What we consider to be obvious, true, or commonsense depends on the various assumptions we hold. Becoming aware of our assumptions is difficult at best. Despite our belief that we know what our assumptions are, we are hindered by the fact that we are using our own interpretive filters to become knowledgeable of our own filters. Described as a “cognitive catch-22,” it is the equivalent of our trying to see the back of our head while looking directly into a mirror (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). Becoming critical requires that we find a mirror that critically reflects our thinking and reveals our most influential assumptions.

Writing necessarily refers to writing. The image is that of a mirror capturing only the reflections of other mirrors. When I say “I see myself,” I am not alluding to the illusory relation of subject to subject (or object) but to the play of mirrors that defers to infinity the real subject and subverts the notion of an original “I.” ... Yet how difficult it is to keep our mirrors clean. We all tend to cloud and soil them as soon as the older smudges are wiped off, for we
love to use them as instruments to behold ourselves, maintaining thereby a narcissist relation of me to me, still me and always me. ... In this encounter of I with I, the power of identification is often such that reality and appearance merge while the tool itself becomes invisible. (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 22)

In order to change one’s way of doing, one must undo assumptions or beliefs. K-12 art teachers came together in an online continuing education non-degree course, during Fall 2004, with an openness to explore visual culture with their students, not sure at the onset what this would mean to their identity as art educators. What needs to be undone to become visual culture educators? To transform one’s teaching is an unbecoming task in that only the most reflective seek change, and a reflective practitioner has confidence in one’s teaching to delve deeply into questioning self. When, where, and how “becoming” happens emerges out of an undoing or an unbecoming of assumptions. This paper explores the “betwixt and between,” the space between projection of teacher identity and unraveling that identity. The un/becoming is an intervening in teachers’ positions constructed by conventional expectations and dominant-hegemonic positions of “the world of art.” The backslash (/) that we use in un/becoming suggests that unbecoming is also becoming, and becoming is unbecoming. We explore the / space, which is not a transition between two states of being, but rather a perpetual displacement of a static identity. We facilitated identity displacement through Socratic pedagogy of probing questions within an activity that involved art teachers presenting a visual symbol of themselves as art educators, interpreting each other’s symbols, and responding to the interpretations and questions posed. The discourse then moved to discussions of teachers’ perceptions of the purposes and methods for visual culture explorations in their K-12 classrooms.
We present practicing K-12 art teacher online discourse on visual culture in relation to un/becoming from an exploration into the socialized contexts that shape art education in the United States. This collection of stories and reflections of teachers' interventions into their own assumptions reveal teachers' self-interventions into "knowing" their identities as art educators. Teachers use journal reflections about their visual culture explorations with their students to un/become assumptions about their roles as art educators and to become aware of the historical, political, social, and economic factors that make art knowledge a slippery domain.

Un/becoming art educator assumptions about culture, art, education, and students begin with un/doing the dialectical premise that we act IN the world and the world acts IN us. Our combined stories are simultaneously individual lives and social lives. The division between self and others is ambiguous and exists in analytical constructions. Filmmaker, social theorist, and writer, Trinh Minh-ha (1989), stresses in her work that multiple layers of one's identity are formed not in isolation of self, but from the social codes of representation performed by and on us each day. Minh-ha (1989) tells of becoming through stories, and believes in the power of writing as a way to become. "The story depends upon every one of us to come into being. It needs us all, needs our remembering, understanding, and creating what we have heard together to keep on coming into being" (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 119).

The following themes and ideas arose in a written online dialogue, rewoven here as a story of nine art educators who look at themselves and each other through their art educator self-symbols and visual culture explorations. "Past, present, future" stumbles over each other resisting their interconnectedness because un/becoming is not easy. It is not a shedding of past assumptions, but an un/doing that actively layers on the porous watery substance of art educator identities. Un/
becoming in these K-12 art teacher explorations of visual culture ignites a transformation that enables further transformation. Teacher identity borders begin to shift when the constructed borders are perceived as limitations.

