

# The Mining of History, Cognitive Disorder and Spiritualism in Olivia Plender's *A Stellar Key to the Summerland*

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## Abstract

Olivia Plender's single-volume comic *A Stellar Key to the Summerland* (2007) offers an account of the origins of the Spiritualist movement. This book is part of a practice that deploys historiographic methodologies. Plender explores social and esoteric beliefs from the past that disturb contemporary expectations. The illumination of alternative formations and beliefs in the past offers a redress to the apparent inevitability of the social and economic topographies of the present. The use of comics is read here as part of an ongoing practice of excavation. *A Stellar Key to the Summerland* uses the form of graphic narrative to create a reflexive history. The work contributes to a practice that overlays dream geographies onto perceptions and expectations of social reality, and is suggestive of the possibility of social change while engaging with notions of belief and religiosity.

**Keywords:** artists' books, contemporary art, history, politics, religion, Spiritualism

Olivia Plender has built a gallery-based practice that explores history, often through an archival mining of social and esoteric beliefs that disturb contemporary expectations. This approach is one of illuminating alternative formations and beliefs in the past, as a means of offering a redress to the apparent inevitability of the social and economic topographies of the present. These ideas find a point of coalescence in her single-volume comic *A Stellar Key to the Summerland* (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> The work was published by Bookworks, who since 1984 has

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<sup>1</sup> Olivia Plender, *A Stellar Key to the Summerland* (London: Bookworks, 2007).

produced artists' books as carefully designed objects available at a price that is closer to mass-market paperbacks than an editioned artwork. The output of Bookworks includes works selected by and developed with guest editors. In this instance, the project was chosen by the curator Nav Haq. Therefore, while treating the work as a comic or graphic novel,<sup>2</sup> it is also an artist's book, a particular manifestation of a project that is but a single element of a broader practice.

<FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE>

Figure 1: Olivia Plender, *A Stellar Key to the Summerland* (London: Bookworks, 2007). Front Cover. By kind permission of Olivia Plender.

Plender's use of the comics medium places her in a context of other British artists whose work is exhibited, shown and discussed in mainstream contemporary art fora, and who have also made use of the form. One facet of this use of comics in British contemporary art can be identified in the work of David Blandy, which is orientated towards specific genre forms. Blandy employs a bricolage approach to comics imagery alongside references to anime, soul music, hip-hop and kung fu movies. Comics form part of a varied and expanding set of material forms, including drawings, video and various forms of three-dimensional/sculptural elements. In Blandy's work, comics generally mean aspects of Japanese manga, with some aspects of Marvel comics of the 1970s. The imagery is a reflexive blend of retrofuturism and fantasies of lone samurai warriors, which are used to compose

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<sup>2</sup> For an interesting discussion of the problems of using the term 'graphic novel', see Barbara Postema, *Narrative Structure in Comics: Making Sense of Fragments* (Rochester, NY: Rochester Institute of Technology Press, 2013), xi.

inventive, elliptical narratives relating to cultural identity and subjectivity. A very different approach to comics can be found in Laura Oldfield Ford's *Savage Messiah*,<sup>3</sup> a work certainly deserving of detailed critical attention in its own right, bringing together traditions of collage as socially radical critique, fanzines and low-tech image reproduction associated with subcultures, activism or avant-garde traditions.

Plender's use of the comics form can certainly be situated in relation to these other practices. Like Blandy, Plender uses the comics medium to draw out an intriguing set of relationships and possibilities with real space and sculptural elements. As with Laura Oldfield Ford, Plender's work is concerned with the social, with politics, with histories. There is a sustained attentiveness to processes of historical and archival research. Plender uncovers social formations and political movements, often characterised by faith, belief and marginal systems of knowledge and organisation. She assembles partial histories, incomplete narratives composed from fragments that are modest in their claims to authority or authenticity. This critical historical engagement is at times an issue of recreation in Plender's work. Her exhibition *The Medium and Daybreak*, shown at the Castlefield Gallery in Manchester in 2006, offered a partial reconstruction of a chapel, made up of elements including photographs and handmade banners. A review described this, her first U.K. solo show, as 'less of a simple introduction than a mini-retrospective – a run-through of Plender's practice, and interests, to date'.<sup>4</sup> Her contribution to *Altermodern*, the 2009 Tate Triennial, was titled *Machine Shall be the Slave of Man, But We Will Not Slave for the Machine*. This was a response to her own research into the Kibbo Kift Kindred, a British youth movement set up by the artist and writer

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<sup>3</sup> Laura Oldfield Ford, *Savage Messiah* (London and New York: Verso, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Romilly Everleigh, 'Olivia Plender, Castlefield Gallery', *Frieze* 96 (2006), 201.

