ADVANCES IN PRESENcing

Edited by Olen Gunnaugson, Ph.D. & William Brendel, Ed.D.

* A timely anthology showcasing Theory U and presencing perspectives from the latest research of practitioners in the field
ADVANCES IN PRESENCING

Volume 1

Edited by
Olen Gunnlaugson, Ph.D.
William Brendel, Ph.D.

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Dedicated to the emergence of presencing as a viable field of research and practice
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Chapter 2
Visual Presencing

Kelvy Bird

Introduction

In some art forms, spirit drives the hand. This is the case in visual presencing, the act of two-dimensionally representing an experience of presencing. Presencing, as I consider it, means being with in order to access the potential of a moment. While being with, an artist opens themselves to a channel of spirit, which originates—like water from a well—in source. Source, as I experience it, is the pulse of life itself. It takes some slowing down to attune to the subtly of source, and to intentionally connect with the rise of spirit. Visual presencing, then, aids with this attunement, both for the artist during the creative process, and for those engaging with life force through a picture.

Creatives are familiar with the rhythm of back-and-forth toggle between inner and outer realms. Anyone who has tapped a beat on a table with a spoon or kneaded dough into a soft mound or skipped down a sidewalk is included in this broad term “creative.” I believe that we are all born with innate creativity and the ability to make art; some people have simply cultivated physical expression more than others. Regardless of skill or talent, we each possess an ability to communicate in a way that cuts across divisions of culture and verbal language by using form. Visual presencing can help us revive our creative ability by emphasizing a connection with source over literal, objective representation. A visual expression born while presencing is depiction, instead, of a moment’s truth according to the person receiving it.

My own path into this territory has curved through various creative contexts. Studying abstract painting in college, I learned to represent spirit through line, color, and shape. When I became a graphic
facilitator—or what I will refer to as a scribe in this chapter—I learned to combine images and words to map ideas onto large, upright surfaces so that people could see what they were talking about. When I sat in dialogue circles for hours on end, I learned to take extensive, text-based notes to track the meaning coming through a collective, into a room. Participating in women’s circles, I learned that to orient from the heart is to tap into an infinite and restorative resource. Now, alongside presencing colleagues and practitioners, I am learning to sense into a social field at any given moment, to facilitate how we see ourselves, others, systems and society. I am also continuing to practice, write about, and teach generative scribing.

In the following sections I will further define three forms of my current practice—scribing, generative scribing, and visual presencing—and end by sharing some experiments and possible applications of the later. My hope, and the incentive behind writing this chapter, is that readers will be able to identify ways that visual presencing could be part of their own path, on any scale, to bring forward their own unique gift of creativity, to manifest source.

Scribing

Scribing is a practice in which an artist listens to people talk and simultaneously draws a map of their ideas; those speaking can see a picture of their words unfold in front of their eyes. (See Figure 1.) The purpose of the drawing is to establish connections within content, aid with insight, and support decision-making. The weaving of words and pictures together facilitates group learning and cultural memory.

Figure 1: The dynamic of scribing.

Scribing (in its modern context) has its roots in the early 1970s in the San Francisco Bay Area. It is often defined as a practice that makes the unknown apparent through pictures, maps, diagrams, and models.¹ David Sibbet, founder of Grove Consultants International, originated the terms “Group
Graphics® and “graphic facilitation” to describe methods that use visuals interactively to facilitate group understanding in organizational contexts.iii

There are many cousins of scribing, each of which slightly varies the live drawing approach. One is graphic recording, often a more literal pairing of words and pictures, with an aim to mirror verbal content. Other offshoots of the original practice have now-familiar terms such as sketch-noting, doodling, and mind mapping, and all have found unique uses, markets, and applications. And I would be remiss to omit the intersection of scribing with animation, motion graphics, cartooning, and even virtual reality, which have added dimensionality and access to the core profession in mind-boggling numbers.iii

