Contingency and Causality: 
Post-digital Handwriting

ADAM WICKBERG

KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden

Abstract

This article analyses specific acts of handwriting on paper in relation to digitization. It frames the artifact of the digital image of the handwritten note as a post-digital object, which is defined by the inseparability of analogue and digital and also highlights a relation to the digital in which internal opposition is a part of it. The article discusses the media function of post-digital contingency through two particular cases of handwriting on paper that circulates online. Firstly, it analyses post-digital handwriting in the political sphere using the example of the social media posting and sharing of Donald Trump’s signature after he took presidential office. Secondly, it elaborates post-digital handwriting as an aesthetic phenomenon by discussing the Instagram account of renowned Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist who has posted nearly 4,500 handwritten notes to 320,000 followers over eight years. Finally, it places these discussions into the context of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger to arrive at a better understanding of how the ontological difference of post-digital handwriting is produced.

Keywords


Introduction

What is handwriting in a post-digital infrastructure? Is there a specific quality to texts that are visibly forged by the human hand that endows them with a particular attraction in an age where distinctions between digital and analogue are increasingly difficult to uphold? These are the main questions that this essay sets out to answer.
Rather than discussing all forms of handwriting, I’m interested in how specific acts of handwriting are used and understood in digital milieus (Hörl, 2018: 160). The possible range of analysis could be expanded, but for this article I have limited my cases to the online circulation of digital objects as images of written notes and writing by hand in contemporary art and politics respectively. The art scene is interesting because it typically picks up and explores the expressive possibilities of media and cultural techniques as part of an aesthetic process. The political realm is, for its part, currently undergoing deep transformations as a result of the expanding digital infrastructure and its regulation of information and knowledge, which in turn regulates power in Foucault’s sense. Other cases of interest are cognitive and psychological realms, in which a quality of intimacy inherited from handwriting in modernity is renegotiated through the post-digital; a topic I have explored elsewhere (Wickberg, 2020).

As a medium, writing has often been at the center of theoretical discussions on knowledge and communication over the past century. According to John Durham Peters, writing is a medium that extends memory and alters the three fronts of civilization: ‘relations within the self, between people and between people and nature’ (Peters, 2015: 262). As such, it has gone through a large number of transformations since its dawn in the second half of the fourth millennium B.C., but its main feature as externalization of human speech has remained relatively intact. This relational quality of writing has successively become ever more efficient with each technical transformation. Writing in the modern sense emerged from accounting without this being the primary purpose of the innovation. Rather, it was the context-dependent administration of transactions handled with small tokens of clay that, when it needed to be taught to bigger groups of people, had to be functional outside of the given context (Renn, 2015: 47). From the perspective of cultural evolution and historical epistemology, these types of new possibilities of a technical innovation often occur as a side-effect of the mainstream applications. It is also characteristic that these founding roles for a new development are only realized once a new perspective and new contexts arise (Renn, 2015: 48). This perspective also resonates with the insight that new media make older media visible, which has been a point of departure for media theory since the work of Harold Innis (1948). That perspective, however, is chronologically converse and looks at how older media can be studied and live on
within new media, a practice that is also the foundation of media archaeology. Taken together, media theory and historical epistemology stage writing as the founding medium of civilization, emerging almost by accident and then continuously being embodied in new technical systems.

**Handwriting as a Cultural Technique of the Post-digital**

The most recent of these embodiments of writing is the digital shift, which has put the cultural technique at the fingertips of a growing global population with smartphones, allowing the relations between self, people and their environments to be extended at any time. In this situation, the concept of ‘post-digital’ emerged as a way to account for both the inseparability of digital and analogue, and the underlying digital wiring of almost all aspects of daily life, including the internet of things. Above all, it’s meant to signal a shift away from a time when the digital was optional and particular rather than a given and ever-present. The cultural technique of writing is of course present on all three levels of digital media; as inscription on a hardware level, as code on the software level, and as semantic units through the interface. Even handwriting has found a place on this last level with devices like the apple pencil for drawing and writing, and apps that remEDIATE paper in their interface, while the handwritten paper note operates on a post-digital level when it’s circulated as a digital object in networked systems.

