

Farrah Karapetian

LEAD APRON

Early on in the protests that prompted President Hosni Mubarak's resignation and the end of a nearly six-decade-long secular dictatorship in Egypt, an illustrated tactical brochure was leaked online and translated into English for Western readers. The pamphlet, titled "How to Protest Intelligently," assumed the voice of the Egyptian people and listed demands and goals alongside instructions on how to carry out acts of civil disobedience as effectively and safely as possible. Among these, a diagram of "necessary clothing and accessories" demonstrated the ways in which everyday items could be strategically deployed to outfit a makeshift, nonviolent people's army: comfortable sneakers to run in; a hoodie, goggles, and scarf to protect the upper body, face, eyes, and mouth; thick gloves for handling hot tear-gas canisters; a

pot-lid shield; and a can of spray paint with which to thwart police by obscuring their vision through visors and windshields.

LA-based artist Farrah Karapetian adopted this document as the basis for "Accessory to Protest," a series of photograms and objects (all 2011) through which she continues her exploration of the shared concerns of photography and sculpture. Entering the exhibition space of Lead Apron, a rare-books store and gallery, visitors were confronted first with the photogram *Accessory to Protest 4 (Red Hoodie)*. At about four by two-and-a-half feet, the work features a ghostlike and seemingly incandescent hoodie floating against a burnt-umber background, the garment's zipper a gleaming streak. Karapetian's placement of this work seemed meant to implicate the viewer in the pamphlet's provocations to action, as displayed on a clothes hanger nearby was *Negative: Hoodie*, the very object—what she termed a "constructed negative"—the artist had crafted out of diaphanous organza in order to make the image. In all, eight unique photograms depicted as many "accessories," each life-size and aglow in vivid cadmium red and yellow hues evocative of X-rays and burns. Joining these prints were two additional constructed negatives, *Negative: Spray Can* and *Negative: Sneakers*, cast in transparent resin and effervescent with bubbles of captured air. Save for the print featuring a scarf, *Accessory to Protest 7 (Yellow Scarf)*, which appeared as a jellyfish-like mass of tentacles, almost all the photogrammed objects were readily legible. They were also doubly exposed, indexing a temporal gap that implied both motion and the

Farrah Karapetian, *Accessory to Protest 4 (Red Hoodie)*, 2011, chromogenic photogram, 47 x 30".



proliferation of individual gestures into that of the multitude. The urgency and utility of Karapetian's subject matter was further amplified by the prints' hastily cut edges, appearing as though torn from the zine's original binding. Finally, the pamphlet, too, was replicated—to scale, in an eight-page set of photograms.

In contrast to twentieth-century modernist engagements with the photogram, which pressed the technique into the service of formal abstraction, Karapetian has explored its "hyper-analogue" qualities, emphasizing the connection of her images to three-dimensional space. And while the photogram has continued to figure in the abstract, cameraless photography of several generations of Los Angeles artists from James Welling and Barbara Kasten to Walead Beshty and Kelly Kleinschrodt, Karapetian's engagement locates a revolutionary metaphor in the short-circuiting of mediation

that happens when the camera is abandoned. "Accessory" here alludes, of course, not only to the objects, but to the abettors of revolution as well: the protester, primarily, and secondly, the imagemaker, who transmits the protester's actions to the eyes of the world. This second role has been instrumental in the domino effect of recent popular uprisings, from the Arab Spring to the American Fall. In re-creating the Egyptian pamphlet's protest accessories on her way to picturing them, Karapetian explicitly recodes photography, turning an act of reproduction into one of production, transforming the indexical "that-has-been" of the medium into the proleptic "this will be." And yet photography has not been entirely instrumentalized here; ultimately, the works' beauty (and, in some cases, preciousness) tempers that possibility.

—Natilee Harren