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A space for 'Asian-Australian' art: Gallery 4A at The Asia-Australia Arts Centre

Michelle Antoinette

Australian National University

Since the late 1990s, Gallery 4A at The Asia-Australia Arts Centre has offered a space for the creative development and exhibition of Asian-Australian artists. The careers of a number of artists have been nurtured not only through the physical space of the Gallery, but also through its broader cultural networks. A decade later, the future of Gallery 4A has been challenged and questioned. Are the reasons for this part of the ordinary course of any alternative art space dedicated to such a specific community of artists and/or a reflection of Australia's changing interests in Asian-Australian art and Asian-Australian matters more broadly? This paper considers the two major historical phases of direction in the Gallery's life thus far in relation to 'Asian-Australian' identity. It asks how has the meaning of 'Asian-Australian' changed in the life of Gallery 4A, especially against prevailing cultural currents in Australia? How has this 'independent', 'alternative' art space functioned within the mainstream of Australian multicultural policies, Australian art, and Australian communities of both Asian-Australian and other affiliations? In what ways have the policies of its various Directors tapped into Asian-Australian communities differently? How has this brought to bear on the current situation of Gallery 4A and its art community?

Keywords: Visual art; Australian art; Asian Australian; arts community

If thirty percent of the Sydney population classifies themselves as being somewhat related to Asia then it's important that we investigate it ...

Rod Murray, former Gallery 4A Manager¹

Introduction: historical foundations and other beginnings

Since its inception in the late 1990s, Gallery 4A has offered a space for the creative development and exhibition of Asian-Australian artists. These artists have been nurtured through the physical space of the Gallery as well as its broader cultural networks.

Gallery 4A was launched in Sydney's Chinatown in 1997 as part of the Asian Australian Artists Association (AAAA).² In 2000, the AAAA relocated within Chinatown to its present premises at the historic Hay Street Corporation Building, and also established the Asia-Australia Arts Centre (AAAC). Gallery 4A forms part of the AAAC and at this site uses two gallery spaces in a small double-storey complex. Since inception, the AAAC has promoted itself as 'the premiere forum for the latest ideas in contemporary arts practice relevant to both Asia and Australia', and as part of its mission has sought to 'promote vital cross-cultural dialogue within the Asia-Pacific region through its innovative and comprehensive program of exhibitions, conferences, public seminars,

artists talks and workshops' and by being 'dedicated to the promotion of dialogue between Australia and Asia through local and international' activities.³

In 2007, a decade after establishment, significant financial and ideological challenges emerged prompting questions regarding Gallery 4A's future. Whether these challenges are part of the ordinary course of any alternative art space dedicated to such a specific community of artists, and/or a reflection of Australia's changing interests in Asian-Australian art and Asian-Australian cultural matters more broadly, are focal considerations of this paper. These questions are explored by examining the history of the Gallery's life as marked by the two key periods of directorship. The first being Dr Melissa Chiu's inaugural directorship of the AAAC from 1997 to 2001, followed by the directorship of Dr Binghui Huangfu from 2003 to 2006.

While undoubtedly the personalities behind positions of directorship bear influence on the curatorial philosophies and directions of any gallery, these two phases in Gallery 4A's life are surely also about issues beyond two Directors' individual personalities and outlook. The work of these Directors must be considered in view of changing perceptions of Asia,

Figure 1. Soo-Joo Yoo, 'So this is fxxking beautiful, our future' (2008), mixed media installation exterior street view, August 2008 (Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery 4A).

Australia and 'Asian-Australian' identities. The Directors' individual philosophical and curatorial rationales for the gallery should also be understood against changing cultural policies and social contexts in Australia, shifting international relations between Australia and Asia, and different ways of viewing Asian and Australian art. Bearing these myriad influences in mind, this paper investigates how different meanings of 'Asian-Australian' have been adopted and how these have shifted in the cultural work of Gallery 4A. Further questions addressed are: how has the meaning of 'Asian-Australian' changed in the life of Gallery 4A? How has this 'independent' or 'alternative' art space functioned within the mainstream of Australian multicultural policies, Australian art, and Australian communities of both Asian-Australian and other cultural affiliations? In what ways have the policies of both periods of directorship tapped into Asian-Australian communities differently? How has this brought us to the current situation of Gallery 4A and its art community?

