

Christopher Kulendran Thomas

ARTIST

I didn't ever really want to be an artist. It was never an ambition of mine. And I didn't grow up even knowing that that was a thing that people could do, really. But at a difficult time in my life, growing up when- well, I guess making things became a way to work out things that I didn't understand. And I didn't know that was called art at the time, but later I figured out that that's what art could be for. And I think that's still why I do art. I think for me, a lot of it is about taking things apart and seeing how they work.

It's a job title that, I think, I probably interpret quite loosely. A lot of the work that I do is made through collaborations and a lot of it is also- a lot of it involves kind of other processes, including curatorial processes, for example. And a lot of the work that I am doing now, is made through an ongoing collaboration with the curator Annika Kuhlmann, where we end up like quite often swapping roles, where I make a lot of curatorial decisions and Annika makes a lot of decisions in the work that we make. And I think that these roles are for me quite fluid.

How the role of an artist is understood is probably changing. I think the more that jobs are automated, the more that maybe what a lot of people do, maybe the future of work will look increasingly like what artists do now. And I think that more and more people do kind of creative projects, whether they explicitly call themselves an artist or not. But I think more and more people will probably call themselves artists. And I think that's interesting.

ARTWORK

So, the work that I've been doing over the last few years, I mean, since art school really, is made by purchasing original artworks by some of Sri Lanka's foremost young contemporary artists. And then reconfiguring their work for international circulation. And these are artists who've become successful in a new kind of regional market for contemporary art, which has established itself in Sri Lanka, following the brutal end of the civil war there in 2009. And a kind of side effect of that violence was the emergence of this new market for contemporary art. I've been buying original artworks by some of the artists who've become successful in that regional market. And then using their work as components in my work, kind of radically reframing their work for international circulation. And this business kind of grew out of our understanding of what art does in the world. In terms of its role in the processes of gentrification by which cities around the world shaped, its role on the frontline of globalization and particularly the way in which art has been very effective at prototyping new lifestyle formats. Perhaps on the vanguard of new forms of labor. And so, this kind of started with myself and Annika Kuhlmann, the curator that I'm collaborating with, on developing this in the art field. This started with us kind of talking about how these processes could be perhaps constructively reorganized, if we were to take that as a starting point for doing art.

(New Eelam Trailer)

New Eelam is an ongoing experiment in the form of a startup. A real estate technology company that I'm founding with colleagues in order to develop a new form of housing, based on a flexible global subscription that will make it easy to live between multiple cities around the world. This is based on a model of collective access rather than individually owned private property. And for us, this is an

experiment to see if it may be possible to grow a new economic model out of the existing economic, rather than by opposing it.

All forms of transportation could well be decarbonized in coming years. But housing continues to produce almost a third of the world carbon emissions. And my colleagues and I don't think that today's housing is going to work for the future. Because more and more people are working in increasingly flexible ways and moving around more than ever before. And as more and more jobs are automated, the future of work could look increasingly like what artists do. So our plan is, to gradually convert more and more apartments around the world into zero carbon subscription homes. And if we can make a global housing platform work, then our ambition is that this could be the basis for a sort of democratized offshore economic system that's based on collective access, rather than individually under private property.

I guess we are more interested in what can be instituted, rather than what can be critiqued. But of course, there is always an implicit critique in wanting to do something differently.

INTENTION

I think our ongoing work is a kind of complex experiment, based on a series of interrelated hypotheses. And I guess, the first hypothesis has to do with the future of housing. So, our bet is that housing will be able to work more like an informational good, you know, like how you stream music or movies, and this is kind of in line with a transformation that's happening across many parts of the economy. So, a good example would be with motoring. Where up until now, cars have been a mode of transportation, sure, but also a form of self-expression. And our hunch is that the cars will be valued increasingly for their utility, rather than as a form of self-expression as autonomous mobility becomes more and more useful. So, as the driving is automated and the production of vehicles is automated, the business of motoring will be less about selling cars and more about selling miles per dollar. But as that's automated and less and less dependent on finite natural resources and more about renewable energy, then that's likely to become close to zero dollars per mile. As the lifetime value of users is not really located in selling transportation, but more in keeping users in an eco-system. So perhaps the big hypothesis that we're betting on is that the evolution of our present economic system will no longer necessarily be on capitalist terms. And for us developing our venture alongside and through the field of art, is a way to kind of prototype this speculative bet on the future that we're making. Now perhaps that's a little bit different to thinking about the intention of an artwork in terms of the viewer's interpretation of it, but I think that that's something that's really changed for me whilst we've been- or kind of whilst I've been doing this work, which is- I'm really coming to understand spectatorship perhaps as part of the materiality of the work or part process, but not really the purpose of the work. I don't really understand what we're doing as being completed by the viewer's interpretation. I think that is just part of the process.

MEDIUM

Well, I guess, what we are doing, is kind of a longtime artwork in the form of a startup, which is for us the medium in which to conduct our political project. And the startup is perhaps the paradigmatic organizational form of the near future. You have countries like- you have nation states like Estonia that are explicitly understanding government as a startup. Whilst you have businesses, like Amazon, whose stock is now valued more like that of a nation's currency as in based on a kind of collective confidence that it will continue to exist, rather than in terms of an ability to generate profits. And this is perhaps the interesting thing about a startup. In that a startup is an organization that hasn't really

become a capitalist business, yet. Its economics need not make sense in terms of delivering a reliable bottom line. Rather, it's optimized for its potential. Yes, so a startup is intrinsically about a transformational future and in that sense it's a suspension from the assumed reality of how capitalism has to work. So, a business like Amazon or another public company like Tesla that continue to function based on this future potential, these are organizations that have continued to suspend the assumed reality of capitalist economics. And I think there is an exciting potential for how our present economic system could even be evolving. My hypothesis is that the most effective parts of our present economy are not necessarily capitalist anymore. And so, our way of doing art in the medium of a startup is a way of imagining and potentially producing an alternate future.

