
CHRISTOPHER KULENDRAN THOMAS

NEW GALERIE

Selected Press

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Imagined Communities

How the artists GCC, LAWRENCE LEK,
THE PROPELLER GROUP, LARISSA SANSOUR and
CHRISTOPHER KULENDRAN THOMAS
are visualizing a world in which borders no longer
define who we are by *Ellen Mara De Wachter*

IN HIS 1983 BOOK *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, the historian and political theorist Benedict Anderson wrote that 'nationality [...] nation-ness [and] nationalism are cultural artefacts'. According to Anderson – who was born in China, died in Indonesia in 2015, and held US, British and Irish passports – modern states are correlates of our 'imagined communities': by-products of the industrial revolution that require complex hierarchies and bureaucracies to manage new social and economic needs. Nations are not the only imagined communities: consider other transnational systems we collectively believe in, such as global currency markets, the international value of art or the ubiquitous reach of corporations whose products are available in the most isolated places. These operate across various media, markets and ideologies, promising security, convenience and wealth. As the world achieves peak globalization, these new systems increasingly expose the contingency of countries and borders. At the same time, extreme forms of nationhood are emerging across the world, with the US President proclaiming 'America First', far-right parties enjoying an increasing share of the vote in France, Germany and the Netherlands, and the popularization of isolationist policies and demands for absolute sovereignty becoming widespread. How are artists reflecting on this modern-day tussle between national and global systems? And how are they imagining a world beyond borders, which will require new forms of citizenship?

For over two decades, Larissa Sansour – who was born in Palestine and lives in London – has addressed these questions in her videos and photographs. For *Space Exodus* (2009), for instance, she re-created a moon landing with the Palestinian flag, while in *Nation Estate* (2012), she imagines a solution to the issue of Palestinian statehood in a gigantic skyscraper: a vertical city with floors devoted to Jerusalem, Bethlehem's Manger Square and the Mediterranean coast. Sansour's latest work, *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2016), is a 28-minute science-fiction video telling the story of a 'narrative resistance leader' whose outlawed group buries porcelain dishes in disputed land for future archaeologists to unearth. Here, warfare is archaeological: by planting 'facts in the ground',

a future is orchestrated in which crockery will disrupt dominant historical narratives and constitute physical evidence of a right to the land. Archaeology becomes, in the resistance leader's words 'an epistemology, a tool for shaping national imagination'.

For a related performance, *Archaeology in Absentia* (2016), Sansour worked with art institutions across Israel and Palestine to bury 15 batches of porcelain plates and bowls, hand-painted with the Palestinian *keffiyeh* pattern and made by the mother of her partner and collaborator, Søren Lind. The co-ordinates of these burials are engraved onto metal discs contained in replicas of small Soviet atomic bombs from the Cold War era, which she exhibits as sculptures. Porcelain doesn't have a particular significance in Palestine, which is one of the reasons the rebel leader in Sansour's video chooses it as the 'trademark' of her people. As Lind explained to me: 'Her logic is that, in order for archaeologists and historians to be prompted to revise their current understanding of the region (and for such a revision to eventually cause political change), the material introduced needs to conflict with expectations and traditions. Only if the plates constitute a foreign element ill there be grounds for a revision.'

The idea that nations, like branded products, could have trademarks is central to *Viet Nam The World Tour* (2010–ongoing), by The Propeller Group, a Vietnamese collective established in 2006 by Matt Lucero, Tuan Andrew Nguyen

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and Phunam. The project uses marketing and advertising strategies to generate videos, murals, workshops and performances in several countries. Part of the tour is *Birds of No Nation* (2012), a portable painted mural about conflict-related migration, which has so far been shown in Brisbane, Kabul, Los Angeles and Saigon. Painted by the graffiti artists El Mac (from Los Angeles) and Shamsia Hassani (from Kabul), it asks how people who no longer have a nation might be branded. For The Propeller Group, the issue of nationality and the question of whether there is even such a thing as 'Vietnameseness' are academic. The sentiment is neatly expressed in the project's mission statement: 'We are not Vietnamese [...] nor are we American, nor French, nor Brazilian, nor Iranian, nor Australian. We don't subscribe to those traditional and problematic notions of nation. Nations give way to conflict.'

Since it was established in 2013, the art collective GCC – whose name echoes the acronym of the Gulf Cooperation Council, an intergovernmental political and economic union of Arab Gulf states – has explored the branding practices used during the region's 30-year history of developing new national and regional identities. In that time, the region has undergone a rapid transformation from a traditional culture to a post-oil economy, with staggering developments in the production of, and markets for, architecture, art and culture, as well as the propagation by the GCC of the notion of a unified Arabian Gulf people. Although the art collective is associated with the region, its eight members are distributed across the globe in Amsterdam, Berlin, Dakar, Kuwait City, London and New York. GCC's latest sculpture, *Local Police Find Fruit with Spells* (2017), made for this year's Whitney Biennial, explores magical traditions suppressed by the official cultural narrative, through the story of a purportedly cursed fruit found floating in the sea by local police. GCC's tribute to the incident includes a large melon inscribed with talismanic writing and a human effigy, which is placed on top of scaffolding erected in the middle of a structure reminiscent of a roundabout: a device introduced to the area during the colonial era, but which has been used by the military over the past few years to suppress and control protests. This esoteric take on Gulf culture is a departure from GCC's earlier work, which appropriated the gestures, artefacts and rituals of official state diplomacy. But the group hasn't abandoned its interest in the grandstanding performances of leaders: they recently refashioned *My Vision* (2015), a series of oil paintings depicting the members of GCC in Sheikh drag, as a video for the 'Oculus' screen in Brooklyn's Barclays Center, a 900 m², 360-degree LED marquee. The prosperity of the Gulf, largely due to an oil market bolstered by Western powers, has been a key factor in the region's fervent nation-building over the past three decades. As the environmental crisis and global developments in technology compel us to move beyond fossil fuels, however, the ongoing contest between international and local needs will reach a new stage. What is next for nations whose value systems are inextricably linked to assets that are responsible for environmental disasters and are likely to run out?

The onset of global warming and the hastening of extinction put the play of nationalisms into perspective. But are these threats enough to wipe out nation-centred thinking altogether? London-based artist Lawrence Lek's new video, *Geomancer* (2017), is set in the sky above Singapore in the year 2065, when oceans have flooded continents and Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems are ultra-sophisticated. The *Geomancer* of the title is a retired satellite system that was capable of global

geomancy or reading 'feng shui on Earth' – in other words, of divining the physical and energetic relationships that enmesh borders and transnational systems. The video discusses the speculative doctrine of 'Sinofuturism', which Lek introduced in his 2016 video *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)*, as an anti-art movement started by Chinese AIs gone viral. The movement espouses the values and practices of present-day Chinese industry, which privileges copying over originality and quantity over quality, and operates with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of labour as well as a belief in the possibility of progress independent of human endeavour. Yet, although *Geomancer* is set in a future in which borders are submerged under the ocean and the crisis of human obsolescence is a thing of the past, the hermeneutics of culture, production and power are still wedded to concepts of nationality – in this case, a particular understanding of 'Chineseness'.

