The faculty of the Department of Art and Art History unanimously request that the Vanderbilt University administration approve our proposal that the studio art and history of art units of the present Department be separated into two new departments effective July 1, 2006. If approved, the two new departments would be designated the Department of Art and the Department of History of Art.

Our joint history began almost forty years ago as the Department of Fine Arts, a name that was changed to the present designation in 1998. We have worked well together, being united in our commitment to creative and intellectual excellence, distinction in undergraduate teaching and, above all, our deeply shared belief in the importance of art, both in its contemporary and historical contexts. Since the practice of our professions and the nature of our teaching have long dictated physical separation, a shared departmental culture has been difficult to achieve. In sum, we have evolved from “Fine Arts” into distinct disciplines. We have noted with keen interest the separation of Communication Studies and Theater, especially since their situation has remarkable similarities to our own, and petition for a similar solution.

INTELLECTUAL DIVERSITY AND DIVERGENT MISSIONS

For several years, the College of Arts and Science has encouraged and materially supported diversity—ethnic, social and intellectual. Traditionally, the Vanderbilt undergraduate curriculum privileged canonical figures, texts and images in historical context, but in more recent years a new tack has been taken in the development of programs that promote interdisciplinarity and the contemporary creative spirit, including film, music and poetry. With the establishment of an independent studio arts major last year, the studio faculty envision a closer working and creative relationship with departments, schools and programs such as Theater, the creative writing program in the Department of English, Film Studies, the Blair School of Music and others.

Historians of art have also begun to expand interdisciplinary initiatives but in a manner different from studio artists. Its interdisciplinary engagement is more focused on intellectual engagement with cognate disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, especially English, History, Philosophy, Classical Studies, and Anthropology, in addition to the departments specializing in foreign language literatures. History of art also naturally gravitates towards the newly-established interdisciplinary centers at Vanderbilt. Ultimately, history of art is a historically reconstructive discipline and is differently conceptualized from the actual creation of art, although both undeniably are intellectually complex and creative in their different ways. As the discipline of history of art at Vanderbilt aspires to a national and international reputation for excellence, its needs are best met internally. Only one top-ranked history of art department in the nation is still joined with a studio. While research universities have no single configuration regarding studio art and history of art, union works best when one of the two is considerably
smaller and functions primarily as a service element to the larger discipline. Studio art at present is the smaller of the two departmental components, but with the institutional commitment to the visual arts as part of a more ambitious University (of which the new Ingram Studio Arts Building is the most visible symbol), a secondary, supporting role for studio art vis-à-vis history of art is neither appropriate nor desirable.

FINANCIAL AND BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

In the administrative sense, the Department of Art and Art History is one of the most complex in the entire University, and it is no surprise that its budget is also labyrinthine. It encompasses the maintenance of studio arts classes, the research demands of historians of art, the support of the Visual Resources Collection with its highly involved digitization project, the curation of the permanent art collection and the Fine Arts Gallery programs. At present, only the Gallery has a separate budget; everything else is lumped into one daunting document. With so many different entities vying for support, it is extremely difficult to prioritize needs and to understand the costs of things necessary to the different areas. Progress in the Department has materially suffered because of internal competition for existing funds. Dividing studio and history of art will clarify the budget for the respective chairs, since it is highly unlikely that a chair from either studio or history of art has the depth of knowledge and the understanding of material needs necessary to administer both units effectively and fairly.

PERSONNEL

Because the Department of Art and Art History has expanded and has become much more complex in its operations, the personnel decisions faced by the Chair require a vastly greater expertise than was necessary in the days of the Department of Fine Arts. While art and history of art share interests, concerns and resources—the Gallery and the Visual Resources Collection especially, each discipline can better realize its potential under separate, specialist leadership.

Joint searches for positions in both art and history of art have become more complicated as such issues as multiculturalism, technological advances, globalization and new specializations in both fields demand a type of sophistication and engagement that none of us possess. This presents a daunting challenge to the Chair, regardless of her or his discipline. It is not uncommon for historians of art to defer to the superior understanding of their studio colleagues in studio tenure-track hires and contract renewals, and while the artists bring considerable historical knowledge to the hiring, promotion and renewal process in art history, they can hardly be expected to be deeply informed about recent developments in the field, with the notable exception of contemporary art and criticism. In sum, we step on one another’s toes in many personnel matters and this sometimes causes needless complications, an unfortunate situation that would be remedied by separation into two departments.

The ideal chair for studio art would be a senior artist/scholar of national distinction who would serve as an intellectual leader for the faculty but who also has a solid grounding in
administration. The studio artists will be conducting a search in 2006-07 for just such a leader, someone who understands the daily operations of a studio arts building as well as the instructional needs of studio courses and course development. In addition, this new colleague will necessarily be an artist whose work is strong, compelling and pedagogically exciting. The time is propitious for studio art at Vanderbilt. The new studio major; discussions of possible new degree programs; and the wonderfully impressive new building all offer great potential for the growth of the studio program. We believe this growth may be maximized in the context of a newly-created Department of Art.

The discipline of history of art at Vanderbilt is similarly ambitious, especially in the context of the implementation of a doctoral degree program. All of Vanderbilt’s peer institutions award the Ph.D. degree in history of art. Such ambitions require a strong sense of shared purpose and astute programmatic organization by those best qualified to make it happen. In the last two years, the historians of art have reformed and updated the undergraduate history of art major to make it resemble those offered at peer institutions and have improved the existing M.A. program by implementing more stringent degree requirements that will better prepare our masters’s students for entry into leading doctoral programs. Like studio, history of art has made great strides in recent years and its ambitions would also be best realized in a Department of History of Art.