John Hargrave in the 1920s.<sup>5</sup> The work was intended to appear as an authoritative display, with reconstructions of costumes and banners. However, it included a video element, revealing Plender's attempts to carry out research. The video also presented reflections on the desires and demands embodied in the Kibbo Kift movement as a recurring idealisation of the past that can be found in moments of nationalist expression, particularly at times of social and economic crises. The reflexive gathering of elements presented in these works is a useful image of how Plender operates as an artist. Her practice is a composite of parts. The relationship of *Summerland* to this composite of parts can be thought of in terms of a discussion of comics and adaptation by Peter Wilkins: 'Adaptations, illustrations, and even allusive works of art establish a continuity that establishes an ethical responsibility in that they invite the audience to trace their obligation to the prior work'.<sup>6</sup> This may often be the case within individual practices of contemporary art. Traces linked to prior works sometimes not only illuminate and inform the comprehension of a work, but are necessarily required to engage with it. What is specific here is how a noncomics artist uses a comic that becomes part of that chain of ethical responsibility.

*Summerland* is not Plender's first work to take the form of a comic. *The Masterpiece* was initially published over five issues, and reprinted as a 24-page single-volume work for a

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<sup>5</sup> For a recent exploration of this youth movement, see Kathy Ross and Oliver Bennett, *Designing Utopia: John Hargreave and the Kibbo Kift* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Wilkins, 'An Incomplete Project: Graphic Adaptations of Moby-Dick and the Ethics of Response', in *Transforming Anthony Trollope: Dispossession, Victorianism and Nineteenth-Century Word and Image*, ed. Simon Grennan and Laurence Grove (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2015), 217.

solo show at MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, in 2012. The exhibition, titled *Rise Early, Be Industrious*, demonstrated Plender's ongoing playful reconstruction of elements of social history, with a particular emphasis on notions of education and work ethic. *The Masterpiece* has been shown in different forms, weaving through Plender's gallery-based work, including as drawn individual pages or cheaply produced editions, such as a newspaper version shown in *The Road to Ruin (For Oyvind Fahlstrom)* in 2006. The title of *The Masterpiece* is derived from the commonly Anglicised version of Emile Zola's *L'Œuvre* (1886), a fictionalised reflection on Zola's friendship with Paul Cézanne. The narrative addresses the romantic idea of the artist as genius and tortured creative individual. Plender's story is of a male painter in the 1960s, suffering in his quest to create a perfect work, which will guarantee immortality. In this comic she employs an innovative, playful and inventive use of panels. There is a nonlinear narrative, and a general disregard for a sense of forward momentum in favour of a more disruptive temporality. The drawings are predominantly in heavy pencil, and where ink is used, it is often reproduced so that it retains its unevenness, rather than being reproduced as fields of pure black, as seen in many of the backgrounds of *Summerland*. The experimental play of frames used in *The Masterpiece* also reflects the larger, taller page, which contrasts with the stout rectangle of *Summerland*. Overall, the formal experimentation and playfulness of *The Masterpiece* is downplayed in *Summerland*, with the latter's experimentation limited to variations in a more consistent format and pattern of spatial arrangements.

Plender's work also shares a territory of interest with other contemporary British artists, including Ben Judd and Marcus Coates. Judd, Coates and Plender explore entanglements between contemporary art and a resurgence of interest in faith and belief. I have argued elsewhere that, on the one hand, this seems to correspond to a heightened awareness of the forces of religion shaping global politics, particularly as Judeo-Christian and Islamic

manifestations.<sup>7</sup> On the other, these practices also demonstrate an interest in history, in social margins, in fantasies of subjectivity. Where these practices overlap is not only in a fascination with aspects of religiosity, often overlooked or archaic in character, but also a powerfully critical and reflexive dimension, able to excavate and translate redemptive forces. These forces are extracted out of the past, retrieved both as questions that reframe the present and as possible futures. Plender also shares with Judd and Coates an interest in undermining cognitive expectations. This is a move towards disordering the audience's readings of history and the present. With regard to faith and belief, these artists work against an uncritical restoration of faith, belief and wonderment. Their practices involve scrutiny as well as interest, and disturb rather than reinforce relationships between past and present. For Plender, there is an attention to faith and belief that is intersected by historical and archival research. There is also an emphasis upon social formations and political movements, drawn out of the past, retrieved as both questions that reframe the present and as possible futures. *AADIEU ADIEU APA (Goodbye Goodbye Father)*, shown at Gasworks, London, in 2009, presented a scale model of the 1924 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley, reconstructing a past view of the world as represented for public consumption. The shaping of pervasive ideologies of progress was exposed through the partial re-creation of the exhibition and its framing of a desire to configure the public realm. Plender's model asks whether these ideologies remain in the present. However, while the depicted event has obvious corollaries with the Millennium Dome and the 2012 Olympics, the scale model included a representation of the celestial city, the manifestation of heaven on earth, not only fictionalising the re-creation but also introducing another dimension of hope and progress.

