



# ***VOICE TO VISION*** ***V2V***

*Collaborative Visual Inquiry: A New Way of Interviewing  
Through the Art Process*

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## **THE VOICE TO VISION PROCESS**

The V2V process is one where art images bring up memories of past events, and therefore the art is asking questions that individuals don't typically think of asking. This process of developing a visual image is also the process of discussing an experience deeper.

The following pages introduce the process of Voice to Vision, which has successfully dealt with the topic of organizing meetings in which people from different cultures, disciplines, and generations come together to contribute and learn. The documented process and the final result provide an audience with a personal, emotional response, creating a newly found awareness that was not privy to their prior knowledge.

### **The Idea of a Leader, an Art Director**

Collaboration has to have a leader who has an open mind and believes in the team. In unsuccessful collaborative work, anyone can meander the work in one's own direction that will sabotage the concept of collaboration. For this reason, a leader must be present who is responsible for maintaining the idea that all voices are heard; addressing those ideas and issues that have not been addressed yet, ensuring that all priorities are explored, things that have higher priority are explored more than others, that nothing is left out, and that the best thing is made better.

A good leader cannot have a personal agenda or any personal preferences or prejudices. The leader cannot be seduced by all the arguments presented to them and not be able to make a decision; the leader has to make sure that no one is disenfranchised. The main notion a leader should uphold is that the team they are working with is made up of bright, intelligent individuals who are capable of exceeding any pre-determined expectations and arriving at significant original visual symbols that have never been seen before. The leader has the following responsibilities:

1. Preventing personal conflicts.
2. Choosing participants to create a successful team.
3. Working with the team as a group and also with individuals one-on-one.
4. Controlling the timing of meetings so there is enough reflection time; some things need to be acted on quickly, and others need considerably more time for reflection.
5. Breaking the teams into sub-groups to solve specific problems.
6. Working individually with any participant whose specialization is needed at that moment, and knowing when to bring all the sub-teams together as a whole unit. This means constantly adjusting the schedule.

### **The Idea of a Team**

When choosing a team it is best to look for people who believe in different things, people who are excited about being in the project, and who are looking forward to arriving at an unprecedented, successful conclusion. Every individual brings value to the team; all team members must understand that if any one person and his/her ideas and input are left out, the project itself will not work. At the end of the project, it doesn't matter how much one person said or contributed, it was their presence that made the difference, even if they said nothing at all, it may be the reason the team succeeds. An example of this is a successful baseball team that trades one of their seemingly less valuable players and suddenly begins to lose most of their games. Perhaps that player held the team together in unconscious ways, contributing to the initiative of other players. A good motto to apply to this is "If something isn't broken, don't fix it."

Team members must be fearless and get excited about going into the unknown without ownership of ideas. They are searching for significance and truth very much like in science. One thing that can stop a team is personal conflicts. Personalities in a team will always be diverse, but team members must be able to respect differences, and look forward to using those differences successfully. In selecting a team, it is a good idea to have trial runs to see which people work together best. The leader can also select individuals they've worked with in the past, and combine new and familiar persons together. In Voice to Vision the teams were made up of storyteller survivors, visual artists, musicians, writers, community member professionals from the storytellers' culture, and the video crew if a documentary was being made.

## **How We Start**

The team creates symbolism from dialogue with the storytellers; we are searching for a visual fragment, a symbol to start the project. Fragments in turn look for other fragments to complete a whole. It is in this process that we go deeper into recalling memories that are significant and moving. The team has to keep in mind that there is a significant answer to every visual proposition.

You can start with a completely blank canvas, placing the first fragment in a meaningful position and then adding more fragments to reach a whole. In a different start, to break the ice, participants can begin by painting on the canvas with arbitrary colors that have no reference to any story or subject matter. This will get them used to paint, to being spontaneous, while getting used to the environment and having a fun time. It will also set up a visual signature in terms of their brush strokes, colors they may prefer, and different kinds of tools. Once the field is laid out, exploration of the placement of the first fragment takes place. The fragment may take on meaning in one place as opposed to another, making a particular part of the arbitrary background now meaningful. As the artwork continues, choices can be made with additions that will also find spots to relate to the background. Any parts of this arbitrary background that remain, have to have some sort of reason for being arbitrary, otherwise they are taken out.