METHOD

What we're attempting, is a feat of complex coordination, rather than a feat of technological invention. It that it doesn't require new technology. It's not based on scientific discovery. Every part of what we're doing is based on things that already exist. But it's about putting those things together in a new way to invent something that works in a completely different way and that could transform in a "how it's possible to live". But that's a feat of complex coordination, rather than scientific discovery.

There is always for me a kind of like critical balance between the kind of experimental parts of what we're doing and how those experiments are kind of clearly defined. So, I don't think of it all as one kind of like indeterminate open inquiry. I think of it in terms of a directed and purposeful way of making something happen. But what that is, is kind of an experiment in itself, because it's a sort of like speculative bet on the future. But in order to achieve it, requires quite clearly defined goals. And then, even within achieving those goals, like for example, how we work something out in an exhibition, we're quite purposeful about what we want to achieve with a particular exhibition or doing something in a particular way. But quite often that's in order to try something out that we don't know the answer to. So, I think this way of working is all about balancing the kind of predetermined goals and what we want to achieve with the experimental nature of doing something in a different way.

I think, that that's how I kind of understand what we're doing as a sort of proximal Sci-Fi, in that it imagines a sort of alternate reality that is a lot like a reality that we would recognize but with a crucial part of its logic rewired. In this case, that's the kind of property relations behind what we're doing. And the potential of this venture: to be able to produce that reality over time.

And so, I guess, this kind of like strategy is part of a sort of a cumulative process that we're working towards something. It's a series of long-term goals. So it's less about kind of making discrete artworks and more about how everything that we make kind of adds up to proving or disproving our kind of hypothesis along the way.

PRESENTATION

Perhaps some of the most important culture being made in the world now, is being made by brands. And perhaps that could be done in more sophisticated ways. We are really interested in how the space of art could be used to do commercial or political communication, maybe with more depth or complexity.

So, we've been presenting this business in the art field by making kind of immersive environments. We've been asking ourselves sort of how the space of art could be used to communicate a brand in perhaps more complex ways than we'd be able to do in other communication forms, like advertising. So, a kind of- I think one of the starting points in my collaboration with Annika for developing these exhibitions was to kind of ask ourselves, like how a brand could communicate as an artist.

PROCES

I think art has always been really good at prototyping new lifestyle formats, often on the vanguard of new forms of labor. And it's these kind of like- these things that art is quite good at doing that we're most interested in, I think. Particularly art's kind of structural operations on the frontline of globalization, as an expression of economic liberalization. And as part of the processes of gentrification by which cities around the world are shaped. And this is kind of what I came to through the work that I've been doing over the last three years, since art school really. And I'm now kind of more interested in like these structural operations of art. What art actually does in the world. And so, I think our new venture started by assuming those processes as a kind of way of doing art and asking ourselves, how those processes might be kind of constructively reorganized.

PRODUCTION

Well, I think all startups are kind of- a form of Sci-Fi. I mean, if we're talking about like potential high growth businesses, right? So, I think all ambitious startups that are kind of based on a radical vision for an alternate future. And as what a startup does is taken up, if it's successful, then it transforms behavior. And if it's very successful, then it could transform behavior to the extent that that behavior could become a verb. So, I think all startups are really about producing alternate realities. And I guess, what we're working on with *New Eelam* is that we're bringing together specialists from across the fields of real estate, finance, technology, design, data-science, architecture and art to develop a new form of housing.

So, I sort of like work from wherever I am and I don't really live anywhere, I've kind of been living more or less on the route for the last, well several years now, since art school really. My laptop is my studio, I guess. And my cofounders are all in different places, we're a remote team. Well, we're all working on different things, so right now, we are prototyping our kind of show home and modeling a lot of the data involved. And the exhibitions have become for us a really good way of kind of bootstrapping the business and planning like the early stages of starting this company through doing these exhibitions. And that has been a way of kind of like talking to potential customers and like working with technologies that we're interested in by making our shows.

ART

Where my family is from in Sri Lanka, since 2009 you have this kind of accelerated microcosm to see how contemporary art kind of establishes itself as a function of economic liberalization. And you can see almost on fast forward how that works as part of processes of gentrification by which cities around the world are shaped and kind of on the frontline of globalization. And it's these kind of structural operations of art that are typically disavowed by art people in favor of prioritizing only what art does for its viewer. As if the viewer's interpretation is the only thing worth talking about. And I think, that comes from a kind of like a delusional worldview that has our comprehension at the center reality. But this idea, that reality can only be correlated at our interpretation of it, I think that's a worldview that seems to be unraveling in so many directions. And I think- something that for me is really important that has changed in how I understand what art is for, is that I'm no longer thinking of art as being for the viewers interpretation. I'm no longer thinking of art as something that is completed by interpretation. I've come to understand spectatorship as part of the process, part of what makes art work, part of like maybe even part of the materials, rather than its purpose.

BIO

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), „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). Forthcoming exhibitions include shows at Hamburger Bahnhof (Berlin) and Tensta Konsthall (Stockholm).

Credits

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