

Transkript Gespräch Harburger Bahnhof

Transkription des Gesprächs unter dem Titel «Imagine you could live everywhere» mit Christopher Kulendran Thomas, Annika Kuhlmann und Christoph Twickel. Das Gespräch fand am 14.01.2017 im Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof anlässlich der Ausstellung *60 Million Americans Can't Be Wrong* statt.

Christoph Twickel: I'm happy to be able to moderate this talk here, I think we start with your presentation first.

Christopher Kulendran Thomas: Hello. It's an enormous pleasure to be here and I'm going to start by talking about the work behind the show. The press release for this show is about the political importance of «leaving». Though it doesn't say it explicitly it's inspired by the concept of «forking» in software development, which is what happens when an impasse or disagreement in how to develop a piece of software is overcome by part of the developer community working independently to develop an ultimate version of the code to produce different results. And maybe you could also think about independent movements in these terms. For example, Eelam, where my family is from, was self-governed as an autonomous state for three decades during the Sri-Lanka Civil War and it was led by a Neo Marxist Revolution and the idea of Eelam was that it would be based on equality for all, irrespective of class or gender, race, faith, or sexuality. And this was very different how you could have recently described the society at that time. This idea was eventually crushed in 2009 by an authoritarian Sri-Lankan President who had come to power by appealing to neglected rural voters and opportunistically inflaming racial hatred to get elected. And eventually, he leveraged this hatred and fear of this minority to dissolve parliament and to rule with executive powers, fueled by a wave of populist nationalist sentiment that eventually culminated in the brutal annihilation of the people of Eelam. A more successful example of a «fork» in these terms would be the United States. A minority that felt that they didn't belong in the old world left Europe to build upon a new world. And eventually the old world had to change to be more like the new one. The economist Albert Hirschman sees this option of leaving as being crucial to maintaining political accountability. He wrote this book about 45 years ago called «Exit, Voice and Loyalty - Responses to decline in firms, organizations and states» and his observation was that the option of leaving an organization when it isn't serving its constituents, is necessary to give power to the other option, which is to not leave and transform the organization from within. But now that there is pretty much nowhere left on the planet, at least geographically, to leave to, perhaps the option of «Exit» can take a different form. Because though the proximity of our bodies is still best characterized by geographic distance between points on the face of the earth. The distance between our minds could increasingly be characterized by a completely different metric which is geodesic distance. And that is the number of degrees of separation between two nodes in a social network. So geodesic cartography doesn't map nations states, it maps states of mind. And now technology can increasingly connect us not just intellectually and emotionally with remote peers, but also technology can make it possible for more and more people to be more and more mobile and more and more be able to meet peers in person. The cloud formations of the internet are beginning to take physical shape, driving the reorganization of actual bodies. So, the press release for this show refers to the Silicon Valley blockchain entrepreneur Balaji Srinivasan who often tweets about democracy threatened by increasing mobile constituent who can transfer their loyalties to the cloud. Srinivasan thinks that democracy will be forced to either recover or collapse. Though as of 12 hours ago Srinivasan isn't tweeting anymore, he's deleted all his tweets after having surprisingly met with Donald Trump yesterday even though he has ferociously opposed Trump throughout his campaign. But he met with Trump yesterday about running the FDA and the potential of that is kind of blowing my mind. I don't think that will

