany that I was “like a little sister” and Inna Shevchenko joked that at FEMEN France they thought I was a “KGB agent”. These figurations suggested that I was not on the same level with FEMEN leaders and this created distance between us. I remembered how on my first trip to Paris I experienced how Inna and Sasha were begging Anna Hutsol like little children to buy them heels, because she was obviously in charge of the money (RD First encounter with FEMEN). In Hamburg I saw Sasha lounging in bed all day whining on Skype to her mother that she should be left alone to do her thing with FEMEN (RD Protesting in Hamburg). When Julka and I got fined 454 euro for the Prinsjesdag protest, Anna Hutsol made a Facebook post to raise money and Inna Shevchenko asked if we managed to pay, but we did not receive financial support from them. Back in Paris I was struggling to keep up financially with Inna’s taste for restaurants (RD FEMEN boot camp in Paris). This gave me the impression that FEMEN was collecting money so that Inna could eat in restaurants three times a day (RD Distancing from FEMEN). The last drop was my visit to Inna’s room:

“The only thing I remember is the complete and utter mess around me. There were clothes everywhere. […] When I saw her room, I realised that there is nothing to look up to. Inna can’t even clean her room!” (RD Distancing from FEMEN).

This made the difference to me because I am a hoarder and have a problem keeping up with cleanliness. I consider this my weakness and simply cannot look up to someone who is a mess.

In January 2014 I decided to quit. I deactivated the FEMEN Netherlands Facebook page and stopped all communication through our Gmail and Twitter, but that was not the end. According to my archives I was attempting to restart FEMEN Netherlands in April 2014. I rallied Julka, two artist friends Hinde and Nikki, and Maria Dominguez, a master student doing research about FEMEN, to join me for the international FEMEN boot camp in Paris. There we participated in the Fascist Epidemic protest against Marine Le Pen (Femen activists rally against French far-right in Paris 2014, Femen hold topless protest outside National Front campaign launch 2014). During the arrest I was injured when I was shoved into the police van:

“I fell head first on the ground and was pushed down. For a moment I thought they were going to break my neck. It was uncomfortable and scary. My fellow activists rushed to help and finally I was released. But my neck hurt the rest of the week” (RD Fascist Epidemic).
At the police station I complained about my injury and was taken to a doctor on the other side of Paris. The doctor did a mock examination and reassured me that everything was ok. All this time I was topless and wearing a plastic bag because our coats were stolen. Back in the cell at the police station:

“Inna was making jokes and having a laugh with the others while I was lying on the floor in front of them. I made myself small on a mattress and was asking myself what I was doing there. For a moment I thought, I just want to be with a man instead. Then I caught myself thinking this and decided I was a bad feminist” (RD Fascist Epidemic).

I could not stand my own weakness. My feminist polemic turned against me. Upon my return home I was overwhelmed by unfinished papers and projects for my Master in Fashion Strategy. In addition, I was doing a Minor in Gender Studies at Utrecht University. In August 2014 my life took a turn when I suffered a mental breakdown. My weakened mental health became an obstacle and made it impossible to resume FEMEN.

Ultimately, I have demonstrated that my embodiment of sextremism led to an unapologetically self-critical attitude that accumulated collateral damage. During this process my feminist polemic and feminist snap worked against me. My reflections on cultural artefacts and my relationship to other activists demonstrated that negative emotions pile up and cause permanent damage if they remain unresolved. Although Persson suggested that it is possible to repair damaged self-perception of soldiers through comforting and ego-boosting language, the damage I accumulated as a FEMEN soldier was beyond repair and led to my disengagement from the movement. My relationships with other activists were sporadic and restrained. A self-critical attitude, combined with disapproval of FEMEN leaders, press manipulations that undermined my actions and police display of power and brutality have contributed to my demise. The combination of fulltime master’s degree to fund my FEMEN activity through a student loan, and a Minor in Gender Studies to validate my feminist activism, was a Molotov cocktail. Eventually I broke down under the pressure and could not fix myself. I felt alone because the other members of FEMEN Netherlands disengaged and I was not getting emotional support from FEMEN leaders. In fact, in her public statements Inna Shevchenko ignored that FEMEN Netherlands ever existed. Even though my activism and ultimately leadership of FEMEN Netherlands was approved by Sasha Shevchenko, Inna Shevchenko and Anna Hutsol, my achievements were not considered worthy of addition in the FEMEN canon. But I was there, I was published, and I remember what happened. This was my story!
Conclusion

In this thesis I came full circle from my initial proposition to Sasha Shevchenko to write something about FEMEN. Upon her suggestion I became an activist and went through the fabric of sextremist experience. To reflect on my involvement, I wrote down my memories and analyzed my accounts of empowerment and hurt. As the title of my thesis promised I told you a little story about big issues. I have touched the subjects of media representation of feminist activism, censorship, national politics, the struggle to subvert power, police persecution of street activism, and generational strife for independence, among others. Through little stories that emerged from revisiting cultural artefacts and my Retrospective Diary, I illustrated my embodiment of sextremism. These stories presented my corporeal insights as a soldier of feminism from the battle field of public opinion, adding a lacking insider perspective to academic research on FEMEN.

