

17 The City Art Institute

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In 1975, City Art Institute (CAI) came into being as the School of Art, Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education (CAE).

Optimism and growth in advanced education opportunities were characteristic of the time and it was in this spirit that the new art school accepted its first intake of students.

The new art school was the first of its kind in New South Wales. Artist education had previously been the sole preserve of the Department of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and various private art academies. Following the publication of a number of reports culminating in the Gleeson Report in 1973, it was decided that existing art diploma courses offered by Technical Colleges should be offered in the advanced education sector. Ken Reinhard was appointed as the Dean of the School of Art, Alexander Mackie CAE.

It was perhaps symbolic that the new Dean's first office consisted of a small partitioned space in the corner of a large administrative office on Alexander Mackie's Paddington Campus. As the new Dean of School found himself in cramped and temporary premises so the new art school would find itself operating in a variety of leased premises varying in degrees of inappropriateness. Had the new staff realised in 1975 that it would take 16 years to find for the school a permanent home on a single site, perhaps some of the enthusiasm which marked the opening of the new school might have been dampened.



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The adjustments needed in those early years were substantial. The chronic problem of finding suitable accommodation has been mentioned. The funding authority's enthusiasm for artist education did not extend to providing a single permanent, purpose designed campus.

A more immediate and significant problem was to relate artist education to its new milieu. Nobody appeared to question the validity of its place in the advanced education sector. Indeed it had been the subject of agitation in the years preceding 1975 but few had properly examined the implications of such a move. How should art be taught in a college of advanced education? In the TAFE colleges the proportion of time devoted to face to face teaching was much greater than in the college or university sector, and Art History and Theory occupied a relatively minor place in the syllabus.

Many lecturers, whose previous experience of teaching in art schools had been under the auspices of TAFE were confronted with a situation in which the time devoted to face to face lecturing was significantly reduced. Students in a college of advanced education were expected to be more individually motivated and self directing. It is a tribute to the flexibility and intelligence of the school's first group of lecturers that the transition was effected so successfully.

For the staff of Alexander Mackie CAE their new situation as members of a multi-purpose college also required some adjustment. For the first time a teachers college in NSW was expected to co-operate with an art school in a single corporate entity. There had been a long standing association between East Sydney Technical College and Alexander Mackie CAE to train high school art teachers but that association had not required the close contact of the newly expanded College. That the misunderstanding and friction inherent in such a sudden shift in balance was so minor is a credit to all those involved. In particular it is a tribute to the wisdom and patience of Dr Ralph Rawlinson, Principal, Alexander Mackie CAE.

It was in these first years that the character of what was to become the CAI was shaped. In other centres and in Sydney itself the newly established college art schools held closely to the traditional concept of what an art school should be. Painting, Drawing, Sculpture and Printmaking provided the core of studies built into their new courses. While recognising and developing these disciplines, CAI adopted a more radical view of what should be the province of art.

The applied arts of Jewellery, Fibre and Ceramics were early additions to the range of subjects offered for major study. Photography was a more unusual inclusion to be followed by Film, Video and other subjects designed to reflect the interest in the ephemeral and time based art forms which had become the new art of the 1970s.

Work commenced immediately on the planning and development of what were to be the first studio based degree level courses to be offered in the State. The Bachelor of Education (Art) course was approved in 1977 to replace the Diploma in Art Education. In 1981 the Bachelor of Arts (Visual Arts) was approved. It was to become the largest of its kind offered in NSW.

Post-graduate study in the Visual Arts became available when the new Graduate Diploma in Professional Art Studies was approved. Its first students were admitted to the course in 1980.

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Despite the difficulties of inappropriate and inadequate buildings and the gradual restriction in funding, the School of Art grew in reputation and facilities. Named after the chairperson of the Alexander Mackie CAE Council, the Ivan Dougherty Gallery opened in temporary premises on the Cumberland Street campus in the Rocks district in 1977. Its charter required that it should provide a venue for professional exhibitions which could not be accommodated in other galleries. By so doing it performed the dual function of providing a teaching facility for staff and students and an art resource for the community.

The Clement Semmler Library, named after the last chairman of the Alexander Mackie CAE Council, was well on its way to becoming New South Wales' best specialist art library.

As it grew, the School of Art, like other institutions in the advanced education sector, was faced with the prospect of new associations. Amalgamation of college with college or college with university became the subject of a spate of official reports. Having only recently undergone a kind of amalgamation, the School was probably better prepared than most for this new era.