Since beginning research for this paper, further important developments have taken place surrounding Gallery 4A including the appointments of Daniel Droga as AAAA President, and Aaron Seeto as Gallery 4A's Director.⁴ Seeto was a former curator and regular artist at Gallery 4A (2001–04) and his directorship began in January 2008. These appointments signal promise and continuity for the Gallery, and provide an opportune moment to reflect on the Gallery's past practices and ideologies, and in doing so, to also contemplate its future. A consideration of the two major historical phases of the Gallery's existence – led first by Chiu and then Huangfu, and within two very different socio-political periods in Australia – is surely critical in such reflections.

Prefacing '4A': the larger landscape of Asian-Australian art in Australia

Gallery 4A's first phase, under Melissa Chiu, may be contextualised within a stronger period of general support from the Australian government for developing Asia-related cultural affairs and exchange, and cultivating Asian-Australian creativity as part of Australia's multi-cultures and international affairs with Asia – in short, this period is underlined by a strong pro-Asian outlook. The policies of then Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating (1991–96) sought to 'engage' Australia in Asia, repositioning Australia within the Asian geographic and cultural imaginary and furthering Australia's economic and cultural engagement with Asia.⁵ This also paved the way for increased interest in Asian and Asian-Australian art in Australia.

In regard to Australia's art industry, this earlier phase was marked by the emergence and development of Asian related art projects and/or organisations such as the Perth-based Artists' Regional Exchange, the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery, and the Melbourne-based cultural centre Asialink, a key centre for Australia-Asia cultural exchange and learning. Alongside these initiatives, several independent exhibitions with a focus on Asian-Australian art emerged such as *Out of Asia* (Heide Museum of Modern Art 1990), *Here Not There* (IMA, Brisbane, 1993), *Transcultural Painting* (1994), *Above and Beyond* (ACCA, IMA et al. 1996) and *Transit* (AGNSW 1998). This was the context for Melissa Chiu's beginnings as inaugural Gallery 4A Director.

Phase one

Melissa Chiu established Gallery 4A in the mid 1990s together with a small group of Asian-Australian artists including Lindy Lee, William Yang, Guan Wei, John Young, and

Ah Xian, artists with whom she also worked closely in preparing exhibitions of their work. In so far as the board members at the time were all practicing artists, 4A could then be reasonably described as an artist-run space. Under Chiu's directorship, these artists and others carved a space and identity for themselves as 'Asian-Australian' artists. Together, their efforts were pioneering and formative in developing our understandings of 'Asian-Australian' artists and their art as an integral part of the larger Australian artistic landscape and its cultural mainstreams.

For Chiu and the Asian-Australian artists she worked with, the notion of Asian-Australian complicated any straightforward sense of bi-polarism between Asia and Australia as the cultural position of Asian-Australian artists was seen to fit into both categories. Echoing Sneja Gunew's reflections on artists in a multicultural Australian context, Asian-Australian artists in Chiu's vision were seen to traverse cultural categories in their role as cultural mediators between Australia and Asia.⁶ By contrast, Australian art dealer Gene Sherman maps this type of cultural negotiation in terms of a teleology of becoming, describing one Asian-Australian artist's complete transformation from 'Asian' to 'Asian-Australian' to 'Australian': referring to the career of celebrated artist Guan Wei, Sherman comments, 'There was a moment when he was a Chinese artist living in Australia, then he became a Chinese-Australian artist, and now he's an Australian artist'.⁷

Relating the foundational aims of Gallery 4A and its view of Asian-Australian artists, Chiu explained in one interview that:

the gallery has the same brief as the Association in the sense that it aims to promote Asian-Australian artists. In addition to this, however, it was felt that we should not set up the conditions so that Gallery 4A and the artists who show here should be ghettoised and termed solely as "Asian-Australian" artists. This term immediately limits the possibility of them contributing to Australian culture.⁸

Evidently, part of Chiu's aims in steering Gallery 4A was to be careful that it not be seen as 'ghettoising' or limiting the parameters for understanding the meaning of 'Asian-Australian'. Under Chiu's direction there is a desire not to stress the marginality of Asian-Australian artists but rather, to promote their cultural difference as the very substance and fabric of Australian artistic culture. Appropriating the cultural studies work

Figure 2. Gallery 4A, 181-187 Hay Street, Sydney (Image courtesy Gallery 4A).