A variation of this can also be having the artist on the team make an arbitrary background consisting of two colors. The storytellers are then given the two colors and can reshape the

forms to their liking by painting over them. This gives the storyteller something to start with, allowing for decision-making regarding their preferences to take place.

### **Devices for Recalling Memory: Fragments**

The first meeting with participants should be very casual. The goal of the meeting is simply for everyone to meet and become familiar with each other, with nothing intentionally asked about personal stories. There should be no structure set to follow that first meeting, other than a general discussion of the project. This is where you let nature take its course; no one knows where the conversations may go. The second time you meet is when you can start the process of visual art making.

It is very difficult for people to know which stories to tell and why. We have used many devices over an eight-year period to help prompt storytellers in the search for a visual start. Devices are versatile tools, they can be sounds, words, colors, etc., that invoke a memory. The purpose of the device is to form a fragment, a visual response that will be transcribed onto the canvas, as well as to prompt a story from the storytellers that becomes the focus of the artwork. The fragment represents only a small part of the story, and can be placed anywhere on the canvas. After the first fragment is placed on the canvas, devices are no longer used; instead, we rely on discussion to make the artwork progress. Discussion of the story leads to the consensus of what other imagery can be added, in contrast or similarity, to the first fragment to continue the visual documentation of the story. This continues, until after many sessions, the artwork reaches completion. The entire story does not have to be portrayed on the canvas since the artwork is not an illustration of the story, but a finished product that is a collection of the emotions created by that experience. An informative narrative explaining the source of each visual symbol, will be documented in writing and displayed along with the artwork.

#### **1. Drawings as Answers to Questions**

We usually ask 10-20 questions and give the storytellers a matching amount of index cards to respond on. The drawing responses should be done spontaneously in about 30 seconds; they should be an immediate reaction. Start out by asking questions that would be fun for the participants to answer. Examples of fun questions may be: “What is your favorite food?” “What houses were next to yours, across the street, or close to you (if you lived in the country), when you were growing up?” “What is a sporting or dance event you like to attend?” Sometimes people laugh, and start talking and bonding with each other because of their responses to these questions; the questions may prompt positive past experiences the participants had. Play it by ear, when the storytellers are ready to move onto further questioning, follow up with tougher questions. A tougher question may be: “When did you know that something was terribly wrong?” A response to this type of question may be a very powerful drawing. The next step is to have the storyteller explain what each of the drawings references. As a group, discuss which one of the index card drawings should be the first move to be made on your artwork. Sometimes, after discussion, some of the responses to the fun questions can be the most significant image to start with.

## **2. Color**

Set a general topic, such as “good times vs. bad times,” “childhood vs. adulthood,” “this place vs. that place,” etc. Spread out on a table, numerous sheets of color and have participants choose three colors that represent each of the opposing sides of the general topic. You should end up with six colors in total. From discussion, choose one of the three colors from each opposing side to represent each side. All the participants can discuss the size, shape, and position of the two colors selected to start the picture.

Example Using Color: Storytellers were asked to pick a color that was positive for them during the Holocaust experience, this exercise proved to be hard for the storytellers as they couldn't think of an experience for their chosen color. To help the storytellers, one of the artists gave an example by responding with her own experience with a particular color; her grandmother used to wear a dress of that color around the house. The next question for the artist was “Do you remember a memory of her in that dress?” The artist told a story about a game her and her grandmother used to play together. Upon hearing the story of the artist, the Holocaust survivors now understood the process and were reminded of a story (based on a tan color) when they had to walk through a desert in Romania.