During the negotiations which finally led to the establishment of Sydney CAE it seemed likely that the structure of the proposed new College would confirm the identity of the School of Art by identifying it as CAI, one of five semi-autonomous Institutes forming the new College.

Meanwhile the School of Teacher Education moved to its new campus in the southern suburb of Oatley. Work could now commence on the refurbishment and partial occupation of the Albion Avenue Campus by the School of Art.

With its new logo, CAI of the Sydney CAE came into being in 1982. It occupied three campuses — at Cumberland Street, the Rocks; Flinders Street, Darlinghurst; and Albion Avenue, Paddington. Over the coming years Cumberland Street would be vacated leaving Flinders Street as the only leased premises occupied by the Institute.

Negotiations commenced for a radical innovation in Australian artist education. It was proposed that for the first time a masters degree in studio arts should be offered by a college of advanced education. This became a reality in 1982 in the form of an MA degree offered jointly by CAI, Sydney CAE and the Sydney College of the Arts (SCA).

In 1984 approval was granted for the offering of a Graduate Diploma of Art in Gallery Management, the first of its kind designed to give professional training to graduates who intended to make a career in one of the growing number of professional and private art galleries.

The new status of CAI brought with it a new responsibility. Prior to amalgamation, the Bachelor of Education (Art) program had been jointly offered from the two Schools of Alexander Mackie CAE. The Bachelor of Education (Art) Course had been constructed on the principle of concurrent and integrated study of studio, art history and pedagogy. With the creation of the Sydney CAE the BEd (Art) Course became the sole responsibility of CAI and the principle became an institutional, as well as an academic reality.

In common with the other Institutes of Sydney CAE, CAI had become a smaller component of a large college. Art and Art Education were now elements of a much

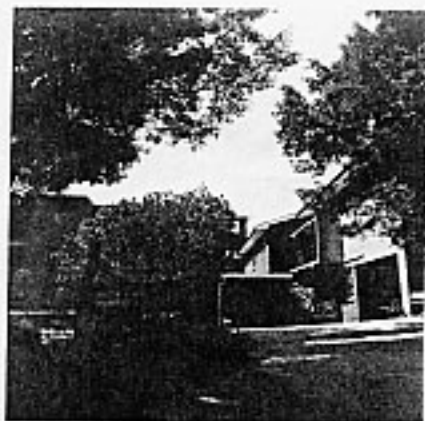
broader academic profile than had been the case at Alexander Mackie CAE. Nevertheless, CAI entered the new association with a sense of optimism.

The concept of semi-autonomous Institutes operating under the umbrella of a single College identity seemed to offer a better opportunity for an art school to prosper. It would allow CAI to adopt a higher profile within the State's art community. There had always been a tendency for those not directly involved in artist education to assume that CAI's sole function was the training of art teachers. Its previous association with what had once been a teachers college encouraged this assumption despite the fact that CAI had always been one of the largest professional art schools in Australia. Subsequent events proved this optimism to be well founded. The CAI was established in the consciousness of the art community in a relatively short period of time.

It is also true that the need to assert itself in a new institutional environment where resources were limited and competition was fierce brought with it the need to clarify priorities, to refine arguments and to defend practices with a precision which had not previously been necessary. CAI was acquiring the maturity and toughness needed to face the hard realities of the future.

The new identity and assertiveness of CAI were of immense value and were a direct result of the amalgamation which created Sydney CAE. However one event took on symbolic significance, for it appeared to suggest that a measure of this new found independence could be in jeopardy, that same independence which the staff of CAI believed should be maintained and enhanced. The issue was one of accommodation for it was clear that Sydney CAE's accommodation problems required urgent solutions. Many Institutes, including CAI occupied leased or unsuitable premises, but a suggestion that the solution might be found by acquiring a single large campus, such as a refurbished Redfern Mail Exchange to house most of the Institutes, including City Art, was greeted with dismay.

It was believed at CAI that such a move would submerge the Institute in a way which would lead to a loss of credibility with the art community. The suggestion also bred fears that the integrity of the professional art courses offered by the Institute would



The refurbished campus of CAI at Albion Avenue, Paddington.

be diluted by requirements to offer places in studio classes to students from other Institutes who required general studies subjects as part of nursing or teacher education courses.

These fears may have been unfounded, but even the possibility of the loss of an ideal campus location in Paddington's art gallery district, coupled with the suggestion that at some time in the future it might be necessary to include nursing or teacher education students in classes devoted to professional studio studies, engendered an uncertainty beyond reassurance. Nor was the gradual increase in the resources available for capital equipment and consumables sufficient to convince the staff and students of CAI that their futures were assured.

