
New Eelam: Tensta
by Christopher Kulendran Thomas
11.10 2017–14.1 2018

STREAM
HOUSING
LOVE
SHARING

Tensta konsthall

New Eelam: Tensta is an exploration into the future of housing and citizenship. Conceived by the artist Christopher Kulendran Thomas, in collaboration with Annika Kuhlmann, the long-term artwork takes the form of a real-estate technology company that intends to develop a flexible, global housing subscription that aims to make homes as streamable as music or movies. Based on collective access rather than individual ownership, the post-capitalist startup plans to rewire property relations through the luxury of communalism rather than of private property.

New Eelam engages with the issue of citizenship whereby, all around the world, the right to belong somewhere is bound to specific nations. In Kulendran Thomas's case, this is understood through the lens of the unsuccessful Tamil struggle for independence from what is now Sri Lanka. After fighting for self-determination when Ceylon gained independence from Britain in 1948, the self-proclaimed Tamil homeland of 'Eelam' was self-governed for three decades before the brutal end of the Sri Lankan Civil War in 2009. But rather than attempting self-governance by force, what would happen if technology instead enabled a more liquid form of citizenship beyond borders?

New Eelam: Tensta's 'concept space' consists of a furnished platform featuring hydroponic home-farming ecosystems in which fish fertilize vegetation that in turn cleans water for the system's aquariums. This is one of the technologies being developed for **New Eelam's** global roaming subscription homes and is prototyped here as a living sculpture. Just as **New Eelam's** subscription homes will feature artworks by significant artists involved in each location's art scene, the 'show home'

presented here features artworks by Swedish artists, Ann Edholm, John Skoog, Jim Thorell and Lisa Trogen Devgun. A rectangular lounge with a fabric cover with a geometric pattern provides a place to rest. Just as most of the elements on the platform are reused from previous presentations, the lounge is a remnant from Tensta konsthall's 2015 exhibition **Frederick Kiesler: Visions at Work Annotated** by Céline Condorelli and **Six Student Groups**. It is the artist/architect/designer Kiesler's leather party lounge now refitted with a cover.

An art work on the wall on the platform, a painting from Kulendran Thomas' series **When Platitudes Become Form (2017)**, plays into the artist's discussions around how art produces reality through international circuits of distribution; and specifically how the attendant global distribution of capital and power affects local politics.

In this series, Thomas's method is metabolistic: he buys original artworks by artists from Sri Lanka whose commercial careers are developing quickly and incorporates them into his own work. Most of these art works were purchased by Thomas from the online platform **Art Space Sri Lanka**, itself an example of how, due to economic liberalisation, among other things, Sri Lanka's creative industries in general and the contemporary art sector in particular have blossomed since the 2009 ethnic cleansing of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority.

In addition, a new film, entitled **60 million Americans can't be wrong**, is shown on a flat screen. 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? What could a new Eelam be if it was a distributed network rather than a territorially bounded nation? If the idea was liberated from the land, creating a new Eelam for all, where citizenship was a choice, not a hereditary privilege? Taking as a starting point economist Albert O. Hirschman's 1970 treatise *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, *New Eelam's* second film looks at exit—the option of leaving—as the ultimate means of ensuring political accountability. But today, where would you go? Influenced by Hirschman's writings, the blockchain/biotech entrepreneur Balaji S. Srinivasan has suggested that today's New World could be pioneered in a completely new dimension—'the cloud'.

The film looks at the emancipatory potential of technologically accelerated mobility beyond national boundaries, exploring how the autonomous individual—rather than the industrial labourer—might be the revolutionary subject of a post-capitalist society. It looks at how the architecture of clouds, mapping states of minds rather than nation states, could allow for geodesic networks to concretise and take shape in actual space, eventually resulting in reverse diasporas that open up new possibilities for more liquid forms of citizenship to emerge beyond geographical borders.

Different iterations of *New Eelam* have been shown in the 2016 Berlin and Gwangju biennales and most recently at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof.

As an extension of *New Eelam's* concept space at Tensta konsthall, a new set-up for the classroom area has been developed and fabricated by second year students of Konstfack's Interior Architecture and Furniture

Design program in collaboration with Christopher Kulendran Thomas and Annika Kuhlmann. Growing out of the ongoing project *Tensta Museum*, Tensta konsthall's classroom has taken different shapes and forms since 2014. It has been used on a daily basis for meetings and activities by various groups ranging from a language café (as part of artist Ahmet Ögut's independent educational platform *The Silent University*), a craft oriented women's café, and a homework assistance space to public talks and screenings.