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<sup>7</sup> See Dan Smith, 'New Maps of Heaven', *Art Monthly* 338 (2010), 11–14.

The idea of a promise of New Jerusalem resonates through much of Plender's work, and is brought into sharp focus in *A Stellar Key to the Summerland*. The book offers a partial historical narrative relating to Spiritualism, described in the introduction by a fictionalised depiction of the deceased Andrew Jackson Davis, speaking to us from beyond the grave, as 'the religion for the age of reason'.<sup>8</sup> Davis, known as the Seer of Poughkeepsie, was the author of numerous works, including the six-volume encyclopaedia *The Great Harmonia* (1850–1861) and a work also titled *A Stellar Key to the Summer Land* (1868). He practised for a number of years as a clairvoyant and a healer, using powers of magnetism. He then claimed that in 1844 he was transported from his home some forty miles to the Catskill Mountains, where he communed with two figures from history: the physician and philosopher Galen (129–c. 200 CE) and the Swedish scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). From this point on, he developed and zealously promoted his idea of Harmonial Philosophy, a form of modern Spiritualism that actually preceded modern Spiritualism. Charting an account of the origins of the movement, the narrative of Plender's book is set soon after both the Shakers' move to North America and the establishing of Mormonism. This is a period of radical social and religious formations. Plender draws attention, for example, to Robert Owen's alignment with Spiritualism. Owen, an archetypal utopian who founded the cooperative movement, is quoted as declaring, 'Socialism until united with Spiritualism: a body without a soul'. Through a practice that deploys historiographic methodologies, Plender mines social and esoteric beliefs in order to open up spaces of questioning and uncertainty. The interest in Spiritualism resonates with her exploration of the Kibbo Kift movement. Both are approached as formations of belief and social values that, at the time, were presented as

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<sup>8</sup> As Plender's *A Stellar Key to the Summerland* is not paginated, I will not include references for quotes taken from the work.

alternatives to their respective ideological contexts. Shining a light on these histories is intended to reflect on the construction of narratives that reproduce the present conditions of neoliberal financial capitalism, and the fallacy that the way that things are is unchangeable. These are lost histories that feed into the present. The unearthing of alternatives in the past is performed as a demand for alternatives in the present. *Summerland* exemplifies the ways in which Plender links together dream geographies with political ones, through historical and archival excavations. Echoing Plender's use of her own voice in the video element of her work on the Kibbo Kift, the presentation of the narrative through fictionalised historical characters performs a questioning of the veracity of historical information. In both works, the emphasis on subjective voices is suggestive of a claim for authority that is undermined by the personal and the absence of institutional legitimisation.

The printed form of *A Stellar Key to the Summerland* is something of an unusual shape for a comic. The small size of 12.5 × 18 cm and slightly irregular dimensions/ratio dictate a structure to the pages, with generally either a full-page spread or two wide panels operating as a standard format. The text is in an unnamed font, clearly printed rather than handwritten or hand-designed. There are two fonts used. One is a standard font for speech bubbles, and an italicised text for captions. These are subtle points of signification, markers that perhaps indicate that this is not really a comic, but maybe instead demonstrate that this is an artist's book. A strange addition to the back cover of the book has a preview of a work called *Summertime Ends*. This is described as a story about the Kibbo Kift. However, the book was never published, and the preview reads as a fictional promotion, self-consciously trying to position this book as something else, as a commercial form through a fictional conceit within the work.

