

## **Ben Yau Q&A with Nadir Project Space / Kitty Bew**

**Can you tell me a little bit about how *The Spectre of A World Which Could Be Free* came about? What interests you about this particular moment in history?**

*The Spectre of A World Which Could Be Free* began with research into the birth of our neoliberal age. I wanted to find out what had first set alight the bonfire of rights and regulations that we have been bearing witness to for decades, the flames of which steadily engulf the last vestiges of our protections. Inspecting the ashes of neoliberal flashpoints in history, my research led me to 1973: the violent coup toppling the socialist Allende government in Chile. The optics of this downfall would be relentlessly paraded as the paragon of socialist failure, in turn sparking the flame of neoliberalism that would dominate politics, first in Chile under the violent, free market dictatorship, and then to the US and Britain with the Reagan/Thatcher era. But as it turns out, Allende's socialist government didn't collapse organically. It was not until 2000 – when the CIA were forced to into a massive declassification project – that the vast extent of US intervention in Chile was revealed: massive propaganda efforts spreading conspiracy theories, false flag operations within Chile's military, and resistance at every step with the goal of sabotaging Allende and 'collapsing Chile from within'.

*The Spectre of A World Which Could Be Free* is an exercise in re-reading and recuperating this history, utilising these declassified CIA documents. The project collects and arranges this material alongside press images and articles, weaving together the sometimes opposing narratives of covert intelligence and public knowledge at the time. In keeping with this diversity of source materials, I combined different printing methods in their reproduction, mostly sympathetic to the relevant archives I collect from. I also utilised different 'planes' within the framed collages, alternating between placing prints flat inside the frame, raising materials up by adding space and depth, and placing materials on the frame's glass. This was done to emphasise these parallel narratives that exist on different levels.

**To what extent do you aim to relate to the political realities of the present?**

It's imperative to educate ourselves of current political realities and struggles. This research determines the direction of travel in my work. For example, I embarked on *The Spectre of A World Which Could Be Free* because understanding the roots of neoliberalism challenges the prevailing notion that it is the only thing on the menu. I believe that history can unlock the imagination from the tunnel vision perspective that the current reality is the only possible, potential world. Or as Ishmael Reed puts it, "using the

past to explain the present and to prophesize about the future.” My role is less about pointing to our current political realities – we are already living it – and more about pointing to the ways in which we have arrived at this reality. This is also a premise of postcolonial theory; you need to understand the role of colonial powers in laying the groundwork for these dynamics in the past in order to grasp the dynamics of international relations and racial inequities in the present.

**How do content and form come together in your work? Is finding the right formal language important to you?**

Finding the right formal language is very important. I’m interested in working with analytical aesthetics, such as in *The Spectre of A World Which Could Be Free* where I borrow compositional cues from the investigative and archival. In other words, I try to think about how form can be used to trigger a more analytical gaze, which is why I’m generally drawn to a lightness of touch in my work rather than a heavy-handed approach. On top of that, I try to balance functional, analytical compositions with more experimental ways of presenting.

**Do your works involve an extensive research process?**

Yes, research is an important part of my process. I try to consume from a variety of different sources, so it includes things like digging into journals and reading essays, watching documentaries, and scrolling through various image banks. I’ll be the first to admit that the large majority of this research ends up as lengthy, cryptic notes on my computer that I’ll never look at again. It’s a laborious process, but worth it when things come together.

**You draw from a variety of sources, including authors, theorists, philosophers. Is the mediation of different voices an important element in your works?**

I think ‘mediation’ is a good way to describe my role as an artist. It’s very light handed and suggests an emphasis on negotiating existing materials. In a similar manner to appropriating other materials such as images, documents, and newspaper clippings, the application of the voices of theorists and writers is an important part of my practice. An example would be from the title of my project on the Chilean coup, which comes from a paragraph in *Eros and Civilisation* by Herbert Marcuse that I came across in Mark Fisher’s unfinished book:

[T]he closer the real possibility of liberating the individual from the constraints once justified by scarcity and immaturity, the greater the need for maintaining and

streamlining these constraints lest the established order of domination dissolve.  
Civilisation has to protect itself against the spectre of a world which could be free.

The downfall of Allende's Chile can be understood as this spectre: the reverberations of a spoiled emancipation that threatens to fall silent. Marcuse goes on to describe the extermination of a world which could be free as its 'exorcism', foreshadowing the CIA backed military coup that deposed Allende, purging the radical imagination. The writings of Fisher and Marcuse set the conceptual groundwork for the project, so the negotiation of the text by Marcuse within the title offers the viewer a point of entry to the project.

**Archival and historical material play an important role. Is a process of collection and selection at the heart of your practice?**

Yes, generally the research provides the material to be collected, and informs the selection and presentation. I try to think of these things holistically, which probably explains why my process is pretty chaotic. Much of the time, I need to have texts, images, web pages, notes, and anything else related to the project in front of me. Free association can be a very useful approach.

**Circumstances of crisis, destruction and disruption seem to be very present in your work. Could you talk a little about this?**

I want to highlight moments in history where many forces collide and reorient the social order. I argue that we are living in the debris of past collisions, whether that is the CIA-backed Chilean coup in 1973 which was the focus of my multimedia project *The Spectre of a World Which Could Be Free*, or the unrelenting, iron grip of Thatcherism in Britain which was a starting point for my moving image work *Proximate Currents*. But I think collision is only half of the story, and actually much of what materialises in public life happens very quietly. I'm thinking of Stuart Hall's argument that moments of both 'rupture and settlement' are critical in a conjunctural analysis of history. How, for example, the Obama era led to the rise of Trump. There was no large collision, no explicit rupture that led to Trump's rise to power; it was the result of a slow realisation that the promise of hope and change was not going to materialise for large swathes of the country, and the profound disillusionment that comes from that realisation should never be forgotten.

**Do you want to talk a little bit about what you're up to now and in the coming months?**

I'm currently working on a new project to be included in an ambitious and exciting book by Rashi Rajguru. I'm not sure how much I'm allowed to reveal about it yet, but briefly, the starting point of the book is the image of the black hole at the centre of the M87 galaxy – the first image of its kind – published in 2019. My project in progress, *The Unity of A Complex of Appearances*, will critically look at the associations between cosmology and culture, and the book is due to be published in 2021.