The complexity of the arts is recognized in contemporary society, where art is seen not as a monolithic idea or practice, but as filled with conflicting values and perspectives. We see art as a means for self-expression and personal interpretation. We note its service to politics and propaganda, its function as a commodity. We used to speak of art as timeless and transcendental. We now construct it as multiple. Multiple constructions assume, implicitly and often explicitly, that the meaning of any kind of art is inseparable from the conditions under which it is generated and experienced. Religious art evolved in awe-inspiring churches to communicate, inculcate and inspire. Fine art thrived with the establishment of professional academies and museums striving towards aesthetic goals as well as for the attention of an elite audience. Avant-garde and post-modern art have been connected with social and political movements and issues. Folk art has been promoted alongside political movements and the quest for national identity. Popular art received a boost with modern technology which made it widely accessible to targeted large populations.

Still, the boundaries among the different art genres can be blurred, and there is borrowing across genres. For example, fine art of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries borrowed from “primitive” African art, which was regarded as uninfluenced by socialization, exemplifying the freedom and independence of natural expression. Less ideological but not less important is the interchange between fine art and media which has been on-going since the latter half of the 19th century where artists have learned from advertising and from the illustrated press. In this paper, I examine school art and some of its specific contexts. School art is distinct from other genres, yet draws on them, re-framing and adapting contexts to create a unique genre to its unique goals and structures. I discuss the various art types which school art borrows and adapts, and describe the resulting homogenized genre.

Artistic genres, classical and popular, are discussed extensively in the scholarly literature, examining their distinct contents, formats, purposes, clienteles, and value systems. In contrast, the contents, formats, clienteles and value systems of “school art” are rarely discussed. Among the important exceptions are Arthur Efland who first coined the term in his seminal article (Efland, 1976; see also 1983 and 1990); and Tom Anderson and Melody Milbrandt (1998) with their important discussion of the authenticity of this style.

The understanding of “school art” as a genre requires the understanding of the contexts that shape and define it. Context can be defined as “the whole situation, background or environment relevant to some happening” (Grossman and Stodolsky, 1997, p. 181). A context is a “culturally and historically situated place and time, a specific here and now, the unifying link between the analytic categories of macrosociological and microsociological events” (Graue and Walsh, 1999).

In this paper, I focus on the meso, the institutional contexts for art specialists—the structures for art education and the communities of practice of the school. Meso contexts draw on the tradition of art as a school subject, and are connected to other school subjects, arts as well as academics, and their relationship to visual art. Meso contexts interact with micro level contexts – the individual teachers’ and students’ beliefs and backgrounds—and the macro level contexts – the larger cultural values. The mutual shaping of these multiple contexts creates and shapes the genre of school art.

Unlike the fine arts, school art functions in contexts that are not artistic nor exclusive. School art evolved in the educational settings of the 19th century with the expansion of public school and mass education. Its incorporation into the general curriculum was a struggle from the very beginning, never quite assuming equal citizenship with the academic disciplines which have constituted the foundations of schooling. During the 150 years of its existence, school art rode different ideological and pedagogical waves, assuming radically different functions: from a highly utilitarian skill, through a humanistic discipline assumed to cultivate the mind and the spirit, to the embodiment of the child's self-expression and emotional outlet. These ideological views aside, the contemporary reality of school arts is tinged with the bare necessities of educational settings: most principals and administrators I talked with said that the arts were there primarily to comply with union requirements of release time for classroom teachers.

However, the role that the arts play in the public schools is more complex than the one acknowledged by principals, a role that is at the same time marginal and central to the ways that schools establish their presence as institutions. Arts disciplines are peripheral to the academic, core curriculum: school art is another disciplinary layer added to the many separate areas of instruction present in today's schools. In this sense, it is a by-product of foundation ideas of curriculum that build from the basics or essential knowledge outwards to the peripheral or less essential knowledge. The three R's are at the center—and art, while more institutionalized than something like an anti-drug program, still exists on the outskirts (Bresler, 1998, December). At the same time, school art surrounds the building, contributing to the everyday “school look” as well as to the festive holidays and special events. This decor, distinct and unique to schools, serves and fits with schools’ goals, explicit and implicit messages in its contents and forms of presentation.

This chapter is based on a four-year qualitative study1, which examined the genre of school arts in American elementary settings as reflected in the operational curricula (Goodlad, et. al., 1979) of visual arts, music, dance, and drama. The focus of this paper is on the visual arts.

In general, art is taught by (i) art specialists; (ii) classroom teachers; or (iii) artists in residence. To complement other studies of school art which focused on classroom

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1 The study was sponsored by the Bureau of Educational Research and the Research Board at the University of Illinois (for a methodological discussion, see Wasser & Bresler, 1996).