

Lights are on and we're at home

THE AGE - WED 17/8/05

VISUAL ART REVIEW DOMENICO DE CLARIO: A SECOND SIMPLICITY

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art,
111 Sturt Street, Southbank, until
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Robert Nelson Reviewer

IN DEFIANCE of the illustrious space at ACCA, Domenico de Clario has built an apartment building, a life-size double-storey block with an irregular ground plan and domestic interiors. The lights are on and you can smell the cooking.

You don't normally touch art in galleries and you might initially experience some trepidation setting foot in the installation. But a doorway beckons. As you ascend a narrow staircase, the homely smell of soup intensifies.

The building is little more than a pine frame, with fine metal bracing on the diagonal to hold it rigid. Nevertheless, it seems to be built with more structural soundness than millions of shanty-dwellers enjoy throughout the world.

Once upstairs, you're greeted by the artist, who might engage you in conversation. When I went at the weekend, I apparently just missed the artist's parents, who had been cooking.

When you speak to the artist, you realise that he isn't simply in attendance — like a gallery guard — but a living supplement to the installation.

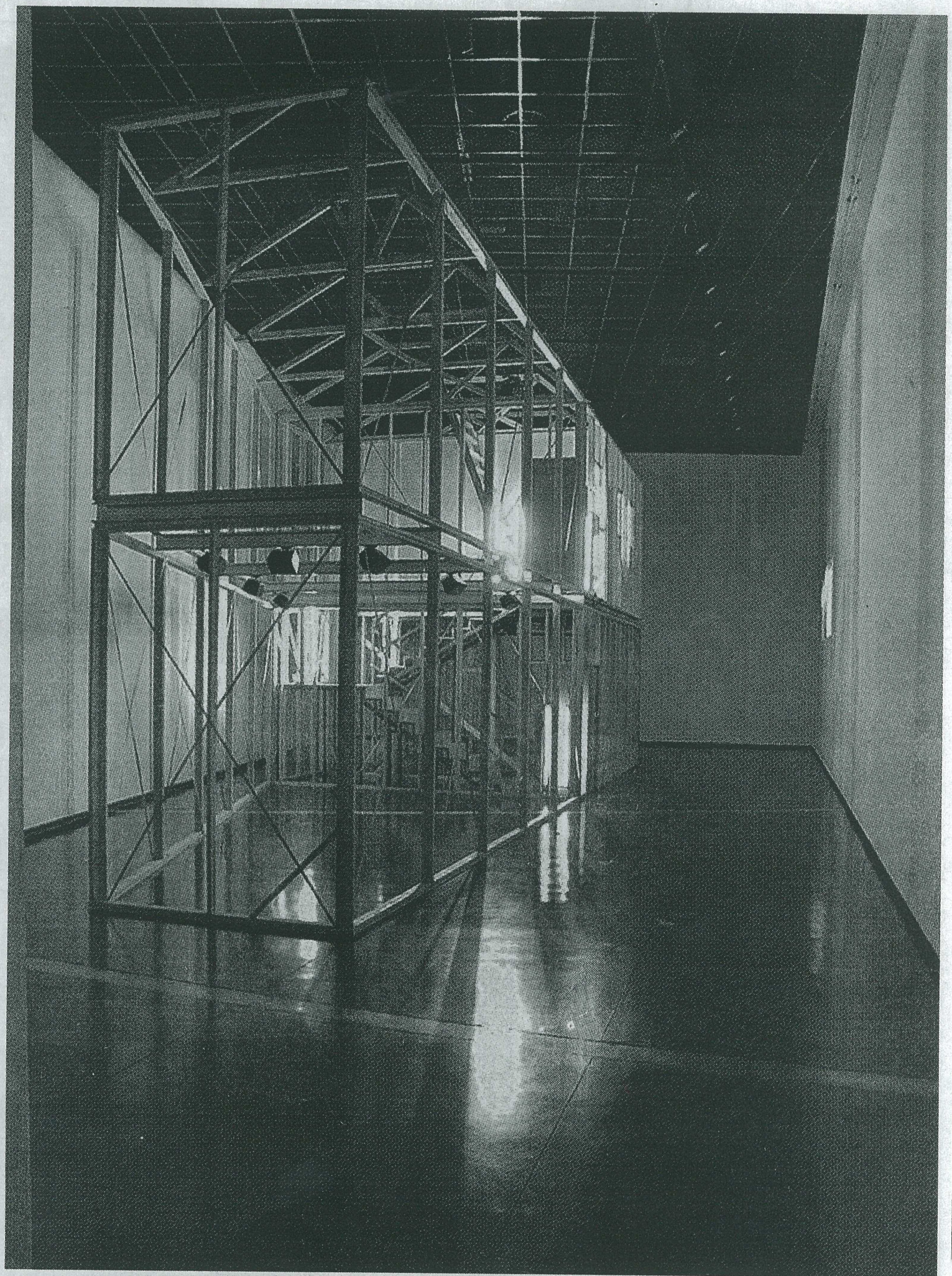
You and he (and, if you're lucky, his parents) become a performative element of the work.

Through talking to the artist, you learn that the makeshift structure replicates the flat in Trieste, Italy, in which de Clario and his sister lived with their parents and grandparents before migrating to Australia in 1956.

To call it a flat seems an overstatement. It's really just a room furnished with the abstracted forms of a cot (for baby sister), a double bed (for the grandparents and little Domenico) and a couch or divan (for the parents).

The room at ACCA also contains a couple of cabinets, some food, plus table and chairs. On the landing, which is shared with the neighbour's flat, vegetable soup cooks on a small range.

All in all, you don't have much room to move. Other visitors arrive and you find yourself sharing the role of host, explaining what the artist has said to you and helping him handle the congenial duties that go with Italian hospitality. It's relaxing up there. It probably wouldn't occur to you to strike up a conversation with someone looking at a picture in a gallery,



Domenico de Clario's *A Second Simplicity* installation at the ACCA.

but this is different. The space is to be shared.

The purpose of this charming installation is ambitious, as it represents layers of memory in a curious balance of presence and absence. The original flat in Trieste, no longer fit to live in, has been rented for the duration of the ACCA show, so that the prototype can commune, as it were, with the simulacrum.

You have to ask: which is the more real? Is it the original, which is corrupted, condemned and defunct? Or is it the representation, which is strangely reinvested, even with the life of the people who once lived in the real flat?

As you ponder this sweetly

dismal ontology, you can look out and see half a film projected on a wall, which is apparently all you could glimpse of a nearby cinema in the flat in Trieste.

And with all the spatial compromise, you become aware of the infinite scope for imagination, growth, love and contentment, just as much as the friction, embarrassment and pressure that you'd normally associate with cramped living quarters.

A steep stair, almost a ladder, leads to a tiny attic, not much taller than a shelf.

A mattress up there would have afforded the only privacy possible for the parents.

It's probably not the point of

the installation but I also feel that it talks to middle-class Melbourne — obsessed with renovations, electronics and multiple garages — of a life not long ago, in which global media did not determine personal values and marketing did not yet drive the escalating ambitions of competitive lifestyles.

There must have been many reasons for de Clario to want to return to the tight spaces of his childhood.

You can't go back but you can go beyond or behind, a great paradox of living memory that reveals something of what we are today.

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