

Video Review

WENHUA SHI'S LIGHTCODER

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When the Chinese government released activist artist Ai Weiwei after demolishing his studio and holding him in custody, the Golden Seal (or “Great Firewall”) censored bloggers who tried to disseminate information about his case. In the spirit of Ai Weiwei’s art, Wenhua Shi’s *LightCoder* stands in conceptual elegance, inviting us to decode a language that cannot be openly spoken. The turn of a dial triggers a light display of slowly delivered Morse code, which viewers are invited to transcribe, using key cards (see video of viewer interaction at <http://vimeo.com/27630869>). The artist’s statement explains that the machine is generating “sensitive, censored words” from the Great Firewall of China. On the surface, *LightCoder* is simply raising awareness of Chinese censorship. In its

execution, however, *LightCoder*’s iconography and interactivity bring cultural, historical, and political schemas into complex relationships.

Formalistically, the light coder itself is stark and deceptively simple: two vertical wooden boxes, symmetrically placed. On the left-hand box is the dial; on the right is the flashing light: data in, data out. The symmetry and simplicity seem to imply that even the most antiquated Western telecommunication system has more integrity than the Chinese-regulated Internet. That Wenhua Shi has chosen to incorporate this system—thereby evoking an American mythology that is rife with highly situated notions of freedom, pioneering, and heroism—seems to position East in relationship to West starkly. But rather than suggest a superficial contrast,

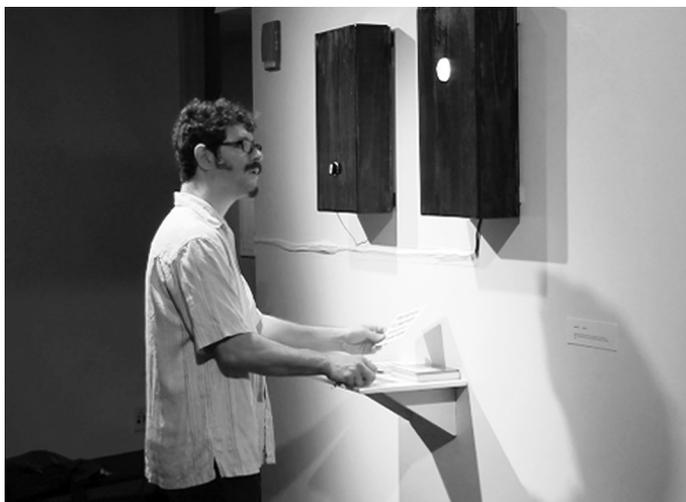


Photo 1: Jeff War-mouth interacts with Wenhua Shi’s *Light-Coder* in the UFVA New Media Exhibit in Boston, Massachusetts.

Wenhua Shi appears, on the contrary, to assume a position of mutual deconstruction: it is likely that viewers will know the bleak history of Chinese immigrants in the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, for example, at a time when both the railroad and the telegraph were foundational to American civilization as we know it. Where are the heroes of free speech and human rights when such causes are not economically convenient? The key to transcribing *LightCoder's* Morse code lies in a pack of pencils and a mass-produced stack of glossy white cards with playful red type—all of which allude to Chinese labor and its relationship to US consumption.

LightCoder is curiously impossible for an audience to use. Even though we are tantalized by the prospect of decoding “sensitive, censored words,” it is not feasible to simultaneously watch and document the transmission as it flashes. After many collaborative attempts, a group of viewers was able to decode only the word “stud,” finding out later that it was intended to be a sentence beginning with the word “student.” Other participants reported defeat from the outset. The Golden Seal itself works on automated code, selecting specific texts and at times censoring whole Web sites or leaving textual fragments behind when the algorithms fail to take into account context or semantics. Although Wenhua Shi states that he does intend for us to be able to decode the words his machine generates (and the transmission of code is slowed down for this purpose), it is perhaps the thwarting of desire that

becomes more interesting—and the fact that we cannot, even by virtue of our own Western codes, solve this problem.

Compounding this thwarted experience is a sense of urgency. No longer the foundation of communication infrastructure that it was in the West in the 1800s, Morse code is still nevertheless widely used as a language of emergency in international travel and communication. In radio static, when a voice cannot be heard, code can be. Pilots and air traffic controllers are still required to have basic proficiency in Morse code. Amateur radio operators have an affinity for it. Aeronautics still uses it. Samuel Morse, collaborator in the invention of the code, was himself considered a highly accomplished artist, whose signature work depicted the transmission of Calvinist culture to America, at a time when British immigrants were pursuing religious freedom.

In the end, *LightCoder*, in all its apparent simplicity, can actualize as an important storm of confusing signals for viewers. We are left with the sense that this is an emergency of sorts; that the senders of this code are hindered; that “listening” is an arduous but important task; and perhaps most importantly, that we (Western listeners) are being sought, as an audience, to become aware of this dilemma and to define our political engagement in it as a necessity, based on who we believe we are, if not who we really have been.

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