happen but if that happens, that could see the potential of technology (gene technology) unbanded. That could be a turning point in the evolution of the human species. (laughs) I don't know if Srinivasan is going to do that job, but he has deleted his twitter account after that meeting. Anyway, Srinivasan imagines the potential of reverse diasporas that start out internationally distributed and end up physically concentrated. So as more and more people connect and institute new social forms that transcend nation states, we can potentially begin to see «cloud towns» determined by geodesic distance rather than geographic distance and then potentially «cloud cities» und ultimately «cloud countries» could materialize out of thin air, where citizenship could be a choice rather than a hereditary privilege. So, the ongoing enterprise that this exhibition is from, began with a sort of thought experiment of asking what the idea of Eelam could have been if it had been imagined as a distributed network rather than a territorially bounded nation. A new Eelam for all perhaps, with its idea liberated from its land. And what emerged from that thought experiment is the real estate technology company that our colleagues and I are starting. We're bringing together an interdisciplinary team of specialists from the fields of technology, real estate, art, architecture, finance, and design with the aim of potentially transforming how housing can work. It's part of a long-term strategy for thinking about how a new economic model might evolve without friction out of the present system. Through the luxury of communal access rather than individual ownership. And the idea is that if more and more homes around the world could be redesigned as standardized commodified technologies, inhabited flexibly, and traded optimally, then potentially the capital gains from real estate markets could be repurposed towards reducing the cost of housing. Essentially making homes function more like informational goods. And the potential is to gradually reduce the cost of our subscription until it could, in theory, become a trivial cost like the cost of electricity. What we're developing to work is that a flat rate monthly subscription will give you continual access high quality apartments in specific neighborhoods in cities around the world so you can move around freely and because of the flexible way in which the apartments will be inhabited, they can be bought and sold optimally by the company and over time the trading of the continually revolving property portfolio can progressively subsidize the cost of the subscription itself. So, we want to reengineer how housing can work to give a much better deal to those that value experiences and the relationships that they have and share over the accumulation of things and the amassing of assets. And we think that this could eventually be the basis for a democratized off-shore financial system, optimized in a very different way and made a lot more accessible than the existing off-shore industry. And this faty is rooted in the possibility that long term structural transformation might be more likely to be achieved by making something that works better rather than by requiring a moral choice based on ideological criteria. The more the jobs are automated the more the feature of immaterial labour might look more and more like what artists do. And as homes become more and more primary site of production for increasingly post-labour economy we're interested in how the ownership of this means of production «the home» can be reorganized. And also, in what kind of new social forms this could open up. So, for example «the nuclear family» sort of came about a pre-industrial revolution and that was kind of literally concretized in the shape of the home and now in institutions like marriage or whatever seem to be financially underwritten by mortgages and so if the way housing can work can be opened up through this new industrial revolution that we seem to be at the beginning of then what kind of new social forms could that open up. And of course, the art world has always been quite good at prototyping new lifestyle formats, like loft living would be an obvious example of something that the art world did half a century ago in Manhattan that has since become a sort of more mainstream lifestyle aspiration. And now it's perhaps the art world that is at a forefront of reproducing around the world the lifestyle of globalization. So, like I have been living on the road since I've finished art school. But in Sri-Lanka you have this kind of accelerated microcosm to see in only the last six years how contemporary art establishes itself as a function of economic liberalization. So, the civil war there ended seven years ago and almost overnight the first generation of white cube western style commercial galleries opened up to create a marker for what was called for the first time

contemporary art. And that new contemporary art market profited in the economic liberalization that followed the end of that war. I guess the venture that we're starting really grew out of this understanding what art does in the world. And taken as a starting point like these structural operations including art sort of diplomatic portfolio on the frontline of globalization and as part of the process of gentrification by which cities around the world are remade. Maybe I could hand over to Annika, New Eelam's artistic director and of course the curator of this exhibition to talk about how we're developing this in the art field.

