

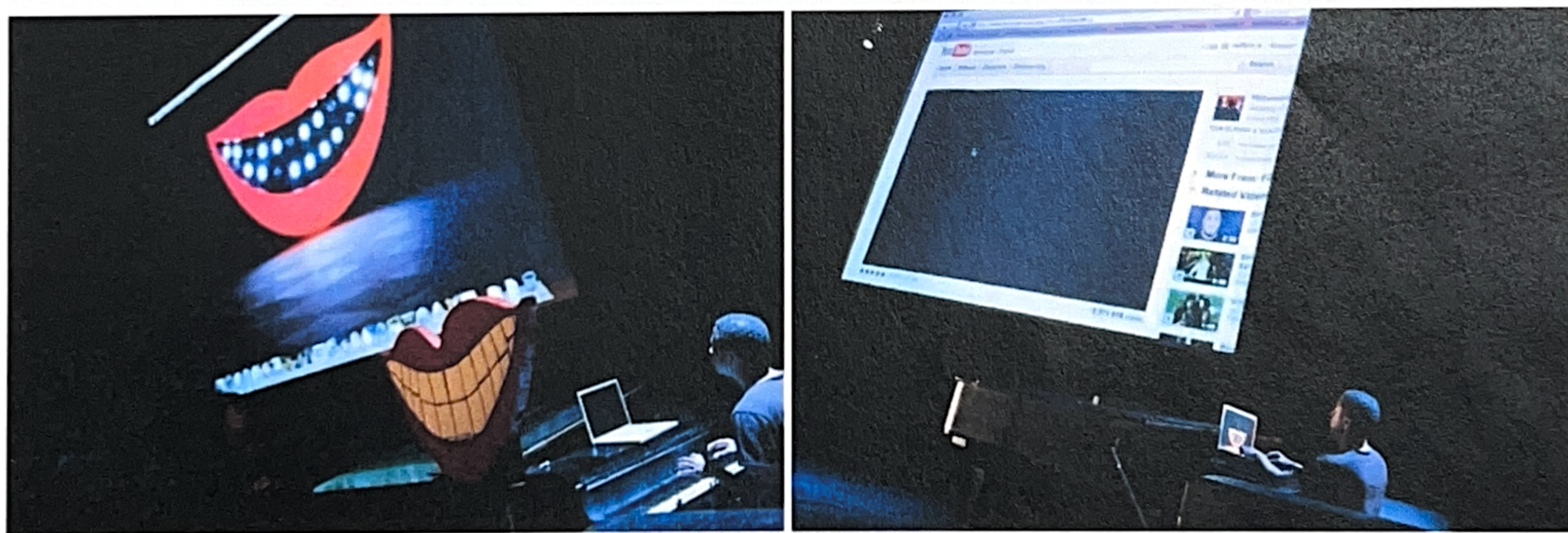
Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

April 27, 2009

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Virtual Sketchbook: Sanford Biggers's *Conundrum*



Presented at the The Kitchen on April 16th and 17th, Sanford Biggers's *Conundrum* was performed by a mouse. That is, it was primarily executed by the clicks of Biggers's computer mouse, resolved by the viewer's eye against the screen. The Kitchen characterized the work as a collection of "live video mixing, improvised music, and a small ensemble of dancers whose choreographed movements cast geometric light patterns through space." At the core of this vaudevillian collection of vignettes is a replication of behaviors that could be titled: "Our Unrepentant Love of the Keyboard," or maybe "The Internet is My Cosmos." More specifically, this work's attention is fastened to YouTube as both cultural hub and home of the mash-up.

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Yes, Biggers mashes, literally moving between a piano and his laptop to orchestrate duets between video singers and live performers. The audience was delighted because they recognized Biggers's actions. They do this, too. They click; they use a mouse. Sometimes they even sang along while parsing a culture within the poverty and riches of the screen. Yet the web-generated laughter was offset by some real things -- most strikingly, a sculpture. A gigantic red-lipped grin was placed in front of the audience; at other times, it surfaced in an alluring video work.

This big mouth has something to "say" and yet a conversation regarding the historic exaggeration of the so-called African mouth was barely articulated in the piece. Does this mouth hint at the tenacious persistence of blackface minstrelsy, race-based fetishism and smiling servitude? After the performance, one audience member insisted that these hovering red lips were simply a floating kiss.

Affectionate or mocking, the sculpture's migration from stage to screen, and to stage again remind us that objects, whether ethereal or literal, are not always fixed. The further alchemy of fusing You Tube acts to live bodies, or dressing live dancers with glow lights or masks does not evoke the ghost -- only the guffaw.

The videos Biggers references are easily located on the Internet. When scrolling through the hundreds of alternate versions of the same videos (remakes, mock versions, and homages) one wonders why his film, "Conundrum," features original works and known quantities. If the source videos are so readily identifiable to the public, one wishes Biggers would mimic the methods of Japanese medieval court poets, wherein elegance and craft were expressed by hinting at original source only barely; the sophisticated viewer was able to experience the shadow of the original and its deviation simultaneously.

These derivative videos trawl for a kind of half-baked adolescent sexuality that violently laughs, and is laughingly violent. Biggers's mash-ups are largely easygoing and most interested in the infinity of spectatorship -- no dirty, weird simulacrum operating in a technological vacuum here. Ultimately, the video most worth seeing isn't one that has been uploaded to YouTube: It features a man, seemingly bound by his own clothes, against that mouth-strung tree. It is Biggers's own video nestled within these goodies-but-not-so-oldies and it hardly shows through the Internet mirror hung between the stage and the audience.