The notion of 'liquid modernity' developed by the eminent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who died in January this year, may help us imagine a future beyond fixed nation states. Bauman posited that in late modernity – in a world already transformed by the digital revolution and governed by the global movement of capital – identity comes to be defined by the way we flow through places, states and categories. This liquid condition is characterized by nomadism across living conditions and professions, as well as political, sexual and ideological identifications. Taking up Bauman's idea of liquidity, the artist Christopher Kulendran Thomas has, for the past few years, been working on a project that brings together the story of Eelam, the homeland of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka, with the business practices of Amazon, in order to imagine a future society in which a liquid form of citizenship could be connected to real estate.

Thomas – whose parents fled the civil war in Sri Lanka in the 1980s – begins his video, *New Eelam* (2016), with the story of the Tamil Tigers: a militant group that, in 1976, formed a secessionist state in northern Sri Lanka, which led to three decades of civil war, culminating in the massacre of the Tamil Tigers in 2009. The video then segues into the story of Amazon, a global company that is generally viewed as an exemplar of efficiency. In a voice-over, Thomas explains how, instead of paying dividends to its shareholders, the company re-invests profits into its infrastructure, offering investors the long-term value of 'a non-profit-making global service'. Amazon is also at the forefront of automation: the replacement of human labour with machines. Together with the advent of streaming technology, which makes products and services instantly available to subscribers, Amazon represents what Thomas calls 'an accelerated mutation in the nature of capitalism', which, by offering both corporate security and consumer flexibility, reconciles the opposing camps of capitalism and communism. The video concludes with a bona fide sales pitch, in which beautiful multi-ethnic people hang out in an apartment flooded with light, drinking fresh juice and passing around computers showing New Eelam: an online global service for collectively owned homes.

Thomas's project is compelling as a way to imagine a future in which nations relax their hold on identity and movement. However, I find his laudatory version of Amazon problematic. The company may offer an interesting model for an idealized society sometime in the future, but right now it has a terrible reputation: it avoids paying tax on a grand scale and treats its workers like machines. It is a global distribution system designed to incite consumerist desire and generate revenue, not an altruistic organization.

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The idea for the New Eelam service came to Thomas during a time spent living and working between cities in Asia and Europe, when he began to notice a growing tendency for people to work at home, supplanting the office as the primary site of production. Thomas explained to me that he wanted to find a way for 'globally dispersed citizens [to] take collective ownership of this means of production'. Once New Eelam is up and running, subscribers will pay a flat rate to live in one of the company's properties, as well as becoming co-owners of a growing portfolio of properties. Over time, if successful, Thomas imagines that the service could grow into a 'cloud nation' with its own form of citizenship – a subject he is set to explore in a forthcoming video, *New Eelam 2*.

Across the globe, people are increasingly participating in fluid transnational networks to do business and to communicate. One might expect the political and governmental structures that represent them to reflect that paradigm shift. Yet, in many countries, just the opposite is happening: right-wing governments promise to restore past greatness, intent on securing their stay in power. They build walls, break trade partnerships and block free movement, preferring to satisfy majority opinion holders who don't share progressive ideas around a more fluid conception of global systems. Consequently, these governments are promoting a narrow ideal of sovereignty that grew out of the conditions of the industrial revolution more than 200 years ago. As artists grapple with this topic, the next step isn't yet clear. We can only hope that, in time, outdated forms of nationhood will disappear and a new kind of community will emerge – one that transcends the existing conventions of borders in order to meet the current and future needs of people and the planet ●

ABOVE
Christopher Kulendran
Thomas in collaboration
with Annika Kuhlmann,
New Eelam, 2017,
exhibition view at
Hamburger Bahnhof –
Museum für Gegenwart
– Berlin. Courtesy:
the artist and
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im Hamburger
Bahnhof, SMB, Berlin;
photograph:
Jan Windszus

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By Aude Launay

D'aucuns seront sans doute passés à côté, auront traversé sans même y prêter attention le petit salon qui tenait lieu d'installation de Christopher Kulendran Thomas à la dernière biennale de Berlin. Un canapé confortable, une moquette épaisse, des tableaux et bibelots sans trop d'ostentation, un chic international relativement standardisé. Un écran plat diffusait ce qui ressemblait à un documentaire, alternant vues d'archives scientifiques, d'actualité, rendus 3D et images modifiées, mettant en perspective avec l'histoire de l'humanité et de la sédentarité la constitution de l'état d'Eelam Tamoul au Sri Lanka puis la création du géant du commerce Amazon, établissant des liens extrêmement discutables entre marxisme et capitalisme mondialisé, voire suggérant l'abolition de leur antagonisme. La polémique se dissolvait alors dans un final qui avait tout du spot publicitaire pour une nouvelle proposition immobilière, un nouveau style de vie, une nouvelle société, bref, une nouvelle vie.

Dépasant la condition de consommation immédiate d'œuvres d'art contemporain tel qu'il est généralement de mise dans les biennales que l'on traverse bien souvent au pas de course pour s'assurer des dernières tendances, Christopher Kulendran Thomas utilise l'espace de l'art contemporain comme un espace de test pour un projet qui prend place dans une réalité économique plus vaste que celle du simple marché de l'art, qu'il inclut au passage comme l'une des matières premières de son travail. Nous discutons avec lui de sa conception de l'art comme champ d'efficience.

J'aimerais engager cette discussion en revenant sur les fondements de votre travail, c'est-à-dire votre projet *When Platitudes Become Form* (en cours depuis 2013) pour lequel vous achetez des œuvres à des galeries d'art contemporain sri-lankaises et les « reconfigurez pour le marché de l'art contemporain international (occidental) ». Vous avez déjà beaucoup parlé de ce projet ces dernières années mais j'aimerais vous faire préciser la manière dont vous opérez la translation entre les deux sens du terme « contemporain », et particulièrement visuellement. Votre manière de « re-configurer » ces œuvres pour le regard occidental et le marché occidental est-elle purement empirique, c'est-à-dire basée sur l'esthétique des œuvres qui se vendent bien ?

Eh bien, c'est une question de contexte historique : les artistes dont j'acquiers les œuvres – que j'utilise ensuite comme matériaux, comme composants pour les miennes – connaissent un véritable succès sur le nouveau marché de l'art contemporain régional qui s'est développé au Sri Lanka ces cinq ou six dernières années à la suite des crimes de guerre brutaux qui ont mis fin à la guerre civile en 2009. La libéralisation économique qui a suivi ce que beaucoup nomment là-bas un génocide a amené avec elle la première génération de galeries commerciales de style occidental créant un nouveau marché régional pour ce qui s'appelle désormais là-bas art contemporain.

