

## “Visualizing Russian Feminism”

Smith College  
Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies Program  
Neilson Library KnowledgeLab  
December 9, 2016

Submitted by Hilary Fink (Smith College)

As the culminating project for RES 236, *Contemporary Russian Women Writers*, Smith College students Arielle Barylsky ('20), Emily Carlson ('18), Emily Paruolo ('17), Alexandra Ostrowski Schilling ('18) and Olena Zozulevich ('17) presented a multi-media exhibit, “Visualizing Russian Feminism,” that explored female representation and identity in Russia from the early twentieth-century revolutionary period into the twenty-first century. The display was divided into five areas:

### Soviet Propaganda Posters:

Olena Zozulevich displayed a number of Soviet propaganda posters spanning the years from 1917-1950, and provided the following context: “While 19th-century Russian literary depictions of women focused on femininity, motherhood, and domesticity, Soviet propaganda posters put forth an image of women as strong, confident, and equally capable citizens of the Soviet state as men [...] Responsibility for family life still fell on women’s shoulders at the same time as they were expected to be productive members of the Soviet labor force, however, [therefore demanding] a very difficult balancing act as women attempted to fulfill both work demands and provide for the needs of their children.”

### Literature:

Emily Carlson’s area of the exhibit focused on selections of Russian women’s prose from the early 20th century to the early 21st century. In her presentation of works by Alexandra Kollontai, Natalya Baranskaya, Tatyana Tolstaya, Maria Arbatova, and Anna Babiashkina, Ms. Carlson highlighted “a range of topics: from motherhood and balancing work and family, to societal expectations of women and their relationships, to sexuality and desire. [These authors’] writing challenges ideas about womanhood in each era.”

### Women’s Film:

Alexandra Ostrowski Schilling presented clips, screen shots and explanatory text for Alina Rudnitskaya’s *Vixen Academy: How To Be a Bitch* (2007), Natalia Novik’s *The Cart* (2012), and Oksana Mikheeva’s, *Defocusin* (2013). As Ms. Ostrowski Schilling noted, “[These films] all offer insight into the work of contemporary Russian women filmmakers, grappling with topics from domestic life to revolutionary movements to women’s perceptions of themselves.”

### Cartoons:

Emily Paruolo presented a selection of contemporary Russian comics, including *Oblaka* (2006) by Namida (pseudonym of Anastasia Vasil'eva), *Ms. Marvel Volume 3* (2014), and *Exlibrium* (2015) by Natalia Devova. As Ms. Paruolo notes, “A first wave of Russian comics appeared in the late 1980s, coinciding with Perestroika, but they gained popularity in earnest with the advent of the Internet in the 2000’s. The freedom of the Internet in particular helped many female comic artists develop and gain prominence [...] [T]he comic series *Exlibrium* tells the story of a young woman tasked with keeping fictional characters in their books, a sharp departure [from traditional gender roles and stereotypes].”

### Art & Social Engagement:

Arielle Barylsky notes that “... the art world in Russia is thriving. In particular, there is a rise in Russian women artists that self-identify as feminist or whose artwork visibly promotes feminist ideology.” Ms. Barylsky presented a number of examples of contemporary Russian women’s feminist art, including:

*ZHENA*, street art collective, two street stencils, one of which challenges “the expectation of women to be unquestionably sacrificial, and the other exposes the nature of sexual violence.”

*Wonderzine*, online magazine for women, topics include fashion and beauty but also articles on domestic violence and depression, highlights successful and innovative women leaders in all fields under its “Heroine” tab.

*Pussy Riot* is a simultaneous punk rock band and art collective whose members - Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samutsevich - were put on trial and eventually sentenced to a two-year term in a labor camp after an activist performance lasting under a minute in the Christ the Savior Church in 2012. The group is still active today after having been released, and their lyrics revolve around concepts of LGBTQ rights, feminism, and political engagement.