DOMENICO DE CLARIO

CHRIS REID

Even before entering the gallery to see Domenico de Clario's installation *A Second Simplicity*, I notice the smell of cooking. Inside it turns out that the seductive aroma emanates from the upstairs room of an incomplete timber-framed, two-storey structure. Fabricated within the gallery for this exhibition, the structure sketches the outline of a building rather than forming a functional apartment block. There are kitchen facilities on the upstairs landing outside the only enclosed apartment. Here, de Clario and his parents warmly greet us. They have just finished lunch at a gingham cloth-covered table that seats six and empty wine glasses and used dishes are stacked in a corner. It is a homely, welcoming scene. The lunch guest has departed, and the delightful hosts are eager to meet viewers and talk.

Inside, the apartment is incomplete. It contains several forms constructed of unpainted particle-board, their shapes representing two large beds, a single bed, a smaller cot, a sideboard [on which sit vases of real flowers] and a wardrobe. De Clario explains that he and his parents have recreated the apartment in Trieste in which they, his grandparents and his sister lived until they immigrated to Australia in 1956. He was then nine years old. He says that by mapping the apartment's dimensions and the dimensions and locations of the original furniture, he is triggering spatial memories stored pre-consciously in the bodies of those who dwelt there. Recreating the apartment has restored his and his parents' memories of the apartment and of life in Trieste. He theorises that triggering memory by recreating a familiar space has redemptive power. Unresolved feelings attached to place can be mitigated and new understanding created. The idea that cultural memory has a spatial as well as a visual aspect departs from conventional wisdom. Most people remembering their childhood will look to visual clues such as photographs, letters, documents, clothing and the colours and motifs of soft furnishings. But there's another clue: projected onto an adjacent gallery wall are the sort of movies shown in the cinema across the road from the Trieste apartment. The upper half of the image is masked, replicating what was visible from the apartment window, and so we see Cary Grant's and Ingrid Bergman's mouths talking but not their eyes and hear muffled Italian-dubbed voice-overs.

Because it's nearest the door, I sit on the edge of the form representing de Clario's sister's cot and observe him and his parents greeting more viewers. These visitors' puzzled looks soon give way to friendliness and they begin disclosing their own stories, as I had done on arrival. Intimacy is triggered through the hospitality of the hosts, the homeliness of the space [despite its unfinished state] and the understanding that we are here to share memories in a life affirming way. We discuss issues such as migration, Australian society and the journey through life.

A bare yellow lightbulb hangs above the table. De Clario has also added coloured fluorescent tubes to light parts of the building—the entry, the privvy, the stove, the grandparents' bed, the attic and so on. He explains that these represent the energy points, the 'chakras' of the building. He has rented the original room in Trieste for the duration of this exhibition and it contains a blue fluorescent light, representing speech, completing the set and symbolically linking the original site to its simulacrum. Perched in the attic is de Clario's 1950s tricycle, found only recently in the Trieste attic, where

he reveals he was conceived. I imagine what it would be like for six people spanning three generations to live in one room.

A Second Simplicity is a composite of installation, performance, sound and [found] film that forms a history or a literature. De Clario is a well-known performance artist and here his parents are also involved. Gallery visitors could eavesdrop on the de Clarios' conversations with invited lunch guests via loudspeakers beneath the apartment. In engaging with them, whether as invited guests or as onlookers, we too become performers. The work is organic, occupants and visitors evolving through participation. The unclad timber frames and forms invite us to project our own thoughts and memories into the apartment. We become aware of how life is underpinned by essential binaries: emigrant/immigrant, from/to, past/future. Movement is distinct from destination; beginning and end are distinct from flow. To migrate is more than to travel, it is to reinvent oneself. The sum of all migration is cultural evolution. To understand one's past—oneself—one must stand back both spatially and temporally. De Clario's

grandparents might never have contemplated emigrating. His parents did so and with no money, just the promise of a better future, after a significant shift in world politics and in Australian immigration policy, made it desirable and practicable.