of Paul Gilroy and Ien Ang, Chiu argued that 'The work of Asian-Australian artists must be interpreted within an Australian idiom (where they're at) rather than necessarily an Asian culture (where they're from) ... The importance of an Asian diaspora and the individuality of Asian-Australian artists lie in their potential to disturb the perception of an homogenous national culture'.⁹ In this sense, Chiu is cautionary about recognising the significance of diaspora – she is attentive to Ang's warning to watch that the question of 'where you're from' doesn't threaten to overwhelm the reality of 'where you're at', whereby the idea of diaspora threatens to become a disempowering one. (These ideas are echoed in Nicholas Jose's reflections on 'Chinese-Australian' artists Ah Xian and Xiao Xian when he says, 'I don't think they'd be making this work if they hadn't spent time in Australia. I think it's given them a distance from China and a chance to reflect on what it means to be Chinese and how that interacts with the wider Western and international culture').¹⁰ Chiu also recognised that Asian-Australian artists themselves as a group are not homogenous, 'that they possess more differences in terms of their cultural background and biographical history rather than similarities [and] that 'Asian-Australian' is itself a term that some artists refuse to identify with and consider limiting because of its racial component'.¹¹ In a different context, artist Sangeeta Sandrasegar (who exhibited at 4A in the group exhibition *Tale Chaser* of 2003 as well as the *Asian Traffic* touring exhibition in 2005) has commented on this issue:

I don't know how equipped I am to deal with the 'Asian-Australian' label at present. I have spent last year and this away from Australia to try to deal with (or escape) some of the wider emotional implications of current governmental and foreign policy. At the moment, as the cultural and political mythicising of [what is] Australian/un-Australian grows more heated and more forcibly homogenous. I feel that the already compromised position of the hyphenated identity is as such growing proportionately.¹²

Like some other artists, Sandrasegar expresses concern and caution about the curatorial device of attaching cultural labels such as 'Asian-Australian' to describe artists and their art, particularly if we consider that Anglo-Australian artists are rarely categorised this way; rather the latter become somehow divorced from ethnicity and their art is more commonly discussed in terms of other, more formalist, aesthetic concerns (i.e. art movement, style, composition, etc). This is rarely the case for Asian-Australian artists whose art was often interpreted primarily in terms of ethnicity and only then – although not always – in terms of formalist aesthetics.¹³ Moreover, the term 'Asian' is generalising and often misses the diversity amongst Asian-Australian artists, as well as convergences across the art of those of Asian-Australian and other cultural affiliations.

Chiu's recognition of the limitations of a racial discourse is made clear in her shaping of 4A's cultural mission:

the gallery is going to have to work hard against the derisive label of simply being an "Asian gallery". Gallery 4A is not about Asian art. When we started the Gallery we were not concerned with setting up the discourse of a minority culture. [Rather] the exhibition programme is a showcase for Australian art, which also includes Asian-Australian artists.¹⁴

Indeed, in her vision to undo an homogenous Australian national culture and to present Asian-Australian artists as diverse, Chiu offered exhibitions with artists of both Asian and other cultural origins alongside each other. Moreover, she was concerned to represent the diversity of aesthetic approaches adopted by Asian-Australian artists and exhibited art beyond that which was overtly 'Asian' or 'ethnic' in its iconography and significations. For instance, 4A hosted exhibitions under Chiu's directorship that included photographs by Felicia Kan depicting Australian rural landscapes, and the early painting

installations of Lindy Lee which appropriate iconic images by European masters of painting by representing them in bold grid forms and washed in dramatic hues. In these and other Asian-Australian artists' work, deducing obvious 'Asian-Australian' elements can be practically impossible at times.

Phase two

Chiu's curatorial philosophy is remarkably different to that of the following 4A Director, Binghui Huangfu, who had no qualms about highlighting and promoting the Asianness in the term 'Asian-Australian' and the importance of Asian diasporas to Asian-Australian identities. Indeed, Huangfu argued that because of the very ignorance of Australian society to the possibilities offered by Asia, it was her mission to engage Australians in Asia and Asians in Australia. As arts reviewer Uros Cvorovic remarked of this period:

Initiating international touring exhibitions and cross-cultural initiatives, 4a was thus an important cultural player in the larger (and perhaps all too slow) process of Australia getting to know its [Asian] neighbours better. Good examples were the immensely popular *Still Away* and *Asian Traffic* ... In this respect, in its role as a cultural ambassador between Asia and Australia, 4a has been more than successful.¹⁵

