

DESIREE D'ALESSANDRO AND DIRAN LYONS BEAR ARMS: WEAPONS OF MASS TRANSFORMATION



Desiree D'Alessandro is an artist who recently earned her MFA degree as a Regents Special Fellow from UC Santa Barbara. She has exhibited works nationally and internationally at venues such as the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Brevard Art Museum, Atlantic Center for the Arts, and the Tampa Museum of Art. Her video works have screened at the 2011 European Media Art Festival in Germany, Chashama Film Festival, Open Video Conference, RE/Mixed Media Festival and the Victoria Independent Film & Video Festival in Canada.

Diran Lyons is an artist who works in different media, including video and photography, painting and drawing, stationary and kinetic sculpture, indoor and outdoor installation, and performance. His Political Remix Videos have screened at Ars Electronica, LA Shorts Festival, the Open Video Conference in NY, Athens Video Festival, amongst other notable online venues like IMDb, where his [Jake Gyllenhaal Challenges The Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize](#) (2010) was the first Political Remix to reach #1 on the IMDb most popular short film ratings.

Desiree D'Alessandro: Hello, Diran. I'm excited to ask you some questions about your work. I know your emphasis and focus have evolved over the years since we first met in Tampa, Florida in 2005. I understand you are currently a Political Remix Video practitioner, however this hasn't always been the case. What were your artistic pursuits prior to engaging remix?

Diran Lyons: I studied sculpture and painting at California State University, Fresno as an undergraduate in the late 1990s. I started making video art toward the end of my time there and became completely enamored with the medium in general by the time I graduated in 2000. I then went on to earn an MFA in New Genres at UC Santa Barbara in 2004, putting video to use in interdisciplinary, multimedia installations. Currently, I make a lot of remix work, but it wouldn't be accurate to exclusively distinguish myself as a Political Remix Video artist. I've consistently maintained an open art practice, refusing to commit to any single method of working. Ideas can find form in so many different ways. When creative people actively seek out the most powerful physical manifestations of concepts they hold to be important, unplanned and exciting discoveries often take place. This is particularly the case when allowing an idea to flow along logical or even illogical trajectories.

DD: It is interesting that you took up remix in your post-academia experience. When I was enrolled at UC Santa Barbara, I met institutional resistance in engaging the remix genre as part of my academic studies.

DL: That's right! Weren't you issued a Digital Millennium Copyright Act Violation through the institution's DMCA agent?

DD: Yes, I was issued a first-time DMCA offense for acquiring and utilizing the footage necessary to generate fair use remix works. While I had to get more creative in the way I gathered source materials, it didn't stop me from remixing. I made two remixes in direct response to their reprimanding, utilizing footage from [Step Brothers](#) (2008). The first was [WHAT?! DMCA Violation](#). It juxtaposed screen shots of the internet ban placed on my computer with a humorously defiant scene from the film.

YouTube

WHAT?! DMCA Violation (Step Brothers Remix)

libragoddess04 94 videos

0:18 / 0:31

925 views

3 likes, 0 dislikes

This video is protected as an instance of

The remix screened at the Experiments in Cinema 6.3 festival in New Mexico and the Basement

Media Festival in Boston. The other video was an [Open Video Conference Trailer](#) that advocated fair use over DMCA enforcement. I screened it at the conclusion of the lecture I presented, "[UC + DMCA](#)," in the OVC auditorium. You also contributed to the Open Video Conference by co-authoring a paper with Byron Russell on theory related to remix.