In the longer cultural history, handwriting has been challenged by technologies of imprint over the five centuries since the Gutenbergian revolution, yet it has always somehow survived (Neef, 2010). One could argue that the reach of digitization far exceeds those of previous writing technological shifts, but that would be overlooking the fact that technologies of writing and literacy have always been closely aligned. Sonia Neef has pointed out that the oft-repeated question of whether handwriting will survive digitization is philosophically and historically incorrect (2006: 8). She notes that philosophically it is erroneous because it assumes a teleological relationship between media and their practices. Understanding handwriting historically, she contends that “in spite of the emergence of generations of ‘writing machines’, manual script has never disappeared; on the contrary, as it evolved,
handwriting adjusted its practical functions, social meanings and cultural aesthetics” (2006: 8).

The problem posed by post-digital handwriting can also bring the concept of remediation to mind, which is used to analyze how new media are always depending on the logics of older media (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). An extension of this concept is ‘premediation’, which refers to handwritten signatures in digital media, complementing the perspective that remediation offers on ‘the refashioning of prior media forms and technologies’ with ‘the cultural desire to remediate future media forms and technologies’ (Grusin, 2006: 98). But the concept of the post-digital is different from remediation. It has been described as a phenomenon that takes place when digitization is so abundant and evident that it no longer provokes wonder and techno-optimism but also resistance and distancing within the digital itself (Cramer, 2014: 13). The main features of this condition are disenchantment with the digital, the reviving of old media, and the collapse of distinctions between the digital and the non-digital: “The historical distinction between the digital and the non-digital becomes increasingly blurred, to the extent that to talk about the digital presupposes an experiential disjuncture that makes less and less sense” (Berry, 2014: 22). The post-digital art and media festival Transmediale’s 2016 jubilee reader Across & Beyond (2017) gathers important contributions from across the field of media theory and arts in an exploration of the concept that resists a unifying answer. Instead, they propose thematic lines to catch hold of the ‘post-digital contingencies’ across the continuum of theory and practice. The notion of the post-digital they propose resonates with my concept of post-digital handwriting in the emphasis on contingency and, a point further stressed by Florian Cramer (2014) in his contribution to the volume, the refusal of a shallow notion of ‘post’ as only being a chronological marker, much like what happened to the notion of postmodernism.

Recent media theoretical readings of Heidegger and Simondon emphasize that a culture of behavioral control flourishes in digital milieus that has become constitutive of worlding and experiencing in digital cultures (Hörl, 2018: 156). This sums up the deeper logic of the post-digital condition quite well and, in it, media move from being machines of communication to machines of capture of the unsayable and unthinkable (Parisi & Hörl, 2013: 39). How then does this situation affect
handwriting? It seems that the specific logic of the digital in moving away from communication allows for a repurposing of the handwritten note which is no longer primarily semantic but rather acts as a trace of contingent causality, since we’re dealing with a networked digital object made up of data, metadata and user experiences. The interrogation of the existence of digital objects, based on Simondon’s concept of milieu, offers a useful working definition of life cycles in three stages that can enhance our understanding of post-digital handwriting.

The first process is that in which the ontologists and computer scientists create a metadata scheme or ontologies for digital objects; the second process is the implementation of these schemes in databases and pieces of software, which creates a milieu for the digital objects. The digital object can hence be seen to exhibit its modes of being by situating itself within the digital milieu. The third process to be understood is that by which these objects and the machines construct a technological system, which further integrates human users into it. This triangle is composed of different technical ensembles (Hui, 2016: 75).

There is thus a relational traffic inherent in digital objects, which is essential to understanding the post-digital. The being of a digital object is constituted by its relations of different orders: in the digital milieu created by databases, software and interface, and by situating itself in this system where humans become integrated as users.

**Writing and Paperwork**

The various screens we spend our days gazing at encourage the constant consumption and production of the written word. But what of handwriting? Many attempts to theorize it as a medium have been done, notably by Friedrich Kittler (1985) and Walter Benjamin (1936), supplemented by an increasing number of studies on paperwork in recent years (Wickberg, 2018; Gitelman, 2014; Kafka, 2012; Krajewski, 2011). In these studies, paper appear as a foundational media format which is primarily understood historically, and whose media function of inscription through writing remains in the deep logic of the digital. The difference is of course
ontological, in that the contemporary act of inscription remains hidden from the perspective of the user, but it nevertheless governs transactions and relations in a most fundamental way. Many of these studies also stress the importance of paperwork for the design and construction of a digital infrastructure, in a way that goes beyond the concept of remediation.