According to one of my earliest mentors, Bryan Coffman, the term scribing goes back to at least 1981, when knowledge workers who drew on walls during collaborative sessions were called “wall scribes.”iv Seshat was the Egyptian goddess of wisdom and knowledge who is credited with inventing writing. “Usually, she is shown holding a palm stem, bearing notches to denote the recording of the passage of time . . . She was also depicted holding other tools and, often, holding the knotted cords that were stretched to survey land and structures.”v I find it fascinating that the current role of the scribe has evolved directly from the original meaning. Scribes mark the passage of time and delineate structure within, and for, cultures—albeit with new methods. Each drawing maps territory the scribe is helping a social body to understand, whether it be a company’s business strategy, a city’s public land development, or a family’s move to a new country.

Prehistoric cave paintings also recorded and charted the presence and activity of species. Native American medicine wheels, Tibetan Buddhist sand mandalas, and the dreamtime influence in Aboriginal art—along with many other ancient and contemporary co-created visual formats—include a spiritual approach to social art, recognizing the connection between the human species and source. I have gravitated to the term scribe to define what I am—and what I have actively practiced since 1995—because of this harkening back to something primordial, something that seems timeless and enduring, something that provides a service that cuts across any one lifetime or generation.

Scribes serve as artistic aids in shared seeing and human navigation. Scribes represent information, in as neutral a way as possible, to craft living artifacts. We draw, then document the work digitally, then let go of the original pieces by handing them off to clients; and sometimes we even erase our work surfaces immediately after a group ends their conversation. The process happens quickly, and the product is fleeting. The final digital images end up on people’s smartphones, in documents, reprinted as posters, in reports, in library displays, and as handouts for those who were not in the room during the making of the piece. But the physical artifact is a mere echo of the primary value, which is in-the-moment collective sourcing and reflection.

Scribing is an inherently participatory social art form. The hoped-for outcome is that a group will
see a course to take, find its direction. Thus the purpose of the scribe is to help people see what they are talking about, to aid in thoughtful, considered action. The painter Wassily Kandinsky viewed art as a liberating device that could bring the inner life alive through pure line, shape, and color. Scribing, by going beyond an abstract two-dimensional plane, activates the inner life of the social field, the unseen—yet felt—territory of human interaction.

Scribing, as a social art, is an exposed, witnessed, feedback-dependent activity that only takes place in the presence of a group of people. It gives shape to human conditions in an organic way, in rhythm with what is voiced. It depends not on one artist’s view, but on the input of many views that converge through the artistic act. I often refer to those in the room as a “participant-audience” to reframe the traditional interpretation of “audience” from passive receivers of an expression into active players in a co-creative act, even if the act is through one person’s hands. When I work at a wall with a participant-audience at my back, then, my engagement is fully with both the substance of their conversation and their energy.

By responding immediately to what I hear and sense, live, in front of a group of people, I create a picture whose meaning they can quickly assimilate into the conversation. Discerning different vantage points in a group is a good starting point. I might hear some people speaking of aspiration and boldly write the word “vision” on one part of a wall. I might also hear a faction speaking about limits and boldly write the words “conditions” on another part of the same wall. I might map comments around each main word to continue to highlight individual contributions and differences, while simultaneously listening for the voices that speak to the tension between the two camps. If these voices exist (and the possibility for them is not only in my mind) then I might add the words “creative tension” and most notably, draw some lines between the various areas of the board. (See Figure 2.) To note, underpinning this approach is the use of models, specifically Creative Tension from Robert Fritz, and Creating the Problem from MG Taylor. vii
Thus, through its reflective mirroring, the drawing has the power to immediately structure, influence, and transform the thinking in a room. There is a reinforcing loop between the drawing itself and the receiving of the drawing; the loop expands the understanding that a room of people share and thereby can expand their sense of possibility. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3: The dynamic of scribing as it influences thinking that then influences what is spoken and further recorded.
There is a cadence in the process that flows like this: I listen. I draw. You see. You speak. I listen I draw you see you speak. You see I listen you speak I draw. You speak I draw we see we listen. The words and the marks and the impressions and the thinking blend in and out of one another. The boundary between group and speaker and self and wall dissolves.