DL: Yes, a [video document of the presentation](#) is available as well as a [transcript](#). Byron Russell and I "polyfurcated" the paper into a few different but overlapping issues. Byron succinctly articulated why "Critical" Remix (as opposed to "Political" Remix or "Media Stylo") would be a more apt descriptor for the field. I encourage everyone to consult his arguments on that specific subject as well as his assertions regarding free speech and fair use in the 21st century. For my part, I fortified an ethical foundation for remix video, addressing my commentary to individuals I've encountered on both the left and right of the political spectrum who disrespect the PRV genre because, say they, it peddles in intentional obfuscation and deception (One of my favorite contemporary graffiti artists, [Tes One](#), made precisely such claims when we got into it about one of my videos on his [Facebook wall](#)). Generally, all remix utilizes what one could call a "Creative Lie," which means at base that the editor cleverly recalibrates clips ripped from context to form a sum that posits a truth proposition. I also described the Creative Lie in this [essay](#) and during this [radio interview](#), using Nietzschean aesthetic theory to demonstrate that the viewer isn't actually deceived by such works. For example, no one thinks that Obama and Jake Gyllenhaal actually sat down to debate war and foreign policy, but my editing strategy contrives the illusion of them doing so, which further makes it possible to present the video's punchline shared by many who have opposed the various wars against the Middle East. As such, remix videos don't come across as documentaries or "factual," but ostensibly as artistic creations that rebuke the powers and present deeper truths. In any case, when pondered thoroughly, the argument that these works are "deceptive" (and therefore "unethical") isn't very convincing. That's the crux of my contribution to the OVC paper.

DD: It is interesting how you're incorporating academic theory with the genre of remix, which isn't something I've frequently seen advocated in communities often emphasizing the "raw," DIY approach. I appreciate that you're not abandoning, but rather applying, your formal academic training

to the practice. How exactly did you get involved with remix and begin to hybridize these praxes?

DL: When I first encountered the PRV community in 2007, I saw the form as a new branch or offshoot for my creative practice, as a way to conjoin my love of video and the topical politics that my work often engaged with other media. I further saw an attractive egalitarian element that remix shares with drawing, one in which the primacy of "the idea" is emphasized: projects created with either medium cannot be resolved by throwing money at obstacles that arise during the creative process (as we see routinely with high budgeted films or ambitious spatial projects, for example). I really liked that aspect. Moreover, remix was and remains a way for an artist to speak directly to powerful individuals or institutions, although imbuing the work with mystery and subtly is concurrently important. A hint of ambiguity can help raise questions that get overlooked in the case of more didactic work. Finally, I was seduced by the potential for a more far-reaching conversation via an online platform, beyond the art galleries and screening venues with which I'd already been familiar. Given that I hold the most critical role of art to be creating brush fires of political discourse, it was very exciting to happen upon the PRV community online.

DD: So, given this interest in topical politics, what was your first remix and what compelled you to make it?



DL: My first Political Remix was [George W. Bush Battles Jesus Christ](#). I made it in 2007 in response to USC's call for entry to their [24/7: a](#)

[DIY Video Summit](#), which featured a PRV program curated by Jonathan McIntosh in early 2008 (As a point of historical fact, it was not screened at the event). With that remix, I juxtaposed various aggressive, pro-war statements by Bush after 9/11 vis-à-vis the pacifistic appeals of Christ as represented in Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977). Through the montage, my ambition was to problematize and undermine Bush's claims to devout Christian faith, claims he successfully used to woo the bible belt and Christian vote in the run-up to the 2000 general election.

DD: Do you feel the remix was successful in message conveyance?