Another fictional conceit is the textual introduction, printed over two pages in a barely legible small font. It is credited to Andrew Jackson Davis, via a spirit medium named Gladys



Carr. The opposite page is a spread, decorated with ornamental banners (Fig. 2). These kinds of decorative pastiches, reminiscent of nineteenth-century pamphlets and book frontispieces, are a familiar trope in Plender's work.<sup>9</sup> There are named characters depicted on this page, the book's cast of players: Kate and Maggie Fox, Emanuel Swedenborg, Andrew Jackson Davis. Davis speaks of seeing, or being aware of and present in, the world of 2007, or at least a slice of it, which is called 'an age of miracles'. The technological achievements of modernity are addressed as once being thought of as impossible, as laughably fanciful, as much so as 'the idea of the dead coming back to life and walking!' The book is presented in this fictional introduction as an instructional text. 'If you have ever dreamed of a better life, *A Stellar Key to the Summerland* will show you how to achieve the extraordinary'. There is a promise of self-improvement, made possible through reading this manual for a better life. The book is presented in terms of the power of 'harnessing the mind' and as 'a new revolutionary fitness book for the soul'. Communicating with spirits is situated as a goal, alongside overcoming 'the many hazards of modern life, perform at your peak, gain emotional and financial freedom, attain leadership and self-confidence and win the co-operation of others'. This is a rather focused form of self-help narrative: '*A Stellar Key to the Summerland* is a guidebook to superior performance in an age of success'. In terms of Plender's authorship, this is a specific politicised gesture, exposing self-help as a tool for competitive advancement in capitalist frameworks. Irony is used to draw attention to such narratives, as a making strange of them. The ironic approach suggests a sense of positioning, a placing of the book in an oppositional context.

<FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE>

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the design here resembles her board game *Set Sail for the Levant* (2007).

Figure 2: Olivia Plender, *A Stellar Key to the Summerland* (London: Bookworks, 2007). By kind permission of Olivia Plender.

Davis then introduces himself: a shoemaker named after President Andrew Jackson, ‘who rid America of its Natives’. Plender offers an additional political valence, situating the work in the context of historical narratives that address the genocidal history of the United States. Davis presents this through a lens of Spiritualist beliefs, describing the massacre of Native Americans as sending the majority of them ‘to live in the spirit realm in the 1830s, a place which is most likely located in the West and otherwise known as *The Summerland*’.

Spiritualism is not only presented by Davis as the antecedent of the study of psychology, but he also contends that ‘the social revolution of nineteen hundred and sixty-eight’ popularised the ideas contained in *Summerland*. These ideas can then be found, according to Davis, in New Age counterculturalism and the belief that ‘wealth results from inner harmony’. The movement’s origins in northern Britain are emphasised along with a sense of regret for the loss of the movement’s ‘radical aspects in favour of economic liberalism’, although when considering the overall process of self-actualisation, the character of Davis dismisses anything that might look like social or economic hindrances. Factors such as ‘poverty or lack of educational opportunity, can be cast aside as so much superstition’.

The book is presented as a guide to success, questioning contemporary forms of self-help, or our desire for these forms. The desire for success is ironised:

Rest assured my friends, that success has no limits! In addition to the opening up of new markets on the earth place (the initial sphere through which the pilgrim may progress), in lands formerly in the grip of, henceforth, discarded socialistic notions,

there are still six remaining spheres to be conquered, each containing market places and inhabitants waiting to be relieved of their coin.

Spiritualism, like other forms of politics, is presented as detached from historical roots and former social responsibility: ‘Those other aspects of the Modern Spiritualist Movement can be set aside for the sake of the dissemination of this one idea and the ascendancy of the individual’. The use of irony indicates that having lost any potentially political dimension, Spiritualism reflects a normative aspect of individualistic neoliberalism. The linking of politics, history and myths of success, consistent in Plender’s work, is exemplified by *Tina*, a touring exhibition curated by Plender, and that included her own work, which was shown at different venues between 2008 and 2010. The title of the exhibition was taken from the neoliberal mantra popularised by Margaret Thatcher that ‘There Is No Alternative’. Thematically, the exhibition sought to address the reconstruction of Western economics and politics since the 1980s, and to re-present the present as composed of contested histories.

Following the introduction and the decorative frontispiece of *A Stellar Key to the Summerland*, a splash page introduces the location with an unboxed caption, placing the reader in Poughkeepsie, New York, in 1844. The drawing shows a modest single-story house in a wilderness. A forest and the slope of a mountain rear up behind it, the contrast between loose cross-hatching and the white of the page suggest snow, as do the rapidly drawn lines that indicate the meagre presence of bare trees. The next page introduces the dominant format of the book, with each page consisting of two panels, one above the other (Fig. 3). A conversation is taking place between Emanuel Swedenborg and Davis. The conversation introduces Davis to the idea of return from ‘the undiscovered country’, and to the reality of communicating with angels. The conversation is first seen from behind Davis, looking towards Swedenborg, whose face is heavily crosshatched, as if emerging from the blackness

of the panel's background. The panel contrasts with the following pages, where both figures are evenly illuminated. Some of the panels show elements of the interior space, with horizontal wooden panel walls, while others cover the space with black. Visually, these panels establish an overall consistency of formal approach in the book.

<FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE>

Figure 3: Olivia Plender, *A Stellar Key to the Summerland* (London: Bookworks, 2007). By kind permission of Olivia Plender.

Davis talks of his longing to know 'the structure of that country', which Swedenborg describes as being so similar to this world that the deceased often fail to realise that they have in fact died. There are seven spheres that spirits pass through, the spirits moving from a resemblance to their mortal self towards superior conditions. Immortal souls are subject to improvement, much like the reader as addressed by Davis. Over the course of a few pages, the conversation moves from the heads of the speakers, to views of the house within the landscape, which itself incorporates otherworldly elements, blurring those divisions between this world and the other spheres. A splash page with no borders shows Swedenborg and Davis standing, like Virgil and Dante, amongst a neoclassical city. The standard format of the book is broken up at this point. For example, two pages that follow the scenes of this celestial city are comprised of eight small panels per page, each panel with a numbered caption below in imitation of a protocomic sequence. The drawings look as if they were worked at a larger size and reduced to miniature proportions, which has the effect of making the inked lines significantly thinner. The impression is that these images are reproductions of prints rather than drawings in ink. The medium itself is addressed here in terms of historical developments and precedents. Like the frontispiece, these pages imitate or approximate an archaic form.

This is also a form, made up as it is from numbered sequences of text outside of each image, that allows for detailed explication. Each caption in this sequence delivers a particular aspect of the tenet of the structure of the Universal Summerland, while each image is a visualisation of the point made in the caption. These vary in degrees of either straightforwardness or allegorical nature.

The shifts in format that occur throughout *Summerland* can be read as serving to keep the reader off balance, creating a landscape that changes, is unstable and requires a certain amount of reorientation on the part of the reader. Following this sequence, there is a return to the heavenly cityscape, where Swedenborg walks, putting the reader in mind of Plender's model of New Jerusalem and the British Empire Exhibition. Her drawings have a sense of openness, emphasised by empty white spaces instead of any attempt to create a detailed ground upon which the buildings stand. Much of the visual impact here is directed not so much towards the creation or development of a particular narrative, but instead evokes a visual sensibility regarding the constitution of this heavenly realm as a kind of surreal neoclassical environment. This is a way to break up the conveyance of information regarding Spiritualism. Across three pages, we are shown aspects of the urban heart of the Summerland with no text. These pages are presented without any sense of causality or linear narrative, and have a silent, dreamlike quality. The silence is broken by an enormous all-seeing eye, and in a panel below, Swedenborg continues on his tour with Davis, as speech bubbles return. Davis thanks Swedenborg for his guidance. Swedenborg responds, 'Why do you call me guide? Your guide is within you'. Rather than progressing according to a conventional narrative, the story here continues as a nonlinear accumulation of images and textual fragments.

After a number of impressionistic sequences, we see Davis return to his reality, sitting amongst the Poughkeepsie landscape in a top panel, and the relative bustle of a small town below. Horses and carts, with rows of storefronts, set the scene across two panels, before we

see Davis standing on a cart, proselytising that there is no such thing as death. His speech continues across the two panels of the next page, showing Davis interacting with other men and women as he spreads the word. The next splash page shows Davis, his portrait in the top right corner, his figure gesturing below. It is a page that serves as a chapter heading, announcing Davis as 'The Poughkeepsie Seer'. The drawn images on the following pages are, as is generally characteristic in *Summerland*, characterised by an immediacy and unfussy looseness. There is little time given to accuracy, or even any kind of measured stylistic consistency. The faces are crude in terms of the rendering of features, lacking fine detail or a clear approach to stylistic reduction. Cross-hatching is uneven and inconsistent. Narrative structure is mannered, leaning away from realism towards allowing Davis to speak to different audiences over time in a continuous speech. We see Davis in the centre of consecutive panels, a speech bubble on the left, members of an audience to the right, a background suggesting a building almost identical in both. He is telling people on the street about the conflation of the social and the spiritual: 'I have seen how spirit composure, physical health and even economic wellbeing flow from a person's rapport with the cosmos'. This personal enlightenment has been previously shown to the reader in those pages where Davis walked among the Summerland. The opposite panel shows the face of Davis alongside rows of text in different fonts, reminiscent of an archaic poster using a variety of text styles for impact. The following panel shows some response from this generic audience, as a man accuses Davis of blasphemy. The rather wooden poses, poor sense of likeness and typeset speech bubbles here are at times almost akin to the most turgid moments of *Classics Illustrated*, yet simultaneously distanced by breaks with conventional narrative continuity, such as the text/image 'poster' of Davis.