## **3. Books on Patterns, Plants & Trees, Architectural Structures and Furniture to Remember Places**

A book of wallpaper, floor, furniture, or textured patterns can remind people of a place they were located during one of their very personal experiences. Sometimes the person is attracted to a pattern but doesn't know why, and questions to find this “place” can lead to a deeper discussion. Questions such as: “Was this pattern in a restaurant or home, or an institutional setting?” And even if they don't know the answer, you ask them, “Which one does it FEEL like to you, if you don't remember specifically?” “Where would you place this even if you don't have the memory yet?” And continue in this way of questioning. If they respond that it reminds them of a restaurant, then you follow up with a question like “Was it in a big city or small town, even if they don't know, which one does it FEEL like to them?” If they answer, the next question would be, “Which restaurant and which small towns did you go to?” Even if that wallpaper design wasn't to that particular restaurant, it doesn't matter anymore, because then you can inquire, “What was on the walls of that restaurant that you DO remember?” This process is an example for any type of pattern or visual prompt. The storytellers don't need to have the correct answers because they tell you what the pattern feels like, and you can ask what kind of places they were at and what happened in those places based on their feelings toward the pattern. If this fails, try another pattern to get to a different lead. If this method works and becomes a story, the first mark is a pattern of the wall, or the color of the room, or a fragment of a suit someone was wearing that prompted the story. The artwork does not need to have a time sequence, it can be a compilation of all significant things a person has to tell in one plane; different cities, different time periods, etc., can be attached to the same artwork. The prompting can lead from one important story to another.

#### **4. Antiques and Collectibles to Elicit Stories**

This exercise involves understanding the culture of the person you're working with. The person asking the questions must read up on the culture involved and find antiques or collectibles that relate to the culture, but also those that don't relate specifically. The antiques will provide a diversity of imagery that could come from animals, toy vehicles, functional items from the past such as a candelabra, a winepress, faucets, salt and pepper shakers, or an old-fashioned cord phone from the past—because maybe they were kids during this time frame and owned such a phone, or could remember their grandmother having one. You can also have storytellers bring in heirlooms from their past to initiate a discussion. The two-dimensional imagery of the logos stamped into the products can also prompt a past memory. Even if the object does not prompt a memory or is not recognizable, the style, construction, material used, or time-period, can prompt a memory.

Example: An antique trolley from the 1930's was shown to a Holocaust survivor, which reminded her of a time during the beginning of the war when she alluded a Gestapo that ran out in front of her. Seeing the antique trolley brought back the memory for this woman that she had not thought of for years. You can put anything up in front of someone and they can tell you what it reminds them of, through metaphor.

Contemporary collectibles may include items such as Captain America, characters from Star Wars, marbles, stones, giveaways in cereal boxes, coloring books, magazines and magazine ads, etc. These items could prompt a memory through metaphor, and the present can connect to something from the past. If an item from this category is chosen as a first fragment, it can also resonate with the generations that grew up with it, immediately attracting them to the artwork and providing better identification with the story from the past.

Example: "Captain America" a more recent object, was selected for an image in an artwork.. He became, as a metaphor, the hero that liberated them from the concentration camps.

#### **5. Personal Interpretation of Visual Fragments**

In the V2V project, we use famous paintings from the past (computer print-outs) and cut out arbitrary and less important pieces of the artwork. The resulting fragments become like a Rorschach test, where the person has to interpret what they see. If a story arises, you can print out an enlarged copy of that fragment to start the imagery on the canvas. It gives you a definite shape and colors to go along with it.

#### **6. Working Over an Existing Throw-Away Painting**

Buy a cheap painting from Goodwill or use discarded art students' work, editing and using the existing space to place in aspects of the storyteller's stories. After brainstorming with the group about how the space can relate to the storyteller's experience, the team can add his or her own imagery and take out or transform unrelated imagery to the storyteller's experience.

## **7. Interpreting Quick Abstract Doodles**

This exercise is not unlike the Rorschach test, except in this case; the participants both draw and interpret the doodles. After hearing some of the storyteller's experiences, make a quick abstract doodle (no recognizable subject matter) with a pencil that takes no longer than five seconds. Create about 15-20 doodles. Each person should interpret one doodle that conveys a relationship to the story they just heard.