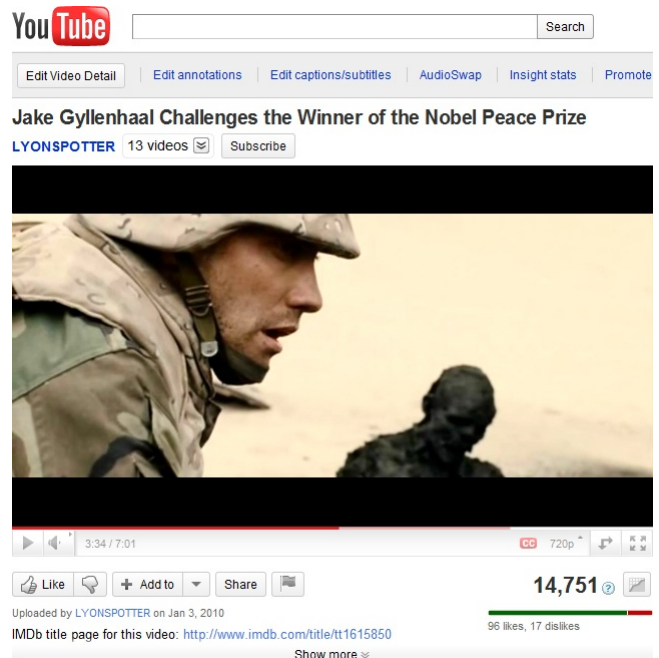
DL: Well, many viewers found the piece incapable of achieving such objectives with any sort of axiomatic leverage, for a remix of this nature intrinsically minimizes the theologico-political difficulties surrounding Christ's teachings in ways that are not present in the argumentation of historical and contemporary critical writing on the subject. A writer may use whatever words s/he chooses to support a rigorously argued scriptural position, but the remix artist finds himself constrained by the footage and commentaries available in extant filmic/video works. Yet amidst the PRV medium's limitations in presenting a holistic discerning of the biblical text, I saw the overarching value of the remix in the self-reflexive questions it generated about the nature of remix video itself, i.e., whether the genre can itself be philosophically rigorous or whether it rather stands as the catalyzing object of subsequent philosophical and political thinking. I came away leaning toward the latter.



DD: You have produced a considerable oeuvre of work since that time. What are some of your favorites and why?

DL: *Jeremiah Wright Painting a Picture of US Aggression* (2008) is my favorite. Wright truncates the issues surrounding the events he describes, but his vehement tirade coupled with the images I chose to illustrate it elicits an emotional response and makes the brutality of US military intervention very palpable. Jonathan screened the video at Ars Electronica 2008 as part of the New Cultural Economy Symposium.

Jake Gyllenhaal Challenges The Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize screened at Los Angeles Shorts Film Festival in Hollywood, Athens Video Art Festival 2010, RE/Mixed Media Fest in Brooklyn, amongst other venues. It was the first PRV ever to reach **#1 on the IMDb most popular ratings for shorts**. Being an example of transformative storytelling, it directly takes poignant shots at Obama's duplicitous and malleable stance on war within the context of accepting the world's most prestigious peace prize.



I felt the narrative dealt self-reflexively with the video medium itself in ways that aren't present in other works, as issues of time, identity, and non-linearity are at the forefront of the video, which comes out of my interest in Deleuzian film theory. The two Chevron remixes I made toward the end of 2010 [*Tapping Human Energy (Chevron Commercial Remix)* and *Chevron Lie Detector (2012 Remix)*] are also special to me because the

identity correction of Chevron's PR campaigns reminds people of the wars the oil company so often pressures the Pentagon to start, the current conflict in Libya representing the most recent example.

DD: Yes, I remember first encountering your interest in dismantling oil company propaganda when we were invited to present at UCSB's Interdisciplinary Humanities Center Conference, "**Oil + Water: The Case of Santa Barbara and Southern California.**" At that time, I was promoting one of my first remixes on the theme of water conservation, which -- when coupled with your oil remixes -- completed the two-part conference theme. **World Water Shortage vs. Golf Course Consumption** has since received broad public



attention with screenings at the 2010 RE/Mixed Media Festival in New York, Rogue Remix Festival in Fresno, PRV screenings at Gallery 25, and the *ONE* exhibit with the Arc Gallery and IMAX Dome Theater. The work has also been reviewed on politicalremixvideo.com, a forum maintained by McIntosh, whom you've mentioned, and also Elisa Kreisinger, Martin Leduc, and Anita Sarkeesian.

