

EVENTS

Artist's Talk

Christopher Kulendran Thomas will discuss *When Platitudes Become Form* on Saturday September 21st at 2pm. All Welcome.

Workshops

As part of the exhibition there will be a series of workshops which will take place in September. If you are interested in finding out more about this process or would like to participate please contact Georgina Jackson georgina@mercunion.org or 416.536.1519

BIOGRAPHIES

Christopher Kulendran Thomas (b. 1979, based in London and Berlin) works through collaboration and/or exploitation to manipulate the processes through which art is distributed in order to set in motion the mechanisms of social change. Since completing his MFA in Fine Art at Goldsmiths, London, in 2012, solo exhibitions have included *When Platitudes Becomes Form*, Centre for Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv and *When Platitudes Become Form*, Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin. Thomas' work will be included in the forthcoming historical survey *Art Turning Left: How Values Changed Making 1789-2013* at Tate Liverpool.

Georgina Jackson is the Director of Exhibitions and Publications at Mercer Union.



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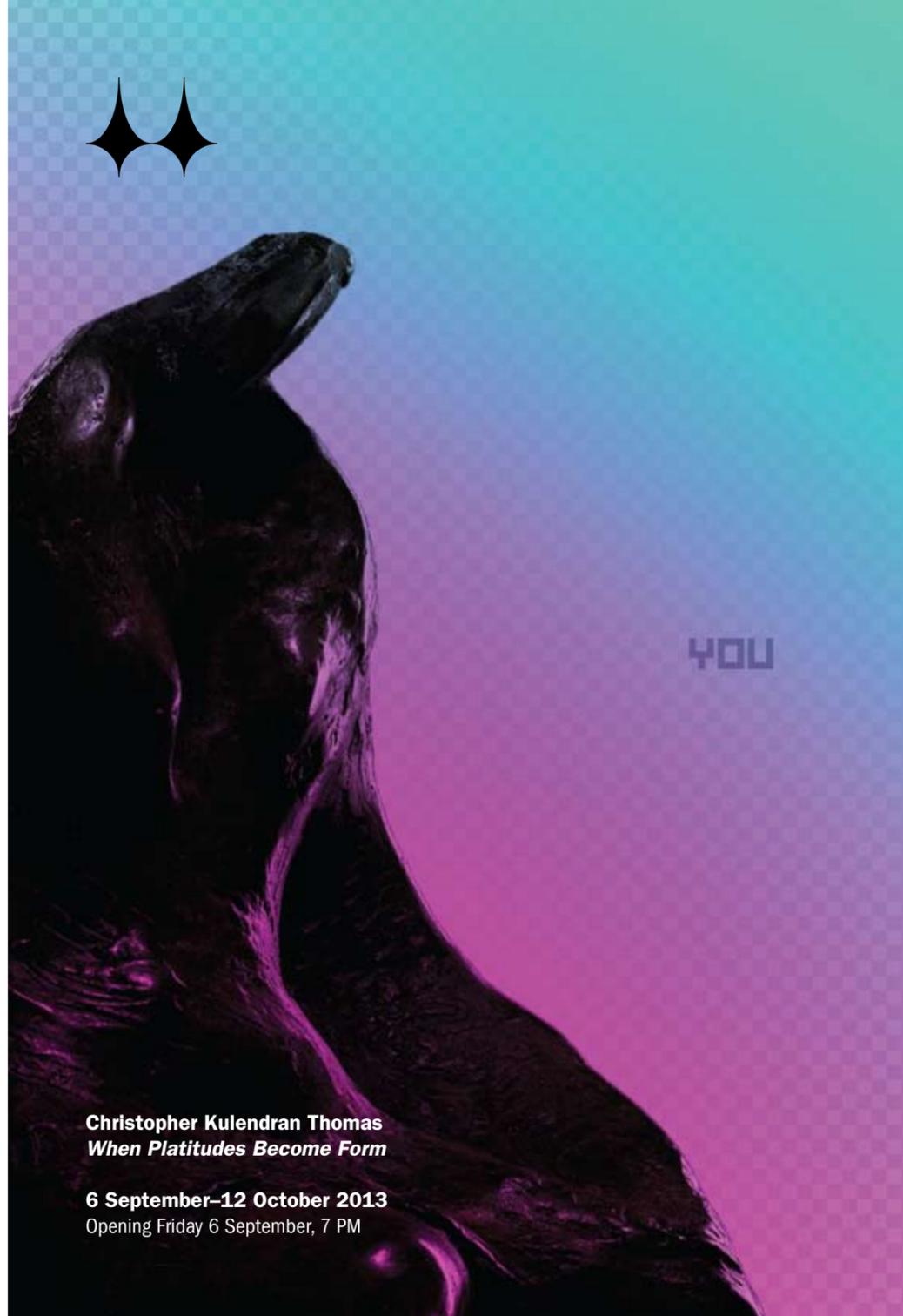
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Christopher Kulendran Thomas
When Platitudes Become Form