There are depths, or phases, of scribing that directly correlate with attention. Attention is informed by different levels of listening that can help us shift our awareness and sense of possibility. Otto Scharmer describes the four levels of listening as: (1) downloading; (2) factual listening; (3) empathic listening; and (4) generative listening. I apply each level of listening to the visual practice of scribing, as shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Levels of Scribing.**

**Level 1: Mirror.** We hear a word and draw a picture from memory. Our image is literal; someone says “bird” and we illustrate a bird. This is object-oriented scribing, with a focus on naming individual parts.

**Level 2: Differentiate.** We interpret words and make sense of parts by expanding our vantage point. We draw what we hear in a factual context and organize parts into like clusters. “The bird is flying, then it reaches the coast and joins a flock” becomes a story.

**Level 3: Relate.** We connect ideas and make meaning by stepping back to see the entirety of a person or
situation, seeking to understand relationships and structures in a way that encompasses the whole. We shift from noticing sequential movements to noticing dynamics from above, as if in a slice of time. The words are “bird” and “nest”, and the scribing includes the feedback loop between the two.

Level 4: Surface. We reveal an emerging future potential by letting go of past conceptions and tapping into the true present moment. Once we sense the reality that wants to unfold, the essence that wants to be known, a drawing can help define the forces in play. What is below the bird? A gust of wind? A tide? A pending migration?

Generative Scribing

In level four scribing, “generative scribing,” we sense into potential for the systems we serve. This requires being sensitive not only to the content that is obvious and clear, but also to the content that is fuzzy or faint—hesitations in a speaker’s voice, long pauses between words, coughing that interrupts a sentence. We are fully receptive to all kinds of sensory and intuitive inputs: rain on the roof, a fly buzzing around someone’s juice cup, the freshness or staleness of the air, the light, the shadows. As our aperture widens, we receive information with expanded awareness, attending to the unfolding nature of reality.

Generative scribing advances the visual discipline of scribing by extending the range of the artist to an entire ecosystem, “a system, or a group of interconnected elements, formed by the interaction of a community of organisms with their environment.” A generative scribe calls attention to an emerging reality that is brought to life by, and for, the social field in which it is created. No picture exists outside the context of the system—the interacting community—in conversation, and no system’s comprehension of itself is complete without the reflective representation and aid that the picture offers. The relationship is participatory, reciprocal, and procreative.
My experience with this kind of work, starting from about 2003, leads me to believe that the key to generative scribing is sensing from the heart. It’s piercing through to something essential, seeing clearly without fear of the result or consequence of what emerges. It requires trust in the complete blankness of things. It also demands personal vulnerability, which for me has meant softening to the situation and letting my defenses down, which sometimes is in conflict with needing to stay steady in order to produce! Most importantly, generative scribing can only happen when the social body (a handful or thousands of people) is committed to being together in place and time, committed to joining in the present.

The generative scribe must sometimes grope in the dark to find threads of meaning, then quickly get that out and up on a wall for others to see. Anyone who is able to see the drawing is actually an active participant in its creation. There is no “other.” There is a hand that holds a marker, that leans forward from the extended arm of an upright physical body acting purely on behalf of the whole. I draw because we exist; I draw as a social act.

I have often wondered—especially in light of symbolic art, such as that of Indigenous peoples—about the true potential of generative scribing to cross physical and spiritual lines. Can a scribed image embody the dimensionality of past, present, and future in a larger timelessness, all at once? How far can we push the comprehensive limits of systems, and our own limits, to shift the place of understanding between known and unknown worlds? Can scribing generate a vibrational field that goes beyond literal words to transcend the moment?

As I continue to reflect on these questions, I choose an integrative approach to revealing unnamed wholeness, believing it presents as close an echo as possible to the complexity and inherent beauty of the natural world. Often this requires synthesizing multiple threads of content into one
encapsulating picture. (See Figure 6.) It’s an approach that deepens level three systems scribing, the value of which is in revealing interdependency. (See Figure 7.) It’s also an approach that expands on the linear flow of level two story scribing, the value of which is naming parts that somehow could relate. (See Figure 8.) All levels have their place; none is better or worse! All scribing helps people see. A generative approach, quite simply, taps into an additional dimension of knowing.