Paper and documents are essentially inseparable and mutually defined by what Lisa Gitelman calls the ‘know-show’ function, understood through their status as epistemic objects (Gitelman, 2014). On the one hand documents of paper contain knowledge, and on the other hand they exhibit this knowledge. This function is foundational to modernity in general and to modern bureaucracy in particular, aptly captured by the dictum of Philip II of Spain, ‘Quod non est in actis, non est in mundo’ (‘what is not on file does not exist’). The transformation of the logic of writing in early modern bureaucracy through accounting and the diagrammatic use of paper can be understood as a foundation to the 20th century passage into the digital by means of computation (Siegert, 2003). The idea of a long passage into the digital resonates with notions of the post-digital in the insistence on the deep cultural logic of the computational revolution, embedded in cultural techniques of sign practices:

Firstly: It is not about semiotics, but about Cultural Techniques of writing, reading, signs and numbers. Secondly: signs are not ideal objects, but externalized things; they belong to the world of res extensa and take their position accordingly. The symbolic world is the world of machines, which can also be made of paper. Thirdly: Sign practices are always connected to specific spaces, particular semiotopes, as it were: the office, the ship, the atelier, the laboratory, the academy, and so on (Siegert, 2003: 14, my translation).

This connection between sign practices as cultural techniques and specific environments can also be understood in connection with the physical spaces where writing takes place as ontic operations producing ontological concepts (Wickberg, 2018). In this way, media theoretical studies of paper and post-digital practices converge in an ontology of writing which refuses separations and clear-cut breaks, and instead understands media as part of different environments. This essay continues this trajectory by exploring acts of handwriting on paper in the realm of
the post-digital, as a practice dependent on physical space and restricted time in which the sign function collapses under the weight of the trace.

Post-digital Handwriting and Social Media

In my analysis, handwriting on paper is reconfigured as a post-digital object appearing as a networked digital image, through which the trace of contingency is highlighted in various forms of data and metadata on the social media interface. I will explore the issue first in the performative politics of post-truth Trumpism and then in what Timothy Morton calls the ‘aesthetic dimension,’ taking the Instagram account of curator Hans Ulrich Obrist as my case. According to Morton (2013), the aesthetic dimension is where the traces of causality can be found: ‘If things are intrinsically withdrawn, irreducible to their perception or relations or uses, they can only affect each other in a strange region out in front of them, a region of traces and footprints: the aesthetic dimension’ (Morton, 2013: 17). This means that interactions between objects have consequences even when we cannot see them, because they are in their being essentially withdrawn, a term borrowed from Heidegger to express that a part of something is ontologically present, yet not graspable as such to the human subject. The aesthetic dimension is a space in front of the object where interactions occur, and what we perceive as causality are traces of those interactions: ‘the interobjective space is the aesthetic dimension in which the appearances of objects interact in what we call causality. There is no way to determine the boundary of this space in advance’ (Morton, 2013: 177). So, the aesthetic dimension is what we see of an object and its interactions with other objects. If we supplement Morton’s theory with Yuk Hui’s phenomenology of digital objects, it becomes possible to say that post-digital handwriting represents the coming together of paper and networked data and what we experience as a composite phenomenon is really an effect of these interactions. In Morton’s view, the aesthetic effect is dependent on absence, so that every trace and footprint we encounter as art is echoing with what is no longer present (2013: 18). For post-digital handwriting, the absence of the sensory qualities of pen strokes on paper, their sounds, smells and the haptic movement of human hands, are present in their absence on a smartphone screen whose interface embeds
them in an Instagram feed of metadata. The turn to short videos of handwriting on Instagram exemplifies this tendency as it reinforces intimacy (Wickberg, 2020).

Following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the handwritten signature of Donald Trump went viral on social media, sparking a number of interpretations of its emblematic significance. As a prolific Twitter user, Trump has since made it part of his political practice to post images of himself signing documents. These objects, that posit themselves in their digital milieus as images of the act of handwriting on paper, are instances of what I call post-digital handwriting. I understand this phenomenon as a dynamic process where the post-digital object is both made up of the handwritten note itself, ink on a piece of paper – and the data and metadata of social media, user experience and interactions. This process recalls the concept of remediation (Bolter & Gruisin, 1999), but what I want to address goes more into how the contingent every-day object of the handwritten piece of paper and its haptic and human associated qualities follows a different media logic as a networked digital object. In brief, I am more interested in the ontology of the post-digital object than with how digital media achieve their cultural significance by paying homage to, rivaling, and refashioning earlier media.