Generally the second phase of directorship in Gallery 4A's life might be regarded as more outward looking, whereby the term 'Asian-Australian' comes to signify a different set of relationships. Previously what is defined as 'Asian' and 'Australian' in the term 'Asian-Australian' was negotiated from and situated within the Australian multi-cultural context. By contrast, in the second phase these hyphenated cultural categories become negotiated through a relationship of regional cultural exchange between a place called Asia and another called Australia, such that 'Asia comes to Australia' and 'Asian-Australian' is fed back to Asia. Huangfu highlights this, explaining:

[it was about] cultural exchange ... to bring Asia to Australia and also mix "Asian" with "Asian-Australian" ... the context of "Asian-Australian" [artists] expanded ... not just first generation ... we were trying to bring second, third, and fourth generations into the whole mix, you know Asian-Australian with Asian artists, together.¹⁶

To this end, major touring shows curated by Huangfu in this second phase such as *Open Letter* (for Asialink) and *Asian Traffic* sought to expand the regional and international scope of Gallery 4A's endeavours and certainly left their mark in Australia and Asia.

Notably, during Huangfu's period of directorship there was a significant governmental shift in Australia's foreign policy, economic activities and cultural relationship with Asia. Replacing the pro-Asian policies of Prime Minister Keating was a more culturally conservative, American-influenced program under the Coalition government, led by Prime Minister John Howard (1996–2007). Particularly after 2001, Australia's cultural climate shifted in dramatic ways underlined by more stringent policies regarding immigration control, internal security, military involvement, free-trade agreements and related to all of this, a re-evaluation of 'Australian' and 'Un-Australian' values. Certainly, any previously positive Australian attitudes to Asia and Asians were also upturned, assisted by the anti-Asian policies and sentiments of political figures such as 'One Nation' political party leader Pauline Hanson. Since the change of government in 2007 and the appointment of Prime Minister Rudd, the socio-political tide seems to be turning again to a more pro-Asian outlook in Australia's foreign policy and cultural attitudes. These swings in cultural attitudes to Asia continue to unsettle the definitions of, first, what it means to be 'Asian-

Figure 3. *Asian Traffic* opening-Foreground, performance by Mella Jaarsma; background, Renee So installation (Image courtesy of Gallery 4A).

Australian'; second, of the kind of art practices which takes on this identitarian framework; and finally, of the mission of an 'Asian-Australian' cultural institution such as Gallery 4A.

Huangfu was appointed Director of the AAAC in 2003, marking the second phase of Gallery 4A's history. Suggesting the new perspectives she would embrace, she remarked:

4A was established to promote Asian-Australian contemporary artists. Now after seven years of existence we are in a position of making changes to how we present this philosophy. The underlining fundamentals of Australian culture are changing, we now have in Australia substantial numbers of people who are Asian-born or have Asian heritage. What we aim to do is make all Australians aware of the contributions being made by this dynamic section of our population ... I believe 4A has an important role in providing some of the other faces of the Australian story ... Our program will expand upon research into Asian-Australian and Asian contemporary art.¹⁷

In her concern to present the 'other faces' of Australia, Huangfu alludes to Australia's multi-cultural social fabric, and particularly, to artists whose ethnic background is Asian. In doing so, she aims to cultivate a renewed respect for Asian peoples and their cultural heritage, engendering more positive attitudes in Australia toward those of Asian and/or Asian-Australian background; moreover, she has sought to change Asian impressions of Australia as a racist society. She explains in another interview that her impressions of Australia from Southeast Asia suggested strong anti-Asian attitudes and it was from this basis and these negative attitudes that Huangfu positioned her work with 4A.¹⁸ Moreover, within the context of Australian art collections and exhibitions that include Asian art, Huangfu regarded 4A's role as unique. She asserts:

We are the only organisation dedicated to continuously exploring contemporary Asian thinking, in the context of contemporary art in this region... Brisbane is well known for the *Asia-Pacific Triennial*, but ... this only runs once every three years ... While contributions to exploring contemporary Asian art by any institution are a good idea, no other institution

besides 4A has that as a daily brief. Australia has not had a particularly proud history of exploring anything that is not European in origin. What 4A is capable of doing is allowing Australians to understand the depth of Asian-Australian thinking. By combining local and significant international artists who demonstrate new ideas, maybe Australians will begin to see the reality that non-European thinking will be the major influence on human development in the twenty first century. 4A's mission is not to be influenced by a narrow self-conscious vision, but rather to celebrate the power of Asia as a major contributor to the future of Australia.¹⁹

