**Caroline Turner**
*Senior Research Fellow, Australian National University*

In 1993 distinguished Asian historian, Professor Wang Gungwu noted that: "The modern world has made people aware of similarities and differences among themselves to an extent never dreamed of in the past. Being thus more aware, people can never be the same again". (1)

Cultural exchanges are not always on terms of equality, but they are a vital part of working towards greater mutual understanding of the similarities and differences exposed by increasing global 'traffic' in our world.

Gallery 4A's *Asian Traffic* project was originally presented as an official parallel event of the *2004* *Sydney Biennale*. It was indeed the largest event in Australia this century to focus on contemporary Asian art. The title was an arresting and evocative metaphor for the dramatic flows of people, information and ideas within the Asia Pacific region today. The project brought together 15 artists from Asia with 15 Asian Australian artists, many of whom were also immigrants to Australia; and through the exhibition and associated conferences, roundtables, artists' talks and publications over a four month period *Asian Traffic* created an artistic catalyst that validates the aim of Gallery 4A to be the premier forum for the latest ideas in contemporary arts practice relevant to both Asia and Australia.

The exhibition also toured to several Asian cities including Singapore, Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, thereby continuing to evolve and to generate new ideas.

The turn of the century has witnessed an astonishing geopolitical shift in the balance of world power to Asia, economically, politically and even militarily, necessitating a consequent rethinking of global relationships at every level. There has also been an energetic rethinking in recent years of older cultural hegemonies in which Western art dominated art theory and international art forums. A new global art is emerging and the Asia Pacific region is one of its most dynamic hubs.

*Asian Traffic* constitutes a most significant contribution to the complex current debates and the speed of the changes taking place in our region and in the world. In this sense it is much more than an art exhibition: it provides a much needed platform for exploring many essential questions for our contemporary society and transforming ideas in the Asia Pacific region in the context of accelerating change. The current paucity of such platforms in Australia only underlines the importance of this event.

The historical disassociation of Australia from the rest of the region makes the issues raised in this exhibition of particular urgency in this country. Former Australian Ambassador to China Stephen Fitzgerald asked in 1997: "Is Australia an Asian country?" He did not answer the question directly, but argued emphatically that it was no less than a matter of survival for Australia to become what he called 'Asia-literate' in terms of cultural understanding. He noted that it was economic concerns which finally drove us to discover Asia, but 'the pre-eminence we give to economic relations with Asia now obscures the political and diminishes the human, yet it is the human which is so much part of what we stand for'. (2) Fitzgerald was writing in the context of posing ways forward for Australia in its relations with Asia, stressing the significance of humanism and the human.
 *Asian Traffic* focuses on the vital human dimension in terms of art, culture, people-to-people exchanges and cross-cultural understanding, vigorously exploring these issues through the artist talks and public programs. It aims at making people aware of the passionate engagement of so many artists in the region in social issues within their societies which can benefit those societies and change them for the better, as Director Binghui Huangfu argued so eloquently in her paper at the major international conference. It thus provides the most valuable service possible to mutual understanding. *Asian Traffic* also demonstrated most convincingly, through the work of the 30 artists represented, the strength and quality of contemporary art practice in the region.