Par exemple, pour cette pièce que j'ai réalisée il y a quelques années, j'ai acheté cette peinture d'un jeune artiste nommé Pramith Geekiyanage qui venait juste de commencer à exposer avec la nouvelle galerie la plus influente de Colombo. J'y ai simplement ajouté ces stores verticaux. La translation est toujours basée sur les mêmes récurrents qui circulent parmi mes pairs dans le contexte dans lequel je travaille. Mais les œuvres que j'achète au Sri Lanka sont elles aussi le produit d'une circulation, un peu plus lente, de mêmes – des canons de l'histoire de l'art occidental au contemporain sri-lankais.

Le terme « contemporain » a été utilisé tout au long d'au moins la moitié du siècle dernier pour référer à l'art de ce temps. Mais je pense qu'il signifie désormais autre chose, je pense que l'art contemporain est devenu un genre – un genre historiquement spécifique qui est apparu à un moment de libéralisation économique mondiale. Et ce que « contemporain » signifie aujourd'hui au Sri Lanka est peut-être la même chose que partout ailleurs : un genre d'art dérivé des canons occidentaux. Ainsi, la translation que j'opère dans ces œuvres se situe entre ce qui est considéré comme contemporain dans un marché, dans un contexte, et ce qui est considéré comme contemporain dans un autre – ce qui, bien évidemment, reflète aussi la différence qu'il y a entre là d'où viennent mes parents et là où je suis maintenant.

Ajouter une valeur financière à un objet en le camouflant est une manière de subvertir non seulement les paramètres d'un marché de l'art mondialisé mais aussi le principe même des arts visuels, traditionnellement basés sur une relation individuelle entre l'objet et le regardeur. Ce faisant, vous vous posez en tierce partie venant troubler des siècles de certitude esthétique. Cela signifie-t-il, selon vous, que cette idée de l'art comme une relation esthétique personnelle à un objet est absolument contingente ?

C'est en effet une très bonne manière de le dire. Il me semble que ce paradigme historique – selon lequel l'interprétation du regardeur complète l'œuvre – se dissout dans une époque de connectivité en réseau croissante, une époque dans laquelle il semble de plus en plus approprié de comprendre l'art comme complété par la circulation plutôt que par le spectateur. Au travers de mon travail, j'en suis venu à envisager le rapport au spectateur simplement comme une partie du processus plutôt que comme la fin de l'œuvre. Mais c'est la trajectoire de ce processus qui, finalement, m'intéresse le plus : plus mon travail est suivi, plus j'achète des œuvres de ces jeunes artistes sri-lankais les plus prometteurs. Par exemple, pour certaines des pièces que j'ai commencé à produire en 2013, des dessins de Prageeth Manohansa ont été acquis auprès de la galerie Saskia Fernando à Colombo puis « re-montés », si l'on peut dire, sur des t-shirts Nike tendus sur châssis (des t-shirts pour la plupart fabriqués au Sri Lanka, d'ailleurs). Il y a un véritable

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from the ongoing work

NEW EELAM, 2016

Acrylic on canvas, concrete shelf, LEDs, plant and 'New Eelam' Im (HD, 14:06 min); featuring ATLAS bar stool by NEW TENDENCY

Image: Laura Fiorio

ethnique (économique) « soft », les bénéfiques de la prospérité récente (comme l'art contemporain) devenant une sorte de justification rétrospective de la violence sur laquelle cette prospérité est fondée. D'une certaine manière, la conception humaniste libérale des droits universels peut être vue comme faisant partie intégrante du problème. Et je pense que c'est la version esthétique de ce problème juridique – ce que Boris Groys nomme « l'égalité des droits esthétiques » – que la trajectoire de ce travail affronte. C'est la curatrice Victoria Ivanova qui m'a fait découvrir le concept de « droits posthumains ». Et réfléchir à ce qu'ils pourraient être est une bonne manière d'appréhender l'éthique de ce travail, et les problèmes qui sont à son origine. C'est une manière d'avoir le problème plutôt que de le désigner depuis le confort d'une certaine distance critique. Je pense que c'est la trajectoire de l'œuvre telle qu'elle se déploie qui fait la véritable « œuvre » de l'œuvre. Mais c'est une trajectoire instable. Par exemple, les prix des œuvres de Prageeth Manohansa ont augmenté très vite et si sa carrière explose internationalement, alors il serait possible qu'à un moment les composants de mon œuvre valent plus cher que mon œuvre elle-même. Elle pourrait alors s'autodétruire économiquement. Mais il est difficile de prévoir les conséquences que la trajectoire de ce travail pourraient avoir sur le marché émergent de l'art contemporain sri-lankais. La disproportion de circulation entre mon travail et les œuvres que j'y utilise pour matériaux est devenue extrêmement importante. L'une des galeries les plus influentes du Sri Lanka a engagé une collaboration avec un nouvel artiste qui est présenté comme l'artiste « post-Internet » du Sri Lanka : acquérir ses œuvres m'a donc amené à modifier l'esthétique de mon travail pour produire ces peintures abstraites sur lesquelles intégrer ses collages numériques, que j'enveloppe ensuite d'un filet de pêche.

Mais l'on pourrait aussi voir ce type de peinture que vous produisez comme étant parfaitement dans la lignée de ce retour à des manières plus expressives de faire de l'art qui est désormais très populaire.

Tout à fait, et je pense que c'est pour cela que je peux le faire. Mais peut-être que ce qu'« expressive » signifie, est, en soi, ce qui est intéressant. Peut-être que ce qui est exprimé n'est pas tant un « soi » qu'une circulation de mêmes par laquelle se co-constitue ce qui ressemble au fait d'être humain et de s'exprimer, comme une sorte d'ADN synthétique. Mon travail opère, selon moi, une sorte de translation machinique au travers de ces flots de données bio-culturelles. Pour approfondir cette réflexion, et anticiper un peu sur notre temps, se pourrait-il que ce que vous nommez cette « connectivité en réseau croissante » annonce la fin de la subjectivité individuelle autonome telle que nous la connaissons ?

Il me semble que l'un des mythes les plus répandus de notre temps est l'idée selon laquelle les humains sont catégoriquement distincts de tout ce qui n'est pas humain. Mais les

engouement pour cet artiste au Sri Lanka mais son travail connaît aussi une circulation internationale en tant que matériau de mon propre travail et se retrouve présent dans des collections et des musées dans lesquels il n'apparaît pas en son nom propre.

