



**The Art Association of Australia and New Zealand 2010  
Conference** <http://www.aaanz.info/>  
**December 1st-4th,**  
**University of Adelaide**

**Session Title:** Art History and Philosophy

**Session Convenor:** Jenny McMahon

**Session Date:** Friday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>.

<http://www.hss.adelaide.edu.au/philosophy/research/aesthetics/>

This symposium is inspired by the round tables organised by James Elkins in Cork, Ireland and Chicago which aimed to create a dialogue between art historians and philosophers on concepts which are central to the way both disciplines conduct their respective endeavours. For our symposium, art historians and philosophers will discuss topics and concepts which are likely to be given different interpretations by the respective disciplines. We will attempt to bridge the gap between the respective interpretations by inviting a closer consideration of the alternative perspective. The first topic will be the relation of aesthetic and moral considerations in evaluating the photography of Bill Henson. The second will be "Beauty" and the third, will be the nature of "Aesthetic Autonomy".

**The speakers are**

John McDonald (Art Critic, Sydney Morning Herald), Craig Taylor (Flinders, Philosophy) on the photography of Bill Henson; Christopher Allen (Art Critic, The Australian) and David Macarthur (Sydney, Philosophy) on Beauty; Jolanta Nowak (Melbourne, Art History) and Jenny McMahon (Adelaide, Philosophy) on the nature of aesthetic autonomy.

**Speaker:** John McDonald

**Title:** Bill Henson

**Abstract:**

The controversy surrounding Bill Henson's photos in 2008 exposed deep divisions in Australian society, and not simply between those who treated the pictures as works of art and those who saw only pornography and exploitation. It showed there was a class of people who make it their business to speak on behalf of everyone else, from the 'exploited' child, to the 'irresponsible' parents, to the community itself - which was allowed only one viable response. It also demonstrated that there was a large component of society that had never heard of Bill Henson, (including the Prime Minister), even though he was the subject of a large retrospective in Sydney and Melbourne the previous year. If we were to accept the views of activists, columnists, and radio shock jocks who argued that Henson's work was "child pornography", it would have had the effect of criminalising public, corporate and private collections, not to mention anyone who owned a catalogue or a magazine containing one of these works. This clearly untenable situation was – and is – a legal possibility under existing legislation in NSW and Victoria. Does this suggest that our politicians are too ready to listen to, and identify with, those who wanted to burn the photos and the photographer? Is this merely a question of 'reflecting' a consensus among 'decent' people? Does it highlight a split between those willing to entertain the complex claims of art and those who think only in terms of subject matter? This paper will attempt to look at the anatomy of a moral panic.

**Biographical Statement:**

John McDonald (b.1961) has been art critic for the Sydney Morning Herald from 1983-89, 1994- 1998, and again from the beginning of 2005. He is a former Head of Australian Art at the National Gallery of Australia, where he acted as Curator of the exhibition 'Federation: Australian Art and Society 1901-2001', which toured the nation until June 2002.



John has lectured throughout Australia, and taught Art History & Theory at the National Art School, Sydney. From 2002-04 he was director of Newcontemporaries, a non-commercial exhibition space at the Queen Victoria Building in Sydney.

John's publications include monographs on Australian artists such as David Strachan and Jeffrey Smart. In 2007, with photographer, R.Ian Lloyd, he published Studio, an overview of 61 contemporary painters and their studios – as a book, an exhibition and a DVD. The show was launched at the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, in July 2007 and is still touring Australia.

Art of Australia – the first volume of a new – and comprehensive - history of Australian art for Pan Macmillan, was issued in December 2008. He is the major contributor to the catalogue of the White Rabbit collection of contemporary Chinese art, and is currently working on Volume two of Art of Australia.



Bill Henson in front of one of his images.

