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**CHRISTOPHER KULENDRAN THOMAS**

NEW GALERIE

Selected Press



## NEW EELAM AND THE DISPERSION OF CRITIQUE

by Jeppe Ugelvig

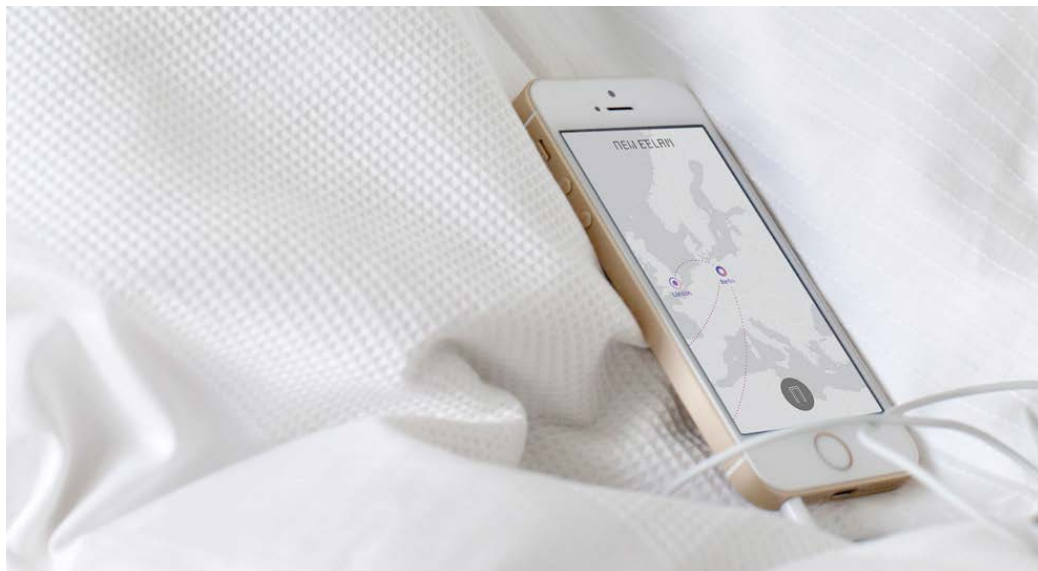
1. Christopher Kulendran Thomas' ongoing work *New Eelam* – developed in collaboration with curator Annika Kuhlmann and initially introduced at the 9th Berlin Biennial and 11th Gwangju Biennale, with a new iteration coming soon to Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin – exceeds the traditional limits of the artwork. 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 viscosity, 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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# BERLINARTLINK

## 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."