**Undoing Assumptions:**
**Real Artmaking is Hands-On**

Who can forget the experience of wet clay coursing between your fingers?
Elliot Eisner (2001, p.8)

The idea that artmaking involves direct experience with media is one of the assumptions that needs to be undone in order to become visual culture educators. This assumption has been apparent in recent criticisms of visual culture (e.g., Eisner, 2001), but even before visual culture became the “buzz” in art education, it was apparent in debates about art and technology. In the past, art educators assumed that creating images with computers was a sterile, mechanical process. Creating art by hand was seen as a more “authentic” process, one that entails a physical manifestation of talent and heroic human achievement (Johnson, 1996). In theory as well as practice, hands-on approaches to artmaking were viewed as the “normal” way to make art.

Some of the participants in our course still hold on to assumptions about the normalcy of making art by hand. The first exercise in the course was to “[d]evelop a visual symbol to represent yourself as an art educator.” Participants were encouraged to use any means they wished to create their symbols, such as scanning a drawing or collage, creating a digital graphic, or uploading a digital photo (Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy, & Knight, 2004). Each participant in the course (including the facilitators Karen, Wanda, and Patricia) posted a visual symbol on the course web site, sometimes with a brief description of the image. Participants then commented on each other’s symbols, offering various
interpretations and insights into the ways our symbols reflected our beliefs as art educators.

Looking at symbols that had been posted by some of the others, one participant, Alice, found it interesting that many of the images were computer-generated. She wrote, “When I first heard about the assignment, I immediately thought about creating my symbol by hand drawing.” As a result of time constraints, however, as well as seeing others’ digital symbols on the course web site, she, too, decided to “create with the help of the computer” (Walkowski, 2004, September 19). Patricia asked whether there were significant differences between using tools such as pencils and brushes, and using computers to create images: “Is one way more expressive than the other? Is one more authentic or ‘real’ than the other?” (Amburgy, 2004, September 21). Alice replied,

I guess I am from the old school and feel that the direct hands-on approach is somewhat more expressive. It is like handwriting versus the word processor. You can read what is there but some of the little nuances of a line or pressure of the stroke [are] missing. ... The computer is just another tool like the pencil or brush but I think it has a whole different feel to it, a less personal feel. I like using the computer to create but sometimes feel “distanced” from the final piece. (Walkowski, 2004, September 21)

David, another participant in the course, also commented on pencils and brushes as opposed to computers as artmaking tools. He said that after initially resisting contemporary technology, he has now “completely embraced the digital world.” He sees his students interacting with contemporary technology, “the tools of their generation,” with “amazing dexterity.” Observing one of his students drawing with Freehand®, David noted, “She has a wonderful ‘touch’ with that tool. It is no different to her than a pencil or brush” (Miller, 2004a, September 24).
Assumptions about technology and artmaking were reflected in the visual symbols that participants in the course created to represent ourselves as art educators, as well as the verbal messages we posted. Some of us used traditional forms of artmaking as a first step in creating our symbols, while others created symbols that were digital from the beginning. Because of the nature of the course—an online environment—all of us had to use digital technology to some degree. Even if we created our symbols “by hand,” we then had to scan our symbols in order to post them on the course web site. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

Figure 1. David Miller, 2004, Symbol. Image posted to A ED 5011: PreK-12 Art teachers’ explorations into visual culture
Figure 2. Alice Walkowski, 2004, *Maybe This Is My Symbol*. Image posted to *AED 5011: PreK-12 Art teachers’ explorations into visual culture*.
Two participants incorporated images of brushes and pencils—traditional artmaking tools—in their visual symbols. Alice used traditional tools in her symbol, not to represent what she sees as the focus of her teaching, but to represent students’ expectations that art class will concern only making. (See Figure 2.) Alice noted that she includes traditional forms of artmaking in her curriculum, but she also wants students to learn about a whole spectrum of content in art, including history, artists, cultural significance, legal issues, and so on. She wants students to know that “art is about more than just making things” (Walkowski, 2004, September 20). The commonly held assumption that art is handmade, and technology distances the hand, continues to haunt students’ assumptions about the nature of art.