In my research I aimed to answer the following questions: How is FEMEN being produced through sextremism and how does this process affect the activist? What is sextremism? How does sextremism produce a FEMEN soldier? What problems emerge in the process? How is aggression appropriated? What does it lead to? What did sextremism mean to me and how did it transform me? By answering these questions, I wanted to explore internal processes of FEMEN to demystify how it operates and demonstrate how it influences its followers.

The research that I produced suggested, through an autophenomenographic analysis of my personal experience, how FEMEN employs sextremism to create soldiers of feminism. It proposed that sextremism is an attitude, a way of life and technology of resistance. For me sextremism embodied feminist polemic that turned against patriarchy through topless protest. Through personal accounts I illustrated how I internalized this aggressive femininity during physical and mental training. I argued that in protest FEMEN activists communicated to the public and mobilized new activists through feminist snap. This led to the observation that sextremism produced visual activism that internalized feminist polemic and transformed it into figurative storytelling. I explained how I reproduced sextremism through body image that made me assertive and empowered me in action. In turn I demonstrated how personal accounts of sextremist embodiment and problems encountered as a woman in the world reproduced FEMEN’s fight in the media. During interviews with the press I pinpointed topical feminist issues, making FEMEN real and relevant in Western society. However, FEMEN Netherlands was criticized for cross-passing national values and power symbols. The media appropriated the spectacle created by FEMEN Netherlands but often distorted it and bend the news to fit its own agenda. In my experience sextremism was empowering but also destructive. It promoted an unapologetic self-critical attitude that accumulated collateral damage in battle. The sporadic and restrained relationships between activists did not allow intimacy. Because of the eye of the media, tenderness was perceived as weakness and was not aloud. The combination of criticism, media scrutiny and police persecution hurt my feelings. These unresolved feelings of hurt led to resentment and disengagement from FEMEN.

This research contributed a detailed personal account of a FEMEN activist. It encompassed my full story of becoming and disengaging from FEMEN while acknowledging my feelings. My analysis differs from previous research on FEMEN, because of its autophenomenographic approach and insider perspective. Not only have I merged author/researcher/researched and provided an introspective account of sextremism, I connected it to relevant embodiment concepts that helped to explain sextremist technology of empowerment and unintended side effects.
In my account of FEMEN I did not focus on nudity. Even though bare breasts served as a passport to tell my story to the press, I did not feel that my nudity was the point. I used bare breasts to trigger interest in what I had to say about the politics behind my actions. My claims about empowerment may be disregarded by assuming that I tried to justify rude behaviour and diverted attention from reckless cultural appropriation of FEMEN. However, my contribution challenges the notion that FEMEN unanimously imposes nudity on women minorities abroad. In the Netherlands my protests targeted Dutch patriarchal institutions that disguise themselves as progressive because they employ a few women. Although it has been argued by numerous scholars that FEMEN encompasses mostly university educated women, there is an assumption that we are familiar with intersectionality as ‘common sense’ in the tradition of Western feminist theory. However Western knowledge was systematically unavailable to women in Ukraine and I learned about intersectionality from my privileged access to Gender Studies at Utrecht University, at 28 years old. Repeating the mistakes of Western occupants by attempting to save Muslim women from their traditional attire and relationship with men, caused FEMEN’s transcontinental solidarity to be confused with neo-colonialism and silencing of Muslim women, while women of Arabic descent such as Safia Lebdi and Loubna Méliane played an important role in establishing this agenda.

My style of writing was experimental and built on the diary genre. Although I embarked on an academic thesis, I did not have as much experience as my peer students. Most of them have completed at least a bachelor’s degree at University while I had to do with 30 EC in Minor and 45 EC in Master credits. Subsequently I was insecure about my academic writing and decided to compensate through evocative storytelling. My art school background has taught me the art of bricolage. This merged well with my chosen research methods based on autoethnography and autophenomenography. By exploring writing as a method of inquiry I learned to analyze my experiences and relate them to feminist theory. Writing this thesis was emotionally difficult and resembled psychoanalytic therapy. However, I emerged victorious: wrote a memoire, sorted out my feelings and gained closure.

It was my intention to write myself into feminist theory and share my introspective knowledge of FEMEN with the academic community. Through this thesis I attempted to contribute to academic contextualizing of sexism. My personal account shined a light on the experiences of a FEMEN activist that previously stayed behind curtains. In the process my research raised new questions: How would FEMEN’s representation be affected when introspection of all activists would be considered? What would be the outcome if press and academia would focus on the plurality of voices and individual stories of feminist embodiment within FEMEN, in stead of focussing on most celebrated members and group activity?
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**Empirical Materials**

**Media**


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**Retrospective Diary**

Reclaiming the Body  
First Encounter with FEMEN  
Gogbot Festival  
Protesting in Hamburg  
Homomonument  
FEMEN Boot Camp in Paris  
Reproducing the FEMEN Boot Camp  
Ukrainian Embassy  
Prinsjesdag  
Nationale Synode  
Distancing from FEMEN  
Fascist Epidemic  
Beyond Repair