The Complexities of Communication
Caitlin Whalen
April 21, 2008

The city and the communication between of citizens are inseparable from one another. Evidence of communication is laced throughout the city in the form of advertisements and signs, creating a constant backdrop the public space of the streets and parks. This is layered with electronic forms of communication, television and the internet, to create virtual public spaces and adding to the physical public space. The city as we understand it could not exist without this underlying complex structure. However its existence yields questions that can be understood through the work of artists, and others.

One may be tempted, as Jean Baudrillard presents in his *The Ecstasy of Communication*\(^1\) to consider the communicative structure as a network and the individuals as terminals. Baudrillard explains that the modern person is ‘only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence.’\(^2\) People become engrossed in the act of receiving information presented in the physical and electronic public spaces of the city. This in turn degrades the quality of public space. For example advertising creates a city that is not ‘a public scene true public space but gigantic spaces of circulation ventilation and ephemeral connections.’\(^3\)

Baudrillard’s perspective on communication in cities, while useful as a starting point, does not address many complexities of the issue. Understanding Wenda Gu’s

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\(^2\)Jean Baudrillard: 233
\(^3\)Jean Baudrillard: 230
installation *Temple of Heaven* (Figures 1 and 2) through the lens of addressing communication within cities, provides a deeper insight. The installation was created in 1998 for the contemporary art center in New York as part of a world wide project called the united nations. The entire project consists of visiting cite world wide and collecting hair from a total of 325 barbershops. The hair was then used to construct pieces with imaginary scripts based off of real world languages, and incorporated into a culturally specific installation for the particular site. The project asks many interesting questions by using human hair as a primary medium and issues involving a global scale.

In *Temple of Heaven* a room is draped with hair woven into fictional scripts reminiscent of English, seal script (the first unified writing in China), along with two others. Lights shown through the weavings illuminate two low rectangular tables surrounded by a set of chairs. The seat of each chair contains a television screen showing images of the sky with clouds. While at first glance *Temple of Heaven* could be interpreted as a loose expression of Baudrillard’s concepts, upon further inspection each element reveals a more complicated connection to communication within a city then may be initial apparent.

A prominent feature of the installation is the array of various woven scripts which closely resemble each language that they are modeled after. This sketch of written language that has lost all of the meaning associated with its typical use since the letters, or strokes, do not combine to construct recognizable forms. The basic interpretation of the work through Baudrillard is to consider the viewer as the terminal

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and the words as information originating from the network. This could be further interpreted through considering Baudrillard’s description of radio stations that are close enough in frequency that ‘the stations overlap and mix together (to the point that sometimes it no longer communicates at all)’. The scripts therefore would be a transition from representing information passing through a network to a terminal to nonsensical information following that path.

The viewer’s relationship to the scripts encasing the room can not be equated with an instance of terminals leading to a network. Baudrillard’s argument assumes that people being a passive receiver of information, to the point where the information and the receiver are virtually indistinguishable. The viewer and the scripts can not be related in this way for two reasons. First the viewer must interpret what is seen receive content of the communication. To get the message that they are fake interpretation is necessary. Additionally the identification of which scripts are actually fake will be radically different depending on what language the viewer knows. A Chinese viewer might recognize the Chinese script as an imitation, while might be unsure about the Latin script, while and American might have the opposite experience. Therefore the viewers can not be simplified to terminals since they necessarily need to digest the information they receive to fully decode the message. Extending this idea to communication within the city observe that people can not entirely passively receive all the information available, there will inevitably be some unexpected information thrown with the mundane.

The television screens built into the seats of the chairs suggest a further Baudrill-

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5 Jean Baudrillard: 232
lard explanation on the surface. The screen could be seen as a physical representation of a terminal, with each wire leaving the base of the chair, and gather together at the central tables. People sitting in the chairs would be therefore connected to the network via their very real terminals.

The key in this example is the relationship between the viewer and the screen, and the contents of the image on the screen. The viewer will either be walking around the exhibit, looking down at the screens in passing, or seated on a screen. It is only a detail in the installation, not the focal point that Baudrillard requires. In fact it can even be covered entirely from sight if the viewer feels inclined to sit. The image on the screen is homogenous in time and carries none of the over saturation of ideas that a network model entails. Relating this to communication within a entire city reveals that there are is a choice of the level of involvement with the communication, a choice public space to engage with.

The *Temple of Heaven* is essentially an artificial public space created by the artist. It starkly contrasts with Baudrillard’s view of public space in this age of communication. He writes,

> the body, landscape, time all progressively disappear as scenes. And the same for public space: the theater of the social and the theater of politics are both reduced more and more to a large soft body with man heads.  

The array of public spaces, and private spaces, once available have been melted into one large public space. The consequence of large amorphous public space is that the flow of communication becomes unidirectional, information flows from the

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6Simon Leung and Janet Kaplan: 90.
7Jean Baudrillard: 230
public space to the individual. There is no concept of the individual influencing the communication, nor creatively responding to it.

The space created in this installation including the atmosphere, the lighting and the familiar furniture creates an ambiance that is far from Baudrillard’s ideas. The space itself, and even the piece’s title, *Temple of Heaven*, suggests contemplation or possibly quiet discussion. Wenda Gu even intended for the installation to create a space that invites meditation.\(^8\) Not only is the space distinct from other public spaces we encounter daily, but it incorporates the space of the body by its extensive use of human hair. The use of this material is additionally evidence of a bidirectional relationship with the public space. Others have contributed personally to the space by giving their hair, providing an example of the contributions to the public space by individuals.

In considering the work of Wenda Gu and Jean Baudrillard it is not insightful to simply conclude that the ideas presented in the *The Ecstasy of Communication* are a poor model for understanding the *Temple of Heaven*. More insight can be gained by considering the installation as a means of further developing and clarifying the ideas originally presented by Baudrillard. On this path of reasoning it is clear that the network and terminal model is an over simplification. Just as in many physical examples of circuits and networks contain variability in the function of their components, and constantly influence each other, the analogy of a network to explain communication needs these details to be complete. Reflecting on the *Temple of Heaven* assists in illuminating these details, building a better understanding of

\(^8\)Simon Leung and Janet Kaplan: 90.
communication on the scale of a city and its relationship to public space.

Figure 1: Temple of Heaven (www.wendagu.com)
Figure 2: Temple of Heaven (www.wendagu.com)