Source: opinionaustralia.com

**Speaker:** Craig Taylor

**Title:** Art and Moralism

**Abstract:**

This paper concerns the moral criticism sometimes directed at certain works of art, and specifically the danger in such criticism of descending into mere moralism understood as a vice involving the distortion of moral reflection and judgement. As juxtaposed to such moralism, serious moral reflection in these and other contexts requires of us something more onerous than a mere concern for morality. I will focus on the recent (and extreme) moral criticism directed against the work of Australian artist Bill Henson. What I hope to draw from this example is something of the nature of moralism and in contrast to this what serious moral thought and reflection really requires of us in relation to our assessments of works of art.

**Biographical Statement:**

Craig Taylor is a senior lecturer in philosophy at Flinders University. Craig's research is largely in ethics including moral psychology and applied ethics, and he has published a book, entitled *Sympathy: A Philosophical Analysis* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002), and numerous articles in this area. Craig's current research includes a book entitled *Moralism: A Study of A Vice* forthcoming in 2011 with Acumen, and (with Stephen Buckle) an edited book entitled *Hume and the Enlightenment* forthcoming 2011 with Pickering and Chatto.

**Speaker:** Christopher Allen

**Title:** Beauty and art

**Abstract:**

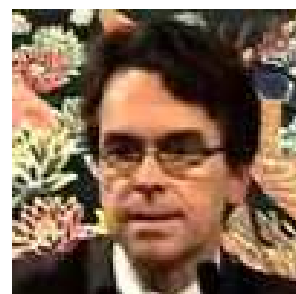
The idea of beauty has been fundamental to our thinking about art from the beginning of aesthetic theory and even in the earliest literary description of paintings and sculptures. Art has been concerned with the celebration of beauty in the human body or in nature, or with its discovery, its isolation from the coarse matter of the everyday; or again it creates beauty by the skill of the artificer. Sometimes even the ugly in nature can become beautiful in the manner of its representation; thus Cicero refers to a beautiful sculpture of a subject inherently repellent: *gorgonis os pulcherrimum*.

Keats said that beauty was truth. Since his time, paradoxically, the suspicion has arisen, and then hardened into a prejudice, that beauty is in fact mendacity; that it is a falsification of the truth, while the ugly and the vile are the marks of authenticity. But this is a fallacy engendered by the abuses of the mass media and the kitsch mirages of beauty conjured up by the advertising industry.

If we turn from the nervous arousal provoked by these images to what Kant called disinterested interest, we may argue that beauty is the experience of being, of truth or of reality. In its simplest and most uncomplicated form, we may encounter it in nature. But what happens when we turn from absorption in communion or insight to the task of articulating and communicating what we have perceived?

**Biographical Statement**

Dr Christopher Allen completed his PhD at the University of Sydney in 1992 and held a postdoctoral position as Visiting Lecturer at the Collège de France in Paris in 1994-96. He lectured in art history at the National Art School in Sydney from 1997 to 2008, and has been Head of Art at Sydney Grammar School since the beginning of 2009. Christopher Allen is the author of *Art in Australia from Colonization to Postmodernism* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1997), *French Painting in the Golden Age* (Thames and Hudson 2003), *Charles-Alphonse Dufresnoy, De Arte Graphica* (translation and commentary, Droz 2005) and other books and articles. He has been art critic for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian Financial Review* and is currently National Art Critic for *The Australian*.



**Speaker:** David Macarthur

**Title:** Beauty

**Abstract:**

Beauty seems both familiar and distant. It is a familiar term in our description of the experience of certain natural and artefactual objects (e.g. people, fashion, artworks). It is mysterious in the metaphysical tradition that leads us to picture beauty as unified, perfect, truth-conducive, morally uplifting and, above all, transcendent (or otherworldly). But in the everyday world beautiful things have no essence, may be more or less beautiful, false as well as true, evil no less than good. What of transcendence? In this paper I argue that this is the key feature of beauty but that the kind of transcendence at issue has been misunderstood as metaphysical. Following Kant we may say that beauty is not beyond or above the world but only transcendent *of us* and our powers of expression. Beauty, like love, is an elusive contentfulness, an ever-out-of-reach fullness, that for all our attempts to put it into words always exceeds them. This has suggested an otherworldly understanding of beauty. But what it points to is an attitude of “more”: the beautiful object invites a (loving) attitude that always sees more in the object than we can say. Hence the pleasure of beauty is bound up with the magical elixir of not-knowing.

