Dear Dr Hunt,

Open letter concerning proposed changes to the National Art Library

We are writing as a group of organisations whose members work in library and information services across the UK and internationally to express our concern at the proposed staffing and service changes at the National Art Library and their impact both on the integrity and credibility of the V&A and the wider fabric of specialist knowledge and research in the UK.

We, along with associated organisations across the research & library community, understand and empathise with the position in which the museum finds itself and the need for structural action to address the financial challenges arising from the pandemic. We appreciate that the process of considering the proposals is ongoing and we very much hope that there is still an opportunity to find a more productive course through these challenges.

The National Art Library is rightly regarded as one of the pre-eminent art libraries in the world, by merit both of its collections and the knowledge and expertise of its information professional staff. It is central to the intellectual credibility of the museum and its standing in the research community both in the UK and around the world.

The services are widely-used by industry, academics, students, researchers and creative professionals. The library itself houses an unique repository of collections and knowledge of international significance that cannot easily be moved either physically or online without significant impairment to the quality and comprehensiveness of its services.

Specifically, our concerns are as follows:

- That the reduction in the number of staff posts within your library and information services teams, and specifically the National Art Library, risks losing both the decades of knowledge and experience about your collections and dedicated expertise in their interpretation for a broad range of audiences and purposes;

- That the proposed closure for a year while wider strategic plans are set in place is unnecessary and will cause significant impairment to the currency and accessibility of the collections and resources of the Library;
That the proposed movement of elements of the service to the Museum’s new facilities in Hackney will of necessity restrict access to the Library’s collections, resources and staff given the reduced transport and accessibility of the new site;

That some of the proposals appear to be driven by the belief that the process of finding appropriate digital alternatives will be relatively straightforward. Unfortunately, we know from considerable experience that this is not the case and that there are some aspects of services, such as licenses for access to specialist journals, which cannot easily be replaced digitally;

That little consideration appears to have been given to the wider tapestry of knowledge and expertise within which the National Art Library sits, nor the undue pressure that the proposed restrictions will place on other national and independent research organisations across the UK.

We recognise that this will be a challenging and volatile time for the museum, but we would like strongly to urge you both to limit the negative impact on professional staffing to the greatest extent possible and to maintain access to the world-leading collections, resources and expertise of the National Art Library while you work through the challenge of the overall restructure.

We remain at your disposal if it would be useful to meet to discuss these concerns. We very much hope that you will maintain access to the National Art Library and limit the impact on professional posts, both to protect the tremendous value of the library itself and also to ensure that the V&A is able to continue to represent the very best in the UK’s cultural and creative life.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Mahurter, Chair, CILIP Rare Books and Special Collections Group

Nick Poole, Chief Executive, CILIP

David Prosser, Chief Executive, Research Libraries UK (RLUK)