As one of the most influential curators in the contemporary art world, it is interesting that Hans Ulrich Obrist is using the social media platform of Instagram to disseminate imagery of the cultural technique of handwriting on paper. He invites different persons, often artists, philosophers and musicians, to produce a handwritten note, which he then publishes on his account. Tirelessly posting notes every day, his feed now comprises around 4,500 posts and is followed by 320,000 users. He thereby cleverly converts his account to a huge collective art gallery in which the cultural technique of handwriting on the everyday medium of post-it notes are co-constituted with a contemporary social medium through the interobjective space of the aesthetic dimension (Morton 2013).

The Performative Nature of Post-digital Handwriting

An intriguing example of post-digital handwriting is the political signature and signing practice of the U.S. President Donald Trump. Since the present decade, handwritten notes appear as an exception of communicative singularity in an
infrastructure of instantly accessible data. When images of the singular piece of handwriting on paper appear in this as a digital object, it distorts the media logic of the digital, even if what we’re seeing is only an image of the singular object. Signatures have of course been endowed with a special status throughout modernity and are tightly tied to notions of authorship and authority. In this sense, the signature has already been performative for the past five centuries, regulating a variety of formal affairs (Neef, 2006: 221). Today, we know that most important political communications happen via mobiles and computers, as the numerous leaks reveal, and that storage, access and transfer of nearly all political data is now digital, but the very event of a politician’s hand holding a pen and signing a document is still the legally binding event. The action of the signing itself has consequences, i.e. causality, and cannot as easily be undone or changed once it is carried out. The digital object of the networked image of this event becomes the ‘distorted archaeological trace’ of the collision of objects taking place in the aesthetic dimension. This means that images of political signatures and writing scenes is not qualitatively new in the 21st century, but the way these images are now used and circulated signals a shift toward post-digital media practices.

Donald Trump’s love for Twitter is by now obvious to anyone who has followed U.S. politics the past four years. He often posts images of himself at work and often in the process of signing bills and orders. These images have been picked up by Twitter users who come up with ingenious interpretations of what his signature represents.

Examples include ‘the gates of mordor’, ‘a soundwave of demons’, ‘and a lie detector chart’ (Voon, 2017). When he took office, his counselor Kellyanne Conway tweeted ‘The pen is ready’. A couple of weeks later he had already signed controversial bills of travel bans and the building of a wall along the Mexican border. At the time of writing, 33 environmental regulations and environmental protection laws have been undone, and another 24 are underway.

One of Trump’s first actions of power after assuming office in 2017 was the passing of an anti-abortion law called the ‘global gag rule’, which stops American aid to help organizations that facilitate abortion – the very same law that George W. Bush’s office used to stop aid to several African countries, leading to an increase in the
spread of HIV. The Guardian’s reporting of Trump’s action captures the agency of post-digital handwriting quite well: “How Trump signed a global death warrant for women. With one devastating flourish of the presidential pen, worldwide progress on family planning, population growth and reproductive rights was swept away. Now some of the world’s poorest women must count the cost” (Boseley, 2017). The image of Trump with pen in hand signing a bill surrounded by his closest male associates (many of which have now been replaced) went viral on Twitter and Instagram, and came to represent how a powerful white man, repeatedly accused of sexual misconduct, surrounded by six other white men in suits, signs a paper which will effectively stop millions of women globally from deciding over their own bodies if they become pregnant. It simultaneously reflects the performative aspect of political signature and the causality it represents when circulated as an image, which become a distorted archaeological trace.

Political decisions are generally slow processes and Trump’s impulsive political behavior makes the pen appear as a natural extension of his power. While the White House orders a specific presidential pen for the office, Trump abandoned it early on and instead started using his longtime favorite, the Sharpie marker pen, which gives a thick bold imprint. The pen came into a publicity storm after the President allegedly used it to alter NOAA’s meteorological forecast of Hurricane Dorian’s path so that it appeared to hit Alabama. Images of Trump with his pen again went viral on Twitter and memes were posted with images altered with a Sharpie-pen. The scandal became known as ‘Sharpiegate’ in reference to the pen Trump used to alter the forecast map. NOAA was forced to smooth over the disagreement with Trump by releasing a statement saying he was correct. The political implications of this practice are arguably enormous, but it also shows how the President’s pen and handwriting become emblematic and go viral on social media. Soon after the scandal, Trump and his campaign started selling Sharpie pens as official Trump markers, to ‘set the record straight’, with Trump’s signature printed in gold on them.