As everyone posted their symbols and discussed what the symbols meant, Wanda posed an interesting question to us. “If we had created a symbol to represent ourselves as art educators ten years ago, would it be different from the one we created today?” (Knight, 2004, October 9). Alice wrote that ten years ago, her symbol would have included:

- more art media to represent the ‘projects’ that go on in class.
- Projects would have been more media-based than concept based. The world of art history would have been much smaller and less central to my teaching, (although I’d have to go back farther than 10 years for that). (Walkowski, 2004, October 10)

Social change is on-going and seldom immediate. It is never isolated in an individual (Minh-ha, 1989).
Undoing Assumptions: Visual Culture Is Only Visual

It may be that if art educators continue to privilege visual objects and/or visual experiences, which is characteristic of visual culture studies, our students and the field will be susceptible to manipulation through our other sensory modalities.

Paul E. Bolin and Doug Blandy (2003, p.247)

As contemporary art educators have debated the merits and drawbacks of teaching visual culture, some have become concerned that the "visual" part of visual culture will be interpreted narrowly to mean only what can be observed with our eyes. An emphasis on what can be observed—the kinds of qualities that can be "immediately felt," as John Dewey (1934) put it—was characteristic of modernist conceptions of aesthetic experience that drew distinctions between aesthetic, intellectual, and practical or ethical aspects of life. Most contemporary theories of visual culture, however, are not grounded in a separation of the intellectual and the ethical from visual aspects of life. On the contrary, contemporary theories of visual culture typically assume that vision, knowledge, and ethics—particularly social ethics—are deeply intertwined (e.g., Sturken & Cartwright, 2001; Smith-Shank, 2004). Another assumption that needs to be undone in the process of art educators un/becoming visual culture educators is the idea that vision can be isolated from other socially constructed experiences.

One of the questions we asked participants in our course was, "How do you define visual culture in relation to your role as an art educator?" (Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy, & Knight, 2004). Leslie wrote that, before this course, she had not thought about visual culture as being separate from aesthetic studies. She had thought of visual culture as being part of "the visual art experience" (Flowers, 2004, September
David wrote that he defines visual culture as “the information or stimuli that identifies or characterizes a group of people and their attitudes.” He added,

The word “visual” is tricky because I don’t consider visual culture to be limited to the properties of the human eye. As an art teacher, however, my context is primarily visual. (Miller, 2004, October 3)

Like other art educators, participants in the course sometimes struggled with the “visual” part of visual culture. Karen responded to David’s comments by saying she thinks it is important “to inquire into visual manifestations of cultural practices that shape knowledge, representation, ideology, and power,” and like David, she does not “limit visual to physiological sight” (Keifer-Boyd, 2004, October 4). Patricia agreed: “Visual culture is about more than what we see with our eyeballs” (Amburgy, 2004a, October 6).

How does visual culture go beyond what we see? In discussing our definitions of visual culture, participants in the course examined ways that visual culture is related to ideology, social power, representation, and constructed knowledge. Donna noted that in teaching visual culture, there is more of a focus on the message of images, both in “the art we are viewing” and “the art that the students are creating” (Maske, 2004, October 4). Julie wrote about how it is important for children to understand what they are seeing, especially the way right and wrong, good and bad, ugly and beautiful, important and unimportant are culturally determined (Palmer, 2004, October 4). Responding to Julie’s insights, Patricia wrote that from a visual culture perspective, viewers are not understood as passive recipients of images. “[V]iewers may negotiate or oppose cultural narratives about right & wrong, good & bad, ugly & beautiful, etc.” (Amburgy, 2004b, October 6). Julie wrote back, “[I]t is called empowerment” (Palmer, 2004, October 8). David provides an example of how leading a discussion to focus on
the cultural narratives within artworks tends to lead to issues of hegemonic power and ways people have sought empowerment:

For the past few years I have striven to be topical or thematic in directing the intellectual/artistic traffic in my courses. For instance, a topic last year was Art & Society, which quickly led to notions of Manifest Destiny. Conversations led to topics of empowerment and dominance. (Miller, 2004, October 10)

**Undoing Assumptions: “Euro-Western Culture” is Central**

Is this [visual culture] not the way to bring western culture back into the center of art education again?