Working together in focus groups, the students have taken *New Eelam's* proposal for a more flexible way of living as a starting point to research and develop a system of easily reproducible, universal joints that could be assembled with local materials by anyone anywhere to create a variety of interior settings. The resulting furniture designs are inspired by meetings the students had with the different groups regularly using Tensta konsthall's classroom.

Low seating

This piece with adjustable sides reflects the multifunctional purpose of the classroom and allows adjusting the furniture. By Axel Dernevik, Annsofi Gråmunke, Oscar Persson Lidgren, and Freja Ullert. Thanks to Kvadrat AB.

Table

The design of the table is based on a nonagon, which allows the tables to be placed in a variety of flexible formations, optimizing the set-up of the classroom for a flexible learning and co-working environment. By Julia Holmgren, Elina Sjöwall, Emma Hamilton, Fredrik Sahlström, and Joel Caesar.

Stool

Placed on the outside of the stools and benches, the structurally strong, triangular stool highlights the design, reflecting key values such as flexibility, mobility, and adjustability. Based on the same geometric shape as the tables, the seats can be placed in a variety of formations allowing for flexible group constellations. By Dario Samardzic, Elina Justusson Lahti, Emma Larsson, Matilda Henriksson, Natasia Wadsted, Isac Blücher, and Simon Öreby.

Storage

The design of room dividers has been informed by the local accessibility of materials and legibility of construction, creating flexible, easily movable structures that also function as long-term storage. Made from a combination of wood and fabric, the dynamic system with adaptable dimensions functions as both shelf and shield, creating and defining rooms. Alvastina Ringqvist, Lisa Andrén, Caroline Ossmin, August Orsvall.

A group consisting of students from the third year of interior architecture and furniture design and from the preparatory course by the KTH School of Architecture run in Tensta, as well as young people engaged with Tensta's "techgården," have met with Kulendran Thomas and Kuhlman to discuss the future of housing and citizenship. The teachers who participated in the process are Simon Anund, Lars Pettersson, and Sergio Montero Bravo from Konstfack and Marie-Louise Richards from the KTH School of Architecture. Makda Emabaie, student at Konstfack and host at Tensta konsthall, was also a participant.

Christopher Kulendran Thomas is an artist whose work manipulates the processes of circulation and distribution by which art produces reality. Thomas's work has been included in the 11th Gwangju Biennale (2016); the 9th Berlin Biennale (2016); moving is in every direction, Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin (2017); Bread and Roses, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (2016); Co-Workers: Network As Artist, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2015); and Art Turning Left: How Values Changed Making, Tate Liverpool (2013).

Annika Kuhlmann is a curator who works predominantly through long term collaborations. As Artistic Director at New Eelam, she has been collaborating with artist Christopher Kulendran Thomas on exhibitions for the 9th Berlin Biennale, the 11th Gwangju Biennale and Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart. Together with curator Anna Frost, she established the curatorial project planes.sx, and as an artist and founder of Brace Brace she has exhibited at MoMA Warsaw, Auto Italia in London, KM Temporär, and for DIS magazine. She is currently working with Tino Sehgal on an upcoming exhibition as part of the 'Immersion' program at Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin.

Conversation between Christopher Kulendran Thomas, Annika Kuhlmann, and Maria Lind

Maria Lind: New Eelam wants to offer an alternative housing system, where homes can be ‘streamed,’ so to speak, rather than owned individually or rented. What is the relevance of such a system today?

Christopher Kulendran Thomas: As everything else moves towards cloud-based subscription models (from streaming media to car-sharing), today’s fixed housing could feel increasingly restrictive. I think more and more people will come to value mobility (and the relationships that this can enable and the experiences they can share) over accumulating material possessions. As many more jobs are automated, the future of work could look gradually more like what artists do, with people working in increasingly flexible ways and moving around more. Meanwhile, it’s perhaps the home rather than the factory or office that is becoming a primary site of production for an increasingly post-work economy. So the real estate technology company that we and our colleagues are founding, New Eelam, is based on a long-term strategy to reorganize this means of production—the home—through collective access rather than individual ownership.

We’re developing a flexible global housing subscription whereby profits from real estate markets can be repurposed towards reducing the cost of housing. As a subscriber, you will have continual access to apartments in cities around the world for an all-inclusive flat-rate fee so that you can move around as you wish, eventually with your personal settings and services coming with you from city to city. And because of the flexible way in which the

properties will be inhabited, we’ll be able to sell them more easily than if they were occupied on fixed rental contracts. So over time, the cost of each subscription could be progressively reduced through real estate profits generated from trading a continually revolving property portfolio across cities. Eventually we think the on-demand housing of the future could be provided for free to increasingly transient populations as the basis for new forms of citizenship beyond borders.