Figure 6: An integrated, generative approach to scribing.

Figure 7: A systems approach to scribing.
Visual Presencing

Like a seed in a pod that grows on an upward moving stem, visual presencing is inseparably embedded within generative scribing. It is a core capacity, a skill, for the generative scribe. But it does not need to serve a group or system; it can be a personal expression, practiced in private or in front of a group. In either case, the visual presencing practitioner connects with source, through spirit, through active presencing. Drawings come to life from a qualitative place of listening, when a practitioner is rooted in his or her authentic “self,” sensing and serving an emerging potential. (See Figure 9.)
This is a capacity I’ve applied most recently, since working with the Presencing Institute starting in 2006 and scribing for u.lab and the u.ecology starting in 2014. I am still coming to understand what it is, what it represents when taking shape, and the impact it has on our understanding of humanity. In addition to tracking my own experiences with visual presencing, I have been experimenting with the method in a series of dedicated learning environments. In three specific workshops, I led similar exercises with slightly different conditions. These yielded consistent results, and has led me to believe that—regardless of artistic training or region in which a person lives—anyone who wants to experience visual presencing has it within reach.
In Berlin in July 2017, through a Visual Presencing Program, we attempted for the first time to stage a community visual presencing experience. The delivery team of Julie Arts, Angela Baldini, Aimee Aubin, and myself were experimenting with a way to embody level four listening through drawing. There were twenty-six participants in all: twelve graphic recorders and fourteen other familiar with Theory U but with limited, or no, scribing experience. We inserted the visual presencing experiment toward the end the second day, when we had been learning about the sensing phase of the U and were shifting into presencing. It followed this design:

1) Review the Levels of Listening framework.
2) Exercise with a hands-on experience to embody listening levels two and three. To practice the latter, we set up three-person groups around the room. In each group, one person shared a story, one person listened, and one person listened while scribing. We repeated this activity in rotation so that each person could practice each role.
3) Revisit listening level four and provide an overview of generative scribing.
4) Draw in front of a blank board—without any audio or video inputs—while connecting with source, within field awareness, attending specifically to level four listening and scribing.

As soon as we started, the sound of pen on paper pinned to cardboard was as loud as a howling winter snowstorm. After only a few minutes I paused the group, walked them through a short mindfulness moment intended to reconnect them to earth, sky, and heart, then rang a chime signaling that they could start drawing again. But some seeming urgency remained, and many participants continued drawing with gestural gusto.

Many other people did pause. Some sat. Some closed their eyes. Each found a rhythm within the social body that we had, and were extending, together. At the end of twenty minutes, we took a gallery walk to view and absorb the drawings. The pictures remained on the walls throughout the workshop, as a spiritual reminder and to serve as a container for other images and ideas still to come.

We did not talk about the experience as a full group because we had not included that step in the workshop design and were short on time. There would likely be much to learn from a follow-up reflection on what each person experienced in that short twenty-minute window, and from what they saw in the body of work they had shaped.

The general feeling in the room, though, was one of release, of freedom—where it seemed like people had been able to draw without the pressure of an expected outcome or need for the drawing to be literal or make “sense.” Although the group’s urge to draw had been very insistent, my memory is that
they had achieved a sense of timelessness through the process and seemed more at ease with their own beings. I think we were all a bit surprised by the abundance of the visual outcome.

Munich

In October of the same year I collaborated with Svenja Rueger of the Value Web to deliver a visual practice workshop. It differed slightly from the others in that the main framing was not Theory U but my own Generative Scribing model of practice. Instead of drawing to silence, people drew to the audio of Mary Oliver reading her poem “Wild Geese,” with an intent to practice level four scribing. In this case, presencing was applied to visual practice (rather that visual practice applied to presencing, as in Berlin). Content informed the drawing, spirit informed the listening, and the hand united the two.