Annika Kuhlmann: Christopher and I have been developing New Eelam and it's artistical position in the last year and a half, starting with the first presentation that we've done at last year's Berlin Biennale. And I guess as a pre-text for the way we've been thinking about New Eelam in art was through the question how we can understand the space of art as a media space, how a brand might communicate if it was itself an artist and how that art space as a media space and that communication holds the potential for more interesting and complex, maybe more critical brand communication than any other marketing communication would usually allow. A brand to talk about itself in context and its mission and its visions maybe. (shows images) This is from the Biennale presentation at Akademie der Künste in Berlin where we presented New Eelam for the first time in sort of a concept space show home lounge environment that actively adapts commercial or corporate aesthetics to introduce the idea of a long-term artwork in form of a startup. The central element of this presentation was a film, which you can see over here, and you might have recognized a couple of the works because this show is a re-adaptation or re-formulation or re-interpretation of what we've done at Berlin Biennale. Here though showing it more focused on the individual artworks rather than building a complex environment as you're seeing here where all the works come together to build one space, one environment in which to experience and get a feeling of what New Eelam could be. A seductive space in a way that invites you to sit down on a sofa to watch this 15min. film in a home that could potentially be the homes that the film was talking about. In this case clearly focusing on very familiar aesthetics of what a luxurious environment would be of what a loft space could be furnished like of what an aspirational spatial design is. The film is part of a series we're working on, we're currently producing the second part of this growing epic of series that deals with different aspects. It's kind of a sci-fi proposition, you have a new word for it - I think its poly- or polid sci-fi - you can also call it proximal sci-fi or a speculative documentary in which we tell the history of Eelam basically in a way that focusses on specific aspects that allow us to draw it into this future scenario of New Eelam. What if New Eelam was possible. Here is a different presentation more focused on images rather than on materiality if you want. It's more creating an imaginary image spaced space. What you see in all these presentations are works from artist from Sri-Lanka. These are parts of Christopher's formal work series «When platitudes become form» that he purchased in Sri-Lanka, at Art Space Sri-Lanka, it's one of the contemporary art galleries that opened after the end of the civil war and is reformatizing into his artwork. So this approach is something that we've merged into New Eelam that we have rebranded through New Eelam in a way thereby creating decorative artworks that furnish the space that use art as it is commonly used by a lot of collectors and institutions and corporations but also allowing through these works sort of a prism onto the structural consequences that Christopher has been talking about and that contemporary art is working through and that we're adapting or reorienting in New Eelam. So that's why these works have become an integral part of our presentations. To get back to the film briefly, it's a speculative documentary that we're building into a series that tell the history from a slightly changed perspective, rewiring certain preconditions that we have in our current reality in order to reformulate this new as if reality in a way what would be if property relations were rewired what would be if we could upload ourself into the cloud, what would happen if this vision, this New Eelam idea, that for us right now is unthinkable would become possible over time would maybe become possible because we introduce the vision of New Eelam and build it together so that in our collective imagination we can actually make the impossible possible we can make this shift that we are supposing a

reality we're proposing in a way. I guess this idea of a vision of a proposition of using the space of art as this maybe not critical space, but visionary space that's something we will be further expanding in the next year with the upcoming shows, the next one will be at Hamburger Bahnhof where we are again changing the way we've presented it from the luxury showroom lounge space to the imaginative image space like aerie space to this presentation here focused on the individual artworks and then understanding the potential of our presentation of New Eelam in art as potential of actively speculating of using these rooms that we create as prototypes for potential ways of living in the future so the next space is going to use aquaplanic systems in order to grow a garden inside the museum space, we're gonna build walls from straw-bail which is pointing into the future of sustainable energy efficient building strategies, we're going to have the second part of the film talking about the idea of the cloud and the potential of the exit and the fork. So that's the perspective we're working towards right now in our presentations together with the research program that we will be developing in order to discuss the context of New Eelam and all the questions that relate to it.

Twickel: Thank you for the introduction, maybe I should introduce myself also to make clear I'm not only moderating here but I also have a position in this. My name is Christoph Twickel, I'm a journalist here in Hamburg working for die Zeit and Spiegel online, but I'm also involved in the so called «right to the city» movement here in Hamburg which took off in 2009 with the occupation of the Gänge Viertel and other activist things that happened in these days. I'm part of a project called Fuchs Genossenschaft. We bought an old Kaserne from the city of Hamburg in 2015, the Viktoria Kaserne in Altona and that has to do with right to the city movement because the protest against the implementation of IKEA in Altona and let's say the struggle to keep the old Frappant in Altona as an art space and a social space led us to also fight for this other building the Fuchs Kaserne Altona and I'm on the board of this newly founded association and in a way that makes me also quite interested in your work because of course the right to the city has something in common that the city space and the access to the city is a field where social struggle or social distribution and also exclusion take place. And I think all these questions that we as activists are interested in. We were talking about gentrification, I wrote a book about gentrification a few years ago. My first question would be that New Eelam presents itself in a quite slick corporate aesthetic, in the video I saw about New Eelam you also took the example of Amazon as a corporation as something that could be a reference to New Eelam, but also New Eelam as you put it before, takes a study point of the oppression of the people of the autonomous region of Eelam. That's quite a jump from the civil war in Sri-Lanka to a proposal like this. We should talk about that first, how is that connected?