There is a degree of narcissism in autobiography. However, de Clario is not so self-absorbed. Here he is simultaneously the artwork and the subject of his own experiment. He is also creating a model for contemplating our culture and ourselves, a central concern in today's self-reflexive world. Our modern pre-occupation with history and culture betrays psychological insecurity. In this theatre I am aware I am an actor whose script unfolds in response to my environment.
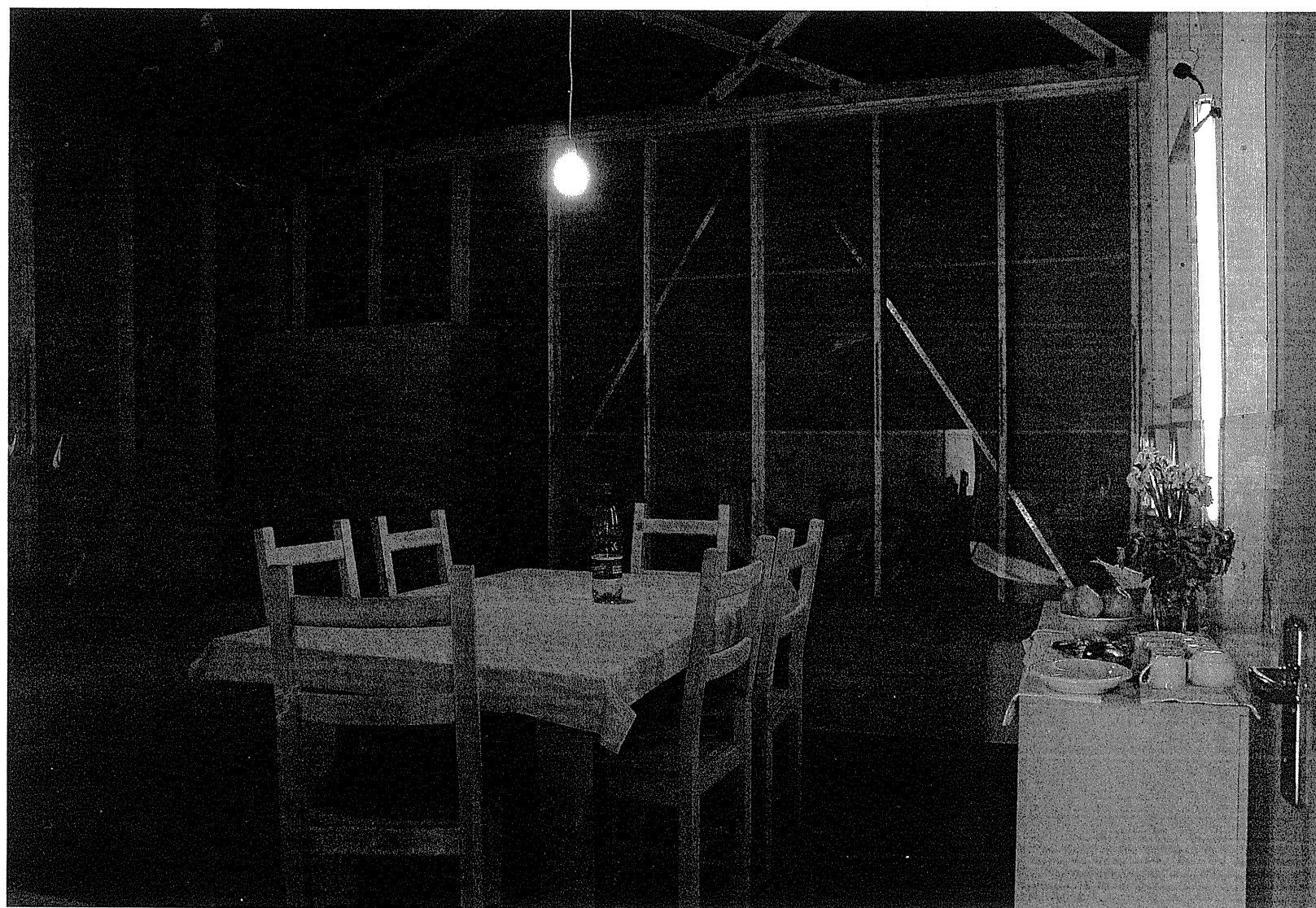
On 17 September [that is, towards the end of the seven week exhibition period], in the early evening, de Clario commenced a performance of a very different kind in the gallery. Sitting blindfolded at a piano beneath the apartment, he began improvising gentle music. In acknowledgement that he was conceived at the moment of a full moon, his twelve hour