Plender depicts a response from Davis to accusations of blasphemy and consorting with demons by presenting his description of the continuity of visitations from the spirit

world. He uses the then recent examples of the Mormons and the Shakers. The Mormons' Joseph Smith is shown consorting with an angel at the top of a full-page spread, an outstretched hand appearing in the lower half. This page is one of those that stands out in *Summerland* as making use of a simple but effective design, as well as in this case a varied thickness of linework (Fig. 4). The use of ink on the page reads as a measured balance between control and chance. As this section on recent precedents for spirit communication continues, Davis is lecturing to his audience, perhaps over numerous occasions, while Plender as author is also presenting her own version of a lecture to the reader.

<FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE>

Figure 4: Olivia Plender, *A Stellar Key to the Summerland* (London: Bookworks, 2007). By kind permission of Olivia Plender.

After relating the encounter between Smith and the angel Moroni, the verbal lecture of Davis, or the visual/textual lecture of Plender, moves on to Mother Ann Lee of the Shakers and the establishment of a community at Mount Lebanon. A double-page spread presents 'The Spirit Realm' as a landscape image, with Native American tepees amongst various white figures from religious movements across the history of the United States. This is an ornamental and architectural double-page spread, with a brick pediment and sculptural skeletons standing on either side as bookends. The lecture continues, with Davis making it clear that although he may not agree with all of the points made by these extant spiritual engagements and religions, he implores his listeners to turn away from Calvinism and the doctrines of previous generations. This two-page segment shows a more detailed background environment of a wooden main street of a small town. The layout then shifts again on the next two pages. One page is a list of 'The Seven Principles'; the opposite page, which includes

twelve small panels that form a border for a central panel, presents ‘The Fox Sisters & Their Family From New York’. The page is headed ‘Hydesville Arcadia County 1848’, and the panels depict various scenes, including encounters between settlers and indigenous Americans. These scenes appear to contextualise Davis in his ongoing proselytising, and acknowledge the future importance of Native American figures as spirit guides in later manifestations of Spiritualism.<sup>10</sup>

Emmanuel Swedenborg returns, explaining that at his direction, the illiterate Davis educated himself to spread his ‘Harmonialist cause’. Swedenborg relates that in March 1848, Davis had a vision of events that shifted the narrative direction of Summerland, and also ‘that opened the floodgates for spirit communication’. These so-called Hydesville Rappings move the book into a different narrative direction, and end the introductory encounters between Davis and Swedenborg. Plender is able to develop an extended diegetic sequence across the two-panel-per-page format that achieves a sense of tension and conveys elements of dread and fearfulness. This is a change in both tone and pace, relying less on exposition, temporarily becoming a form of horror comic. The first two panels that follow Swedenborg’s introduction have a cinematic appearance in the staging of protagonists, the sense of expectation in their poses, of exchanged looks and an absence of speech between them. The only word is a sound effect that appears in the second panel: ‘KNOCK’. The panels suggest a couple who are undergoing tribulations, the man’s eyes closed in the second panel as he hears the noise. His wife is touching his arm, perhaps supporting him rather than seeking support. The tension is

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<sup>10</sup> See Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphor, and Media into the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).



sustained as the man leans in against a door, with the sound repeated: ‘KNOCK KNOCK’.

The framing of the action is reminiscent of film noir, reduced to still images.<sup>11</sup>

This couple are the parents of two girls, shown cowering in bed as the knocking continues. Swedenborg accompanies this showing with a telling, appearing in a circular panel and describing the situation. The Fox family have lived in the area for a year, and had been aware of the knocks and taps for some time, which increased in intensity at night. Plender then continues to make use of the panels with little reliance on text. The sequence of images generates a feeling of unease and a sense of fearful expectation. The family are sitting up, waiting for the noise to come, unsure of what might come with it. A page of two similar but different panels hints at an uncanniness in the use of repetition and variation. Both panels show Margaret Fox sitting in bed. The top panel shows her husband alongside, crouching tentatively, or perhaps in the process of standing. In the panel below, he has gone, replaced by the sound effects of ‘KNOCK KNOCK’, suggesting perhaps he has gone to check on his daughters as the noise continues.