Mais plutôt que la conception que l'art contemporain donne habituellement de lui-même comme plateforme d'égalité (au moins en théorie), plus ce travail se déploie, plus il semble intensifier l'asymétrie structurelle entre ses composants. Et tout comme l'asymétrie qu'il y a entre mes origines familiales et le contexte dans lequel j'évolue actuellement, cette asymétrie structurelle se constitue via des écologies complexes de mondialisation – de violence militaire et économique. Au Sri Lanka, la conception des droits de l'homme selon les Nations Unies a fourni une couverture à la communauté internationale pour lui éviter d'intervenir et de prévenir ce qui est désormais de plus en plus unanimement reconnu comme un génocide. Et cette violence se perpétue via un nettoyage

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conséquences écologiques désastreuses de cette illusion de supériorité sont désormais plus largement reconnues, ouvrant la voie à une compréhension de la réalité comme ne tournant pas nécessairement autour de nous.

Les plateformes numériques omniprésentes aujourd'hui peuvent être envisagées comme des points d'intersection entre la matérialité humaine et la matérialité non humaine. De mon point de vue, il est peu probable que les générations à venir comprennent les limites de leurs corps de la même manière que nous le faisons avant notre immersion totale dans la technologie en réseau. Nous sommes plus le médium que le médium est pour nous. Et je pense que l'art doit évoluer dans le sens de cette nouvelle compréhension.

Bien évidemment, l'art a toujours été produit par (et a contribué à) produire la réalité qui lui est contiguë. Mais les opérations structurelles de l'art — notamment, au premier plan de la mondialisation, le fait de prototyper le travail dématérialisé, contribuant ainsi au processus de gentrification qui reformate les villes de par le monde — par lesquelles l'art est effectivement efficace, sont généralement désavouées en faveur de discussions au sujet des conséquences de l'art principalement en termes d'interprétation du regardeur, comme si la réalité dépendait de l'interprétation que l'on en fait.

Et il est trop tentant, à lire que vous considérez « le rapport au spectateur simplement comme une partie du processus plutôt que comme la fin de l'œuvre », de vous demander quelle serait cette fin de l'œuvre ?

Ces dernières années, au Sri Lanka, s'est développé en accéléré ce microcosme au cœur duquel ces opérations structurelles se déroulent de façon frappante comme le produit d'une violence brutale et de la libéralisation économique.

J'ai alors commencé ce travail dans le but de surmonter ma distance d'avec là d'où vient ma famille, et de faire face à ce qui se passait au Sri Lanka à ce moment-là. Mais cela m'a forcé à affronter des questions plus simples — comme l'intégration, ou plutôt comme le désir de s'intégrer tout en ne croyant pas en ce dans quoi l'on cherche à s'intégrer. Peut-être est-ce là une histoire classique d'immigrant de deuxième génération.

Je pense que, pour moi, la chose la plus importante dans le fait de faire de l'art est d'être capable d'extérioriser ces conflits ou ces contradictions intérieurs et, en les surmontant, d'ainsi parvenir à une compréhension plus subtile de ce qui est en jeu. C'est l'explication la plus claire que je puisse donner au fait de faire de l'art. À un niveau moins personnel, je pense que mon travail est pour moi une manière de parler de l'efficacité de l'art dans le monde. Et c'est ce qui m'a mené à une nouvelle phase de ce projet, avec l'idée de produire quelque chose de constructif à partir des opérations structurelles de l'art.

Oui, New Eelam, votre projet à long terme dont le branding a été discrètement introduit lors de l'exposition « Co-workers » au musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris (à l'automne 2015) puis lancé plus officiellement lors des biennales de Berlin et de Gwangju (en cours), et dont *When Platitudes Become Form* fait désormais partie intégrante. New Eelam se présente comme « une proposition alternative dédiée au développement, de manière non conflictuelle, d'un nouveau système économique à partir du système existant, par le luxe du Communalisme plutôt que de la propriété privée » au moyen d'un système d'habitat en streaming qui permettra ce que le film publicitaire présente comme « une forme de citoyenneté plus liquide et transfrontalière ». Pouvez-vous préciser ce qu'un tel projet commercial a à voir avec le monde de l'art ?

Pour moi, l'art a toujours été un bon prototypeur de nouveaux modes de vie. Le fait de vivre dans des lofts en est un bon exemple : apparu dans le monde de l'art il y a plus d'un demi siècle, il est maintenant devenu une aspiration du grand public en matière d'habitat.

Plus les tâches sont automatisées, plus ce que font les artistes, à mon avis, devient une manière de prototyper le futur du travail dématérialisé pour une économie post-travail, tandis que l'habitat (plutôt que l'usine ou le bureau) devient un site de production important. L'entreprise que je lance avec mon équipe développe un système de logement à la carte à l'échelle mondiale sur abonnement pour faire de ce moyen de production une propriété collective. Un forfait mensuel offrira à ces citoyens du monde un accès permanent à des appartements de standing un peu partout dans le monde pour qu'ils puissent évoluer librement entre les villes du réseau. Et chaque souscripteur de New Eelam accumulera des parts dans le portefeuille renouvelable des propriétés. Au fil du temps, la valeur croissante des parts de chaque citoyen pourrait abaisser de plus en plus le coût de leur abonnement.

C'est une alternative à l'échec de la stratégie politique si désastreusement défaite au Sri Lanka. Au lieu d'une révolution militaire qui établirait un état autonome, nous ambitionnons de faire de l'habitat du futur l'élément d'un réseau plutôt que d'une nation territorialement délimitée, et ce en développant un nouveau modèle économique et non en s'opposant à l'existant.

Nous commençons par présenter cette entreprise dans le champ de l'art et, en collaboration avec la curatrice Annika Kuhlman, nous explorons les manières d'utiliser l'espace artistique pour une communication commerciale et politique plus complexe et plus intense que nous pourrions le faire dans tout autre contexte. En préparant ces expositions, nous nous sommes demandé : comment une marque peut-elle communiquer à la manière d'un artiste ?

Lorsque j'ai rencontré Annika Kuhlman, elle m'a dit que « New Eelam n'est pas quelque chose qui ressemble à une start-up, c'est une start-up. New Eelam est ce qu'il présente,

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il ne représente pas. » Pour la biennale de Gwangju, vous avez développé les images de la campagne de publicité pour New Eelam, faisant de l'espace dévolu à votre solo show un espace de branding à 360°. Diriez-vous que la fusion du domaine de l'art et du domaine de l'entreprise que vous opérez et que la manière dont vous venez de la décrire en disant que votre idée était de « développer un nouveau modèle économique et non de s'opposer à l'existant » est une stratégie d'infiltration mise en place sur la base d'un choix volontaire ou qu'elle vous a été imposée par le système économique lui-même ? Autrement dit, acquiescez-vous avec Metahaven lorsqu'ils écrivent : « Le réalisme capitaliste fonctionne comme un cadre qui force ses opposants politiques à "parler le même langage que lui". [...] toute alternative (mise en place par les opprimés) doit d'abord être présentée dans le langage et selon le protocole de l'oppresseur¹ » ?

