

HANS ULRICH OBRIST

The Post-it Man

Essay

By
Dave Kim

With Instagram, Hans Ulrich Obrist showcases the lost art of handwriting in the digital age.

Hans Ulrich Obrist joined Instagram in December 2012 and has since posted more than 400 photographs of handwritten notes from the distinguished people he meets. One might expect the feed of one of the world's most influential curators to be a rich collage of filter-enhanced art, architecture, and beautiful people. Either that or a ghost town, an account updated just a few times out of beginner's curiosity before its busy user decided that real life was more interesting.

Obrist's feed is active but unassuming. He averages roughly one upload a day. His posts are pictures of scrawls on paper, not exactly #wow material, and the messages themselves are often cryptic or illegible (though Obrist always types out the text and attributes the author in a caption). Pay them some attention, though, and the images start to take on a strange power—one that's not just linked to the celebrity or cool factor of the artists, writers, architects, and public figures writing the words.

Part of the notes' power comes from the startling reminder that we don't see much handwriting anymore. Correspondence today is rendered in computer fonts and emoji, and it's entirely possible to have a lengthy relationship with someone and never know how he or she writes "hello." We're probably missing something important because of this; studies have shown a link between handwriting and personality, how the shape, size, and ligatures of our script can reveal details about our inner lives and character traits. There's something illuminating but oddly voyeuristic about carefully examining a note written by a stranger. It feels like peeking at a private moment—even when we're reading a message from artist Sarah Morris that proclaims: "Nothing is private. Everything is up for grabs."

One also feels the pleasure of matching texts with one's perceptions of their authors. A haiku from Björk—"handwritten or typed /

galaxies colliding / coexist on axis"—is written in blue highlighter ink with childlike unevenness, and it could easily be a lyric in one of the Icelandic musician's ethereal songs. A suggestive memo from John Waters reads, "Six fuzzy beavers quickly jumped the narrow gap"—a very John Waters rehash of the well-known typographer's pangram, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." And the ever-audacious Kanye West reminds us that "good taste is a gift but bad taste is a privilege," even throwing in a doodle of a ninja for emphasis.

Eager to evaluate these gems—and the occasional dud—are Obrist's nearly 35,000 followers, and the opinions and commentaries left in the comment sections are almost as entertaining to read as the featured texts. Consider the public remarks made for a missive from artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, who, for her contribution, wrote, "We need a new password she said" in a small notebook held open by someone's thumb. The following comments are *sic*, with the handles switched to fruit types for privacy:

@apple: Your thumb is a pen? Woah! You are like Robocop or Stationary Man...or something...

@banana: How the f is this art? 'Ve been following u for months, and you've only posted crap.

@orange: @banana dislike

@pear: @hansulrichobrist should write @banana's comment on a post it and Instagram it

@pineapple: yes please do that!

@kiwi: Clearly she has not listened to Grayson Perry's BBC lectures ... Tut tut tut

And so forth. The fact that anyone can contribute anything to the comments is both the best and worst feature of any open web platform, but for an Instagram feed like Obrist's, the miniature public forums created by these

posts reinforce the aesthetic and cultural value of the posts themselves. Each like or response adds to the aura of what is essentially an electronic record of a written record, a signifier of a signifier.

Despite the irony of preserving analog content with a digital medium, Instagram seems tailor-made for Obrist, whose projects tend to be cumulative and ongoing affairs. His "Do It" exhibition series and Interview Project have been in progress for two decades; he is a painstaking collector who keeps adding to a body of work and extending its scope, rather than racing toward a completion date. Instagram's single vertical stream helps to marshal the plurality of handwriting styles and personalities Obrist encounters. But it also draws attention to the evolution of the feed, which began a year ago with photographs of people and objects and is now dedicated almost exclusively to these handwritten notes. Its development is a fitting metaphor for how we ourselves evolve, a virtue captured perfectly in a note to Obrist from none other than Frank Gehry. "THIS IS MY HANDWRITING," the first line reads, in nimble chicken scratches. Below it, in shaky, inky cursive, is another sentence: "This was my handwriting."