I took notes on people’s reflections throughout the day. They included comments such as these:

• How has our container shifted and what is trying to emerge?
• This is poetry. I can let go. This is art now.
• How do I cope with the energy [coming through me]?
• How can I get to a level of trust with a client to be able to draw from my intuition?
• I would love to [draw like this] every day, but will anyone pay me for it?
• Something emerged from looking at someone else’s drawing, and interpreting the drawings together. The two drawings enhanced the meaning of each one.
• The process of drawing, not the picture, carried the meaning.
• There are just lines and dots, but the whole world came together in that moment. It releases in myself a healing that I could never have predicted—that we have the ability to do that, that we have so much light in there, in what we draw.

China

In November of the same year I co-facilitated a three-day residential program with Jayce Pei Yu Lee, Lili Xu, and Ripley Lin in Hangzhou, China. The design was similar to the one we used in Berlin: the first day dipped into capacities for opening (mind-heart-will) and perceiving (using the Iceberg model, see Figure x) (Schein, Senge); day two focused on levels of listening and scribing, and day three on discerning and project application.

One large difference between this program and the others was that everything I said was translated from English into Chinese after each one or two sentences. The dedicated translator, Chloe Gao, had already attended two of my previous workshops and knew the material well. But it’s hard to
know how my tone and emphases may or may not have come through. While the other three facilitators could tell how well the group was following the process and understanding what we were trying to convey, I felt two steps behind. The drawings were also in Chinese, and it was difficult to find feedback on the learning process without directly understanding what people were writing.

The venue was in an eco-park called XiXi Wetlands outside Hangzhou, where we were able to walk through low-lying areas of water on carefully maintained paths. The access to nature and the fact that the entire group ate every meal together added a dimension to our level of connection. While the in-room delivery was a challenge, the warmth of the convening was quite clearly felt by all.

On day two, Lili delivered the section on four levels of listening, and we had participants engage in an exercise with a leaf to experience level four. Lili encouraged us to “regard the leaf as a representation [of energy]. The dynamic movement is the reality. See with the heart.” And she referenced Goethe: “Every object, well contemplated, opens up a new organ of perception within us.”

Instead of providing large markers for each person, as we did in Berlin and Munich, the local team found Chinese brushes and ink. This was a brilliant choice, as the thick brushes with fine points lend themselves perfectly to energy moving through the body, arm, and hand. While markers have plastic casing and a nib where ink comes out, the brushes had wooden handles with fiber bristle. These natural materials, I believe, allowed for a stronger connection to culture, place, and source. We worked on undyed, brown paper. I mention these things because each step in the process, each choice of location, staging, tools, and even how to handle the verbal language affected the quality of experience.

Despite the variety of conditions across these three unique cases—Berlin, Munich, and Hangzhou—I seemed that each person was able to access source in some personal way and apply that authentically through their own hand. No one abstained or did not draw. There was no copying of someone else’s style. There was no better, no worse. No expert, no beginner. Each brought forth an energy they had connected into through our collective presencing experience. All growth was in the direction of yes.

Personal experience

I have so far described visual presencing as something that happens in a group context. But there is a personal side to it too, that I have examined more intimately by working directly alongside Otto Scharmer and, as mentioned, with our online course and platform u.lab: Leading from the Emerging Future. Sometimes I have planned out the skeleton of a drawing on a wall if our core team has a clear enough sense of the content. Sometimes I start with an entirely blank slate, quite literally, working on a well-used old blackboard surface. Sometimes I use markers loaded with chalk ink. Sometimes I use a
brush with the same ink.

When a visual presencing element comes into the work it might be captured in one small feature of the drawing that the participant-audience would never recognize, since it happens through the making and is not easily noticeable in the final picture. Sometimes a bit of ink will drip down from a mark, no matter how careful I’ve been in my application. Sometimes a texture results from drawing with a certain repetition or directionality in a rhythmic sort of state. Sometimes a large arc I’ve drawn is crooked and has a bend to it midway, a bend that does not make sense from the large gesture my arm has made. These features are all unexplainable in the moment, and I notice them, and let them be. It is in these fractions that I feel the presencing coming through, the letting come. And my own letting go is the acceptance that they wanted to be there is just the way they showed up. (See Figure 10.)