The narrative continues with John Fox trying to gain support from his neighbours. Outside of the tight restrictions of these nocturnal haunting scenes, and the reduction of text to the point where it is almost exclusively present as the supernaturally produced sound, Plender returns to a dramatic rendering in which the characters’ poses are rigid, their dialogue stiff and functional. This is evident in the Foxes’ home too, when Margaret Fox tells one of her daughters about the Great Awakening of the 1830s, where impressionistic imagery such as a tree being struck by lightning and a distant view of the earth from space break up the telling

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of stillness and the moving image in relation to narrative cinema, see Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second* (London: Reaktion, 2006).

of a story within the story. Margaret Fox becomes a guide in the book, as Davis and Swedenborg have before her.

The mysterious bangs and knocks in the Fox home subsequently gather public interest to the extent that they come to be reported on nationally, at which point they come to the attention of Davis, who is practising as a spirit healer and preaching social and religious reform. For Davis, these sounds are evidence of communication from the world of the dead. Swedenborg narrates this transition from Harmonialism to Spiritualism alongside images that contrast scenes of nineteenth-century modernity with the presence of the otherworldly. Single-page image and text combinations relay the development of pseudoscientific approaches to spirit communication, leading to the adoption of Spiritualism in northern Britain. In an atmospheric sequence, urban street scenes are depicted in heavy cross-hatching. In one pairing of pages, three panels show city streets, while Swedenborg explains that it was not uncommon for a famous dead American to appear at a séance. The final panel shows such an apparition. This section outlines the emergence of Spiritualism as a phenomenon that gave voice to the disempowered, with references to class and gender. It is described both in terms of providing a space for the exploration of political views, but also as a performed role that enabled social mobility. Becoming a medium could be a way out of working in a factory.

The setting undergoes a sudden temporal shift as the reader is brought into the recent past of 2004 through a Spiritualist meeting in Barrow-in-Furness. There follows an extended account of a performance by a medium and a spirit artist, bringing the history of Spiritualism into a contemporary setting, undermining the predominant assumptions about such practices as merely exploitative or rooted in pure superstition. The performance is grounded in a more complex history of Spiritualism as a radical social force. This more contemporary setting brings *Summerland* to an end. The work closes with a curtain, which both visually continues the background of the stage on which the medium and spirit artist perform, but also a curtain

already shown (Fig. 5). This is a curtain shown being raised across scenes of urban industry, lifted by Swedenborg in a pose that was appropriated from an 1822 self-portrait by Charles Wilson Peale, opening his museum in Philadelphia, the first public museum in the United States. This figure of American enlightenment is here co-opted in the image of Swedenborg, suggesting a process of American Enlightenment shining upon Britain. Finally, as an appendix to *Summerland*, Plender has included a guide to notable locations associated with the movement around London. This extends the idea of *Summerland* as a kind of guidebook, referring to an actual physical geography overlaid by historical narratives that see intersections between the social and the supernatural.

<FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE>

Figure 5: Olivia Plender, *A Stellar Key to the Summerland* (London: Bookworks, 2007). By kind permission of Olivia Plender.

Plender's practice is resonant in its insistence upon a decentralised approach, using drawing, archival excavation, historical research, performance, curating and gallery-based research. Her practice also suggests a crossing of seemingly opposed elements: the mystical and the political, a sense of overlap and intersection that is echoed by the crossing of gallery-based work with printed graphic elements. Plender sets up tensions between the esoteric and social reality, between historical excavation and the political present and the importance of orientating this present towards the future. These interests are performed within an attentive but expanded approach to the idea of medium. This may be read as a pun, given the thematic territory of *Summerland*, but the idea of medium resonates with an ongoing set of debates

around medium that have been set out by art historian Rosalind Krauss.<sup>12</sup> For Krauss, social convention and process become part of medium, but it is the conscious bringing together of discrete aspects that defines medium in her selection of artists, most notably in the work of James Coleman and Jeff Wall. The medium of comics is used by Plender as a device amongst a broader range of gallery-based activities, incorporating elements of drawing, installation and sculpture. Plender's practice can be thought of in terms of Krauss's argument that artists can assemble their own medium through preexisting elements. Plender reconfigures and manifests the results of her research through drawings and narrative, in moving image and in a range of material and embodied manifestations. Comics are employed as one of a number of tools for the mapping of dream geographies.