Je suis parfaitement d'accord avec cela mais je pense aussi qu'une transformation politique réelle sur le long terme a plus de chances d'aboutir en produisant quelque chose qui fonctionne mieux (quelque chose que les gens souhaitent) qu'en requérant un choix moral. Nous cherchons donc à permettre une plus grande liberté et une plus grande flexibilité par la propriété collective qu'il serait possible par la propriété privée individuelle, en faisant fonctionner l'habitat plus comme un bien informationnel. Et pour que cela fonctionne, il n'y a pas besoin que cela ressemble à une révolution politique, il faut simplement que cela fonctionne mieux que le système en alternative auquel New Eelam se pose — c'est-à-dire le marché de l'immobilier qui concrétise un antagonisme fondamental entre location et possession.

Justement, vous vous placez dans la lignée de cette prise de conscience que vous évoquez comme inspirant votre réflexion, qui est de considérer les plateformes technologiques omniprésentes aujourd'hui — comme Google, Amazon, Facebook ou Apple — comme des états transnationaux. Diriez-vous que vous essayez de positionner New Eelam comme un contrepoint post-capitaliste à ces plateformes tout en utilisant une conception relativement similaire ?

Et, puisque toute utopie révèle un jour une face sombre, quelle pourrait être celle de Eelam ?

Malgré la résurgence actuelle des politiques nationalistes à certains endroits du monde, je pense qu'à plus long terme l'état nation est une forme d'organisation qui deviendra de moins en moins signifiante. Tandis que, comme vous le dites, les plateformes mondiales commencent à agir comme des états nations et qu'à l'inverse, certains gouvernements actuels (comme celui de l'Estonie) se considèrent comme des start-ups. Dans ce paysage extra-étatique transnational, mes collègues et moi voyons le potentiel du modèle de propriété collective de New Eelam à surpasser les économies capitalistes du profit par-delà les frontières nationales. Mais je ne pense pas que nous envisagions cela comme une entreprise utopique car nous n'avons pas défini, idéalisé, un endroit à atteindre ; notre entreprise est plutôt fondée sur une rénovation de processus existants qui ne peut être imposée à personne mais ne peut réussir que si elle offre aux gens ce qu'ils souhaitent.

Je vois cela comme une sorte de science-fiction de proximité, en ce que nous proposons une réalité alternative très proche de la réalité que nous connaissons mais avec une part cruciale de sa logique rénovée, spécifiquement le type de relations de propriété que nous essayons de reformuler. L'excitation artistique vient, pour ma part, de la traduction, au fil du temps, de cette proposition originale en une réalité potentiellement source de transformations.



NEW EELAM, 2016

from the ongoing work New Eelam, 2016

Aluminium frame, printed tension fabric, 'New Eelam' flim (HD, 14:06) and 'New Eelam' silent lift (HD, 1:15)

Installation view, 11th Gwangju Biennale, Asia Culture Center, curated by Maria Lind
Design: Manuel Bürger & Jan Giesecking; Photography: Joseph Kadow; Creative Direction: Annika Kuhlmann

Image: AKK



NEW EELAM AND THE DISPERSION OF CRITIQUE

by Jeppe Ugelvig

1. Christopher Kulendran Thomas' ongoing work *New Eelam* – developed in collaboration with curator Annika Kuhlmann and initially introduced at the 9th Berlin Biennial and 11th Gwangju Biennale, with a new iteration coming soon to Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin – exceeds the traditional limits of the artwork. Not only formally – the work is envisaged as an open-endedly durational project in the form of a startup – but particularly in its socioeconomic spatiality and critical technique. Rooted in the complicated story of the geographical displacement and genocide of the Tamil people, *New Eelam* can best be described as a real estate tech company that envisions and proposes new liquid models of citizenship and distributed homeownership in an age of technologically accelerated dislocation.

2. After an American presidential election in which nearly half of the country's voters at least acquiesced with the rather aggressive displacement of others (incidentally resulting in Canada's immigration website crashing on election night), questions of belonging seem to be taking on a new global urgency. How can the liberal nation state negotiate increasingly polarized populations? What does a reactionary response to neo-nativism and anti-globalism look like for communities that still pursue dreams of multiculturalism? And where does technology sit within the practicing and delineation of citizenship and the bourgeois capitalist institution of the home?

3. Envisioned as a flat-rate subscription service, *New Eelam's* subscribers will gain access to a portfolio of homes "in some of the world's most charismatic neighbourhoods," as its promotional video promises, saturated with the quintessential iconography of urban wanderlust, recognizable from start-up advertising. Adopting the closed loop growth model of e-retailer Amazon, 100% of the revenue of *New Eelam's* subscribers, along with capital gains from the speculative real estate investments the company makes, are reinvested into an ever-expanding portfolio of properties, effectively lowering the rent while improving the service for users. What will form, imaginatively, is a global network of homes owned by no one and everyone – or as the video promises, "luxury global communalism rather than private property". As a corporate entity, *New Eelam* owes its architecture equally to the historical notion of the socialist coop and the contemporary sharing economy start-up, two seemingly opposing structures that nonetheless converge via technology in our contemporary socio-economic reality. With *New Eelam*, Thomas sees a potentially emancipatory trajectory for technology in the global economy: specifically, the liquidation of citizenship through the dissolution of individual property ownership in a time when capitalism accelerates its way out of its own sustainability.

4. Beyond the artist's own biographical relation (Thomas' family are Tamil and left escalating racial violence in Sri Lanka), there's a specificity in adopting the history of the Tamil people as a basis for *New Eelam*. As a civilization, the history of the Tamil people of "Eelam" stretches back over 3000 years, effectively pre-dating the rise of both the nation state and its coupling of citizenship (and hence, any definition of legitimate geopolitical 'belonging'). Colonial rule left the Tamil people governed by an ethnic majority backed by foreign governments, leading to the exclusion of Tamils from academic positions and civil service jobs in the Sri Lankan public system. After a long and bloody civil war, in which more than 300,000 Tamil people were internally displaced and tens of thousands of civilians were brutally murdered, the idea of Eelam (an independent, gender-equal socialist state) fully collapsed with

the defeat of the Tamil Tigers in 2009. This sudden "peace" paved the way for aggressive foreign investment and Western tourism in Sri Lanka. And, as Thomas himself describes, "in the immediate aftermath of that violence, and the consequent economic liberalisation that followed, a new local market for contemporary art emerged." Thomas' exhibitions feature original artworks by some of Sri Lanka's foremost young contemporary artists, purchased recently in that 'peacetime' economic boom and then



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reconfigured by Thomas for international circulation within his own compositions. His work manipulates some of the structural operations of art, the means by which its circulation and distribution produces reality. This ongoing operation translates what counts as contemporary across the global contours of power by which the 'contemporary' itself is conditioned and draws on the outward performance of democracy by which nations evade international accountability. Put differently, the story of Eelam is also a story of the subjugation of socialist communities to destructive global capitalist market forces and their colonial genealogies. The story of New Eelam, on the other hand, is an attempt to reimagine community through and beyond them.

