CHAIR’S REPORT OF WORKING PARTY TO CONSIDER THE COMBINATION OF THE ART HISTORY AND CURATORSHIP PROGRAMS FROM THE SCHOOL OF CULTURAL INQUIRY WITH ART THEORY IN THE SCHOOL OF ART

Background

As a result of a meeting of Heads of School within RSHA on 24 August, it was agreed to establish an informal consultation process to consider the issues outlined in a proposal for structural change developed by the Director RSHA, Professor Howard Morphy. The principles and timing of the process were set out in a document prepared by Professor Paul Pickering, Acting Director RSHA, dated 6 September 2012.

The Art Working Party (Art WP), together with two other working parties, was charged with identifying the key issues (including arguments for and against the relevant proposals and related issues) and potential common ground. A discretion was bestowed on the working parties as to what activities they might undertake, including a call for submissions.

Representative working parties were to be established with an independent Chair. Membership of ART WP was confirmed on 12 October 2012 as follows:

Margaret Thornton, Professor of Law (Chair)
Sasha Grishin, Professor & Head of Art History and Curatorial Studies, School of Critical Inquiry, CASS
Charlotte Galloway, Lecturer, Asian Art History & Curatorial Studies, SCI, CASS
Anthea Callen, Professor of Art, School of Art, CASS
Ashley Eriksmoen, Head, Furniture Workshop, School of Art, CASS

Mrs Rosemary Shepherd would provide administrative support for the WP.

Meetings

The Art WP met twice: on 6 November and 27 November 2012. Further deliberations were not possible as Professor Callen was departing for overseas in early December and would not be returning for several months.

(1) Meeting of 6 November

Members of the ART WP from Art History made clear their opposition to the idea of any amalgamation. They were strongly of the view that revisiting the issue for the fourth time was of little value. They elaborated on the nature of past reviews and evinced concern that neither the Chair nor the members from the School of Art, who were recent appointees to the ANU, were au fait with this history. Their basic objection to a merger was that the two areas were
fundamentally incompatible as the principal role of the School of Art was to train art practitioners while that of the art history was to train curators.

In contrast, the members of the WP from Art Theory were amenable to the idea of amalgamation and could see only positive outcomes, particularly as art history and art theory are already enmeshed in the pedagogy and practice of the School of Art. They pointed out that the two areas were not as divergent as the art history members claimed, particularly as about 140 first year undergraduates in the School of Art were enrolled in art theory, which was a compulsory subject. They also believed that a critical mass of art-oriented scholars would be beneficial for the research profile of Art generally at the ANU and would have positive flow-on effects for ERA.

**The Art WP decided that:**

(a) The way to proceed was to call for submissions from interested persons in Art History and Curatorship, Art Theory and Heads of Program in the School of Art; HDR and undergraduate representatives would also be asked to give feedback.

(b) The Chair would draft an email to be circulated for approval which would then be distributed by the Art WP members.

(c) The Chair would meet with the Dean of CASS in order to be briefed as to the background for the initiative.

(2) **Follow-up from Meeting of 6 November:**

(a) The Chair drafted an email in consultation with members of the WP, which was then circulated, with a deadline for response to Mrs Shepherd of 21 November 2012.

(b) The Chair met briefly with Professor Paul Pickering, Acting Director of RSHA and, subsequently, Professor Toni Makkai, Dean of CASS, to obtain a clearer view of the background and rationale for the working parties.

(c) Professor Grishin requested that certain documents and correspondence pertaining to possible amalgamation over the period 2010-12 be circulated to members of the WP. Ms Suzanne Knight, the Executive Officer of RSHA, with the permission of Professor Pickering, compiled these documents, most of which were marked ‘Confidential’ and sent them to the Chair for perusal. The Chair determined that it was appropriate to circulate relevant excerpts only to members of the Art WP as some of the documents were outside the WP’s terms of reference. Names of staff were excised.

(3) **Final Meeting of 27 November 2012**

The main item of business was to consider the submissions received in response to the call. Twenty-one submissions were received, which included one from a member of the WP (Dr Eriksmoen) and one from the Senior School Administrator in the School of Critical Inquiry (Ms
Lopera). These submissions were not discounted by the WP and did not affect the overall views which were clearly divided along Art Theory, School of Art versus Art History, School of Critical Inquiry lines. Ms Lopera’s submission provided useful background information.

Of the 21 submissions received, twelve favoured a merger and nine were opposed. In terms of the staff/student breakdown, ten staff submissions were received, which included nine from the School of Art, all of which favoured a merger. The one staff submission opposed was that of Ms Lopera from SCI. No staff submissions were received from Art History and the Art WP resolved not to receive late submissions. [A subsequent email to the Chair from an Art History staff member indicated that this person’s views had in any case been communicated to the Art History members of the WP prior to the meeting. Two other late submissions were also received by Mrs Shepherd].