6 September–12 October 2013
Opening Friday 6 September, 7 PM



Christopher Kulendran Thomas *When Platitudes Become Form*

Through his ongoing enterprise *When Platitudes Become Form* Christopher Kulendran Thomas reconfigures artworks by some of Sri Lanka's most celebrated young artists purchased through the new contemporary art gallery scene in Colombo. The dislocation of artworks from one context to another, rather than operating as a seamless transition, is problematised by Thomas who mobilises current aesthetic tropes to translate contemporary art's mimetic forms from the West. Contemporary art rather than universal becomes a language as material form translated from one context to another.

The recent rise of the contemporary art market in Sri Lanka both reflects and affirms the country's post-war economic liberalisation following the genocidal assault on the Tamil minority in the East and North of the island in 2009. Born in London in 1979 after his parents left escalating civil conflict in Sri Lanka, Thomas exploits the gap between contemporary art from here and there, setting in motion consequences that undercut the parameters of both. Asymmetric structures are aligned with asymmetric markets to exploit the difference. Taking as material the whole system by which contemporary art is distributed, Thomas reconfigures artworks in order to instigate part-clandestine processes of structural change in the formerly Tamil-occupied territories of the North and to form a media platform to link diasporically dispersed Tamil solidarity.

Cultural exchange is explicitly perverted by the underlying colonial trading patterns that it usually masks. Art is acknowledged as ecologically contingent within its networked reality. Counter-manipulating imperial interdependencies of art and war, a conspiracy of consequences is set in motion that extends beyond the work's as yet visible horizons.

- Georgina Jackson, Director of Exhibitions & Publications

An interview between Christopher Kulendran Thomas and Georgina Jackson

GJ: In *Art Power* Boris Groys unpicks the supposition of modern and contemporary art as pluralistic and explores the undisclosed assumptions which gather around what we determine as 'contemporary art'. The role of 'the contemporary' and 'contemporary art' is a central tenet of your practice; can you explicate the interconnection between these two terms?

CKT: The term Contemporary Art has been used throughout the last half-century to refer to art being made at the time but it seems to have mutated over time into a proper noun, now referring to a particular (but unstated) globalising ideological formation. This was forged perhaps through the deregulation of financial services in the 1980s by Reagan, Thatcher and others, and the collapse of Communism at the end of that decade as a viable political alternative. The resulting ideology of non-ideology has prevailed since then as the 'contemporary' condition. However, in the wake of the global financial crisis, I wonder whether we could begin to see Contemporary Art as a limited art historical condition that we might look back on as the art of neoliberalism.

GJ: The prioritisation of the visual within Western societies has been problematised by Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes* crucially exploring how this prioritisation has affected our understanding of the world while more recently theories of Speculative Realism have explored the potential of thinking through the object. The question of materiality is central to this work, from the artworks purchased from a gallery in Colombo and reconfigured for exhibition, to the acknowledgement of spectatorship as part of the very material of the work. How do you perceive the role of the object?

CKT: Contemporary Art came about in the television age as a cultural form that was specifically for spectatorship but the big media of our day no longer works like that. Google and Facebook, for example, take us not simply as their spectators but as their very materials for all sorts of algorithmically processed purposes that we see very little of. Beyond a bogus distinction between subjects and objects, networks can be understood as sites of intersection between human and non-human materiality, as 'large-scale objects' that are too dispersed to be seen in their entirety. I find Tim Morton's idea of 'hyper-objects' is a useful way of understanding artworks that are so massively distributed in time and space as to transcend localisation. The materiality of *When Platitudes Become Form* includes all the transactions, translations and manipulations involved in its networked circulation, as well as (but not limited to) gallery-bound spectatorship.

GJ: There is also an act of translation through the work; artworks popular within the emergent contemporary art scene in Sri Lanka are literally reconfigured for Western audiences. In his essay "The Logic of Equal Aesthetic Rights" Groys posits art's emancipatory power as giving equal permission across all media; what is the role of this act of translation and how does this connect to equal rights?