Thomas: The connection is only a kind of thought experiment, which is only a bad attempt at a self-governing autonomous state was ultimately crushed by a government that better understood how to leverage international geo-strategic interests and commercial interest against their minority opposition. And that revolutionary struggle ultimately didn't understand that conflict on a global scale in the same way that the Sri-Lankan government did. That struggle was mounted on a more or less local scale of establishing an independent territory. So, the thought experiment was to ask what this idea of a self-governing autonomous state could be if it was understood in really kind of the opposite way. So, I think what we're embarking on is kind of the opposite strategy to that revolutionary struggle that my parents ultimately left.

Twickel: What are your parents thinking about the project?

Thomas: That has been quite an evolution actually. Cause when I started making the work that has come before the venture that we started now, it was a way to address some of the stuff I found troubling that I couldn't even talk to my dad about cause it was always end in an argument. So, there was a while where my dad and I were not talking, but now he has come around and I have come around to understand where he was coming from and where I was

coming from and I think now my parents really appreciate this proposition as an alternative to what they saw fail.

Twickel: I'm asking because I think, starting with the civil war in Sri-Lanka, the Tamil community and Eelam – I don't know much about it – we're talking about a rural community.

Thomas: Actually, after the independence from the British Empire, Tamils ended up being disproportionately in clerical jobs and academic jobs and that revolutionary movement began as a protest against university admissions discrimination. So, it would be unfair to characterize it as a rural thing. But there is an important point in that that you make, because the Sri-Lankan governments strategy to economically isolate that movement cities didn't end up developing in the way they did in south Sri-Lanka.

Twickel: Let's put it that way: do I get it right, that they are saying that we have to give up on that idea of developing a certain region of a nation state as an autonomous place where we could do something as a community?

Thomas: My dad has come to understand, from this distance over thirty years, that conflict purely economically even though he understands the violence the Sri-Lankas new economic prosperity is founded on, he is enthusiastic about it. That's where we had difficulties understanding each other. But now it's all good. The organizational form of the geographically bounded nation state is less than 400 years old, and we think will become a less and less important organizational form despite recent resurgences in nationalism. But I think the longerterm trends are away from that as an important organizational form.

Kuhlmann: Or one could even say that nation state has created a lot of conflict in a way the pre-conceived sovereignty of nation states is was enabled the genocide in Sri-Lanka in the end, because in the international community it would have been quite a stretch to intervene because of those rules and because there was also a perceived democracy in the country as well.

Twickel: Do we have to crush the nation state-based citizenship before we can teach the other one? Or let's put it this way: you're talking about a more liquid form of citizenship and citizenship beyond national borders but still we are affected with citizenship that is imposed on us by nation states. How do you deal with that? That's also the sort of problem I have with the corporate aesthetics of New Eelam, that in my eyes it seems to be something that seems to be focused on a target group, that has less problems with citizenship anyway, you're talking about a jet-set that already is living in kind of a mobile way. Do you know what I mean?

Thomas: Yeah, absolutely. In the first instance, we can only design a product for a market that already exists, but the potential is to, over time, be able to make it possible to live beyond borders in increasingly accessible ways. And really, I think your question is about inequality and real estate markets as they're currently organized are machines for reproducing inequality. Like the classic dilemma that many people face is between the relative flexibility of renting versus the perceived security that comes with owning real estate. But it's only the super-rich for whom real estate is part of a diversified portfolio of investments. For most homeowners, property will amount to the majority of anyone's investments, quite often their only investment and quite often leveraged to the hilt with mortgage. And these are the homeowners, these are the winners of the property game. Renters get screwed harder.