Of the eleven student submissions, three were in favour of a merger and eight opposed. Once again, there was a clear line of demarcation between them, with those in favour from the School of Art and those against from Art History and Curatorship. All the student submissions were from PhD students, with no undergraduate submission, no doubt because of the time of year.

The submissions were accepted by the Art WP as being self-evident. The main points made in the submissions for and against amalgamation are summarised by the Chair as follows:

**Arguments in favour of amalgamation:**

- The prospect of a merger is regarded as ‘timely’, ‘natural’ and ‘exciting’. It would draw on and maximise the strengths of both areas;
- Co-location is essential to the development of meaningful and rigorous art-making. The dynamic relationship between culture, history and practice provides a powerful philosophical and academic rationale for re-location;
- There is a need for flexibility to accommodate historical change and the fluidity of boundaries. The School of Art is no longer a discrete entity as was the case when it was the Canberra School of Art, but a fully integrated component of the ANU;
- Prominent international departments of art and art history, such as Stanford and Berkeley, as well as others in the UK, Canada and Scandinavia, reject the retention of rigid borders;
- A merger would enable the presentation to the public of a more coherent image of art at the ANU;
- Graduates from the School of Art and Art Theory and Curatorship compete for the same jobs; they are by no means confined to separate labour markets. Indeed, a number of senior curators within art museums and galleries, as well as conservators and art bureaucrats, are the products of art schools. A merger would therefore bring together students who are presently artificially separated but who may ultimately work together;
- Art history is central to undergraduate teaching in the School of Art and productive affinities already exist in the two student cohorts which could be enhanced with amalgamation;
- Amalgamation would enable the development of a coordinated internship program, which is presently not the case;
- Art theory staff already identify as art historians and a merger would be beneficial in terms of bids for research grant, ERA rankings and joint initiatives, such as conferences;
- Amalgamation could result in significant cost savings as a merger would ease the heavy workloads confronted by staff in the School of Art regarding both undergraduate and postgraduate coursework, as well as HDR supervision.

**Arguments against Amalgamation:**

- Art practice and art history involve disparate skills. On the one hand, a more theoretical orientation could be disadvantageous to practitioners while, on the other, an amalgamation could result in the phasing out of serious art history teaching at the ANU;
- In an art school, the theory segment is merely an adjunct to the artwork produced. Integration would lack the intellectual rigour associated with art history and curatorship in the School of Critical Inquiry;
- The excellent reputation of Art History and Curatorship would be compromised. It would represent a ‘dumbing down’ of the current degree, which is academically rigorous and intellectually challenging;
- The location of Art History with English, philosophy, archaeology, Classics, literature, media, theatre and film, as well as political, social and cultural history accords with the approach of other Go8 universities. It has more in common with these disciplines than art practice;
- Research-intensive universities elsewhere, including those belonging to the IARU alliance have a dedicated department of art history within a division of arts and humanities;
- Immersing a smaller unit into a larger body with different goals is more likely to be to the detriment of the former;
- Potential art historians and art curators would go elsewhere for their studies;
- Re-location would be discouraging and destabilising for staff as it would have a deleterious effect on the School of Cultural Inquiry;
- A merger would dilute further the already limited opportunities for doctoral supervision;
- In its present configuration, art history is better able to fulfil the aims of the recent White Paper, *Australia in the Asian Century*.

**Conclusion**

As can be seen, the voices from Art History and Art Theory espoused diametrically opposing positions on the question of an amalgamation, with Art History implacably opposed and Art Theory favourably disposed. I was unable to discern any common ground that allowed room for negotiation and it is recognised that there are some contradictory assertions. The division appears to be inured in history which, so far as the spokespersons for Art History are concerned, has assumed the status of immutable truth.
A striking symbol of the gulf between the two areas is provided by the fact that the two senior disciplinary members of the Art WP, Professor Grishin and Professor Callen, both of whom are internationally renowned art historians at the ANU, had not met prior to the initial meeting of the WP on 6 November.

The one tiny issue on which there seemed to be unanimity, albeit largely deduced from the Art Theory submissions, was opposition to the phrase ‘The School of Fine Arts’ as the appropriate nomenclature for an amalgamated unit. It was seen to be an outdated term, reminiscent of ‘fine dining’. The only suggestion for an appropriate name if a merger were to occur was the ‘Department of Art History and Theory’.

I thank the members of the Art WP for their contributions, the staff and students who provided written submissions and Mrs Rosemary Shepherd for her excellent administrative support.

(Prof) Margaret Thornton,
Chair, Art Working Party
20 December 2012