



*Eleanor Joan Kerr*  
(1939–2004)

JOYCE EVANS, *Portrait of Joan Kerr* 1993.  
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## *Eleanor Joan Kerr* (1939–2004)



We will not again see an art historian like Joan Kerr, who died earlier this year at the age of 66, at the height of her intellectual powers, but leaving a rich legacy for those seeking to understand how the visual arts inform our culture. Many academics submerge their personalities in the neutral language of scholarly objectivity. This was not Joan's way. Without losing intellectual rigour, her writing and her teaching were the direct expression of an individual voice, of a forceful, resourceful and seemingly fearless personality.

There was something peculiarly Australian – or Australian of an era that may be passing – in her work as writer, teacher and administrator: it was characterised by a kind of intellectual larrikinism that enjoyed challenging authority, whether that of bureaucratic regulation or that which guarded the artistic hierarchies between 'high' and 'popular' arts. A scholarly egalitarianism shaped the content, style and mode of presentation of her work, for example, in small, accessible, challenging exhibitions. She was determined to communicate complex ideas to as wide a range of people as she could so she developed a literary style that gave the impression of immediacy, vitality, informality, but was much worked to give this effect. Colourful, witty and relaxed, it seduces readers into considering serious issues almost without their knowing it. Joan's writing repeatedly approaches what we thought we knew from an oblique angle; it is characterised by wit as well as the mischievous overturning of stale assumptions leading us to perceive well-known images or buildings with new vision.

In considering Joan Kerr's contribution to Australia's cultural life, one cannot ignore the fact that this contribution was also shaped by her husband, Dr James (Jim) Kerr. They had not only a happy 44-year long marriage, but a genuinely collaborative intellectual partnership, seen most clearly in their joint work on Australia's architectural history and on heritage and conservation issues (for example, in their ground-breaking Bicentennial exhibition on colonial prison architecture, *Out of Sight. Out of Mind: Australia's Places of Confinement, 1788–1988*, a sobering corrective to the too often thoughtless celebrations of the Bicentenary). They met when both were students at the University of Queensland, where Joan received her BA Honours in Language and Literature in 1959. After their marriage in 1960, when Jim's job took them to London, they both enrolled in courses on Medieval Art at the Courtauld

Institute, and with the great architectural historian, Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, at Birkbeck College; he described them 'as amongst the best students' he had had in 20 years. After they returned to Australia in the watershed year of 1968, they enrolled in the fledgling Department of Fine Arts in the Power Institute of the University of Sydney, then headed by Bernard Smith. The newly founded Power Institute was in a creative ferment of intensive debates on the nature of modernism, on women's art, on art and working life, on conceptual art, on community arts, and many other issues.

Joan completed her MA Honours in 1975, and then she and James enrolled in the postgraduate program at the University of York; both were awarded doctorates in 1977. Joan's thesis 'Church Architecture in New South Wales 1788–1888' provided material for her first book, *Gothick Taste in the Colony of New South Wales* (1980), written in collaboration with James Broadbent. She taught for a while at the Australian National University, and then returned to the Fine Arts Department at Sydney University, as a lecturer, rapidly promoted to Senior Lecturer and Associate Professor, and was Head of Department for four tumultuous years. She was Research Professor in Art History at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales from 1994 to 1997, and professor at the Centre for Cross Cultural Research, Australian National University from 1997 to 2001. In all this period, she worked on a variety of organisations, most importantly the Historic Houses Trust, the National Trust, the Society of Architectural Historians and the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand. She published twelve monographs, and a huge number of articles and catalogue essays. Much of her published work consisted of interventions in current controversies; ephemeral, but nonetheless significant, examples of a scholar engaged in public debate on matters of contemporary significance. In this she fulfilled Baudelaire's definition of a critic as 'partial, passionate and political'.