Julie Palmer (2004, October 4)

Some art teachers in our group tackle in their teaching the assumption that there is a “world of art” separate from capitalistic and imperialistic ploys for economic, political, and social power. Yet, this un/becoming is difficult given the complexity of imagery valued differently within cultures and the complications of artists categorized according to cultures of a specific place and time period, or by their nationality, skin color, gender, and/or sexual orientation. Unquestioned categorizations of artists normalize these social constructs and foster expectations of the artist based on one’s own cultural “knowledge.”

Art critic, Lucy Lippard has raised such concerns:

The intercultural enterprise is riddled with sociological complexities that must be dealt with before esthetic issues are even broached. There are classes and cultures within cultures, not to mention the infinite individual diversities that disprove both external stereotypes and group self-naming alike. (Lippard, 1990, p. 21)
To undo the assumptions that categorizations provoke, students can ask questions about the social environments that the artist traverses in relation to their own situation within and between cultures.

Culture, by definition, is a social phenomenon. Geertz defines culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings employed in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which [people] communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life" (1973, p. 89). Colombo, Cullen, and Lisle (2004) underscore assertions that "culture shapes the way we think ... it holds people together by providing us with a shared set of customs, values, ideas, and beliefs" (p. 3). Images then codify cultures in ways that do not represent all within the culture and can become the signifier for transmission of narrow views or stereotypes of how we come to know self and others. Un/becoming the cultural impact of images is impossible. However, we can work toward un/becoming our relationship to those images and thereby change the nature of knowledge. If this process stagnates oppressive tropes will flourish.

All students come to school as members of specific and often multiple cultural groups, and as prescribed by their cultures, they have learned particular ways of seeing the world and particular ways of being in the world. Alice explores cultural jostling for visibility and dominance in how she presents the “world of art.”

When I talk about wanting my students to understand the world of art, I am talking about them having as complete understanding about what the artist goes through to create. How science, politics, history, religion, the media, etc. influence what is made. How art is used to influence and control people. What struggles the artist must go through
to achieve success. What legal issues have plagued artists and what controversies surround this thing we call art. Depending on what year we are studying the content can vary. I don't have a priority to this list. I usually just go chronologically through the time era that we are studying. My choices for artists are based on many different art history sources. Of course the usual artists that you find mentioned in art classes are there such as Van Gogh, Picasso and Michelangelo. But, I also try to go over artists who have influenced the current of art, have influenced later artists and of course some that I just personally find interesting. (Walkowski, 2004, September 22)

David stated “a good reason for studying visual culture ... [is to] understand the context of today's student better” (Miller, 2004b, September 24). Since culture shapes our interpretation of the world, our perception of reality, our sense of what is normal, art educators must become culturally conscious. They must not only examine the culture of their students; they must first examine their own cultural backgrounds and frames of reference, particularly in cases where they have been exposed primarily to one culture. Because so much of our culture is taken for granted, teachers may assume that their particular way of being in the world is the only way (provincial assumption) or their culture is superior to that of others (ethnocentric assumption), or that they do not even have a culture (naïve assumption). Becoming culturally conscious is also un/becoming cultural encapsulation (Banks & McGee Banks, 2004). This process begins with recognition, on the part of the teacher, that his or her worldview is not universally shared and differs significantly from that of other nations and peoples.
Undoing Assumptions: Knowledge is Transmitted by Teachers

How do you, as a teacher, communicate information without being in control of some kind? Not necessarily power over, but "the knowledgeable one." I have my student's critique each other's work; at least one person in the class inevitably complains that grading is the job of the teacher.

