

Foundation

The camera pans across the undulating plains of a silent post-pastoral landscape with silhouetted trees scattered here and there denoting an unpeopled, unnatural world. Slowly, this perspective sinks beneath the crest of the land, like a periscope retracting through rocks and earth. Through striations and dark layers of sediment is revealed light and signs of life. Unbroken by jump-cuts or fade-outs the camera follows a factory production line where base matter is formed into giant slabs of construction material. Each sheet is processed smoothly and transferred directly to a building site where it effortlessly slots into place. From the fabricated origins of this single unit is revealed an engineered world of clean white structures, a metropolis of shining modern architecture sprawls forth, into the distance.

This scene I've described from H.G Wells' *Things to Come* (1936)¹ can trigger a confusing temporal slippage while watching it in the present. Released before the Second World War, Wells' vision of the future, made manifest on film in the almost-distant past shows a production-line of such efficiency that the technological moment in question would appear to be still beyond our reach. Like a dream of modernity we woke-up from and promptly forgot. Similarly futuristic-yet-nostalgic, writer of *The Diamond Age*, Neal Stephenson describes the crystalline foundations of his fictional enclave, New Victoria as "Buckminsterfullerene²", evoking images of light geodesic interconnections and domes. Richard Giblett's *New Dystopias*, an exhibition of sculpture, drawing and photography intermingle past, present and future notions of the imperfect man-made system. His work enters a discourse familiar to the theoretical underpinnings of science fiction literature and film, where the possible is inextricably married to the known.

While undertaking an artist residency project in New York in 2005, Giblett made a photographic series of found, man-made holes-in-the-ground. With camera lens angling downwards mimicking the action of a curious passer-by, Giblett captured civil engineers, roadside workers, electricians and sewerage maintenance men tending to conduits, substrates and cables poking-out from the mud. Familiar orange traffic cones and striped barricades appear in each shot lending the series a graphic cohesion. In some of these images, the holes have an archaeological-dig like quality, revealing layers of concrete, dirt and in one picture, an underground stream. The somewhat mythical disused passages of the NY subway system (filtered-into the popular imagination via Hollywood, in blockbusters like *Daylight*, *Mimic* and *The Bone Collector*) are suggested as material layers and depths are revealed. Repairs to other fissures appear to be more technically focussed, as if workers were performing keyhole surgery under the dermis of the city, reconnecting its veins and arteries. In this analogy of city-as-organism, there is one notable wound absent from Giblett's series – the super-pit of all New York holes – the site of the former World Trade Centre.

In *System* (2005-6) Giblett renders a city/structure free of the earthly foundations that beleaguer New York's construction workers. This extensive monochrome drawing represents a free-floating network of interconnected units. While the individual shapes have an obvious, geometric three-dimensionality, forming grids, conduits and towers, the mass itself has an organic appearance. Like a shantytown floating in the void, it does not reflect strict urban planning, rather an architectural growth stretching intuitively (nanonically?) across each page and into space. Like the subcity created for Wells' *Things to Come*, Giblett's drawing also began its life as a single, white sheet multiplying out from one page to another under the artist's hand. The fact that the work is drawn by hand at all, instead of designed on AutoCAD, lends weight to the notion that Giblett is concerned with the philosophical foundations for living-spaces. How social habitats grow out of use and necessity.

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Here an attractive connection can be drawn to Giblett's practice and the designs of post-war, experimental architects from British group Archigram³ in the 1960's. No longer assured by the stability of bricks and mortar, the group sought to define new theoretical living spaces based on survival and subsistence. Peter Cook's *Plug-in City* (1964) provided for a networked superstructure that individual domiciles could literally plug-into. Today we see reflections of this kind of practice in the "coffin"⁴ rooms of Tokyo and the new locker-sized hotels opening in airports. Giblett's sculptural work *Subcity (While you were sleeping)* is a more alarming version of the *Plug-in City*, its title implying that the elaborate construction has grown itself overnight. As a giant model or maquette *Subcity* trades on anxieties about rapid urbanisation in countries like China where cities take shape over short timeframes, absorbing vast quantities of natural resources and energy. This minutely detailed, hand-made plywood construction is comprised of frail components that represent buildings, passageways, routes and social infrastructure, gathered in a multi-layered grid around a spherical form. Glowing green from underneath, the unit is imbued with light and a seemingly atomic sense of purpose, to convert and make use of energy.

As the antithesis of utopia, dystopia is a word used to describe a society with problems. In the world of science fiction writing, totalitarian dystopias are the norm. They are the thing that cyberpunk protagonists must eventually, and often reluctantly overcome (or get-over). For Richard Giblett though, dystopias are where we live now. His recent photographs of holes in the streets of New York tether his proto-architectural and futuristic drawing and sculpture to the imperfect foundations of today's cities. From the gaps in the pavement, history is unearthed and the shape of things to come is predicted. While *System* and *Subcity* share aesthetic and formal similarities, they are the agents of two distinct urban strategies. While *System* seems to float, disassociated from context and gradually expands to fill space, *Subcity* asserts its presence as an imposing, immovable mass. For Giblett, both of these dystopias are recognisable forms, anchored in the present.

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³ *Archigram* Peter Cook, 1973