5. While much of the art that engages so-called "corporate aesthetics" is both critiqued and legitimized as operating through speculative 'fictions' and as employing satirical 'artifice' (as observed in much of the polemical criticism around the 9th Berlin Biennial), there is nothing fictional about New Eelam – in fact, it already exists as a company in its early phases of prototyping its beta edition. While it speculates upon future potentialities for forms of living and working through technology in a seemingly "surreal" or "hyperreal" way (to rely on relatively outdated modes of aesthetic judgment), its cultural, political and economic trajectories are very actual, that is to say concerned with the actuality of contemporary conditions of living and working in a globalized economy. Rather, perceiving the engagement of corporate aesthetics as 'artifice', it points more than anything to the synthetic texture of our everyday lives. This synthetic component to New Eelam is central to its success, as it echoes its (post-)critical trajectory of powering through ever-morphing capitalist institutionality in all its visuality, rather than circumventing it: "to outcompete the present economic system on its own terms," as the narrator in New Eelam's promotional video explains. As a meditation on the failed revolution of historical Marxist states (like Tamil Eelam), as well as on the commodified and nullified status of leftist critique at large, New Eelam envisages a form of autonomy beyond neoliberal capitalism by accelerating the existing system's own unravelling. If the global market economy absorbs and distributes every aspect of human life, and transcends national borders and laws (as seen with multinationals such as Apple and Amazon, the latter of which is poignantly analyzed in New Eelam's long-form promotional video), why not use it as a tool for critical and subversive agency? In Thomas' work, the future of the political Left lies in a mutation of capitalism's own accelerated state of being. This, of course, is no small proposition and contains its own set of ethical conundrums.

6. The avant-garde impulse in Thomas' practice is echoed clearly in the "New" of New Eelam, adding a constructivist and, arguably, even utopian dimension to the work. While New Eelam is "more than art" – that is to say concerned with some form of life beyond the world of art – art remains the starting point and recurring cultural habitat for the project (it starts as a biennial commission and will return to art world platforms when appropriate). Why? As history exemplifies, it is in art that we find the most innovative prototyping of immaterial labor. Ambivalently, art's ever-mutating labor dynamics facilitate a discursive platform for imagining new labor futures, both constructivist (and potentially revolutionary) as well as co-optable for businesses. We see this when strategies from conceptual, post-conceptual, and performance art are adopted by advertising firms and start-ups in the global experience economy, which in turn are recouped by artists, adopting rhetorical or economic strategies from globalized capitalism (fashion, business, PR). If the home is a primary site of labor in a post-work automated future, it is only natural that its early precursors are found in contemporary artworks.

7. It was once widely assumed in Silicon Valley that one needed an MBA to start a company, but with the rise of technology-based consumerism, this was superseded by the engineer founder (Facebook, Google), and more recently, in line with the increasing sophistication of the consumer internet, designers are starting big companies (AirBnB, Instagram). Could this perhaps now be the time when an artist starts a successful high-growth tech company – on artistic and critical terms – and if so, how would their critical apparatus translate into a socioeconomic reality? As Thomas has argued elsewhere on DIS, this shift would entail a departure from the ecology of the art system into a larger ecology of (or even beyond) capitalism[1] – one in which work depends on "reproduction and distribution [in the ...marketplace] for its sustenance," as Seth Price once put it.[2] At the brink of neocapitalism,[3] in which complicity is inevitable and any form of autonomous critique only strengthens the ties around the political subject, the point, as David Joselit argues, is not to deny the power of the market, but to use this power.[4] The strategy of full immersion into capitalist production, giving up any leftover dream of bourgeois art-making, has been hinted at and even experimented with by artists – Renzo Martens, DIS, Shanzhai Biennial, amongst others – but until now, never fully realized. Like all avant-garde practices, in its attempt of embedding itself into a capitalist logic, New Eelam will always risk its own status as an artwork; but isn't this exactly what the most interesting art has always risked?

1. Seth Price, 'Dispersion', in *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*, 2015

2. Christian Boltanski and Eva Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 2007.

3. David Joselit, *After Art*, p. 94

this is tomorrow

CHRISTOPHER KULENDRAN THOMAS: 60 MILLION AMERICANS CAN'T BE WRONG

1. Christopher Kulendran Thomas' family is from a place that no longer exists. For three decades during the Sri Lankan civil war, "Eelam" was self-governed as an autonomous state led by a neo-Marxist revolution. But this uprising was crushed in 2009 by an authoritarian government protected by the cloak of national sovereignty. In the immediate aftermath of that violence, and the consequent economic liberalisation that followed, a new local market for contemporary art emerged. Developed in collaboration with curator Annika Kuhlmann, Thomas' exhibition features original sculptures, paintings and works on paper by four of Sri Lanka's foremost young contemporary artists: Muvindu Binoy, Asela Gunasekara, Prageeth Manohansa and Dennis Muthuthanthri. These original artworks have been purchased recently in Sri Lanka's 'peacetime' economic boom and then reconfigured by Thomas for international circulation within his own compositions, which in the past have been included in exhibitions such as "Bread and Roses" at Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (2016), "Co-Workers: Network As Artist" at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2015) and "Art Turning Left: How Values Changed Making" at Tate Liverpool (2013). Thomas' work manipulates some of art's structural operations, the means by which the circulation and distribution of art produces reality. His ongoing operation translates what counts as contemporary across the global contours of power by which the 'contemporary' itself is conditioned and draws on the outward performance of democracy by which nations can evade international accountability.

2. Late at night on March 1st 2016, Canada's Citizen and Immigration website slowed to a crawl as thousands upon thousands of Americans reacted in despair to the results of the US Republican primaries. Now about half of the American electorate has cast their ballots in a way that has already prompted others to consider leaving the country. Is this a symptom of a post-truth democracy that is becoming increasingly divided? A place where political deliberation has been replaced by reactionary debates that inflame polarized prejudice? Does this US Presidential election constitute a revolutionary attempt by the demographically disenfranchised? Or might this all indicate a more profound crisis in liberal democracy itself?

3. The idea that democracy may be an insufficient form of government has existed at least since Plato attributed the execution of Socrates to the ignorance of the mob. This type of political system can engender prejudice even when it does function; and when it doesn't, democracy can offer the perfect smokescreen for the rule of clever elites. In his 1970 treatise "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty", German-born economist Albert O. Hirschman posits that exit – leaving – is the ultimate political choice possible in a liberal democracy. Citizens, he suggests, demonstrate loyalty when the system serves them well. They exercise their democratic voice when they believe the system is open to change. And if they realize that the only way to change the system is from the outside, by finding something better, they leave. This is exactly what Thomas' family did, leaving behind the occupation of their homeland and abandoning a corrupt pretence at democracy in order to look for a better life. Centuries earlier, it was also this type of exit that was, in Hirschman's view, the founding imperative of the United States itself; and it has remained a crucial way of ensuring political accountability ever since. But in 2016, to where would a dissatisfied American electorate go? Canada? Really?