For the following pages, eight of Obrist's friends sent Surface their own notes—in the vein of those on Obrist's Instagram feed—to run exclusively in this issue.

handwritten or typed
galaxies colliding
coexist on axis

Björk, musician

Ultimately, our
real home is our
life
Etel Adnan

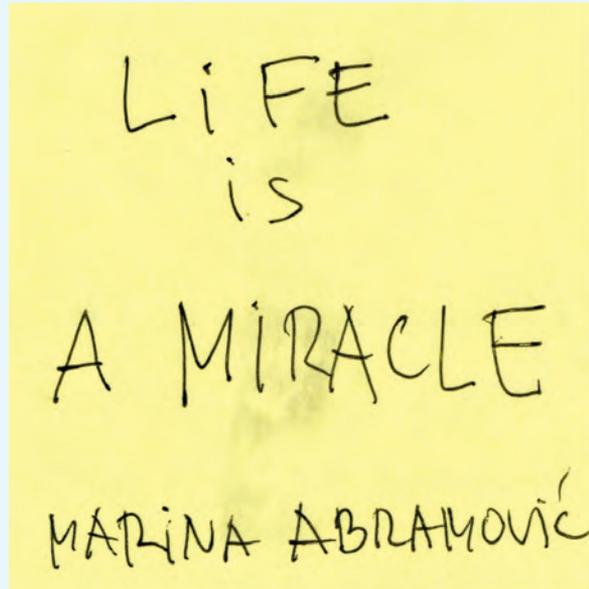
Etel Adnan, writer and artist



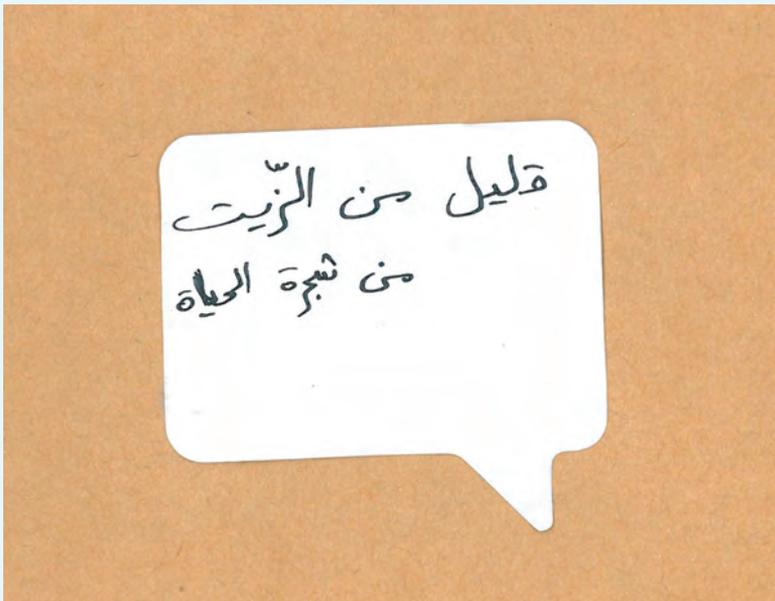
Konstantin Grcic, designer



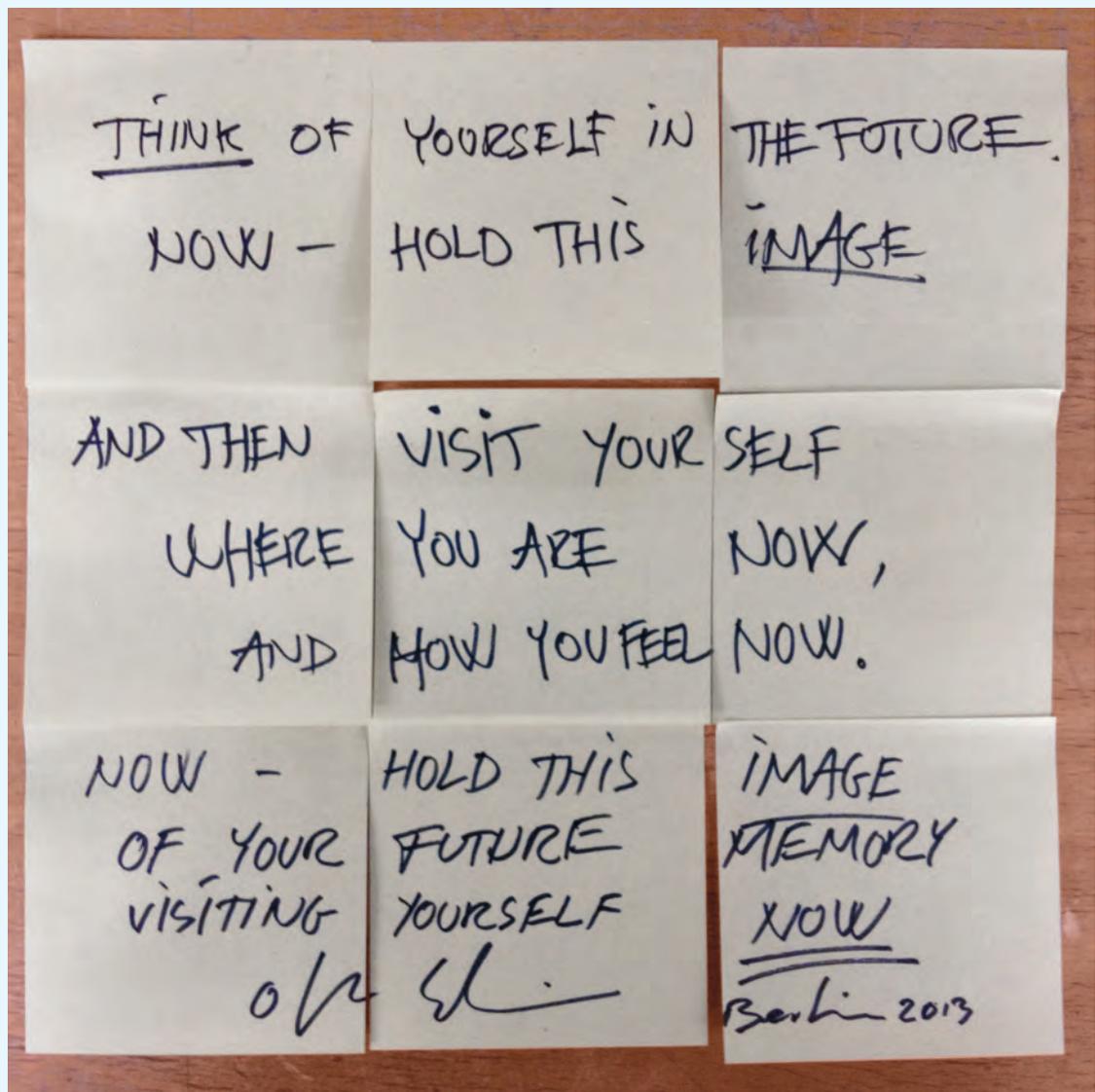
Koo Jeong-A, artist (Im Hak is not equal to Mongdal ghost)



Marina Abramović, artist



Ziad Antar, filmmaker and photographer (A little bit of oil from the tree of life)



Olafur Eliasson, artist

COME IL CANE BEVE L'ACQUA:
IL CANE RIRIÈGA LA SUA
LINGUA LARGA ED ALLUNGATA,
IN MODO DA FORMARE UNA
SPECIE DI CAZZUOLA.
IN SEGUITO IMMERGE QUESTA
CAZZUOLA NELL'ACQUA E LA
RITIRA VELOCEMENTE NELLA
SUA BOCCA, COSÌ DA FAR
SCHIZZARE IL LIQUIDO IN ALTO.
ORA IL CANE RIESCE AD
ACCHIAPPARE IL LIQUIDO COL
MUSO, PRIMA CHE LA FORZA
DI GRAVITÀ LO FACCIA
RICADERE NEL LAGO. IL CANE
RIESCE COSÌ A SORBIRE
L'ACQUA IN TANTI PICCOLI BOCCONI