![Figure 10](image-url)

*Figure 10: A burst of pigment about 2” wide, that came to represent an eye, a portal for seeing. u.lab. Pigment and chalk ink on blackboard, 2018.*

As in the workshops, where a consistent structure yielded similar and surprising results, in u.lab
the format is almost always the same. Timing, team, room, wall, camera across from me, inks, chalks, wipes, remote audience participating from their local settings, some known content that fits within a design, much unknown content that emerges in the moment. But one thing I realize now as I write is that my interior state must always be open. That is a defining characteristic of visual presencing. When I am stuck in thought or am feeling too much or am concerned about how legible my writing will be, I am closed off. It is necessary to be open in the heart and to allow the hand to be guided from that place. Not from the mind or the will, but from a place of pure generosity where outreach and intake meet.

At this point, you might be wondering how visual presencing differs from any other kind of art-making. I wonder too. I think a key difference is creative intent. With visual presencing, the intent is to guide some intangible sense or spirit—inside and outside—into form through the act of drawing. It is not about an artist’s idea or view or self-exploration that the artist projects into a work; this is the case with many 20th century painters, including Abstract Expressionists, for example. In my experience, it’s not personally about the artist at all, beyond the sensibility and willingness of the artist to serve as a “guide” for a new potential to take form. Thinking and ego only get in the way of that.

I still wonder at the mysterious way that spirit takes shape. During the programs I mentioned above, the freeing potential for individuals and the collective was undeniable with each swirl, each ink blotch, each arc, each tilted head, each breath in and out that I witnessed in others, and that I have felt in myself. As I was stirred, the drawing stirred, the energy stirred, the field stirred.

Humanity faces existential challenge with the environmental breakdown a consumptive part of our species (myself and at least 3 generations of my ancestors included) has caused. Functioning from “I” will only perpetuate this destructive cycle. How to shift it? Reinforce, instead, the goodness of the human spirit and revive a lost will to care for the well-being of the whole, of the planet and of all living creatures. Visual presencing could be one aesthetic way to know ourselves more truthfully and tap into our deeper humanity, in the face of these transitions.

The result of visual presencing, as applied within generative scribing, is that the eyes of the practitioner and the eyes of a system—all eyes—are opened to something they have never before considered. The nascent is brought to light, offered through the hand, through conscious intent. Because one individual is willing to function as a channel for spirit, spirit is able to find its way into this earthly realm.

There is power in visual presencing, too, for the individual who draws alone. Being able to locate our truest self and tap into an energy that is larger, more long-lasting, and deeper than that of our minds, hearts, and hands alone—that would be something on its own! Imagine all the people who now say “I can’t draw” shifting their mindset to “The drawing that comes through me provides insight and is a gift
that will be useful as my life goes forward.”

Certainly with our global society in the midst of great transformation, the more we can connect to an inner place of authenticity that gives guidance, the more our actions will come forward with a quality of rootedness. Visual presencing is one art form to aid in this great turning, shifting us from an outside in to an inside out way of being.

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iii Andrew Park, the founder of Cognitive, invented the now ubiquitous whiteboard animation method, most widely known through the RSA Animate series that has received millions of views on YouTube. See the Cognitive website: www.wearecognitive.com.

iv “Wall Scribing: One or two Graphics Team members listen to the conversation and draw what they hear. This is a form of instant feedback and visual translation for participants.” DesignShop Staff Manual, Athenaeum International, Version 3.3 (Boulder: MG Taylor Corporation, 1991), p. 37. See also Donald Frazer, Hieroglyphs and Arithmetic of the Ancient Egyptian Scribes: Version 1. “The profession at first associated with the goddess Seshat is the source of the Egyptian word ‘Sesh,’ meaning scribe.”