Twickel: I think there was an US finance minister in the 30s who said «homeowners don't go on strike». And that's true.

Thomas: So that dilemma between renting and owning, which is concretized by real estate markets, that binary produces structural volatility, precarity and increases inequality. So, what we're trying to develop is an alternative that can potentially provide greater flexibility even than renting and with more actual security, free from leveraged personal debt. So, we're trying to design something that can work better through a communal access than anything that can be achieved with individually owned private property. And if we can prove that for the narrow niche of people like me, who already need this, if we can prove that it's possible to live beyond borders for less than the price of rent and where the cost of that prescription can even be reduced over time then we believe that could become an even more propelling lifestyle proposition for more and more people. In theory, if we can make this work, we should be able to repurpose capital gains from real estate markets towards subsidizing the cost of the subscription, we should be able to keep doing that over time so that slowly we may be able to reduce the cost of housing. Our aim is to make the cost of housing like the cost of broadband.

Twickel: Actually, I don't know if anybody here is getting the business model already, I still don't get it. I'm asking myself if, what you are proposing, is a subscription service that is based on a business that it gets its subsidies from, then who's paying for this?

Thomas: It's not subsidizing, it's a profitable business.

Twickel: It lives from the thriving real estate market. You buy and sell apartments and you make money from that and that lowers the cost for this subscription for your clients.

Thomas: Yeah, because of the flexible way that the apartments will be inhabited, they can be bought and sold more flexibly and through the trading of these apartments we are reigning to be over time able to repurpose the capital gains from buying and selling properties to reducing the cost of the subscription.

Twickel: That's what I mean, we're just saying something very true, that real estate are machines to produce inequality so if the basis of your business model is a thriving real estate market then how do you produce equality from increasing inequality? I don't get that.

Thomas: I understand. This is also why this is not a utopian proposition in that it starts in the reality of actual existing real estate markets. If we can make this work, this won't add to, or take away from, the supply or the demand of apartments in any neighborhood that we operate in. So, it will kind of have a net-neutral effect on existing real estate markets. Does that make sense? Because for every apartment we're taking out of regular real estate markets, we're also taking out one person that would live in them, right? If we can make this work at scale, then we will be able to provide an alternative to the existing options which is renting or trying to borrow or to buy. So proportionately, the potential is to be able to reduce the structural volatility and potentially part of the inequality that is produced by the real estate markets. Some people will always be able to buy houses, that's fine.

Twickel: That's another question I have, for example your hairdresser, does he ever want to live in that flexible mobile way you're proposing? Yeah, maybe he says, if it's only a hundred bucks, I'll do it. But maybe he wants his small home.

Thomas: Yeah, and he would be no better or worse off if what we're doing works.

Twickel: I'm quite interested in the feasibility of that model because I don't think it's something that you would leave in this model for six months and then go to the next step – so let's put it like this: where is New Eelam in five years or ten years? What's the idea?

Thomas: In five years, we hope to have been able to make the subscription work. (laughter) In ten years, perhaps we could begin to be transforming how housing is organized, to be more like an info good. I mean, really at the heart of this is a commodification of housing, to make housing potentially function more like your phone, as a standardized technology. And one that could be more and more affordable and more and more accessible. But a ten-year horizon is a pretty sharp horizon for an enterprise like that. If we can make it work at scale, then we would like to be able to imagine a future that isn't organized around nationally bound citizenship.

Twickel: So, let's say in twenty-five or thirty years, are you still an artist or are you then COO of New Eelam and art is something you did when you were young? (laughter)

Thomas: The idea that art is part of broader social processes, that's nothing new. I mean even the early stages of the modernist project like Soviet constructivism, Bauhaus, whatever, understood art as having potential consequences beyond its own discipline. And that's a potential for art I think we are both really interested in.

