



**Christopher Kulendran Thomas**  
in collaboration with Annika Kuhlmann:  
“Ground Zero” at Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin

Christopher Kulendran Thomas’ family is from a place that no longer exists. 10 years ago, in the summer of 2009, the Tamil homeland of ‘Eelam’ was wiped out by the Sri Lankan army. Born through a neo-Marxist revolution, it had been self-governed as an autonomous state for almost 30 years. However, following attacks on the United States on September 11th 2001, revolutionary movements around the world were re-labelled as terrorists, enabling their eradication. As the international community turned a blind eye, Eelam was annihilated. Curiously, in the months following that violence (and with the economic liberalisation that followed), the first white cube commercial galleries opened in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo, projecting democratic values internationally and representing a generation of artists influenced by the Western canon encountered online.

Projected onto a large transparent screen bisecting the gallery space, the film *Being Human* (2019) forms a three-dimensional hypertext for a collection of paintings and sculptures by Upali Ananda and Kingsley Gunatilake, two of Sri Lanka’s foremost contemporary artists, purchased from one of Colombo’s most influential commercial galleries and presented by Thomas and Kuhlmann as a show-within-a-show. Shot in Sri Lanka, their film traverses documentary and fiction. It features Christopher Kulendran Thomas’ uncle (a family hero who founded the Centre for Human Rights in Tamil Eelam), as well as various guests of the Colombo Art Biennale – a well-known painter, a famous pop star and a young Tamil artist (some of them algorithmically synthesized characters) – who take the viewer on an elliptical journey around the island, from the fallout of the Sri Lankan Civil War to the biennale founded in its aftermath. Examining the idea of creativity as a humanist fiction, the film itself is made through multiple systematic and machinic processes, with characters generated using neural networks running on purpose-built computers and a soundtrack that includes a pop song composed by reverse engineering the prolific Swedish producer Max Martin’s secret songwriting system known as ‘melodic math’.

The work of Ananda and Gunatilake are presented as material components of their own ready-made re-presentation by Kulendran Thomas – and titled as such with inventorial objectivity – circulating as memetic arbitrage across the contours by which identity and power are negotiated globally. Exploring the interrelationship between contemporary art and human rights in an era of globally uneven technological acceleration, *Ground Zero* reflects upon issues of individual authenticity, collective sovereignty and what it means to be 'human' when machines are able to simulate human understanding ever more convincingly.

Around the world, the juridical framework of human rights has been leveraged not only to protect the oppressed and disenfranchised but also to justify the imperial ambitions of the nation states by which human rights are enforced. Perhaps though, the problem is not with the concept of human rights but with the very category of 'human' itself.



Christopher Kulendran Thomas, *Being Human* (2019), in collaboration with Annika Kuhlmann  
Installation views: 'Ground Zero' at Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin; Images: Andrea Rossetti