

Filippo Minelli uses smoke to spotlight political and social issues

By Wilfred Chan, CNN

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Photos: "Bold Statements" by Filippo Minelli

"Shape US B/S-B" by Filippo Minelli – Filippo Minelli first began using colored smoke bombs in a series called "Silence, Shapes" -- which later evolved into "Bold Statements."

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(CNN) — Our time is beset by a special kind of anxiety. The media and the Internet have become personal intravenous hookups to images of crisis -- violence, disaster, political upheaval -- fed to us instantly, wherever we are. For consumers of media, this condition can feel so total it can feel numbing and almost futile to discuss.

But this is precisely what Italian artist Filippo Minelli wants to talk about. Specifically, is there an artistic aesthetic that can explain the way we think about emergencies? If so, could we say the same for the social movements that respond to them?

"Bold Statements" is his attempt at an answer: a performance, photography and installation work he completed last year but feels even more relevant today.



In order to talk about the idea of modern media spectacle, Minelli isn't shy about creating them. His art depends on two main devices: smoke bombs, and huge flags with slogans, which he introduces into public places, often without warning, to the surprise of passers-by.

Yet there's a twist: the smoke bombs are harmless, and dazzlingly colored -- and the phrases on his flags fall somewhere between tongue-in-cheek and totally meaningless.

"I'm interested in the aesthetics of politics rather than politics itself," he tells me. "I want to replicate the aesthetic of this historical period, this constant emergency that we are facing."

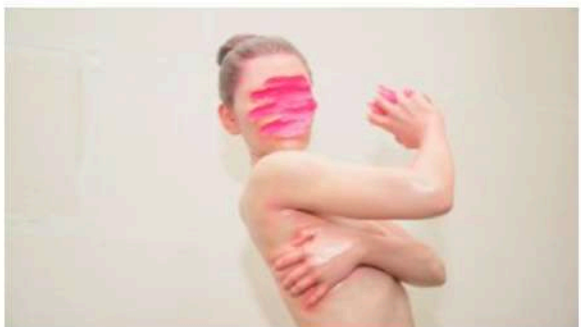
Blowing Smoke

In the artist's concept, the smoke bomb represents the visual metaphor for "emergency" -- think about the scenes of conflict that parade across a television screen on an average evening news broadcast: funnels of smoke signifying a fresh airstrike; clouds of tear gas billowing after a street protest.

But Minelli colors the smoke in beautiful shades of pink, blue, green, and orange -- an incongruity that invites his audience to take a second look.



"I am acknowledging the nature of smoke and using it for another purpose, political and artistic," he explains.



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It's a tactic that's gotten unpredictable results, the artist says. "In Moscow, some people did not even care about it, but another time security showed up straight away.

"In London, it was very welcomed by the people passing by; everyone was asking questions -- 'what is this about, can we take part in it?'

"But in South Korea they were super scared. They were freaking out, screaming, picking up the phone," he recalls. "I think they're not used to unexplainable things

False flags

The opposite side of Minelli's work involves large, colorful flags that recall both nation-state and political movement -- yet ultimately point to neither.

Emblazoned with nonsensical maxims like "Rise for No Reason" and "No More Opinions," these banners seem to suggest that our political responses to serious problems may be just as incoherent as the crises themselves.

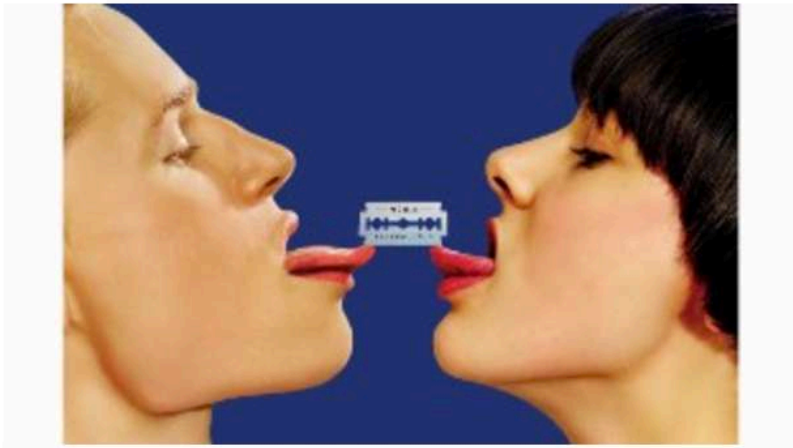
He asks pedestrians to wave the flags -- creating a public scene where the very point is that there is none. The flags are deliberately abstract, meant to suggest the "aesthetic of change" while actually containing something far more vacuous, says Minelli.



"There's a lot of human needs that are reflected in politics but sometimes politics is not the real answer to those needs," he tells me. "Everything's changing, but politics is not really keeping up with the speed of change."

Looking for a reaction

Minelli photographs his performances and incorporates them into his art installations, which ultimately ask us to rethink our reactions to crisis, and our relationships to the political world.



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someone agree with me," says Minelli.

"Art should be that thing that bugs you, makes you feel not a hundred percent comfortable, and makes you wonder outside of the mental schemes of the moment."

Suppose we could get past our ideas of what emergencies are worth gawking at, he proposes -- could we become more sensitive to more languid, but perhaps more serious problems like inequality, surveillance, climate change?

If we sensitize ourselves to the absurdity of dividing people under differently-colored banners -- what kind of existence might we be able to imagine for ourselves?

"I'm very happy when what I do manages to have people thinking. I don't really care about having