Most would agree that Joan Kerr's finest single achievement was the *Dictionary of Australian Artists: Painters, Sketchers, Photographers and Engravers to 1870* (Oxford University Press, 1992). This was a project begun by Bernard Smith, but in terminal crisis when Joan was reappointed at Sydney University in 1981. In subsequent years we sometimes laughed at how lightly she agreed to my request that she continue this work, for neither of us had any idea how much labour would be involved. Joan was determined to include every known artist who had worked in the Australian colonies – and she defined 'artist' in the widest possible sense as the producer of any visual imagery. In this, she was in tune with those advocating a widening of art history from the 'fine arts' to all products of visual culture. Wanting to get support for this ambition, she arranged that we should visit an eminent historian who had a central role in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Unfortunately, he said that such a project was unrealisable, particularly with our limited resources. Nevertheless, Joan pursued this vision, doing so with such tenacity that I sometimes feared that the project would devour not only her and the dedicated researchers working with her, but also our whole Department. Yet she and her collaborators did realise the

impossible. The *Dictionary* transformed our understanding of Australian colonial art. It gave the first real look at the creative ferment in these small, isolated colonies, and it disrupted forever a history conducted in terms of a handful of well-known artists and a thin corpus of oil and watercolour paintings. It revealed the instability of the artistic profession – with very few artists able to work full-time as artists – and showed as never before the multiplicity of imagery that informed the colonists about their own society and environment, as well as about the outside world (for example, in William John Wilson's nearly five-metre long panorama of the *Siege of Sebastopol*).

The book fulfils one of the important functions of a dictionary-browsing. I once looked up Tom Roberts' teacher, Thomas Clark, who brought English teaching methods to Melbourne, and found that he had not only painted *Diomedes capturing the horses of Rhesus, King of Thrace*, but also *Fern Gully with Aboriginal Family*. Without realising it, I had browsed through the fourteen other Clarks, including Thomas's son, Alfred, a scene painter and panorama painter, once a seaman, later a radical member of Melbourne's Legislative Assembly. Add to these his support for the Williamstown Football Club, his making of a fortune in land speculation, the horsewhipping given him by a reader of his articles critical of Queen Victoria, and one has a microcosmic glimpse into Melbourne of the 1870s and 1880s. A cross-reference led to William Pitt, scene painter for George Coppin, who had imported a prefabricated iron theatre for Melbourne; Pitt, an Englishman, worked with a multicultural bunch – a Scotsman, an Italian and a German – to paint a 7620 sqm panorama of Naples for the Cremorne Gardens. Pitt also painted Australian landscapes and transformation scenes such as a 'Conchological Cosmorama of Coral Coruscations'.

These conjunctions are picturesque, but even this small example illustrates the way the *Dictionary* not only gives an extraordinary sense of the vitality and variety of visual arts in the Australian colonies, but also challenges us to recognise that similar phenomena were and are present in all complex cultures.

The *Dictionary* also shows that meticulous scholarship can raise consciousness of major social issues. It provides precious evidence on Aboriginal artists working in European styles in the nineteenth century (her exhibition, *Artists and Cartoonists in Black and White: The Most Public Art* [S.H. Erwin Gallery, Sydney, 1999], acts as a counterpoint by showing the pitiless stereotyping of Aborigines in mass imagery). It also brought to light the existence of a huge number of women artists, many of whose works had previously been dismissed as mere feminine pastimes. Joan fulfilled her role as a major feminist scholar in *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book, 500 Works by 500 Australian Women Artists from Colonial Times to 1955* (Sydney, 1995).

The *Dictionary* and *Heritage* were collaborative ventures. This was, of course, necessary for projects of this scale, but it was also Joan's preferred way of working. Her major collaborators on the dictionaries were her postgraduate students, all of whom have published significant books and articles on Australian art in their own right. In addition,

there were 190 contributors to the *Dictionary* and 214 to *Heritage*; they included academics, curators, amateurs and descendants of the artists. Not long before she died, Joan had the satisfaction of knowing that the *Dictionary* would be digitised – and that the collaboration will continue.

She was also an inspiring teacher. Her lectures were vivid, witty, engagingly informal, but based on impeccable scholarship. Her students can today be found in museums, galleries, universities, art schools, in conservation and heritage bodies, in arts administration throughout Australia. It is they who will continue her legacy, adding to it, challenging it, changing it – as Joan herself would have done.

Joan Kerr died on 22 February 2004, having endured a dreadful illness with great courage. She must have been fortified by the extraordinary warmth of the tributes paid to her at the now legendary dinner held, some six months before her death, at the Gothic Revival Government House, Sydney – about which she had written so eloquently. Joan is survived by her husband, Dr Jim Kerr, their two children, Tamsin and James, and five grandchildren.

*Virginia Spate*