ML: Can you describe the background to the project in terms of how people of Tamil origin literally lost the self-proclaimed nation of Eelam on the island of Sri Lanka in 2009, which for nearly three decades had been self-governed with, for example, its own legal system with courts, a police force, military, schools, health care, a television channel and a national bank?

CKT: Well, indeed; my family is from a place that no longer exists. For three decades during the Sri Lankan Civil War, the Tamil homeland of ‘Eelam’ was self-governed as a de-facto autonomous state, led by a revolution that was inspired by Karl Marx’s vision of a world without nations. Writing in the 19th Century, Marx imagined a world beyond borders, beyond scarcity, and beyond waged labor, where things would be shared collectively rather than owned individually. He imagined a world based on economies of abundance that would underpin societies so just that he thought governments wouldn’t even be necessary. In today’s terms, Marx was a libertarian; but his ideas were tragically distorted throughout the 20th Century in the service of authoritarian regimes around the world that attempted, as in Sri Lanka, to implement his vision by force, resulting in the very

opposite of the liberty that Marx had imagined. In fact, Marx's own writing was analytical rather than ideological; he understood technology rather than politics as the primary driver of historical change—by making new forms of economic organization possible. And given the ways that 'Marxism' has been instituted as an ideology through the last century, I doubt whether Marx would even have been a Marxist. So what could that idea of 'Eelam'—the idea of a self-governed state—be if it was imagined as a distributed network rather than a territorially bounded nation?

ML: New Eelam is a startup. What does that entail and why does it take this particular organizational form rather than, for example, a coop, in which everybody is a co-owner?

CKT: Our venture is inspired by the idea that the kind of profound, long-term transformation that Marx envisioned might be more likely to be achieved by making something that works better, by making something that people want—rather than by force. Our starting point was thinking about how a housing coop could be globally distributed and scalable, but without the often prohibitive cost of ownership that you have when buying in to a coop. And I see something interesting happening now as the 'startup' becomes the paradigmatic organizational form of our times—with public companies (like Tesla or Amazon) perpetually retaining the high-growth-oriented economics of a startup and with even schools (Khan Academy), non-profits (ACLU American Civil Liberties Union), and national governments (e-Estonia) understanding themselves in these terms. Because startups (in the truest sense of that idea) are optimized to create long-term value rather than short-term profits. The most advanced market economies seem

to me to be accelerating towards a tipping point where the triple technologies of (1) the Internet, (2) renewable energy, and (3) artificial intelligence are enabling businesses to compete increasingly beyond limitations of geography, energy, or human labor.

Whereas the economic system that we have known as capitalism is based on scarcity, this emerging 'zero marginal cost' economy (where more and more goods behave like informational goods, which can be reproduced and distributed almost infinitely at negligible marginal cost) is one in which businesses are increasingly neither constrained nor protected by these limitations. (This is why, to site a really obvious example, bookstores have been going out of business.) Amazon could be the first of these businesses with limitless growth potential in that its theoretical 'Total Addressable Market' could be almost equivalent to global GDP (i.e., the whole economy); Tesla could be the second. And so it makes sense that these two public companies retain the high-growth economics of startups and consistently haven't turned much of a profit. (Tesla's profits are non-existent and Amazon's are absolutely meagre in relation to both companies' enormous revenues and valuations.) Because when addressing markets potentially (between them) as big as all retail, media, computing, transportation, and energy, it would be completely irrational to slow their growth in order to extract profits to return to shareholders.

To put this in perspective, Amazon and Alibaba would have to continue to each grow their revenues simultaneously by \$40 billion a year consistently for about a thousand years to fulfil that potential. (Excuse this slightly mischievous way of

framing that calculation; but you get my point). When competing without limits, the long-term interests of shareholders will be better served by continued growth rather than by slowing that growth to extract profits.