Kuhlmann: The artwork is not limited to the tradeable object anymore.

Twickel: I think the model we are proposing is a capitalist model, you choose Amazon as an example as I mentioned before, you want to do this as a capitalist company.

Thomas: Well, the potential is to be able to provide an alternative to social housing and an alternative to citizenship to people who are excluded from either.

Twickel: So why choose Amazon? What is new or different about Amazon?

Thomas: This is kind of a problematic and polemical example in the film, because the extraordinary thing about Amazon is that it doesn't turn a profit. All of its substantial revenues are reinvested into expanding its infrastructure and reducing its cost base to be able to deliver more and more stuff more and more cheaply to more and more people. And the more efficiently and cheaply they can do that, the happier their customers are the more customers they have therefore the more sellers they have on the platform selling to them therefore the more they're able to reduce their cost base and it's kind of a virtue circle, a wheel that keeps going. And of course Amazon a super capitalist company that squeezes every part of its supply chain putting out of business whoever who needs to be put out of business, squeezing especially its own employees even its executives but its monopolistic program is based on making more and more stuff more and more affordable for more and more people and it does that by automating humans out of the equation of production. The thought experiment of the film is that if Amazon can keep doing this, the logical conclusion is that if more stuff can be made more cheaply, but requiring humans less to do it, then Amazon itself will require something like a universal basic income, because Amazon will require consumers to buy to keep it going. And this is becoming a more and more realistically imaginable scenario. If you consider that the most common job in the United States is «driving». More people drive for a living in America than do anything else and that is a job that isn't going to exist in a decade. So, at that point, things like universal basic income will have to become a more mainstream political issue. So, this has a lot to do with your question about inequality, because the kind of economic liberalization that's maintained relatively stable center ground in western politics over the last few decades has ultimately failed to reduce inequalities between people who have benefitted from globalization and people who haven't.

Twickel: How do I know that you two do not become the new Donald Trump? Expanding, expanding, expanding in real estate, you now say it will bring more social equality, you are

walking towards a universal basic income, but on the other hand, where do I see in this company this is going to happen? What's happening to the subscribers?

Thomas: The longer you subscribe, potentially, the more affordable the subscription becomes. That's the mechanism that we are trying to explain. So, the thing that makes it sticky is, that if we can make it work, you'll just be getting a better and better deal. Your kind of asking, «does it require trust?» and I don't think it does. I don't think that what we're developing requires a moral choice. I think it can only work by not making it a moral choice. It can only work by making something that works better. And everything that has to do with how housing is organized sucks. It sucks for everyone. No one enjoys house-hunting, no one enjoys renting.

Twickel: But it's a thriving business and it makes a lot of people richer.

Thomas: Absolutely, capital gains can be extracted out of it and rent can be extracted out of it and the only people that win are the super-rich and landlords. And we think that a fundamentally different business model can work in real estate.

Twickel: And I think that the control-factor is basically how well it works, so if you would start extracting profits and as soon as you would start raising the rents, in that hypothetical scenario we would turn into Donald Trump and we were now of a sudden focusing on capital gains in that theory. But then I think there would be a competition growing, that would probably eradicate the business. So, in a way its life insurance is, offering the best possible product.

Thomas: And this is where Amazon is a good example, because people often think that Amazon can just wipe out competition and then jack up prices, but why would anyone responsible for making that decision, make that decision. Because Amazon is enormously valuable for Jeff Bezos and for Amazons shareholders because it doesn't extract profit. The value of Amazons shares is not based on Amazons profitability or ability to deliver dividends, it's based on something else, and I think something fundamental is shifting in the nature of capitalism.

Kuhlmann: It's like a fork or mutation.

Twickel: So, Jeff Bezos will be forced to be at the forefront of creating a universal basic income. (laughter)

Kuhlmann: Or if everyone works for him then it's the same thing. (laughs)