Huangfu is especially attentive to Asian diaspora and its role in re-defining Australian nationalism. Again, to borrow from Ien Ang, she shows that the 'representation of Asians "here" is inextricably linked to that of Asia "there", [in making] porous the boundaries between "Asia" and "Australia" and unsettling the reassuring separateness of the nation-state as a distinct and self-enclosed cultural entity'.²⁰ In other words, she aims to present Asian diasporic identifications as critical interruptions of homogenous ideas of 'Australianness' (and vice-versa). Indeed, the exhibition *Open Letter* (curated by Huangfu for Asialink) focused on Southeast Asian diaspora artists living in and working from Australia. This might be compared with Chiu's stress on exhibiting artists of Asian or Asian-Australian heritage alongside artists of other Australian multi-cultural affiliations, to similar ends.

Across both phases of directorship a strong sense of Chineseness predominates in matters 'Asian-Australian'. Many of the artists exhibited and featured through the Gallery bear some kind of relationship to Chinese ethnicity. Both Chiu and Huangfu themselves bear Chinese ancestry and are scholars in Chinese contemporary art. Beyond these factors, the influential presence of Chinese-Australian artists must also be seen in light of the increase of artists of Chinese descent in Australia following the Tiananmen Square massacres of 1989 which prompted many artists to flee China for Australia, France and the USA. Interestingly, many were supported in their migration through cultural ties with Australian Embassies in China, and consequently, diplomatic contacts proved influential in introducing Chinese artists to the Australian context in this period.²¹ Furthermore, the larger population of Chinese migrants that have become part of Australian society and their longer history of migration to Australia are also significant.

When asked by one arts reviewer, 'What kind of curatorial philosophy [Huangfu] will bring to the comparatively small exhibition space of Gallery 4a?', Huangfu remarked, among other things, that she 'would like to continue the work that she did in Singapore to promote Asian art in the world context and focus [the Gallery's] study on issues of cross cultural dialogue and hybridization ... [and] to challenge the traditional use of the white box'.²² Indeed, perhaps the most significant exhibition projects mounted by Gallery 4A in the second phase of direction were *Open Letter* and *Asian Traffic*, two exhibitions which focused on issues of cross-cultural dialogue and challenged the confines of the white cube. Both exhibitions toured Australia and Asia marking a fundamental difference to the previous phase of direction in defining the parameters of 'Asian/Australian' exhibition audiences. Rather than exhibiting within Australia only and more specifically, relying exclusively on the Gallery 4A exhibition space, 4A was posited as a foundational space, a launch pad from which to engage with the rest of Australia and Asia. While Chiu did present a limited number of 4A exhibitions overseas, these did not tour and were independent, one-off shows at single venues, suggesting a much more domestic exhibiting focus in Australia. However, as curator, Chiu did include a handful of Asian artists (i.e. living outside Australia in their Asian countries of origin) in her Australia-based exhibitions, such as Malaysian artist, Wong Hoy Cheong, who featured alongside

Australian indigenous artist, Rea, in 4A's first exhibition at Hay Street, *Poisonous Targets* (2000).

Mori Art Museum Director, David Elliott, applauds Huangfu's work on *Asian Traffic* commenting that:

She is right to be critical of all our capacities for stereotyping and suggest[s] that ... "Asian Traffic", is a paradigm for avoiding this by promoting diversity as one of the greatest strengths of Asian culture. Rather than diluting any exotic Asian essentialism, diversity reaches out by increasing the possibilities for interaction of all kinds. I found her sense of mission and avowed intention of "continually challenging the status quo" an infectious shot of energy at the end of the year. But the fact that she managed to organise an international touring show on a cash budget of \$87,000 should be rapidly suppressed. Sydney should be able and prepared to pay a better price to get to know its Asian neighbours.²³