And when addressing markets so big that that profit horizon ends up being on a longer-than-human timescale, it could become harder and harder to distinguish the economics of these businesses from those of the 20th Century communist dream of a perfectly efficient cybernetic economy where resources would be converted into things for everyone without extracting profit. Such an economy should—if it had worked—have been able to out-compete the capitalist equivalent in giving people what they wanted. (To put it really crudely, if the most well-off people had lived in communist economies then more people would have wanted to live in those economies and that economic model would have worked.) However, in the 20th Century, the reality was that communist economies were inefficient and weren't accountable to what their citizens wanted. But now you see the fastest growing businesses accountable only to making things that their customers want and owned increasingly by their employees (with staff paid in stock), operating beyond profit with economics that increasingly resemble that of a coop. And now blockchain-based ICOs (Initial Coin Offering or crowd-funding via a cryptocurrency) could make it much easier for organizations to be owned by their users. So it could make sense, as it did for Marx, to think of communism as a progression from capitalism rather than in opposition to it. Because I don't know if the fastest growing parts of our present economy really make sense in capitalist terms any more.

But on the subject of coops specifically, we're interested in how the underlying blockchain technology behind Bitcoin and Ethereum could enable 'Decentralized Autonomous Organizations' that are owned by their members and contributors, though this technology is still very early and there are a bunch of challenges to make this viable. However, this is where we see the real legacy of the coop and this is the kind of direction we're heading in with our venture as the technology develops.

Because we think of what we're doing as an experiment, based on a series of hypotheses about how we could live. And ultimately our way of conducting that experiment is to build it, measure how it's used and learn from that in order to keep developing it. In this sense, pretty much every consumer tech startup is something of a sci-fi in that each startup (as in a high-growth-oriented business), almost by definition, is based on a radical vision of an alternate future, which if borne out, would produce a new type of mainstream behavior. For me, the artistic excitement of what we're embarking upon is in translating what has begun as an imaginative proposition into a (potentially transformational) reality, the success or failure of which can, of course, only unfold over time.

ML: Who is involved with New Eelam and what are the decision-making processes? Is there, for instance, a CEO?

CKT: We're bringing together an interdisciplinary team of specialists from the fields of technology, real estate, art, architecture, finance, law, data science and design—all of whom I know through the art world. I'm the CEO and the more

outside funding we take, the bigger the board that we'll be accountable to. But we're ultimately accountable to our users and so our decision-making processes are really rooted in continually talking with potential users of what we're developing in order to build something that people will want. Right now I'm working with my co-founders to prototype the technology involved, and we're aiming to launch a trial in two cities next year. And actually the business has really grown out of our understanding of what art does in the world in terms of its role in prototyping new lifestyle formats, at the vanguard of new forms of labor, on the front line of globalization and as part of the processes of gentrification through which cities around the world are shaped.

For example, in the immediate aftermath of the violence that ended the Sri Lankan Civil War, and the consequent economic boom that followed, a new local market for contemporary art emerged, and now this outward projection of the 'contemporary' continues economically the process of ethnic cleansing by which the revolutionary vision of 'Eelam' was defeated in the first place.

So we're interested in how some of these structural processes—what art actually does in the world—could perhaps be constructively reorganized if we took that as our starting point for doing art. And our exhibitions in the art field, in collaboration with our Creative Director Annika Kuhlmann, have become a sort of open, discursive research and development process that feeds into what we're building.



ML: Some of the furniture in this iteration of the project, **New Eelam: Tensta**, has been designed and built by a group of students from Konstfack's department for interior architecture and furniture design, based on your customizable designs, which can join together different kinds of materials to make various types of furniture. What does this mean for the project?

Annika Kuhlmann: It has been incredibly interesting for us to collaborate with this group and to think about how mass customization rather than mass production could work. This is one step in our design process towards a multi-functional interior system that can be constructed anywhere with locally available materials. We're particularly interested in how social formations are organized through, and reflected in, our living spaces. For example, the nuclear family was literally concretized into the shape of the modern home through a previous industrial revolution, with even an institution like marriage often financially underwritten by mortgages. So what new social forms could be opened up by transforming how housing works now?

ML: On the note of what is specific to the Tensta version of **New Eelam** – what does it mean for you to make this project right here, at this point in time, with a vast majority of the inhabitants of Tensta having been forced to migrate, for various reasons, ending up in temporary housing?

AK: Whilst what we're developing will provide no immediate solution to the urgent problems of displacement or of those excluded from citizenship, on a longer timescale, we're interested in how dislocation is perhaps becoming a permanent condition for more and more people. The film we're making for this exhibition is about

technological possibilities for new forms of citizenship to emerge beyond nation states. Specifically, the cloud-like networks of the Internet continue to reorganize the physical world at greater depth and scale, and we're interested in how this could result in 'reverse diasporas'—social formations that would start out geographically distributed until people are brought together through physical social networks.