Above all, the traces of Trump’s political signature signal a reversal of the former logic in which imagery of politicians signing bills more often implied the celebration of progress, whereas now many posts, particularly of Trump perhaps, seem to use it as a representation of a negative consequence. The digital imagery of Trump’s
writing scenes also captures an age old symbol of the pen as a tool of power, going back to the shift from sword to the plume in early modernity. From the perspective of the Trump administration, as Conway’s remark suggests, the signing of bills shows the president to be as actionable as claimed in his campaign, ‘getting things done’, as has been a recurrent expression of praise among his supporters.

Donald Trump showing the forecast map of Hurricane Dorian with the additional black marker over southern Alabama. Source: Wikimedia commons.

The Aesthetic Dimension of Post-digital Handwriting

The signature of Trump’s Sharpie pen as political causality draws attention to an aspect of handwriting that was long considered obsolete, namely graphology. The 19th century pseudo-science of interpreting personality traits through the study of handwriting seems to have gained attraction through the renewed and emerging interest in handwriting in the post-digital, which can be seen in the trends of bullet journaling and penmanship porn (Wickberg, 2020). The graphological analysis is now mostly practiced by Twitter and Instagram users who see in Trump’s signature an expression of his aggressive and unpredictable character. But the fact that handwriting analysis is now being developed as a tool for early detection of Alzheimer’s disease suggests that there may actually be a deeper connection between handwriting and psychology (Ghaderyan, 2018).
Californian artist Lutz Bacher presented an exhibition in 2017 of a 90x3 foot paper printed with a loop of Trump’s signature around the walls of the gallery 3320 18th Street in San Francisco. In the space of the gallery, the signature of Trump becomes an instance of post-digital aesthetics, moving from paper to screen and back. Rather than a simple critique or satire, this work of art draws attention to the symbol of the President’s political authority, the strokes of his pen on paper, which materialize his ideas and turn them into political reality. From an OOO perspective, the artist is highlighting and magnifying the traces of causality happening in the aesthetic dimension. It is in this sense that art is about causality, in that logic and rhetoric come together to highlight substance and matter, their collisions and the effects they cause.

Within contemporary art, the term ‘post-digital’ is “associated with an artistic engagement with technology that is not necessarily preoccupied with the digital as such, but with life after and in the digital, working across old and new, digital and analog” (Bishop, Gansing, Parikka, 2017: 5). Simultaneously, critical work in media theory has tried to think through a world in which the separation of technological materiality from networked global capitalism and global environmental changes seems impossible to uphold and hence in need of philosophical re-assessment. Within this context, the term ‘post’ signals a temporal and critical distance from the digital, while simultaneously being defined by it. As a concept to move beyond new media dualisms and the fetish-like fascination with technology itself, it seems apt to analyze a phenomenon like handwriting.

The proliferation of Post-internet, the New aesthetic, and Post-digital art practices in the current decade has led to an increasing production of artistic content which investigates or intervenes in everyday digital culture. At the same time, many digital media platforms encourage a kind of curating of one’s own space, so that the aura of curation becomes possible without the curator (Balzer, 2015). The role of the curator in contemporary art has been given increasing attention over the past decades, to such an extent that the curator now rivals the artist for attention (Zammit, 2018). Arguably, Hans Ulrich Obrist is a good example of this tendency, being highly influential and well-known for his work well beyond the inner circles of contemporary art.
Obrist’s digital curatorial project *The Art of Handwriting* was started in 2012 on Instagram and has grown year by year to its current 4,500 posts for 320,000 followers. According to Obrist, the project is aesthetically-driven by a literary dynamic where Instagram is understood along the rule- and limitation-based expression of Oulipo. The social medium is used as a curatorial platform to ‘protest the disappearance of handwriting’. Obrist’s own story of the project’s conception is that he spent a winter holiday with Lebanese-American poet Etel Adnan in France, and as they fled rainfall into a café Adnan started writing short poems in a notebook. At that point, he realized the potential of celebrating handwriting using digital media rather than nostalgically lamenting its disappearance as Umberto Eco, among others, had recently done.