Example: One of the V2V Holocaust survivors who was in the Auschwitz concentration camp didn't see anything in any of the doodles sketched. One of the art students said she really liked one of the doodles aesthetically, but didn't know what it was or why. The Auschwitz survivor then responded by saying it was the grass she ate to stay alive. The Auschwitz survivor, to start the picture, redrew the doodle, now identified as grass, making it nearly the whole size of the canvas.

## **8. Storyteller Draws or Paints Symbol**

While listening to a storyteller's recollection, if they say something that forms a visual image in your mind, or say something in which an object was critical to their story, have them draw that object for you on an index card. It doesn't matter how closely it resembles the actual object or idea, the art team can help make it more literal. Collect these index cards, and as a team, select one or more of them to be your fragmented start. Give the selected index card(s) to the storyteller and have them use it as their reference to paint a facsimile on the canvas, discussing size and position.

## **9. Abstract Mark to Tell Story**

All team participants and storytellers create an abstract mark quickly and spontaneously to express the way they feel after listening to a story. Participants play with different shapes, making 3-4 marks and choosing the one that reminds them of the story most. Everybody painting his or her particular mark onto the canvas can be the start the artwork. The purpose of this exercise is not to question the validity of the mark, but simply paint the one mark that resonates with you the most. When all the marks are on the picture, the team can discuss what parts of the story the marks fit, and when more stories are added to the canvas via additional symbols, the existing marks can take on new meaning. This provides all the participants painted signatures to start the artwork. The device calls on everyone to invest in the picture, forming a bond between all the members of the group.

## **10. Smells**

Storytellers are asked to smell the contents of a small container without being told what it holds inside. They are then encouraged to connect it to any experiences where they may have encountered such a smell before. The storyteller might have to be prompted to find out where the smell is from. Questions like "Is it an indoor smell or an outdoor smell?" "Is it from a long time ago or from the near past?" "Is it from your home town or a place you once visited?" "Is it from your home or your place of work?" "If it is an outdoor smell, is it near water, open fields, a forest, flatlands, or mountains?" Etc.

Once the smell has been identified both of what it is and the place it came from, have an artist draw this place by having the storyteller verbally direct the drawing. While creating this drawing, the artist will ask questions about the orientation of the space and other elements and people that were around.

### **11. Collage**

Cut arbitrarily shaped scraps or long linear strips and adhere to artwork. Any of the following materials may be used: wallpaper, colored Plexiglas (opaque or transparent), Formica, laminate strips, different kinds of wood, Plexiglas mirror, colored tape, fabric, cardboards, blind samples, etc.

**Using an Odd-Shaped Scrap:** Placement of a scrap into the artwork can suggest an object or a space. The art team can add drawing or painting to make this suggestion more specific.

**Using Linear Objects:** Have each participant choose a linear scrap to place into the artwork. A discussion of why each person was attracted to the scrap they picked should pursue. The linear pieces will suggest a division of space, creating an above and a below and a left and a right. It could be suggestive of inside and outside, sky and land or water, wall and floor, or even objects such as trees, the edge of a cliff, etc.

### **12. Familial Objects**

Family photos, letters, and documents are scanned and collaged into the artwork. Familial objects should not be put in in their complete form, as they will call too much attention to themselves. A copy of a photo or document should be ripped or cut in half or thirds and act as a suggestion to incorporate with other imagery.

### **13. Division of Space: Utilizing the Third Dimension**

The division of the picture plane into different sections is like room dividers, dividing a large room into smaller sections. 3D division of space is achieved by gluing various molding designs, strips of wood, or other 3D materials onto the picture plane.

Participants are given a section to represent their story. Discussion should take place about which particular shapes these barriers create, and whose stories would fit into each section best. Space should not be divided evenly as this will cause the artwork to become generic and visually predictable. Sometimes a story needs a small space, or a large space to move into the space of its opposite as it progresses. Participants connect their stories with others by continuing their own artwork across the 3D barrier into other people's picture planes. One can slide along a barrier with their imagery, entering sections of other people's stories where it works best for all parties involved. Questions to discuss here could be: "Where does my story relate to your story? Where do our symbols match, or line up?" The idea of painting into someone else's zone leads to an automatic collaboration and discussion about shared space. This collaboration also leads to more creative work as storytellers have to make a conscious move to cross over the border, working out between themselves what goes where.