Julie Palme (2004, October 4)

Turning our attention to the roles, responsibilities, and actions of the teacher, cultural assumptions exert power over us by permeating our thinking at a deep, even unconscious level. We noted this in the visual symbols created by the course participants. All but one had a radial design, a bursting from the center, suggesting a worldview shared by art educators. What is this worldview? We interpreted it to mean that teachers are the central power or authority in their classrooms, impacting all else. They are assumed to have acquired valuable knowledge and understandings that must be given to students through lectures, presentations, scholarly writings, and other means. As repositories of knowledge in their classes, teachers give information and students receive it. This is what teachers (and their students) assume they are supposed to do. Before long, the culturally determined roles of teachers appear to be "natural" because this is how they have been socialized. However, if art teachers are to become effective teachers of all students, through explorations of visual culture they come to recognize that knowledge is not just given and received but constructed by people individually and collectively (Stanton, 1996; Tarule, 1996). As in Julie's case, becoming aware of the assumption that the teacher is positioned to be "the knowledgeable one," is also unbecoming that assumption. She recognizes that such positioning is part of a larger cultural context.
Becoming culturally conscious requires us to examine our worldview and embedded assumptions. Moreover, because schools are patterned after the predominant culture, it is imperative that teachers challenge the validity of these long held generalizations (Bennett, 2003) in relationship to the “world of art” and the curricular choices they make about what visual culture to study. We note the assumptions that art education is the study of well-designed or beautiful images and objects and suggest, “each may be based on ethnocentric interpretations of evidence” (Bennett, 2003, p. 44).

K-12 Art Teacher Explorations into Visual Culture: Changing Visions of Art Educators

There are shared characteristics by this group of art educators who decided to devote time to a non-degree course for professional development. We looked at why these art educators are open to reviewing and revising their teaching and are interested in a visual culture orientation. The teachers’ stories indicate they have profoundly transformed their students’ lives. Alice, one of the art teacher participants, indicates the impact of her teaching from a recent email she received from a student of ten years ago. Her student writes,

I must point out that the dreaded “lecture day,” at least at the time they were dreaded, ended up to be one of the best things I took from your class. ... I can pinpoint the exact moment when art truly touched me. If you remember, the last “living painting” I was involved in with you was Jacques-Louis David’s Oath of the Horatii. ... I was at the Louvre in Paris in December of 1998 when I came around a corner in a dimly lit room. ... and there it was. It was larger than life. It was The Oath of the Horatii. I knew it by name ... I knew who painted it ... I knew when it was painted ... I knew what it meant ... but I never knew how beautiful (or how big) it was. And there I sat for almost a half hour
admiring it. It completely took me off guard because I didn’t know it was in the Louvre and wasn’t looking for it. And lightly to myself I whispered, “Thank you, Mrs. Walkowski. I hope you heard me.” (Walkowski, 2004, September 22)

David, another art teacher who has taught art long enough to have students who are in their mid 30s, described a conversation with one of his former students who said his “art class had had a profound impact on her life’s direction and view of the world” (David Miller, 2004c, September 24). A one-day presentation by David on the importance of art and why it was worthy of pursuit to a class motivated a teacher to go to art school and have a career in the arts. “She said it had been a very important day in her life” (David Miller, 2004c, September 24).

With such success, why would they be interested in changing their teaching? As the stories un/folded it became clear that this group of art educators were not new to the profession, and as seasoned art teachers they had experienced the changes in art education to include discussion beyond studio work, and to present to their students works of art. The broad-scale funding of a discipline-based approach to art education, called Discipline-based Art Education (DBAE), added another expectation of art educators—to discuss works of art. Duncum (2002) asserts that DBAE has taught us that there is more to art than making pictures; there is the need to learn how to discuss images sensibly. ... It would have been impossible to move from a self-expression approach to a visual culture approach without the intervening period where critique of art became accepted as an essential component of curriculum. (p. 8)

Attacks on DBAE by social theorists, feminists, and postcolonial theorists disrupted the “art world” containment of a canon of works all should learn if they were serious art students. The rise of postmodern
discourse of art as visual culture percolated to mainstream art education venues in Spring 2003, when three prominent journal publications in the United States (i.e., *Studies in Art Education*, *Visual Arts Research*, and *Art Education*) had special issues on visual culture, and the National Art Education Association conferences proliferated in visual culture sessions since 2002.