To those working at CAI, it seemed that Sydney CAE's administration could not understand how crucially important the independent identity of the Institute was to its effective operation. The experience of other art schools plus the knowledge gained as a part of Alexander Mackie CAE had demonstrated that the art community believed professional art courses were better delivered in single purpose arts institutions.

This debate had simmered since the publication of the Gleeson Committee Report which had recommended the transfer of diploma courses from TAFE to colleges. It came to the boil in 1984 when the Higher Education Board (HEB) set up the Mansfield Committee to advise on the future direction of art and design education in NSW with particular reference to the Sydney region.

The HEB had for some years been confronted with a particular problem affecting artist education. CAI occupied some leased premises but enjoyed the prospect that at least some of its difficulties would be solved with the total refurbishment of the Albion Avenue Campus. In addition SCA was entirely housed in leased premises. Without some rationalisation of arts institutions it seemed unlikely that the Commonwealth Government would provide funds to meet SCA's need for a permanent home or solve CAI's chronic housing difficulty. The Mansfield Committee's task was to suggest the means by which such a rationalisation might be accomplished.

The Committee invited submissions from interested parties. This created a tension in which CAI's staff and students' support for some form of amalgamation with SCA, in a new single purpose arts college was opposed by the Sydney CAE Council's submission which rejected the suggestion that CAI might be hived off to become part of a new academic entity. So, despite some improvement in the Institute's physical circumstances, staff members began to feel themselves to be operating in an unsympathetic environment in which the critical importance of identity was not properly understood.

In 1985 the Mansfield Committee presented its report to the HEB. Its principal recommendation was a proposal to amalgamate SCA and CAI under an administrative umbrella which would guarantee the maximum possible degree of autonomy for the two Schools. It received immediate and unanimous support from CAI's staff and students but encountered vehement opposition from within SCA. The reasons for this opposition were various but focussed on a fear that the degree of autonomy for the component schools of the new College would be diluted over time with a consequent loss of course choices for future art students. CAI, on the other hand, saw in the Mansfield Committee's recommendation a way in which the

identity and degree of independence which originally had been promised by the creation of Sydney CAE could be guaranteed into the future.

The HEB supported the Mansfield Committee's recommendations which were conveyed to the then Minister for Education Mr Rodney Cavalier. His ultimate rejection of the plan reflected the strident opposition to its implementation by SCA.

The problems remained unsolved. No solution was proposed for the accommodation of SCA and approximately half of CAI's activities were housed in the inadequate premises of the Flinders Street Campus. The staff and students of CAI continued to fear the loss of the degree of independence needed to ensure a healthy future as a major professional art school.

To some extent these fears were allayed by the proposal developed within Sydney CAE to purchase the Flinders Street Campus. At least this recognised that CAI would continue to occupy separate premises within the Paddington area. Even so, the Flinders Street building had been occupied originally on a temporary basis, and the limitations of its inadequate size and the problems of noise and atmospheric pollution could not easily be overcome.

The rejection of the Mansfield plan did not silence those who felt that the rationalisation of the two principal art schools in the inner city could produce a more effective instrument for the delivery of professional artist education. Agitation for radical action continued and in 1987 the Minister responded by creating the New South Wales Institute of the Arts which in 1988 combined CAI, the School of Art within SCA and the Art courses offered by TAFE at the East Sydney Technical College under the authority of a Board of Governors responsible to the Minister.

For those at CAI, the Minister's initiative was unexpected but was welcomed nevertheless. The association with Sydney CAE had not been an entirely comfortable arrangement. Nevertheless, had it not been for that association subsequent developments would not have occurred.

As an Institute of Sydney CAE, City Art had gained in reputation, maturity and authority. Personal and professional associations had been formed which improved the Institute's capacity for the self critical evaluation of its academic offerings and its administrative efficiency.

If Sydney CAE was the parent, who agonised over its apparently unruly offspring, it could now take pride in the assurance and success CAI demonstrated in its new circumstances. Sydney CAE had done its work well and the new CAI was the proof.

In those significant years from 1982 to 1987 many people played a part in achieving this happy outcome. To the staff of Sydney CAE, and in particular its Principal Dr L. Michael Koder, go a generous measure of thanks. No less to Mr Rodney Cavalier, Mr Ron Parry, Dr Clement Semmler, Mr Elwyn Lynn, Mr John Coburn, Ms Lin Bloomfield and Ms Kate Briscoe. These are some of the people whose generous investment of time and counsel has paid rich dividends.