

Diagram 2: A Chinese Room Argument (with apologies to John Searle)

ONE:

Imagine you are in a white room. This room has two slots; through one slot come bits of paper with Chinese characters on them, and through the other you are expected to send out other Chinese characters on other bits of paper. You have in the room a box full of these, and a map telling you which Chinese characters you are supposed to send *out* upon receiving a particular set of characters *in*.^{1, 2}

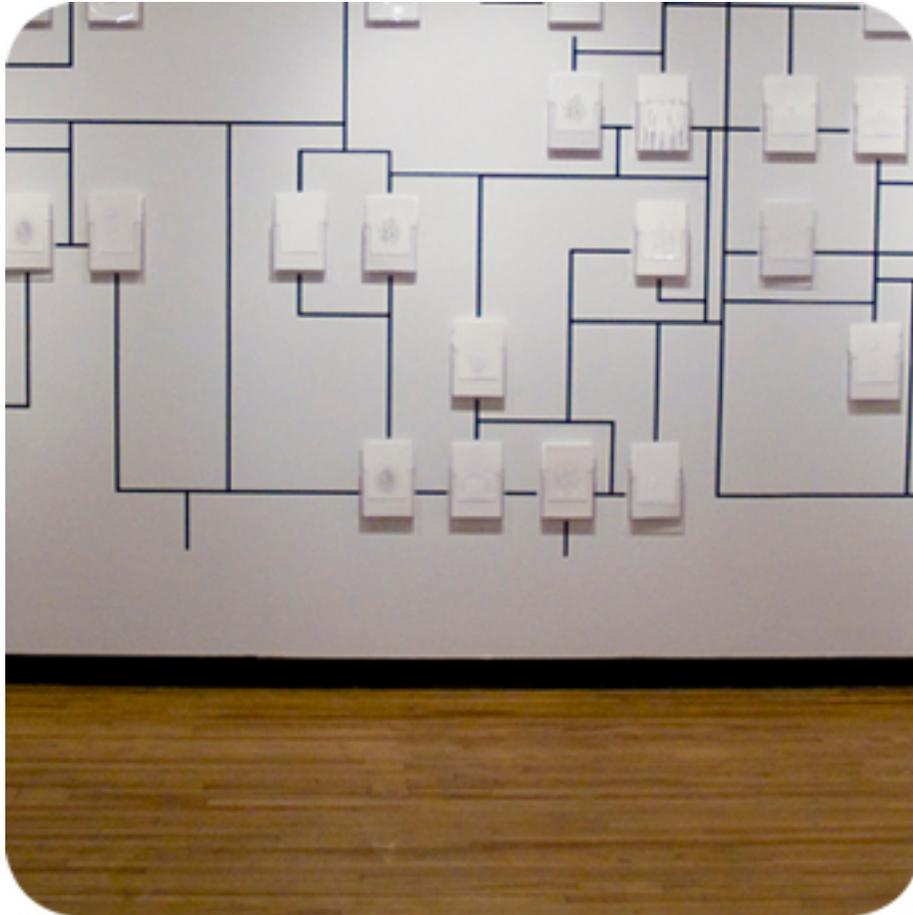
TWO:

Now imagine that instead of Chinese characters, you are given a set of images, we could even say ideas. These image-ideas carry with them references to things within the room and other things without, and there doesn't seem to be a way of meaningfully disconnecting the two. And instead of being expected to re-encode these image-ideas according to a prescribed code before sending them through the output slot, you are instead compelled to arrange them spatially, in one of a vast but limited set of possible configurations.

THREE:

Lastly, I'd like you to imagine that each configuration into which you place these image-ideas proposes new possibilities for its meaning, or indeed contradicts others. Before long, other people enter the room, performing their own configurations of the image-ideas while observing, reading (guessing), or critiquing yours. This process quickly fills the space; the exchange it hosts is the work.

In other words, unsatisfied with treating its viewers as dumb machines,³ *Diagram 2* places us at the mainframe of meaning-making, and our task is to performatively interpret, for each other and ourselves, not merely the content but the very structures—gallery, installation, site, slip of paper, network—through which that content is unfolded. In its proposal of further possibility, it is the obvious conclusion to the McLuhanite suggestion that it is the means by which we encounter the stuff of communication, and not the stuff itself, that is the site of philosophy.⁴



1 - Searle, John. "Can Computers Think?", in David Chalmers', *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1983. pp. 669–675.

2 - It is crucial for the sake of this hypothetical that you don't understand Chinese. If you *do* understand Chinese, maybe imagine yourself throwing out the map and just skip to TWO.

3 - The debate as to whether computing machines can be conscious is known as "Strong AI (Artificial Intelligence) vs. Weak AI"; Searle makes the point that computation is insufficient to demonstrate understanding or consciousness, and that computers therefore exhibit Weak AI.

4 - McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Boston: MIT Press. 1994.

McLuhan's overquoted phrase "the medium is the message" is often diluted into the idea that the medium merely influences our interpretation of its message, but the statement is deliberately bold and should be understood as such.

Lee Henderson is an artist and writer in Toronto; he teaches at OCAD University.