*The Art of Handwriting* thus springs from an insight of the shifting ontology brought about by digital culture, which opens our eyes anew to analogue media like paper and handwriting in terms of aesthetic causality after long having been embedded in our everyday discursive practices. This post-digital logic, that non-digital practices regain interest and undergo a change of their conditions of possibility through the digital, highlights a salient feature of current media ecological transformations. Obrist’s intervention into the media infrastructure of everyday life – using post-its and Instagram – highlight the different materialities by drawing the physical qualities of paper and the haptic movement implied by the hand into the ubiquitous everyday space of visual culture that is Instagram. To a certain extent, the project is also an intervention into the different temporalities of media, juxtaposing the slow and silent post-it note which at the same time mirrors an Instagram post in terms of being ephemeral. The post-it note, however, often only has one or two readers; it rarely travels and is generally discarded after it has done its job of reminding one of some kind of business. Transposed to Instagram as digital object made up of data and metadata, it appears at center stage as a rare reiteration of a lost moment in time when its production took place. Multiplying its readers from one to 320,000, the disposable paper object has become highly visible in an effortless mixing up of digital and physical.

The handwritten notes in Obrist’s digital gallery are often rapidly scribbled down on a post-it note and seem to capture the singularity of thought as it happens. Obrist has
repeatedly referred to the object oriented ontology of Timothy Morton as a source of inspiration for his curatorial practice. In Morton’s conception, art is about causality and what he calls the ‘aesthetic dimension’. If we regard Obrist’s curatorial project of exhibiting handwriting to be to some degree poetic, it is interesting to note the complex argument Morton puts forth about the ontology of poetry not being:

…candy sprinkles on the cupcake of science, nor some ineffable source or power. It is sparkingly apparent yet strange at the same time. It is both root and blossom, essence and appearance, withdrawn yet vivid. Poetry is not mere ornamentation, nor is it some Romantic (or post-Romantic) engagement with (human) ‘meaning’ – as either the public relations guy or the ignored poor relation of an instrumental realm of science and politics…poetry simply is causality, pure and simple (Morton, 2012: 216).

Following Morton, we may consider the post-digital object of Obrist’s handwritten notes posted on Instagram in terms of causality. He maintains that objects are ontologically prior to their relations of time and space and that causality floats in front of them in the aesthetic dimension, which is its Heideggerian unconcealment, as discussed in the introduction of this essay. In line with this, the post-it notes are an expression of causality, that this scribble of letters happened in space-time, which is then redistributed to different space-times in the digital milieu and supplied with metadata. It is precisely this causality and contingency of the handwritten note that captures the logic of the post-digital, which is what makes it so interesting to a curator like Obrist.

In Morton’s contribution to Obrist’s Handwriting Project, this ontological complexity is brought forth with self-distance and humor. One post (2017-10-12) from an AI-themed marathon of philosophy at Obrist’s Serpentine Galleries expresses ‘algorithm star sideboard frog/ human railway junction radio/ forehead stone machinery peanut/ Lebanon ice poem AI/ IOU LOVE’. Another post (2014-10-15) states in curly letters ‘Since everything just is what it is Yet is never as it seems. You might as well burst out laughing.’ Other contributions by Icelanders Björk and Olafur Eliasson – who both claim to be inspired by Morton’s philosophy in their artistic practices – point to the cosmic dimension of the project’s ontological poetics. Taken
together, the Icelandic artists express a movement from micro – ‘Handwritten or typed galaxies colliding coexist on axis’ (Björk) – to macro – ‘PUSH THE PLANET’ (Eliasson).

The term ‘curationism’ has been proposed to cover the ‘acceleration of the curatorial impulse to become a dominant way of thinking and being’ (Balzer, 2015) in a moment in time when, as consumerist subjects, we are engaged in a sort of constant
curation of life. It is perhaps fitting then, and very much along the ingenious reinvention for which Obrist has become known, that the leading art curator is not closing himself off in an exclusionist sphere but rather intervenes in the everyday digital culture of Instagram, but with a concept that overthrows the ephemerality of the digital image flow and wishes to protest the disappearance of the medium of handwriting by inserting it into the digital.

