



# Teacher and scholar had a global influence on the philosophy of art

By Kylie Trask-Kerr and Brendan Ryan

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**Jennifer Anne McMahon – Professor Emerita of Philosophy, University of Adelaide.**

**March 14, 1956 to June 5, 2023**

Jennifer A. McMahon (Jenny to all who knew her) was born in the Melbourne suburb of Coburg.

At the time her dad, Raymond, was a foreman at an automotive components manufacturer and her mother, Kathleen, was a busy stay-at-home mum to a large and growing family. They lived in a modest war service home in Merlynston, just south of the Fawkner Cemetery. Jenny's paternal grandfather had served – as a private – with the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) at Gallipoli in 1915.



Jenny McMahon retired from the University of Adelaide in April 2022 and was immediately appointed Professor Emerita of Philosophy.

Jenny went to school at St Mark's Catholic Parish Primary School and attended Mercy College Coburg for her secondary education. She excelled in her studies and in various sports, including basketball and netball.

After finishing school, Jenny followed her passion and went onto RMIT to undertake a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, majoring in painting, drawing and art history. In 1978, she undertook a Diploma of Education (Art/Craft) at the Melbourne State College, before teaching for several years at Northcote High School and The University High School, Parkville, while pursuing her early career as an emerging artist.

Jenny held her first solo exhibition at Niagara Gallery in 1981 and followed up with another solo show in 1983, after furthering her visual arts studies at the Institute of Art and Restoration, in Florence, on an Italian government scholarship in 1982. During the early to mid-1980s, she also exhibited in various group shows in Melbourne galleries, including Roar Studios and the Geelong Art Gallery, where her work was selected for inclusion in the Faber-Castell Drawing Exhibition.



Jenny McMahon had a passion for art and teaching.

In 1984-85, Jenny worked as a set painter at the Melbourne Theatre Company and was also 3CR's resident art critic, frequently presenting her reviews of Melbourne's thriving art scene on the radio station's popular Saturday afternoon arts program.

Jenny resumed full-time teaching in the mid-to-late 1980s at the former Vaucluse College FCJ on Richmond Hill, while continuing her art practice. She also commenced studies for a master's degree in education at the University of Melbourne, winning the award for best research thesis in education submitted during the 1990 academic year.

In the years 1990-91, she taught life drawing and visual art studies at the Outer Eastern College of TAFE, worked as a research assistant at the Melbourne College of Advanced Education, and began publishing articles on various arts education topics.

In 1992, she commenced studying for her doctorate in philosophy at the Australian National University, graduating four years later. She took up a post in July 1996 as lecturer in arts education at the University of Canberra, where she taught until the end of 2001.

During this period, Jenny published several seminal articles in international journals, drawing upon her pioneering doctoral research on aesthetic perception, cognition and creativity. She also contributed to the formulation of a national education policy through her role as a consultant to the National Schools Network, and as a recognised expert on duty-of-care responsibilities in educational environments.

Jenny took up the post of lecturer in philosophy at the University of Adelaide at the beginning of 2002. Over the next 20 years she rose through the academic ranks to become the first female professor of philosophy in the university's 149-year history, and the first in the history of South Australia. During this time, Jenny established a strong international reputation for pathfinding research in philosophy and interdisciplinary scholarship, most notably in aesthetics, cognitive science, philosophy of art, meta-ethics and Kant studies.

She authored *Aesthetics and Material Beauty: Aesthetics Naturalized* (Routledge 2007), a groundbreaking book that has been a catalyst for a major shift in thinking about many topics in aesthetics. In a review of the book in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Professor Daniel Vaillancourt (Loyola University) called it "a virtuoso performance" and spoke of the genius of McMahan's novel theory.

Her book *Art and Ethics in a Material World: Kant's Pragmatist Legacy* (Routledge 2014) also broke new ground in ongoing debates about the ethical dimensions of art and the beneficial role played by the arts in the lives of individuals, and within and between diverse communities and societies.



Jenny McMahon gives a talk at the Art Gallery of NSW in Sydney in 2017.

Jenny followed these books with a series of edited anthologies, including the inaugural issue of the *Australasian Philosophical Review* (March 2017) on “The Pleasure of Art”, *Social Aesthetics and Moral Judgment* (Routledge 2018), and a focus issue for the highly regarded *Curator: The Museum Journal* (2019) on “The Ancient Quarrel Between Art and Philosophy in Contemporary Visual Art Exhibitions”.

In recent years, Jenny was a prolific contributor of articles and chapters to diverse major philosophy reference books and online research resources, including *The Palgrave Kant Handbook* (2017), *The Oxford Bibliographies Online: Philosophy* (2019), *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (2020), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Literary Theory* (2022), *The Routledge Handbook of Liberal Naturalism* (2022), *Bloomsbury Contemporary Aesthetics Online* (2022), and *The Palgrave Handbook on the Philosophy of Friedrich Schiller* (2023).

In 2014-15, Jenny served as the director of postgraduate studies in the faculty of arts and represented it on several university-wide committees. From 2014 to 2017, she also served the wider philosophy community as executive secretary of the Australasian Association of Philosophy (AAP) and was a strong and effective advocate for the advancement of women and the interests of postgraduate students in the profession. Along with other past office holders of the association, Jenny was honoured at the AAP’s centenary conference at the Australian Catholic University’s Melbourne campus.

In 2018 Jenny also served on the Australian Research Council’s Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Evaluation – the triennial research assessment of all the nation’s higher education institutions – as a member of its humanities and creative arts panel.



Jenny McMahon at the Queensland Art Gallery in 2018.

Jenny had her first brush with breast cancer in 1997, at only 41 years of age. In June 2019, she was diagnosed as having an aggressive triple negative breast cancer and underwent several surgical procedures, followed by extended chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatment.

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Over the past year, Jenny courageously faced mounting health challenges. At the beginning of this year, her health began to steadily deteriorate and two extended periods in hospital followed. By mid-April, she was diagnosed as having an incurable metastatic cancer (Leptomeningeal disease involving the linings of her brain and spine). After a brave last struggle, Jenny passed away peacefully in the palliative care hospice, Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Adelaide, on June 5, 2023. She is survived by her husband, Brendan Ryan, and their son, Lachlan McMahon Ryan, as well as six of her sisters and brothers, and 20 of her nieces and nephews and their numerous children.



Jenny McMahon relaxing at home.

Jenny was a caring, generous and warm-hearted person, much loved by all members of the extended McMahon and Ryan families. She will always be fondly remembered and sorely missed by all who knew her well, including her many friends and colleagues around Australia and the world.

Jenny was a fine, creative, productive scholar and a diligent, innovative teacher who leaves an immeasurable legacy, having taught thousands of students during a long and varied career. She has also made a substantial and enduring global contribution to the discipline of philosophy, particularly in the fields of aesthetics, philosophy of art and meta-ethics. Jenny's writings have already had a significant influence, not only on the many philosophers who have followed in her audacious footsteps, but also on several leading international and Australian contemporary

visual artists, including Olafur Eliasson, Mischa Kuball, Daniel von Sturmer, and Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro.

In 2025, a collection of Jenny's selected essays, spanning some three decades of her philosophical work, will be published by a leading international publisher.

**Dr Kylie Trask-Kerr (Lecturer, Faculty of Education and Arts, ACU Melbourne) is a niece of the late Professor Emerita Jennifer (Jenny) McMahon and co-wrote this obituary with Jenny's husband, Brendan Ryan.**

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