DL: Right, Elisa and Anita engage in remixes that are critical of traditional, rigid gender formulations. Your latest remix and current research operate on similar terms.

DD: Yes. My remix **Woman Warrior Exposed (Sigourney Weaver Remix)** explores how Sigourney Weaver is represented as a female

power icon in pop culture, though several roles from her filmography epitomize Mulvey's notion of the Male Gaze, whereby Weaver is objectified and sexualized in the character personas she portrays.



I utilized juxtapositions of the iconic horror narrator John Newland to draw public attention to the discord between Weaver's selective recollection and her actual cinematic record. The illusion that is presented through Weaver's testimony is dissolved in an illuminating montage that highlights her career of conflicting character personas. It received positive reception at the New York Chashama Film Festival and at its international **2011 European Media Art Festival** premier.

I have since decided to get out from behind the computer and fight my battles in the real world rather than via digital technologies. I took up boxing as a recreational practice to lose weight and have found significant results. The psychological changes that have accompanied the physiological ones are remarkable and my perspective on my artistic practice has transformed as well. This has lead to my current and recent MFA Thesis research, which entails examining the **form and physicality of boxing** as a physical work out, a contest, a spectacle, or the opportunity for visual and cognitive mapping. Examples of these efforts are on my **website**, **blog**, and **youtube channel**.

DL: And being a woman seriously aiming to participate in a male-dominated sport, I think it's great that you're effectively delving headfirst into these contemporary issues by coupling gender and athlete demographics.



DD: Thanks! What about you? Your current remix endeavor is Project 12. What is it and how did it come about?

DL: At the end of 2010, I retired my [LYONSPOTTER](#) YouTube channel and launched "Project 12" as an annual, monthly series of videos on [DiranLyons](#), my new channel. Incidentally, LYONSPOTTER started as a collaborative space with Matthew Potter to host our feature-length film [Goodbye Victoria](#). However, the channel later transitioned into my own personal space exclusively for remix, and the *Goodbye Victoria* material went [elsewhere](#). Alternatively, I've named this new channel DiranLyons, but Project 12 has taken on more of a film production model where I directed the videos and collaborated with different script co-writers, among these have been Stephen Mears, Vruden Jakov, and you, Desiree D'Alessandro. Remix is so big on the concept of sharing that it seemed fitting to have the new project intrinsically incorporate sharing into its scope.

DD: A clever ambition since remix is inherently collective, both in terms of fabrication and reception. I think in many ways that beta testing with someone is a form of collaboration.

DL: Absolutely. The script co-writers and I conceptualized the videos, and I then set out to edit them, as I enjoy editing and the creative problem solving that goes into finalizing a piece. The project overall addressed several different topical issues as they arose, posing disparate inquiries as they

came to mind during the year. For instance, the first video in the series considered the question: "What if a remix attempted to communicate something about our culture and the world at large, without using any words or statements?" Would it be effective, and to what extent? I had a [solo art exhibit](#) open on January 6th, mere days before the Project 12 launch, so I was fresh out of artwork as the first post date approached on January 12th (I post on the 12th day of each month). I edited the first video, [The Dream Is Collapsing \(Project 12, 1/12\)](#), in 8 hours on January 11 to address the aforementioned conceptual framework. The March video considered whether a strong remix could be made by meditating merely on a single word with [Obama Likes Spending \(Project 12, 3/12\)](#). Similarly, all the Project 12 videos proceeded with an algorithmic framework, much like Sol LeWitt, Charles Gaines, and other conceptual fine artists approach conceptual art. A system always guided the production so that the artist's subjectivity in the creative process would not run roughshod over everything else.



DD: Well, Diran, I've enjoyed discovering how our varying remix praxes continue to corroborate and contribute to the remix field. Thanks for collaborating with me on this interview, and I look forward to seeing more of your work!

DL: Yes, and I look forward to seeing how your work continues to develop as well. Thank you very much.