The teachers presented here regenerate themselves in continual self-reflexivity, an un/becoming process that contributes to a perpetual un/folding of art education. Art educators transform their teaching through regeneration that is a slow process of un/becoming assumptions; yet keep remnants of the familiar fabrics of art knowledge. This continual regeneration, evident in the teachers involved in the online professional development course, is analogous to the slippage that often occurs in African and African-American music where with each repetition, each return of the familiar, there are imperceptible elements of change; something is slightly off, slightly varied, and these minute differences make the music flow in a state of constant regeneration, so that one never has a static reproduction of the same.

(Minh-ha, 1999, p. 28)

Some of the participants noted that a good reason for studying visual culture is to understand the context of today's student better. These art teachers have a desire to connect to the familiar and technologically mediated world of their students. Visual culture orientations now in mainstream art education discourse is opening the field of art education to study students' popular culture, which is heavily integrated with technologies.

What appears natural and authentic artmaking has and will continue to change. Individuals such as the art teachers participating in our visual culture explorations online course can extend such changes to consider learning that is significant to the individual within society
on a local and global scale and to the environment. This includes studies of the deep and lasting social impact of visual representations, having a political engagement with visual culture, and asking of any image what are the overt and covert gender, nationalistic, and racial tropes? A visual culture orientation would study how race and nation “are fictions, cultural constructions that shape our social interactions” (Wallis & Fusco, 2003, p. 8).

A concern raised by one of the art educators in this group was whether the study of visual culture would make art education a study of the mediocre.

What about excellence or quality in art? I haven’t read anything about that. Actually, the word hasn’t entered any of the discussions. Is that a part of visual culture? ... Isn’t that an aspect of the work found in galleries or museums? Are there dolls that you have seen that you’ve said to yourself—now—that is a well design or beautiful doll? Is art going to be watered down or become mediocre? Our society/culture tends to do that to things. (Palmer, 2004, October 8)

Karen responded “A study of fine art as visual culture uncovers the signifying processes of artistic merit” (Keifer-Boyd, 2004, October 10). She provided examples of the fluctuations of artistic merit depending on mis-attributions of a work to a “master,” that later scholars discovered to be created by a “mistress.”

Alice stated that quality was not the focus of her teaching of art from the past, thereby not questioning with her students what is selected in the text she uses, Living with Art (Gilbert, 1998). Instead, she believes that she would discuss visual culture critically and equates quality with critical discourse or critique.
Since we can look at work critically or historically, I have chosen to have my students study who, what, when, where, and the why of art. In other words the historical aspect ... I haven’t discussed quality in relation to my art history classes. I don’t know if that is necessarily a good thing or not. I tend to find myself liking a work less if I analyze it too much and feel that maybe the students will like it less too. Quality can be a part of the discussion of visual culture because it is another aspect of what we see. (Walkowski, 2004, October 9)

David challenges the notion that quality is not a part of visual culture dialogue by redefining quality. He suggested to the group of art teachers, “Art does not risk being watered down or becoming mediocre—it risks becoming more relevant” (Miller, 2004, October 10). With each return to the familiar in our dialogue of art teacher identity and approaches to visual culture in K-12 art classes there are glimpses of change. The dialogue enabled us to explore the space between the mirror’s reflection and our constructions of art education and visual culture.

Authors’ Note: This is a true co-authored work with equal contributions from all of us and no first author. The order in which we list authors is based on a rotation we use in our collaborations on publications.

We wish to thank the participants in our course, Leslie Flowers, Kris Fontes, Donna Maske, Julie Palmer, David Miller, and Alice Walkowski, and acknowledge their contributions as reflective practitioners in visual culture explorations in their art classrooms.
Author Identification Notes:

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to the authors at 207 Arts Cottage, School of Visual Arts, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, 16802-2905. Their email addresses are pma5@psu.edu, wbk10@psu.edu, and kk-b@psu.edu.

References

Amburgy, P. M. (2004a, October 6). Re: Thoughts on V.C. Message posted to A ED 5011: PreK-12 Art teachers' explorations into visual culture [online course].

Amburgy, P. M. (2004b, October 6). Re: VC. Message posted to A ED 5011: PreK-12 Art teachers' explorations into visual culture [online course].