Eventually this could produce what we could think of as 'cloud towns,' 'cloud cities,' and even 'cloud countries'—societies based on citizenship by choice rather than by birth. The long-range hypothesis behind what we're developing is that populations that are free to do whatever they care about, wherever they want to be, will ultimately build more valuable economies than populations enslaved by debt into waged labor. We think housing could be democratized for more and more people through a new kind of economic model based on collective access rather than individual ownership.

Maria Lind is the director at Tensta konsthall.

New Eelam, 2017

Experience suite with aquaponic farming system, modular walls, lightboxes, VR model and HD film

60 million Americans can't be wrong
HD, 25 min

Written and directed by
Christopher Kulendran Thomas
Co-directed and produced by
Annika Kuhlmann
Visual concept: Annika Kuhlmann and
Pauline Doutreluingne
Editors: Annika Kuhlmann, Anh Trieu,
Mark Reynolds, Greg Pirolini, The
Mycological Twist, and Sabrina Labis
Subtitles: Greg Pirolini
Sound design: Jordan Juras and
Toni Quiroga
Research: Emma Siemens and
Pauline Doutreluingne

Featuring footage filmed on location
during an artist residency in the
computer game Rust initiated by
The Mycological Twist; with: Anne de
Boer, Eloïse Bonneviot, Joey Holder,
Agatha Valkyrie Ice (Dorota Gawęda
and Eglé Kulbokaite), Anna Mikkola,
Gaile Pranckunaite, Riverside, Viktor
Timofeev

With the support from Tensta
konsthall, Stockholm, A Tale of a Tub,
Rotterdam, and DIS, New York
Thanks to Sharon Zhu

Aquaponic indoor farming system
developed in collaboration with
Mediamatic, Amsterdam
Assistance by Marisa Bihlmann
Design by Annika Kuhlmann and
Romy Kiessling

**New Eelam image campaign and
branding**
Design: Manuel Bürger,
Simon Schindele
Photography: Joseph Kadow
VR model/VR Architecture:
DVLPR/David Tasman, Tom Hancocks
Coding: Web3000
Creative Director: Annika Kuhlmann

Featured works:
Christopher Kulendran Thomas
**From the ongoing work: When
Platitudes Become Form (2017)**
Acrylic on canvas with wooden frame,
netting and **Father** by Muvindu Binoy
(purchased from Art Space Sri Lanka)
Courtesy the artist

Ann Edholm
Untitled (2016)
Lithography
Private collection

John Skoog
Federsee-blick #7 (2013)
Pigment print on Arches velib museum
rag 315g
Private collection

Jim Thorell
Glass, brick and mortars (2017)
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy the artist

Lisa Trogen Devgun
Euro Click (Flat) (2016)
Print on aluminium
Courtesy the artist

With thanks to Oscar Carlson

**Frederick Kiesler leather party
lounge refitted with a cover by
Muna Al Yaqoobi**

Dates

Tuesday 10.10, 17:00–20:00
Opening: New Eelam: Tensta

Wednesday 11.10, 14:00
Artist tour by Christopher
Kulendran Thomas

Wednesday 15.11, 14:00–21:00
Symposium: **Citizenship, the Nation
State and Universal Basic Income:
Scenarios in Art, Architecture,
Anthropology and Sociology** with
Christopher Kulendran Thomas &
Annika Kuhlmann, James Holston,
Jennifer Mack, Roland Paulsen, and
Maria Lind

Wednesday 22.11, 15:00–17:00
Symposium: Hugo Palmarola, Erik
Stenberg, Helena Westerlind,
Christopher Kulendran Thomas, and
Annika Kuhlmann

Thursdays and Saturdays, 14:00
Introduction of the exhibition

The exhibition is a part of the
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Creative Europe Programme of the
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of the European Union

Staff at Tensta konsthall

Fahyma Alnablsi
reception and teaching
Muna Al Yaqoobi
assistance The Women's Café
Emily Fahlén
mediator and production
Asrin Haidari
communication and press
Maria Lind
director
Ailin Moaf Mirlashari
coordinator The News Agency
Asha Mohamed
assistance
Hanna Nordell
coordinator
Hedvig Wiezell
infrastructure and mediation
Didem Yildirim
assistance

Hosts

Arazo Arif
Makda Embaie
Ailin Moaf Mirlashari
Isabella Tjäder

Installation

Martin Gustafson
Eva Rocco Kenell
Carl-Oskar Linné
Hijran Naqeeb
Johan Wahlgren