CKT: Well more than Contemporary Art's equal permission across media, Groys asserts its emancipation across geographies and histories too, affording equal permission to reference local specificities and global generalities. However, the trouble with Contemporary Art's 'equal aesthetic rights' is the same (at least structurally) as the trouble with the United Nations' assertion of universal human rights. The liberal conception of universal rights upon which both are based allows Contemporary Arts cultural/historical remixing and justifies the toppling of certain dictatorships to hand down human rights but it prevents the addressing of internal structural oppression. It invokes an abstract idea of equality that is institutionally normalised without being able to see the means by which that normalisation occurs. This is how the international community failed to prevent the genocidal annihilation of Tamil opposition in Sri Lanka in 2009, much like it failed Rwanda before. *When Platitudes Become Form*, rather than asserting equal rights, deals with (and in) structural exploitation. In that way it could be understood as an assault on universal/human rights.

I began this work as a way of facing up to the difference between where my family is from and where I am now - but to do so beyond the convenient logic of multiculturalism where everything's OK because

everyone's equal. Multiculturalism just doesn't ring true with my experience of that difference. So with this work I'm trying to confront my own roots in a way that is sufficiently conflicted to be truthful to my own first-generation immigrant experience.

GJ: You've outlined that at a certain point the logic of 'criticality' no longer made any sense to you. Can you elaborate on the shift from 'criticality' to the work engaged with through *When Platitudes Become Form*?

CKT: Derived perhaps from Conceptual Art, the logic of 'criticality' was almost immediately institutionalised and academicised so that it can now be taught and learned and rehearsed and played out to create value. It is exactly this value that is required at the top end of the market and it's exactly this that institutions require to maintain their authority. So art keeps doing its pretend politics within its institutionalised pockets of mock opposition. However art has always produced its reality and been produced by its reality in all sorts of ways - infrastructurally, economically, hierarchically, institutionally - which are typically disavowed in favor of the viewer's interpretation of art. This is seen as the only consequence of art worth discussing and this dependence on the viewer's interpretational agency perpetuates a fantasy of individual autonomy with us at the centre. I'm interested in art's actual contiguous reality and its real interdependencies are not limited to spectatorship. So instead of critiquing, I'm interested in instituting art's reality - actually rather than conceptually. This work is not a theoretical proposition in that it does for real what it's about. So I see it as Real Art as opposed to Conceptual Art.

GJ: In *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2009) Mark Fisher acknowledges "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it."¹ Neoliberalism's saturation is often perceived as disabling any potential of *the political* or structural change within the present, however you extend beyond the parameters of contemporary art and lean towards potential consequences or structural change.

CKT: I'm not particularly interested in an alternative to capitalism per se, nor am I particularly motivated to imagine one. Maybe this is a failure of imagination on my part but capitalism, when politically accountable, has brought a lot of people out of poverty and is certainly better than the feudalism that preceded it. However it desperately needs to be reorganised and this has become clear to most after the global financial crisis. It seems to me that imagining an alternative to neoliberalism and its attendant fantasy of individualistic autonomy (in which Contemporary Art is implicated) is crucial to making a world beyond an unsustainable consumption bubble. I am interested in imagining an ecological conception of art that happens through the interdependencies of its contiguous reality, rather than playing up to the fantasy that our interpretation is its only consequence.

GJ: Finally, as part of this exhibition there will be a series of workshops which will take place in collaboration with the large Tamil community here in Toronto and marks a departure for the project.

CKT: This will begin the process of developing a media platform based on Augusto Boal's methodology for Forum Theatre. Participants will learn improvisation techniques and contribute to the early development of a global network for social change through collaborative filmmaking. Developed by Boal in Brazil in the 1970s, Forum Theatre enables communities to deal with local problems through self-organisation. Along with its variations such as Legislative Theatre, these methodologies work through repeated role-playing, with its audience (or 'Spect-actors') exchanging roles with the originating participants to offer alternative solutions to the scenes that are played out. These methodologies have had powerful personal and structural consequences around the world, even producing numerous legislative and governmental changes. Working with a London-based curator, Helen Kaplinsky, and many collaborators, we want to extend the methodology of Forum Theatre online, developing a platform for geographically-dispersed collaborative filmmaking, whereby 'Spect-actors' around the world can contribute their own versions of scenes originated by Tamil communities. Whereas cinema addresses a universal viewer, our ambition for this type of networked production is to provide a platform through which to engage trans-national debate in the local and personal specifics of structural social change.

¹ Fisher, Mark. (2009) *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative*. Zero Books: London, 2.