Plender can be situated within particular discourses around artists who make use of the past as a material. Hal Foster's article 'An Archival Impulse'<sup>13</sup> views three practices through such an interpretative lens. Works by Sam Durant, Thomas Hirschhorn and Tacita Dean are framed in terms of utopian and archival forces, bound by wishful, perhaps paranoiac, responses to failure and a wish to recoup what has been lost, to move beyond pure nostalgia towards something that may be future-orientated in its temporality. This is an important approach to thinking about contemporary art and history, as history is presented as a critical disturbance of the surface of the present. History is also brought into elusive relationships with recovering notions of futurity, with suggestions of how such spaces might be politicised in opposition to dominant ideological frameworks. The archival impulse put forward by Foster is not a mimicking of institutional order. Rather than appearing as rational, the archival

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<sup>12</sup> For a succinct account of her discussion of medium, see Rosalind Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse', *October* 110 (2004), 3–22.

as understood here is defined by internal logic, making connections between what cannot be connected. One element of the work informs another in these practices, in a model of practice that can certainly be aligned with that of Plender.

The curator and art historian Mark Godfrey has, partly in response to Foster, explored the idea of the artist as historian. Godfrey draws attention to an apparent reemergence of historical representation in contemporary art practices in the early twenty-first century. He points out, after Foster, that representations of history in contemporary practices often follow an archival model of research, with ‘one object of inquiry leading to another’,<sup>14</sup> in a process that Godfrey views as an invitation to viewers to ‘think about the past’,<sup>15</sup> to make connections, to join elements together and to consider more general representations of the past in a wider culture. This is certainly a useful impulse in thinking about Plender. Her model of historical narrative functions in part as an alternative to ‘the ways in which the past is represented in the wider culture’.<sup>16</sup>

However, as an artist using comics, Plender is already, perhaps unknowingly, drawing upon an archival and reflexive narrative authority of comics. Comics can be a source of authenticity as a narrative medium, often demonstrating reflection and criticality, but loaded with a kind of subjective immediacy.<sup>17</sup> This has seen the medium used for writings of history, which certainly applies to *Summerland*. More accurately, *Summerland* is situated between the

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<sup>14</sup> Mark Godfrey, ‘The Artist As Historian’, *October* 120 (2007), 143.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> For example, see Ian Williams, ‘Autography as Autotherapy: Psychic Pain the Graphic Memoir’, *Journal of Medical Humanities* 32 (2011), 353–366.

writing of history and *herstory*.<sup>18</sup> It is also a form of documentary, relating to the variety of comics that have engaged in documentary practices, addressed in Nina Mickwitz's *Documentary Comics: Graphic Truth Telling in a Skeptical Way*,<sup>19</sup> as well as in Hillary L. Chute's recent book *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*.<sup>20</sup> The possible examples of comics that have addressed history are a challenge to map, or indeed keep up with, but Joseph Witek's book on Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman and Harvey Pekar<sup>21</sup> is useful here. Witek pointed out in 1989 that despite Jackson's own resistance to seeing his work as political, 'as histories and as comic books the works of Jack Jackson have strong ideological consequences'.<sup>22</sup> They present complex historical narratives, which are hard to find in mainstream media, and present conflict visually in a reconfiguring of frontier history. Plender can clearly be situated within these contexts, even to the extent of exploring North American frontier narratives, producing a work that navigates the spaces of narrative and explanation. Plender's use of comics also resonates with Jennifer Howell's *The Algerian War*

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<sup>18</sup> For an intriguing collection that addresses the idea of *herstory*, see Sarah Lightman, ed., *Graphic Details: Jewish Women's Confessional Comics in Essays and Interviews* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Nina Mickwitz, *Documentary Comics: Graphic Truth Telling in a Skeptical Way* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Hillary L. Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman and Harvey Pekar* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

*in French-Language Comics*.<sup>23</sup> Howell explores forms of resistance and rewriting, with notions of repair and the problematising of secondary school teaching practices in France. Comics, in opposition to mainstream forms of education and memory transmission, offer new and productive dialogues.<sup>24</sup> This is an ideal description of what is at stake in *Summerland*. The use of comics is part of a strategy that incorporates sequential visual narrative as a corollary to object-based spatial elements of gallery practice, as part of the same ongoing practice of social excavation and reconfiguration, and as part of the generation of new and productive dialogues. The use of the comics form is an integral part of a mapping process that is spatial and historical, overlaying cartographies of the past with the possibility of future-orientated social transformation.

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<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Howell, *The Algerian War in French-Language Comics: Postcolonial Memory, History and Subjectivity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> For a further detailed discussion of this territory, see Mark McKinney, *Redrawing French Empire in Comics* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2013).

