

**Spike Art Magazine #62 – Winter 2020**

by LAURIE ROJAS

## Christopher Kulendran Thomas in collaboration with Annika Kuhlmann – “Ground Zero” at Schinkel Pavillon



To be human is to be rife with contradictions. Such is the paradox presented in “Ground Zero”, centred around a film installation made by British Sri Lankan artist Christopher Kulendran Thomas in collaboration with curator Annika Kuhlmann. The film *Being Human* (2019) is a seductive docufiction representative of the post-post-internet turn to tech-driven politics.

Thematically, however, it gets under your skin as it navigates human-rights conflicts and the power of art to gloss over ethical quandaries. The liquidation of the de facto autonomous state of Tamil Eelam in the aftermath of 9/11 and the gruesome end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009 serve as the points of origin for Thomas and Kuhlmann’s ongoing project *New Eelam*, which is ambiguously positioned as both an artwork and as a subscription-based housing start-up. The project is pitched as a meeting point between Marx and the market by synthesising neo-Marxist utopianism with neoliberal tech entrepreneurship to create a global network of connected smart homes for the globe-trotting freelancing class. According to Thomas, *New Eelam* will launch in 2020 and *Being Human* serves as its prequel.

At “Ground Zero”, we learn that in 2009, the same year the Tamil Tigers were defeated, Sri Lanka saw the opening of commercial art galleries and the first Colombo Art Biennial in the country’s largest city. A handful of artworks by prominent Sri Lankan artists Upali Ananda and Kingsley Gunatillake were purchased by Thomas from a Colombo gallery and are presented here as quasi readymades behind the semi-transparent screen on which the film is projected. The works are illuminated at transitional moments of the looped film, which otherwise is screened in a darkened room. They serve as representations of Sri Lanka’s budding art market that, as we learn from the film, was supposed to create a space for freedom of thought and democratic values in the immediate aftermath of the end of the civil war. *Being Human* navigates various concurrent developments as it takes you around Sri Lanka and delves into a somewhat heavy-handed brief history of contemporary

art. At one point the film turns into a pastiche-cum-homage of Arthur Jafa's *Apex* (2013) with a montage of western contemporary art, including previous installations at the Schinkel Pavilion, edited in sync to Robert Hood's track just as Jafa did in *Apex*.

*Being Human* doesn't let you easily digest a moral of the story, but it throws into doubt the very notion of the individual that has informed the last 250 years of bourgeois thought. Because, as the destruction of Tamil Eelam and the accompanying human rights violations indicate, this ideology does not serve all of humanity universally (as it was ostensibly intended to), but rather, it is mediated by ruling powers and often serves the interests of capitalism over humans.

This problem is further elaborated by two algorithmically synthesised avatars in the film: Oscar Murillo and Taylor Swift. Fake Murillo speaks earnestly about how contemporary art is "the perfect cultural expression of a particular way of organising economies around the idea of the individual" and argues that contemporary art is based on "a fiction of humanness". Murillo's rhetoric seems to pull the rug from underneath an established understanding of contemporary art. Meanwhile, an uncanny Swift weighs in on artistic authenticity – to a soundtrack of a new "Taylor Swift" song produced by reverse-engineering Max Martin's "secret" formula for top-of-the-charts pop songs – delivering one of the most memorable lines in the film: "Maybe simulating simulated behaviour is the only way we have of being for real."

As a critical diagnosis of late capitalism and contemporary art, *Being Human* doubles as a manifesto for an artist-led alternative housing start-up that seeks to legitimise the marriage of art with a new type of real-estate company. The project overall is self-contradictory, reproducing that which it critiques, but therein lies its strength. It does not try pointlessly to resist art's self-contradictory status vis-à-vis capitalism. Rather, Thomas and Kuhlmann see such incongruity as a possible source for change and try to weaponise hypocrisy to bring forth something new.