

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

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, *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.²

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. McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Boston: MIT Press. 1994. Lee Henderson is an artist and writer in Toronto; he teaches at OCAD University

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