‘PUSH THE PLANET’. Olafur Eliasson, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Instagram

The Handiness of Post-digital Handwriting

Obrist’s Handwriting Project highlights the contingency of post-digital handwriting through the media integration of Instagram and post-it notes. Two seemingly opposed and unrelated everyday media formats are joined so that the paper and ink cuts through the sleek interface of the social medium, creating an aesthetic effect with a fragment of the human within the non-human. Another way of putting it would be to think with Heidegger that the practice of handwriting and the tools of pen and paper have long been ontologically understood as useful things. As Heidegger elaborates in Being and Time, an object can be ready-to-hand (Zubanden), meaning it is part of everyday practice and reveals itself through its handiness
Heidegger defines handiness as the ‘ontological categorial definition of beings as they are in themselves’ (Heidegger, 2010: 72). When an object like the hammer – Heidegger’s most famous example – brakes, it instead becomes present-at-hand, *Vorhanden* (Heidegger, 2010: 96). As its everyday function is interrupted we can grasp the piece of metal theoretically instead of practically.

Writing tools like pen and paper are typical useful things in a Heideggerian phenomenology. As such, they exist as something in order to do something, in this case usually communication of a certain kind. Over the course of modernity and in tandem with the emergence of various technical media, handwriting became increasingly tied to intimate and personal communication and to the human body. In the 21st century, most of the useful things one would use paper and pen for had been replaced by other, more efficient ways of communicating. The primary device to take their place is the smartphone, which being always connected and available, made the personal message purpose of handwritten notes superfluous, since the message could now always be conveyed independent of space and place. The ontological concepts associated with the media form of personal handwritten notes have, however, not been fully absorbed by these new media. Although the integration of the camera and the digital image as a form of communication along with the rise of emojis seem to operate on a similar logic, it has still not been able to convey the same sense of contingency.

So what happens when the cameras of these smartphones now create digital objects of handwritten notes? Drawing on Heidegger’s understanding of handiness, it becomes possible to assert what the handwritten note is not today: “The ready-to-hand is not grasped theoretically at all, nor is it itself the sort of thing that circumspection takes proximally as a circumspective theme. What is peculiar to what is initially at hand is that it withdraws, so to speak, in its character of handiness in order to be really handy. What everyday dealings are initially busy with is not tools themselves, but the work” (Heidegger, 2010: 70). In order to be really handy the tool must become withdrawn, integrating itself with the hand and the what-for [Woza] of what is to be produced. In this sense, the smartphone is increasingly developing the quality of handiness, particularly to the digital native generation who never had to shift their tools of communication.
In the post-digital realm, pen and paper have become present-at-hand in Heidegger’s terminology, since they are now less handy and therefore also less withdrawn. As handwritten notes and their corresponding tools of pen and paper were used for everyday communication, they were known in their relational nature as equipment for a purpose, but not as what they were in themselves (Heidegger, 2010: 98). They were habitual media, to borrow Wendy Chun’s useful term to describe how digital media produce habits, ‘things that remain by disappearing from consciousness’ (Chun, 2016: ix). As pen and paper were replaced by smartphones and tablets, they stopped remaining by disappearing and became repurposed as artistic and psychological tools.

One may still use paper notes occasionally to scribble something, but to communicate practical information they are no longer the default medium. Pen, paper and the resulting note have become discernable and therefore deconcealed as Being in the world (Dasein). The scribbled note is also present-at-hand because it is present in our consciousness, and thus possible to exhibit as such. As Chun puts it, ‘our media matter the most when they seem not to matter at all’ (2016: 1); smartphones and search engines being typical examples of thought-structuring technology that is so ubiquitous that it is nearly invisible, as were of course pen and paper a few decades ago. For clarity, the everyday and intimate communication of pen and paper did not really change with the advent of the typewriter, which made its success as the essential tool for writers and official communicators. It was not until the advent of smartphones that pen and paper started to be replaced in this everyday sense. When they stop being a thought structuring technology, they lend themselves to the production of different ontological concepts like intimacy, the haptic, the human and the post-digital contingency outlined here.

The personal and intimate handwriting on paper is re-emerging within a digital infrastructure whose endpoint is often a smartphone resting in a human hand. The smartphone, in contrast, is very much ready-to-hand. This peculiar media ecological cycle from hand to hand as it were, is coming together in the contingency of post-digital handwriting.