Elliott's reference to exhibition funding raises, in turn, the question of 4A's funding future and the sustainability of the Gallery. Just before the appointments of Gallery 4A Director Aaron Seeto and AAAA President Daniel Droga, Gallery 4A's fate was looking tenuous and vulnerable after a mostly stable and successful run of ten years. Huangfu resigned from the directorship in 2006, reporting disappointment with the lack of financial support from both Arts New South Wales (formerly the NSW Ministry for the Arts) and the Australia Council who, according to Huangfu did not seem to reward and thereby recognise the achievements of the Gallery in recent years.²⁴ What is most interesting in the discussion surrounding issues of funding is the potential influence of what is valued in mainstream Australian society in determining funding to specific culturally-defined institutions, or in other words, how funding may be linked to cultural attitudes of a particular society at a given time. As Cvorovic argues:

displaced culture describes the way in which cultural institutions such as Gallery 4a are directly or indirectly depoliticised. The impression gained from a number of accounts concerning the events around 4a is that the dimension of cultural politics is almost completely absent ... the capacity of these events to teach us something about the present state of culture in Australia was always articulated as little more than a question of funding ... However it is problematic if we ignore the potential of these unfortunate events to signal a more general (and more concerning) picture of social, political and economic relations in Australia.²⁵

That further State funding has recently been given to Gallery 4A by the NSW Government signals hope and promise, not only for the future of Gallery 4A but also for the worth of Asian-Australian culture to mainstream Australian society today. It will be interesting to observe what future support may be offered to the Gallery at a national level from the Australia Council. This latter contribution might also reveal more about the present play of cultural politics at the national level, especially under the new Rudd government's pro-Asia policies and outlook.

Future alternatives?

Another way to view the past and future life of Gallery 4A is to question whether its initial purpose and premise as a so called 'alternative' art space has been fulfilled. Has recent disruption in the life of the Gallery simply been a reflection of the usual ups-and-downs of most alternative non-profit art spaces?

Gallery 4A is indeed an independent art space, an institution which might be considered an alternative to mainstream public art institutions. In this regard it has been important to developing contemporary art practice which challenges the established order of Australian and Asian art representation in mainstream Australian collections and

exhibitions. In this sense, it has had a unique role in developing art practice and discourse within an Australian context. Alternative art spaces often make a vital and influential contribution to the life of contemporary art within their own localities, challenging and sometimes even surpassing that of State-run art institutions. Certainly many of 4A's pioneering artists have since found fame if not fortune in their careers as artists and now form part of important Australian gallery collections. William Yang, Ah Xian, and Guan Wei, for instance, are all represented in the Queensland Art Gallery collection. Moreover, recent exhibitions of 2008 signal the inclusion of Asian-affiliated artists as part of the Australian mainstream of art, including the *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: Handle with care* curated by Felicity Fenner, and the Casula Powerhouse exhibition *Australian* curated by Nicholas Tsoutas. Both exhibitions featured the art of several Australian artists of Asian descent and mark a significant shift in the representation of these artists in Australia. In this regard, Chiu's pioneering objectives to interrupt the homogenous Australian national culture represented in Australian art history may indeed have assisted in securing a place for these artists in Australia's elite galleries and cultural institutions. And from Chiu's more locally oriented art concerns to critically revision and resituate Asian-Australian art within the mainstream of Australian art practice, Huangfu's extension of Gallery 4A into a dynamic space for regional and international art networking saw it become an energetic and internationally recognised art space that engages in global exchanges and collaborations as well as more local projects, and potentially serves as a vital node in the burgeoning network of alternative art spaces that have surfaced throughout the Asian and Pacific regions and elsewhere.²⁶ Moreover, in Huangfu's time in particular, there was a commitment to nurturing the careers of young, emerging Asian-Australian artists who benefited from having a space to exhibit outside the often rigid parameters of mainstream art establishments.

Conclusion

Clearly the desire to create an alternative art space for the development and exhibition of Asian-Australian art has been of central importance to the aims and *raison d'être* of

Figure 4. Jumaadi ~~Home Sweet Home~~ Home is not Sweet Home, installation view (Image courtesy of Gallery 4A).

Gallery 4A, carving a welcome public space for Asian-Australian artists outside the mainstream (Anglo-Australian) agenda of Australia's major cultural institutions. Yet, at the same time, the extent of the continuing 'alternative' viability of 4A remains to be seen. As Asian art historian T.K. Sabapathy has remarked elsewhere, the central dilemma confronting alternative art groups and spaces is often that 'Even as they ostensibly distance themselves from the establishment, and produce socially engaged, provocative works and are critical of the establishment, even as they situate themselves at the periphery, they also crave for recognition by the center'.²⁷

Arguably the success of the burgeoning alternative art scene lies in the precarious business of being able to sustain collective motivation, financial support and ongoing critical (re-)vision against the prevailing trends of institutionalisation, commercialisation and governmental control. In the case of 4A, the Gallery has continued to shift and reposition itself in relation to the political and artistic currents of the day so as to remain strategic in its curatorial and cultural politics, habitually performing an almost impossible balance of institutionalising an identity of 'Asian-Australian' in-between-ness which is at the same time motivated by a critical ambivalence of purpose. 4A's critical art exhibiting practices have no doubt assisted in dismantling the hegemonic order of mainstream exhibitions of Australian, Asian-Australian and Asian art in Australia, making the story of Australian art history a more truly representative one, and one which reflects Australia's diverse cultural composition and varied aesthetic practices. The question is how will the Gallery continue on with this mission?