**Biographical Statement:**



David Macarthur is a Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Sydney. He is co-editor of *Naturalism in Question* (Harvard, 2004), *Naturalism and Normativity* (Columbia, 2010) and *Philosophy in an Age of Science: Philosophical Essays of Hilary Putnam* (Harvard, 2011). His research interests include art, skepticism, pragmatism, and Wittgenstein. He teaches Aesthetics and Art at the University of Sydney and is the author of “Analytic Aesthetics” (A Companion to Philosophy in Australia and New Zealand, Oppy & Trakakis, eds. 2010) and “How Not to Read The Wittgenstein House” (unpublished ms).

**Speaker:** Dr Jolanta Nowak

**Title:** Picking Against the Knots: Autonomy, Heteronomy and Ethics

**Abstract:**

Aesthetic autonomy and heteronomy are mutually exclusive claims—or so it seems at least according to a central debate between factions of art historians and philosophers of the twentieth century. Jacques Rancière, however, maintains that autonomy and heteronomy are knotted together in an unbreakable bond. Rancière’s rethinking of this debate is a productive point from which to move beyond the apparently irresolvable tension between various manifestations of the doctrine of art for art’s sake and calls for art to be socially, politically and ethically engaged.

Drawing on the work of Rancière, Adorno and Levinas, I argue in this paper that recent arguments for an understanding of art as heteronomous emerge out of a desire to repair the rent between art’s autonomy and ethics. These arguments for heteronomy are doomed to failure, however, since underpinning the case for heteronomy in the twentieth century is an implicit and inescapable acceptance of the autonomy of all art since the emergence of the museum. The consequence of this history for contemporary aesthetic philosophy and art history is that we have inherited a difficult, if not contradictory, understanding of the relationship between art and ethics.

**Biographical Statement:**

Dr Jolanta Nowak is a Tutor Co-ordinator in the Interdisciplinary Foundation Programme, Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne. She took out a PhD in 2007 from the University of Melbourne. Her thesis was jointly supervised between art history and philosophy. Her area of specialty is in contemporary art and ethics. Her most recent publication is "Out From Behind the Shadows: Levinas and Visual Art", *Philosophy Today*, issue 3, 2010.



**Speaker:** Jenny McMahan

**Title:** Art and Language in Adorno and Habermas.

**Abstract:**

Aesthetic autonomy can be interpreted in at least two different ways. It can refer to a unique way of engaging with the world that suspends the interests and physical needs that characterise our normal orientation to the world. On the other hand it can describe a convention of the art world which demands that the artist be free of external compulsions such as might be forced upon her by religious, political, or moral authorities. The notion of aesthetic autonomy that I will be considering in this paper incorporates both conceptions of aesthetic autonomy. It is recommended because neither of the former two notions in isolation explains current art world practice. In particular, the first stops short of addressing the evolving nature of art practices and the second has nothing to say about the basis of art's communicability. Attempts to incorporate both as in the aesthetic theory of Theodor W. Adorno, typically result in what I will term a strong aesthetic autonomy. I argue that strong aesthetic autonomy cannot be defended. I identify a notion of moderate aesthetic autonomy in the work of Jürgen Habermas which is the notion of aesthetic autonomy that I will defend.

**Biographical Statement:**

Dr. Jennifer A. McMahon is Head of Philosophy at the University of Adelaide. She is the author of *Aesthetics and Material Beauty: Aesthetics Naturalized* (Routledge Studies in Contemporary Philosophy series, hbk. 2007, pbk. 2009) and author of the chapter on Beauty in the *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (2001, 2005). She has published in philosophy, psychology, art history/theory and education journals; and is currently working on a pragmatist theory of art at the intersection of art, language and ethics. McMahon exhibited as a visual artist in two solo exhibitions in the early 1980s at Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, Australia.



Detail from Olafur Eliasson,  
*Your Mobile Expectations: BMW H<sub>2</sub>R project*, 2007