4. Influenced by Hirschman's writings, the Silicon Valley blockchain entrepreneur Balaji S. Srinivasan has suggested that America could be seen as the "Microsoft of nations": its code base (or constitution) is written in an obfuscated language, it systematically propagates fear around security issues and it behaves ruthlessly towards key suppliers whilst favouring its rich corporate clients – and the world has no choice but to buy it anyway. But Srinivasan proposes that today's exit might take a different form: by providing opt-in alternatives to incumbent systems, technological innovation can reduce barriers to exit, amplifying democratic voice reinforced by the ease of leaving. Threatened by increasingly mobile constituents who can transfer their loyalties to the cloud, democracy will be forced either to recover or to face collapse.

5. Given diminishing public confidence in existing political institutions across many parts of the world, how might a more liquid form of citizenship be imagined in an age of technologically accelerated dislocation? For his exhibition at Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof, Christopher Kulendran Thomas presents a startup called "New Eelam", founded by the artist to develop a global housing subscription based on collective ownership. Together with his founding partners, Thomas proposes a long-term strategy for how a new economic model could evolve, without friction, out of the present system – through the luxury of communalism rather than private property. This proposition was recently introduced at the 9th Berlin Biennale and the 11th Gwangju Biennale and will be further explored by Thomas in forthcoming exhibitions at Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart (Berlin) and Tensta Konsthall (Stockholm). Functioning initially through contemporary art's transnational networks and through art's role in prototyping new lifestyle formats and new forms of immaterial labour, his post-capitalist venture imagines the future of citizenship beyond national borders. Presented here within an installation that draws on interior design, New Eelam's extended promotional film takes the form of a speculative history documentary that asks how a brand might communicate as an artist and how a state could be constituted in corporate form. It may be worth remembering that some of these questions of citizenship are in any case formed through social and economic processes that evolve over timescales that transcend presidential terms. The need for political imagination on this scale might indeed present one of the urgent challenges of our time.

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WORK // PROTOTYPING THE FUTURE: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER KULENDRAN THOMAS

By Louisa Elderton

Artist Christopher Kulendran Thomas grew up in the UK, the son of Sri Lankan parents who fled the country's civil war in the 1980s. His interest in Sri Lankan history palpably emerges in his artistic practice, most notably in his body of work 'When Platitudes Become Form' (2013-on-going), which co-opts both collaboration and exploitation, reconfiguring the artworks of Sri Lankan artists purchased from galleries in Colombo. Taking the artworks as his materials, and reconfiguring them into new compositions (Nike t-shirts stretched over canvas frames, for example), he also sees his mediation of the art market and its systems of distribution (galleries, online resources) as elements in the work. The aim is to intervene in the infrastructure arising from Sri Lanka's post-civil-war contemporary art boom, and use it to aesthetically map contours of power.

His vision for inflecting systems has continued. Recently asked by DIS to participate in the 9th Berlin Biennale, the artist developed his work 'New Eelam' (2016-on-going), through which he has founded a real startup to provide access to apartments globally for a monthly subscription fee. Asking how citizenship might be approached in an age where a certain portion of society travels incessantly—technology accelerating this dislocation in terms of our obsession with social media, Uber, Airbnb etc.—he envisions a new form of boundary-less citizenship and collective homeownership. We interviewed the artist while he travelled between Berlin, London, Seoul and Gwangju (where he is currently participating in the 11th Gwangju Biennale); the question is, where did he stay?

Louisa Elderton: Your latest artwork 'New Eelam' has been commissioned as part of the 9th Berlin Biennial. How did you first begin to develop this work when you were approached by DIS, and where has the project led you, today?

Christopher Kulendran Thomas: For a year or so I'd been talking with Annika Kuhlmann (with whom I collaborated on the Biennale presentation) about ways to streamline how we had both been living, between a few different cities. We were thinking about how the home (rather than the factory or office) was becoming a primary site of production in an increasingly post-labour economy. And we were interested in how technology could make it possible to take collective ownership of this means of production: the home. I spent the summer thinking through different ways that a flexible global housing subscription could work; and then tried to talk myself out of doing it when I realised the potential scale of the venture and how difficult it would be to do. But I couldn't stop thinking about the extraordinary potential of subscription housing and eventually realised that it was too important not to attempt. I hadn't had any ambitions of founding a real estate technology company but, the more I thought through solutions to the problems involved, the more I became convinced that there was a chance that it could work—and maybe solve some big problems in housing. And when DIS, too, were really keen on these ideas being developed for the Biennale, we thought this would be a great context in which to test out how a brand could communicate as an artist. So I started thinking with Annika about how the context of art could be used by a brand to communicate with more depth and complexity than would typically be possible in other contexts

like advertising. Meanwhile, I'd been working with a small team to develop the business, to model the data involved and to prototype some of the technology. If it works, the long-term potential we see is to enable a more liquid form of citizenship beyond national borders by making homes as streamable as informational goods, such as music or movies.

LE: What's the biggest "problem" for which you're finding a solution?

CKT: Well, it's a problem that a lot of people face: most housing is organised through real estate markets that concretise a fundamental antagonism between renting and owning property. We're attempting to



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resolve this dilemma—between the flexibility of renting and the equity benefits of homeownership—by potentially enabling greater freedom and flexibility through collective ownership than would be possible through individually owned private property. We see it as part of a long-term strategy to start to dissolve capitalist property relations by growing a new economic model out of the existing economic system rather than opposing it.

LE: What about the broader scope of capitalism beyond property relations? Would you describe your long-term strategy as being within the theoretical framework of accelerationism, enabling technological evolution beyond the horizon of capitalism?

CKT: Well, something that is central to our political strategy is the conviction that real long-term structural transformation might be more likely to be achieved by making something that people want; by making something that works better. We think our post-capitalist alternative could out-compete profit-making models. This is a very specific position to take in relation to the whole spectrum of accelerationist thinking.

LE: Many of the artists in DIS's 9th Berlin Biennale use the mechanisms of capitalism in their art (advertising, marketing, brand image) to reflect the condition of our present situation. You describe how 'New Eelam' imagines structural transformation beyond this status quo. However, many have interpreted your promotional video presented at BB9—which uses the backdrop of the Tamil struggle in Sri Lanka and the rise of Amazon as a borderless state—as being ironic. Was irony ever part of your strategy?