2D barriers created by thickly painted color can be used in place of 3D barriers for this device; however, it is more difficult, and therefore more creative to cross 3D barriers.

#### **14. Responding to Words**

All participants respond spontaneously to a spoken word or phrase by drawing a quick image on an index card. Ten to fifteen words are presented, resulting in 10-15 drawings. Examples of words may include: monument, hiding place, facial expression, animal, storm, running, falling, rollercoaster, household object, vehicle, etc. Some of the drawn images will relate to storyteller's experiences and some will not. The images that do not directly relate may reveal, through discussion, to be important metaphors to the story. Unrelated images may be even more applicable than the ones that logically fit with the story. If you have a creative team, each drawing response can be interpreted to fit the story. The team now has a set of images to play with and can decide which ones will be the most intriguing to start the artwork. Storytellers then interpret the selected images into possible metaphors for their own experiences.

#### **15. Relief Sculpture**

The storyteller starts a relief sculpture. The storyteller gives each participant an assignment to help complete the visual symbolism. An assignment could be: making the hands, trees, wagon, etc. The storyteller handles the most important parts of the story, with the artists and the team members there for support. Clay is used for this device as it is easier for non-artists to form imagery in clay rather than trusting their untrained drawing skills. The final product contains parts created by everyone in the team and is put into the relief sculpture.

#### **16. Knick-Knacks**

Working with a team of at least one to two artists, storytellers search for metaphors using knick-knack objects. Knick-knacks can be placed on a table so storytellers may be able to pick them up and look at them closer. As the storyteller starts being attracted to a certain object, the artist(s) ask questions to investigate deeper into why that knick-knack created a metaphor for the storyteller.

#### **17. Create a Logo Based on Sounds**

Create a logo (N overlapping over Y for the New York Yankees) with lettering that has to do with the experience. Ask the storytellers if there are any sounds that they may remember from their particular experience. Is there a sound or word that was heard or said, that resonates with their story?

Examples: The sound of a grenade going off was made into the following logo: pppPPPPPPPHHHHH, with letters written larger and larger as the p's turned into H's. A woman remembers when, as a ten-year-old girl, she said to her father: "Give them all they want, I want LIFE," during the Holocaust. The letters of the word LIFE were stretched and flipped around to fit into the artwork. The letter I was made lower case and placed next to a large-size letter F, representing the little girl and her father, respectively.

### **18. Continuation of Line—Team Effort**

Start with one person drawing a line, hand the pencil off to the next participant to continue the line until everyone has a turn. The intention of this exercise is that the eventual shape of the continuous line will tell the experience of a story when it is finished. This will become an abstract shape that bonds the entire group to the artwork and to each other.

### **19. Team Painting/Drawing of Idea**

If there is a particular symbol or environment that moves everyone, the team can all participate in making that idea become visual. Start by painting part of an object and pass the brush on to another participant to help create that object until all participants have had a turn and the object is finished.

Example: A Holocaust survivor told a story about a death march in which many young and old people did not survive while climbing a steep, long mountainous incline to a work camp. He drew a rocky shaped line at an extreme angle and all team members came up to the canvas and painted their version of the prisoners traveling up the hill.

### **20. Drawings Inspired by Music**

If possible, have a live musician(s) play and/or sing various tunes until one of them invokes the storyteller's memory. After further discussion of the memory, the musician can continue to play the tune to set the mood of the artwork as all participants draw their version of the story. Combine the best parts of each drawing to make a whole.

## **Time Traveling Through the Art Zone**

Through the process of painting one can leave the audience and the conscious state, retracting into one's memories, identifying personally relevant symbols, and forming a work of art that captures life's lessons. This process brings out information that doesn't consciously come out through academic questioning. It's an interview where no questions are asked. The importance here is of the art process, making a work of art that harmonizes with the storyteller and affects the audience to reflect their own related experiences. In order to achieve this, many critical decisions regarding visual language have to be made: composition, color, position, proximity, shape, direction, etc. This is the essence of interviewing through art, the essence of making art.

