



ARTWORK **CENOZOIC CODEX**

ARTIST **KEITH SONNIER**

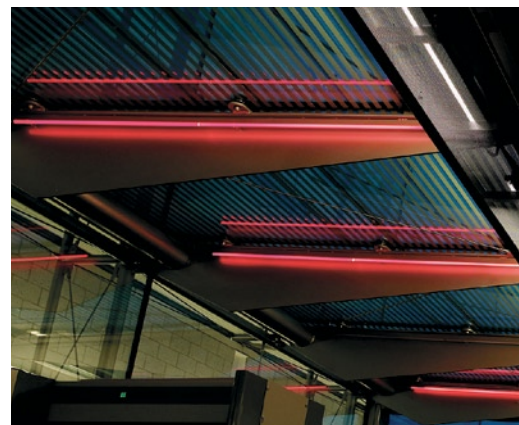
INSTALLED 1997  
U.S. CENSUS BUREAU COMPUTER FACILITY  
BOWIE, MARYLAND

*Cenozoic Codex* illuminates the U.S. Census Bureau Computer Facility from dusk until dawn with vibrant neon light. The striking installation charts the passing of each day and the changing of seasons. The work's presence at night and absence during sunlight hours signifies the cyclic nature of time. During the short winter days, daytime employees get a glimpse of the artwork each morning when they arrive and again at the end of their shifts. As the days lengthen, the artwork belongs to the nighttime employees alone.

Keith Sonnier creates large-scale installations that respond to their architectural contexts, while also serving as prominent public artworks. Of his permanent installations, he states: "It has to look like it grew out of the architecture, and at the same time, it has to have an independent life." *Cenozoic Codex*, consisting of neon tubes in primary colors, is very much a part of the building but is not a mere embellishment. By creating three floating zones of colored light along the building's façade, the artwork transforms the viewer's understanding of the architecture, while also providing a unique aesthetic experience. As the eye travels from left to right along the composition, the viewer is presented with various planes of color. First, there are the vertical blue planes, spaced along the façade; then the long, horizontal yellow plane, which intersects with several of the blue planes. Finally, the composition culminates with the horizontal red plane, leading the viewer into the lobby of the building. When viewed at a distance, the work provides an impressive display of refracted light through colored planes, which, Sonnier imagined, gives the building the appearance of a giant computer or ground space station.

*Cenozoic Codex* takes its name directly from the geological term "Cenozoic," which represents the present geologic era. Known as the "Age of Mammals," this era began sixty-five million years ago and includes the development of the human race. The term "codex" refers to the earliest assembly of a manuscript into book form, but in archaic terms, it also means a code. The title as a whole is meant to imply the systematic recording of human evolution and relates well to the function of the Census Bureau, which has tracked the demographic and economic characteristics of the nation since 1790. NA

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**Keith Sonnier** is internationally known for the innovative way he uses neon, fiber optics, and incandescent light to evoke ancient, exotic, or erotic forms. Born in Mamou, Louisiana, in 1941, he was raised in a French-speaking Acadian community. He studied art at the University of Southwestern Louisiana at Lafayette and, after returning from a year in Paris, earned his MFA from Rutgers University in 1966. He emerged out of a generation of artists in New York City whose pioneering use of industrial and ephemeral materials challenged the existing orthodox views of art and expanded the definition of sculpture. Sonnier's early light sculptures from the late 1960s utilized simple incandescent lightbulbs and their fixtures. Since then, his light works have grown increasingly complex in scale, often incorporating neon tubes and incandescent lightbulbs with exposed wires, transformer boxes, and found objects. Both his individual sculptures and his site-specific installations explore the reflection and diffusion of light through the inherent material qualities of the work and the surrounding architectural space.

Sonnier's diverse body of work is in the collections of many of the world's major museums, and he has been the subject of more than one hundred solo exhibitions in ten countries. His public commissions are equally numerous, and include a 3,280-foot-long neon installation for the Munich International Airport in Germany, as well as a second GSA Art in Architecture commission, *Route Zenith* (1997), an indoor neon installation for the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center in Washington, D.C.

MEDIUM NEON TUBES, TRANSFORMERS, AND WIRING  
DIMENSIONS 26 FT X 502 FT