performance was timed to conclude at the rising of a full moon. On the piano's music stand were personal talismans, including a Buddha statuette, a crucifix and a photo of a man. Nearby were food and water. The small audience variously watched intently, meditated on the music, or tiptoed through the installation. As he played, de Clario would have been aurally aware of us moving about his building as if examining his persona. In the resonant gallery, the music gained a haunting sonority. Attending throughout the night is intended to induce a deeply meditative state in performer and listener alike.

De Clario's multi-layered and complex exhibition is a significant achievement in several respects. Firstly, he explores memory and its role in establishing the self, emphasising here the role of spatial awareness in memory. Secondly, his installation offers an alternative to more conventional visual information: a fully realised replica of the original Trieste building would carry a distracting amount of cultural baggage, for example by problematising representational authenticity. The depiction of the building using alternative media, such as painting, photography, video or text, could not encompass the kinaesthetic or performative aspects of the work. Instead this skeletal structure triggers imagination and action. [Perhaps viewers should try navigating their homes blindfolded.] Thirdly, his inclusion of Hollywood cinema offers another memory trigger and also identifies a primary colonising medium of cultural modernity, establishing ironic intertextualities. Fourthly, this combination of performance and installation recalls the walk-through interactive museum exhibit, but here we encounter living inhabitants, as if we're tourists. Unlike most theatre or performance art, the events that unfold here are neither abstract, because the artists are in our midst, nor are they scripted. The performance evolves through viewer participation, producing new and unpredictable realities of the non-virtual kind.

Finally, de Clario addresses fundamental philosophical questions. In his artist's statement, released at the time of the musical performance, he discussed the idea of the original, inner self with reference to Kant and to Tibetan Buddhism, both of which postulate, in different ways, a transcendental self beyond the conscious mutable outer self. He framed his central concern thus; "Might the belief that a single fixed and lasting self abides through endless arisings of various aggregates of experience constitute a search for the miraculous?"[1] De Clario seeks transcendental awareness by recreating the site of his first awareness. Implicitly, the audience is invited to seek transcendence through self-awareness. Dualistic boundaries between inner and outer, and even between artist and viewer, are thus limned and become transparent, perhaps permeable. By juxtaposing contradictory

paradigms—the reality of secular modernity as distinct from the metaphysical—we see that both culture and the conscious outer self are contingent, ephemeral and subsidiary to the eternal. In a sense his work historicises culture, but in an unconventional, non-relativistic way that exposes objectivity as illusory. By disrupting normal physiological, psychological and intellectual awareness, his work circumscribes and contextualises the outer modern self of conscious memory. We thus radically reconsider such conceits as modernity, culture and self.

De Clario states that his first simplicity was to enter the original home; this is his second simplicity, a kind of *rapprochement* with an inner, original self. In opening his 'home' he is offering the possibility of a cathartic, transforming experience. This is immensely powerful work for those who engage with it at any level.

Note
[1] Domenico de Clario, artist's statement for *A Second Simplicity*

All photos: Domenico de Clario, *A Second Simplicity*, 2005
Photos courtesy the artist