Obrist highlights pen and paper by handing them to artists to produce a singular trace of an event, which he casually photographs with his smartphone and uploads to
Instagram. In order to understand this phenomenon, it is worthwhile to stick with Heidegger in inquiring about the act of communication of the tool and its being as a digital object. I am not concerned here with issues of authenticity or aura as it has been analyzed repeatedly since Walter Benjamin’s artwork essay, because the present questions are of a different ontological order. For Heidegger, communication is about seeing together, and this holds true for mediated communication as well, since that which is seen does not necessarily have to be present and within reach:

It is letting someone see with us what has been pointed out in its definite character. Letting someone see with us shares with others the being pointed out in its definiteness. What is ‘shared’ is the being toward [Sein zum] that which has been pointed out, it is a way of seeing something as in common. We must keep in mind that this being-toward is being-in-the-world, namely, in the world from which what is pointed out is encountered (Heidegger, 2010: 155).

Following Heidegger, we can see how Obrist’s posting of handwritten notes on Instagram constitutes a shared being toward that which is pointed out. It is thus not a matter of reproduction but orientation of being. Through Heidegger, we can thicken the description of the digital object beyond its status as code and system to incorporate user experience and relationality (Hui, 2016). The unconcealment of the useful thing reveals its social and cultural relation to us. Yuk Hui suggests that by incorporating things like interface design which allows user participation, metadata description beyond the merely technical and an emphasis on ‘the relation of the thing to others, which is not only spatial but also temporal and social’ (Hui, 2012: 349), we may arrive at a better and more pertinent understanding of a digital object in its digital milieu.

Coming back to Obrist’s The Art of Handwriting, we can see how the post-digital effect is dependent on the conceptual juxtaposition of the imperfection of the work of the human hand and the smooth and filtered mimesis of life on Instagram. These qualities are experience-based and tied to the metadata through the geotagging of the image and date, time and place of posting, but also and more importantly through the 320,000 followers that interact with and participate in this unconcealment of the useful thing that is a handwritten post-it note. In the circulation on social media of
images of Donald Trump’s acts of handwriting we are instead witnessing how the pen strokes are socialized as digital objects through the relation and interaction they produce.

The practice of post-digital handwriting can thus be related to unconcealment of the tools of communication (pen and paper) through the collapse of their handiness and their consequential appearance as theoretically graspable and present-at-hand. The digital objects are not constituted by the image per se, but by the social, cultural and temporal relations they produce. The particular case of handwriting as a post-digital phenomenon relates to other cases like vinyl, typewriter or cassette in that it is not an abandonment of the digital for the analogue but rather a media ecological feedback loop where the physical medium of the handwritten note is highlighted when captured as a digital image using a smartphone and distributed online on social media platforms, which alters the temporality of both media and draws attention to their respective ontological status.

In a digital milieu, handwriting assumes new qualities which radically change its ontological status. This process can firstly be related to how the text of handwriting changes from being primarily semantic to being primarily visual. The message becomes subordinated to the strokes of pen and their associations with a human being. Contrasting all surrounding typed text with the free haptic movement of the hand over paper, post-digital handwriting becomes a highly aestheticized phenomenon. These aspects are all captured in Obrist’s ever expanding art gallery, the *Art of Handwriting*, on his Instagram account. Secondly, the digital object of handwriting produces new cultural and social relations. The reach of the medium is changed from one reader to an infinite number of users who will produce new networked relations through the image. In the end, handwriting in digital milieus is a striking case of the dynamic and complex conflation of the human and the non-human in media and cultural techniques.

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Adam Wickberg, KTH Royal Institute of Technology. Wickberg is a Postdoctoral fellow in media history at the KTH Environmental Humanities Lab, a core member of the Posthumanities Hub and a visiting scholar at the Max Planck Institute for History of Science in Berlin (MPWIG I) 2020–2021. He works on issues of media history and theory, including digital issues, and the relation between media infrastructures, environment and knowledge, in contemporary issues like the Anthropocene as well as the deeper historical roots of the eco-crisis. His
book *Pellucid Paper: Poetry and Bureaucratic Media in Early Modern Spain* was published by Open Humanities Press 2018.

**Email:** adam.wickberg@abc.kth.se