

generative scribing

A SOCIAL ART
of the 21st CENTURY

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PI

PRESS

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for all who aspire to see

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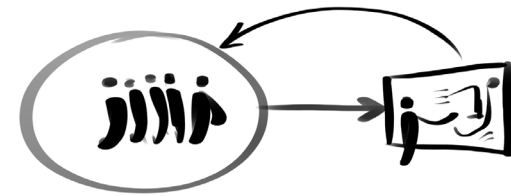
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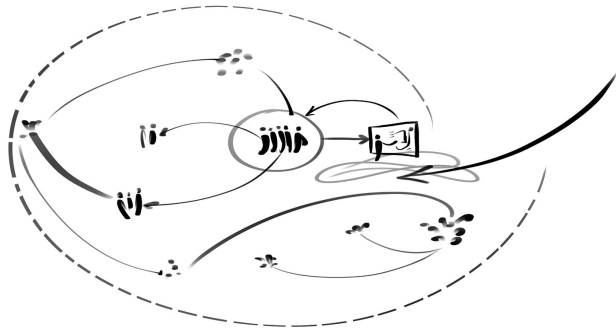
Each of our gestures, scribed on a wall or enacted in daily life, matters to the preservation and evolution of our species.

Scribing, one form of gesture, is a visual practice. An artist maps out ideas while people talk, and they can see a picture unfold right in front of their eyes. The drawing establishes connections within content, aids with insight, and supports decision-making. It's essentially a language that weaves words and pictures to facilitate group learning and cultural memory.



“Generative scribing” advances this discipline by extending the range of the practitioner to an entire ecosystem, while drawing with an attunement to energy. A generative scribe calls particular attention to an emerging reality that is brought to life by, and for, the social field in which it's created. No picture exists outside the context of the system in conversation, and the system's comprehension of itself is incomplete without the reflective representation and aid that the picture offers. It's a participatory, reciprocal, and proactive relationship.

Generative scribing is a visual practice unique in our age, a distinct art form of the 21st century, functioning in the moment, across cultural boundaries, and as a device for social seeing.



Because of its interactive and co-creative nature, generative scribing offers one access route to a sacred way of being, where the spirit of our humanity prevails over any individual agenda. Like witnesses of a solar eclipse at a pond, who share each other's special eyeglasses and swim together in muted waters, our spirits have an opportunity to revive and see anew because of common context. Drawing live, amongst a group of people, scribes make the human condition visible, tangible, known. In a way, we provide a setting, like a pond, for insight to occur.

But wait, what is the story behind scribing?

Scribing is a contemporary visual practice with roots in the Bay Area of California in the early 1970s. It is often defined as a practice that makes the unknown manifest through pictures, maps, diagrams, and models.¹ David Sibbet, founder of The Grove Consultants International, originated the terms “Group Graphics[®]” and the generic term “graphic facilitation” to describe methods that use visuals interactively to facilitate group understanding in organizational contexts.²

There are many cousins of scribing, each of which slightly varies the live drawing approach. One is “graphic recording,” often a more literal means of pairing words and pictures, with an aim to mirror and map content. Other offshoots of the original practice have now-familiar terms such as sketchnoting, doodling, and mind mapping, to name a few—and all have found unique uses, markets, and applications. And I'd be remiss to omit the intersection with animation, motion graphics, cartooning, and even virtual reality, which have added dimensionality and access to the core profession in mind-boggling numbers.³

Practitioners in this field have come to learn the work in clear generational waves that I name in this manner:

1. **1970s: 1st Wave Originators** – like Sibbet, Jennifer Landau, and founding members of Grove Consultants along with Michael Doyle of Interaction Associates. (California, USA)
2. **1980s: 2nd Wave Originators** – Jim Channon, Matt Taylor, and Bryan Coffman with MG Taylor Corporation. (Colorado, USA)
3. **1990s: 3rd Wave Early Adopters** – those who learned with the originators and helped further seed the field (USA), those who started applying the practice within management consulting, organizational change, and not-for-profits. (+Canada, Europe)
4. **2000s: 4th Wave Early Majority** – those still learning from the previous generations in a hands-on manner, employing markers and physical wall surface and also starting to incorporate digital technologies. (+Australia)

1 Robert Horn, “Visual Language and Converging Technologies in the Next 10–15 Years (and Beyond),” Paper prepared for the National Science Foundation Conference on Converging Technologies, December 2001.