One example of this appears in *V2V 5*:

When Alice Musabende, from Rwanda, started the artwork with two arbitrarily spaced colors already painted on the canvas for her. She was provided with two jars of paint of the same two colors. She was to paint with these colors so that one color replaced parts of the other color already on the canvas. Alice began to paint consciously, telling the story of her experiences to the audience and the camera, and seeing the paint marks as having very little symbolic meaning. As she was painting, Alice went into her past and those around her disappeared; she began re-living her genocide experiences. She passed the barrier that took her from the present into the art zone; she no longer looked at anyone in the room and began telling the story not to others but to

herself. The pace of her story and the kinetic movement of the hand began to have the same rhythm. You tell the storytellers to have fun, just make marks, and eventually the marks become meaningful symbols and form a story. This is a phenomenon that happens when you attempt to make a work of art.

## **Symbolism**

Throughout the discussions, artists and storytellers look for visual symbolism that may be direct or metaphorical images from shared stories.

Example of Metaphorical Symbolism—A Holocaust survivor is on a death row march when he bends down to pick up some fallen food. When spotted, the guards take him to the woods to shoot him. The survivor says “If I sing, will you spare my life?” He sings, and the SS Officer lets him go back into the death row march. His life is saved for that day. The symbol selected for this story was a bird, due to birds’ singing abilities. With more research, birdman—an image similar to one in a Hieronymus Bosch painting—of a human body with a bird head, was selected as the metaphorical symbol.

The symbol does not have to be appropriate in age or time; it can be contemporary, historical, or a mix of both. Contemporary connections to the past make the work valuable to today’s audiences, and provide opportunities for the audience members to search history to discover the original sources. An example of this is *West Side Story*, which was based on Shakespeare’s play, *Romeo and Juliet*.

## **Context**

Eventually the group forms a context for the artwork. The team now has to consider what is best for the context in making further additions to the artwork. Context has to appeal to the emotions of the viewers for their experience to be memorable.

## **Stretching the Context**

Once in context, the most emotionally exciting thing you can do is stretching it to its limits to create what is intriguing. Stretching the context creates an ambiguity that has a more interpretive quality. However, there is a point when the artwork can go out of context. If this happens, the ideas of the main purpose are lost and the artwork wanders.

Every move made toward visual modification of the work is made in consensus with all participants to ensure that context and symbolism are maintained. Plenty of reflection time is necessary for this step, with time to “sleep on it” before meeting again. It is important that before finishing for the day the team makes solid decisions to create a structure that can be reviewed and revised. Upon every new meeting it is likely that some of the last moves made during the previous meetings may come into question. In this process of making the image,

storytellers begin to acquire meaning and go deeper into their memories. At times questions prompt memory recollection, at other times, if a person simply gives up on something, ideas begin to flow in. When the team has trouble making visual symbolism, storytellers can help by recalling details that may spark new insight toward the original context—“getting past the sticking point. When storytellers hear about visual problems they are triggered to provide more details to help alleviate the situation.

### **Fine-Tuning the Picture**

Fine-tuning small details can yield a significant impact toward the completion of artwork. At this point, the tougher questions should be asked about particulars. When the finished artwork is presented to the storytellers after fine-tuning by the artists, it appears more powerful to the storyteller, even if he or she does not know what was altered.

### **The Visual Language**

Decisions are visually based on grouping or separation, rhythm and timing, and combining fragments in regards to:

1. Size
2. Shape
3. Color
4. Direction
5. Texture

### **Attitudes for Collaboration**

1. Don't use taste. There is taste, and there is truth; we are not interested in making a picture plane look good, but rather asking questions that lead to a more truthful artwork.
2. Decisions should be based on deeper investigation rather than on finishing the project.
3. Focus should be on choosing moves that you're not used to, as opposed to ones that appear to be smart.
4. Ideas that look good at the beginning are clichés of the past, new ideas are something that's going to look far more unique; keep an open mind.
5. In order to fight prejudices and clichés you have to give up any taste and open your mind up to the wonderment of it all.