CKT: I think a lot of the artists you refer to in the Biennale are updating pop art and the logic of the readymade, by which the look and the artefacts of commerce are brought into the gallery and become art by being framed as such for the viewer's interpretation. But we're more interested in the opposite of that—in the possibility of doing art through commercial processes; using the discursive, imaginative space of art as part of an operation that could have consequences beyond the art field. This is however contrary to the received expectations of contemporary art, by which the viewer's interpretation is seen as the only consequence of art worth talking about. We think, though, that this prevailing idea—that reality can only be correlated to our interpretation of it—is part of a human-centric worldview that has had devastating consequences on a global scale and now it seems to be unravelling in so



many directions. So we're open to the ambiguity to which you refer as, short term, some people now seeing this work as ironic is, in itself, a pretty interesting reflection of their received expectations of art: that it must be 'critical'. But we're more interested in what can be instituted beyond critique. Over time, the artistic excitement for us will be in translating our imaginative proposition into a potentially transformational reality. The success or failure of this though can only unfold over time and may also demand a renewed understanding of what art does—and can do—in the world.

LE: The Guardian has just published an article arguing that 'hipsters and artists are the gentrifying foot soldiers of capitalism.' What do you think about that statement?

CKT: Yeah, that sounds about right. And, in Sri Lanka over the last half-decade you have an accelerated microcosm in which to see how contemporary art establishes itself as a function of economic liberalisation (in the case of Sri Lanka, built on genocidal violence). This is what art is actually good at: it is on the front line of globalisation, as part of the processes of gentrification by which cities around the world are transformed, pioneering new lifestyle formats and prototyping the future of immaterial labour. So our housing venture is a strategy to constructively rewire some of these structural operations of art—what art actually does in the world—into a new kind of economic model based on collective ownership rather than private property.

ArtReview

Aspirations for fashion, for an artistic career and even for an alternative form of citizenship – it is all incorporated into Christopher Kulendran Thomas's work. Among other things, he is drawing on a claim that sociology professor Alain Quemin made five years ago, namely that regional art markets would grow rapidly and simultaneously be relatively separate from the otherwise dominant Western commercial circuit. When Thomas recently showed a work from the ongoing series *When Platitudes Become Form* at the distinctly international Dhaka Art Summit in Bangladesh, his work played into both the regional and global circuits, into some of the crucial ways in which art is being distributed today and into how capital networks affect situated politics.

Thomas's method is metabolistic: he buys inexpensive artworks by artists from Sri Lanka whose commercial careers are developing fast and incorporates them into his own work. Take for example *Awake 111* (2015), by Kavinda Silva, a black-and-white naturalistic drawing of the face of a young person that Thomas has mounted on a green Nike running-vest stretched on a thin fluorescent yellow frame. It is all held together by a thin fishnet grid. The A4 drawing was purchased by Thomas from the online platform Art Space Sri Lanka, itself an example of how, due in part to economic liberalisation, Sri Lanka's creative industries in general and the contemporary art sector in particular have blossomed since the genocidal 2009 ending of the 25-year civil war between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority.

The picture with the drawing and the shirt is in turn hung on top of a large image of the profile of a man that has been glued onto the wall. The oversize man appears as a backdrop to all pictures in this presentation, like a bodyguard ready to swallow the display. This South Asian model will eventually be introduced by Thomas to TurboSquid, an online marketplace for 3D models used for all kinds of animation purposes and so far lacking types from this part of the world. The model is also part of a related venture initiated by the artist, New Eelam. New Eelam is an attempt at reimagining the defeated Tamil homeland of Eelam as a distributed network rather than a territorially bounded nation. Based on technologically enabled global citizenship and collectively



co-owned housing all over the world, this postcapitalist startup plans to make it possible to live across multiple cities by disrupting traditional forms of property relations.

Thus far, the version of *When Platitudes Become Form* in Dhaka is fairly free-floating, as is common with works with such a post-Internet look. However, in addition to a small generic sculpture, a scent dispenser and a pot plant, Thomas's installation

NETWORKED NATION

In the second of her 'GWANGJU SERIES', the biennale's artistic director, *Maria Lind*, looks at an idea of **HOMELAND** as a distributed network

features an Ikea shelf that sits in the middle and holds a pile of catalogues from the Dhaka Art Summit. This is an anchor to the here and now, which happens to be 'the world's largest research and exhibition platform for South Asian Art'. Initiated and organised by the Samdani Art Foundation and its founders, Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani, it was both a generous and generative event, full of contrasts and tensions between rich and poor as well as local and global participants and visitors, with a number of strong art projects and subcurated thematic, historical and architectural exhibitions. Notably, it also included work by artists from Pakistan.

According to the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, aspiration, together with imagination and anticipation, are the vital human preoccupations we need today in order to make 'the future a cultural fact'. Without them, he says, the future is a blind spot and missed

opportunity within Appadurai's own discipline, which tends to be busy with 'pastness'. Instead, he propagates an engagement with times to come, with aspirations for a good life, for existence without imminent risk and for stable living conditions. My feeling is that Thomas with New Eelam, and its aspirations, wants to combine two conflicting sides of 'the technologies of prediction' that Appadurai mentions, ie simultaneously to encompass 'the ethics of possibility', which is often



both images Christopher Kulendran Thomas, from the ongoing series *When Platitudes Become Form* (installation view, Dhaka Art Summit). Photos: Jenni Carter. Courtesy the artist and Samdani Art Foundation, Dhaka

found in art and other imaginative activities, and 'the ethics of probability' championed by everything from neoclassical economy to risk management within the insurance business.

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ARTSY

THE TOP EMERGING ARTISTS OF 2016



Portrait of Christopher Kulendran Thomas in Berlin by Jonas Lindström for Artsy.

The week before the U.S. presidential election, 37-year-old artist Kulendran Thomas opened a show at Hamburg's Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof titled "60 million Americans can't be wrong." The show opened with a question: "Could this U.S. Presidential election even constitute a revolutionary attempt by the demographically disenfranchised?" Pundits in the time since have responded, resoundingly, yes. The exhibition centers on Kulendran Thomas's startup-as-artwork *New Eelam* (2016), which debuted at the Berlin Biennale this summer and proposes a future in which globetrotting subscribers to the service collectively own and occupy hiply furnished homes in cities around the world, while referencing the proposed state of Tamil Eelam, which was wiped out during Sri Lanka's 26-year civil war, often characterized as a genocide.

New Eelam is as much a globalist's dream as it is a very symptom of the hyper-globalization that those 60 million Americans rallied successfully against on November 8th. It toured the world in various forms this year, making stops at the 11th Gwangju Biennale, the Dhaka Art Summit, and the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, in addition to Berlin and Hamburg, garnering unprecedented attention for the London-born and -based artist. (In 2017, he'll enjoy further shows at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin and Tensta Konsthall in Stockholm.) The work continues Kulendran Thomas's practice, which often takes an active role in trying to reshape or reformulate the core structures of our world rather than critique them. "Christopher's approach to art and politics is different from most. He is perpendicular to the left," comments Marco Roso of the New York collective DIS, which curated the Berlin Biennale. "Christopher works through the idea that emancipatory communalism might not be achieved today by force or resistance, or even through any mass-collective moral choice, but possibly through making something that people want. For example the way Tesla is aiming to fight global warming."