2 David Sibbet, “A Graphic Facilitation Retrospective,” <http://davidssibbet.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/GF-RetrospectiveUpdated.pdf>.

3 Andrew Park, the extremely talented 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.werecognitive.com.

5. **2010s: 5th Wave Self-Directed Majority** – people learning about the practice on their own, from books and videos by those who came up in the first four waves. (+Central and South America, Middle East, India, Africa, Asia)

6. **2017– : 6th Wave Collaborative Majority, Innovators, Questers** – people crossing regional boundaries to share best practices and evolve the art form; weaving indigenous, wisdom, and spiritual traditions into the existing visual practices to raise consciousness around the path of human evolution.

According to one of my earliest mentors, Bryan Coffman, the current use of the term “scribing” goes back at least as far as 1981, when knowledge workers who drew on walls during collaborative sessions were called “wall scribes.”⁴ As he once shared, “Scribes in Egypt kept the real story of what happened. Their word for the role was *Sesh*.”⁵

According to Wikipedia, Seshat was the goddess of wisdom, knowledge, and 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.”

I find this fascinating, considering that the current role of the scribe layers directly onto the original meaning. We mark the passage of time and delineate structure within, and for, cultures—albeit with new methods. Each drawing maps some

4 “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.

5 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.”

territory we are 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 served to record and chart 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 humans and the life force all around us.

I have gravitated to the term “scribe” to define what I am and do because of this harkening back to something primordial, something that seems timeless and lasting, something that provides a service that cuts across any one lifetime.

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 wipe down our work surfaces immediately after a group ends their conversation.

The process 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 not in the room during the actual 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. In the process of making these artifacts, a group can see a course to take, find their direction. Thus the aid of the scribe is to induce greater vision, toward action. (See appendix Figure 1.)

Scribing is an inherently participatory social art form.

The painter Wassily Kandinsky viewed art as a liberating device that could bring the inner life alive through pure line, shape, and color.⁶ Scribing, going beyond an abstract two-dimensional plane, activates the inner life of the social field, the unseen—yet felt—territory of human interaction.

Historically, two-dimensional art making has been a private, sheltered, creative act. Artists paint pictures, usually alone in a studio, based on their reality. Sometimes the pictures are exhibited, purchased, displayed in a home or public setting, and viewed. Sometimes they prompt conversation.

Scribing, as a social art, is an exposed, witnessed, feedback-dependent activity that only takes place within a group of people. It gives shape to human conditions in an organic way, in rhythm with what wants to be voiced and seen. It depends not on one artist's view, but on the input of many views that come together through the creative act.

When I work at a wall with a participant-audience at my back, the engagement is with both their content and their energy.⁷ By responding to what I am hearing and sensing in an immediate way, live, in front of a group, what I create can be quickly assimilated into the conversation. Thus, through its reflective mirroring, the drawing has the power to immediately influence and transform the thinking in a room.

⁶ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (London: Dover Publications, 1977), republished from the original *The Art of Spiritual Harmony* (London: Constable and Company Limited, 1914).

⁷ I often refer to those engaging with artwork as a "participant-audience" to intentionally help people think about an audience not as passive receivers of an artist's expression but as active players in the artwork's creation.

There is a reinforcing loop between the actual drawing and the receiving of the drawing; the loop expands the understanding that a room of people share and thereby expands their sense of possibility.



This art has life only because a communal desire for sensemaking exists. Someone, or a team, has decided to bring in a scribe to help people see what it is they are talking about.

What takes form through the hand of the scribe is the content that's meant to come through, no more and no less. What lands on a surface—no matter how well thought-through—is as far as a system can go at that moment. It reflects a slice of time.

Sailors cut through fog at a speed that allows them to hear the gonging buoys guiding their way. Chiropractors adjust a neck within the limits of the person's vertebral mobility. We can only move as fast as conditions allow, within a range of readiness. Scribes attune to those limits and track that movement.

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. That's how it feels. It's fluid.

Scribing offers a relational way of seeing.