Notes

1. Michelle Antoinette, Interview with Binghui Huangfu and Rod Murray, Sydney, March 2007.
2. The Asian Australian Arts Association was established in 1996.
3. The Asia-Australia Arts Centre website, <http://www.4a.com.au/Vision.htm>
4. The new directorship was announced on 3rd October 2007. Seeto's position is funded by the NSW Government through Arts NSW with the support of Gallery 4A's Patrons. See The Asia-Australia Arts Centre, 'Gallery 4A - Asia Australia Arts Centre announces new Director', 3 October 2007, <http://www.chinatown.com.au/eng/news.asp?id=500>.
5. See Paul J. Keating, *Engagement: Australia Faces the Asia Pacific*, Macmillan, Sydney, 2000.
6. Sneja Gunew, 'Arts for a multicultural Australia: redefining the culture', in Sneja Gunew and Fazal Rizvi (eds), *Culture, Difference and the Arts*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1994, p. 8.
7. Michael Fitzgerald, 'Paint the West red', *Time*, online magazine, 18th April, 2005, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1051244,00.html>
8. Francis Maravillas, 'Shifting Cartographies of the South in Austral/Asian Art Exchanges', PhD thesis, University of Technology Sydney, NSW, 2006.
9. Melissa Chiu, 'Asian-Australian artists: cultural shifts in Australia', *Art & Australia*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1999, pp. 256–7.
10. Nicholas Jose quoted in Anne Maria Nicholson, 'Work of Chinese-born artist wins praise', *The 7:30 Report*, Australian Broadcasting Commission, <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2001/s448527.htm>
11. Chiu, 'Asian-Australian artists', p. 257.
12. Quoted in Rhana Devenport, 'Beauty, shadow-play and silhouettes', *Art and Australia*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2006, p. 247.
13. Michelle Antoinette, 'Images that Quiver: the In/Visible Geographies of "Southeast Asian" Contemporary Art', PhD thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, 2005.
14. Maravillas, 'Shifting Cartographies of the South', 2006.
15. Uros Cvorovic, 'What will the neighbours think?', *Broadsheet*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2006, p. 88.
16. Antoinette, Interview with Huangfu and Murray, 2007.
17. Quoted in Maravillas, 'Shifting Cartographies of the South', 2006.
18. Antoinette, Interview with Huangfu and Murray, 2007.
19. *Broadsheet*, 'Investigating Binghui Huangfu', vol. 32, no. 4, 2003, p. 22.

20. Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*, Routledge, London and New York, 2001, p. xx.
21. For instance, Nicholas Jose was Cultural Counsellor at the Australian Embassy, Beijing and Shanghai, from 1987–1990. Huangfu reported that his interest in the arts was significant. Antoinette, interview with Huangfu and Murray, 2007.
22. *Broadsheet*, 'Investigating Binghui Huangfu', p. 22.
23. David Elliott, 'Reviewing reviews: David Elliott looks back at the 2005 DiAAAlogues', *Asia Art Archive Perspectives* (DiAAAlogue) series, April 2006, http://www.aaa.org.hk/newsletter_detail.aspx?newsletter_id=241&newslettertype=archive
24. Gallery 4A expected an increase in funding during Huangfu's time but this was not to be, even in light of the success of shows such as *Asian Traffic*. Some have argued however that perhaps Huangfu's plans were too ambitious and too grand for the small artist-run space and its small budget. As Cvoró suggests, the exact facts concerning funding for Gallery 4A from 2003–06 seems a mystified affair. See Cvoró, 'What will the neighbours think?', pp. 88–9.
25. Cvoró, 'What will the neighbours think?', p. 89.
26. 'Potentially', because collaboration between Asia-based alternative galleries generally excludes Australia and by extension, Gallery 4A, as an 'Asian' participant.
27. T.K. Sabapathy 'Vision and idea: afterthoughts', in T.K. Sabapathy (ed), *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 1994, p. 113.