In 1933, color theorist Josef Albers arrived at Black Mountain College in North Carolina knowing few English words, but enough to convey his purpose for teaching: “To open eyes.”⁸

My own inquiry into the relatedness of things began in earnest when reading and applying Albers’s seminal book, *Interaction of Color*, during a university class called “Color, Form & Space.” Professor Norman Daly challenged us: “Prove color is not independent.” Through one homework assignment—placing two equivalent colors each within a different, larger, colored area—my eyes and mind were blown open by the very same grey appearing purple against yellow, then green against red.

As a painter, I started to attune to the relationships of color and objects everywhere. Beige against indigo: a moth, pinned against a screen, in darkness, seeking light. The inquiry extended to non-material things, too. Ideas side-by-side (my view, your view) . . . how to represent those juxtapositions? People side-by-side (my body heat, your body heat) . . . how to convey the vibrational field?

Then, in 1995, when working on a collaborative art project in San Francisco, I was introduced to scribing through Matt and Gail Taylor—an architect and an educator who developed a methodology for employing group genius in solving complex problems.⁹ They invited me to apprentice at a DesignShop™ for NASA, a collaborative, immersive, three-day program to reimagine the use of wind tunnels. Most of what I remember

about that week is the impressive team of a dozen people that largely self-organized to facilitate over a hundred anxious and eager government employees of all ranks by arranging space, setting chairs, writing assignments, providing information, explaining concepts, documenting, filming, playing music—and yes, scribing! And, I recall being amazed at how art could have a role in shaping group thinking.

The environment itself extended my fascination with relation: over three days, participants wrote and drew out their concepts onto 6 x 8 foot rolling dry-erase walls, making thinking visible to everyone in the room. Through the placement of these large walls side-by-side, each containing ideas unique to individuals or breakout groups, suddenly I saw a format that extended my study of color into team dynamics.

I saw a way of representing multiple ideas from multiple people in one place, to stimulate overarching awareness and insight. One person’s idea (like a grey piece of paper) had different resonance or dissonance depending on whose idea it neighbored.

It was like walking into a cathedral full of mosaic, where each piece of colored glass, though unique, loses itself in the vastness of the overall creation. The full array of those dry-erase walls seemed like a passage to a new kind of human interaction.

The assemblage of the parts—like colors, like mosaic tiles, like walls hosting ideas side-by side, like bodies in a room talking and listening—transcends the current known reality.

⁸ *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College, 1933–1957*, exhibit at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA, October 2015–January 2016.

⁹ Gayle Pergamit and Chris Peterson, *Leaping the Abyss: Putting Group Genius to Work* (Hilton Head: knOwhere Press, 1997).

Society is in desperate need of seeing.

As Albers sought to open eyes, I write this book to advance the capacity of seeing. We are a species edging toward extinction if we do not address and change our behaviors to turn around global trends—including climate warming, gross inequality, and perpetuated violence, among others.

Maybe this kind of urgency for survival has been felt perennially throughout history, during other cycles of destruction or contraction that humankind has faced and caused (the bubonic plague, the Holocaust, . . .)¹⁰ But certainly this is a unique moment in history, with a unique necessity to address our destructive actions in order to preserve life.

With the aid of seeing, together we can more clearly choose and chart our path. Our views become shared and solvable in a very different manner than if each of us exists within our own individual sphere of understanding.

It's a time not only to see what we immediately face in the short term, but also to orient with a long view. It is a time to access the positive potential in ourselves and those around us, without apology, with determination.

***It is a time, with open eyes,
to see clearly and act.***

Today's great challenges call us to (re)arrange our interior dimensions to more adequately meet current, outer realities.

Working from the inside out, then, by unpacking my own experience over the past thirty or so years, I serve up generative scribing as one practice to aid with this larger shift.

This book is aimed at current and future scribes, with an aspiration to expand the possibility of the art form and the impact of our efforts.

It is for a broader audience, too, for those whose “markers” take shape as kitchen utensils, gardening rakes, community leagues, city planning, national policy-making—you name it. By replacing words like “draw” with “cook,” or “wall” with “table,” the meaning can translate to a variety of contexts.

This is a book for anyone who cares about how we exist together as human beings, for anyone who wants to explore their interior functioning, for anyone who seeks to approach the world anew.

¹⁰ Tobias Stone, “History Tells Us What May Happen Next with Brexit & Trump,” 2016, Medium.com (<https://medium.com/@tswriting/history-tells-us-what-will-happen-next-with-brexit-trump-a3fed154714>).