

DISTANCE MADE GOOD

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JEN HAMILTON / JEN SOUTHERN NEW INSTALLATIONS VIA GPS



'The ancients built Valdrada on the shores of a lake...Thus the traveller, arriving, sees two cities: one erect above the lake, and the other reflected upside down. Nothing exists or happens in the one Valdrada that the other Valdrada does not repeat'
[Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities, Cities & Eyes 1*]

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Introduction Annabel Longbourne

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Thousands of miles away from Shakespeare's birthplace, Stratford-upon-Avon lies its sister city Stratford Ontario, Canada. Like the twin towns of Valdrada, the Stratfords share many physical similarities – a River Avon, three international theatres, historic buildings and flocks of white swans are intrinsic to both locations. Therefore the visitor walking in one Stratford risks experiencing dislocation and unease at references to the other.

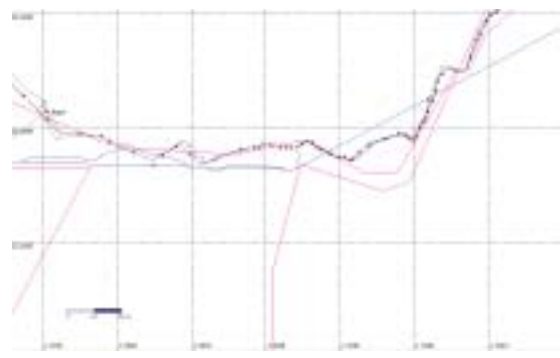
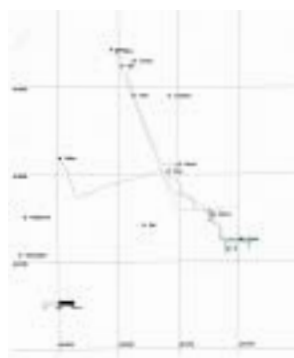
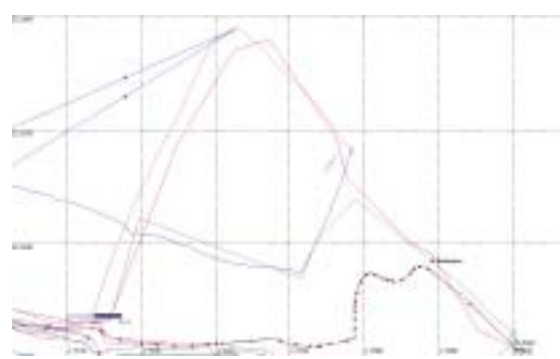
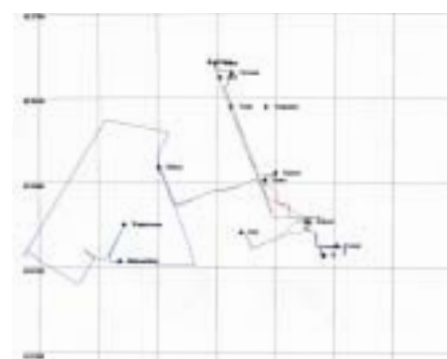
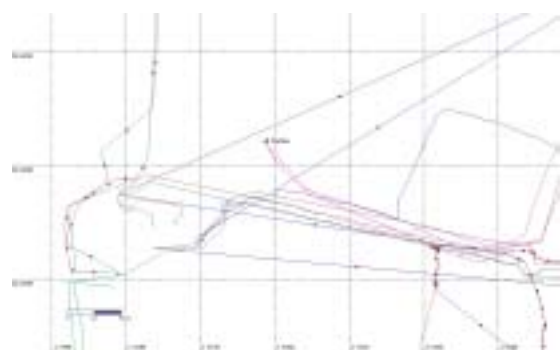
The donation of a portrait of a William Shakespeare to a Canadian settlement in 1832 motivated an appropriation of the name Stratford, and later the identity, of its English role model. It is perhaps not surprising that settlers in a newly colonised country would choose a culturally important location in their mother country as the namesake for their new town.

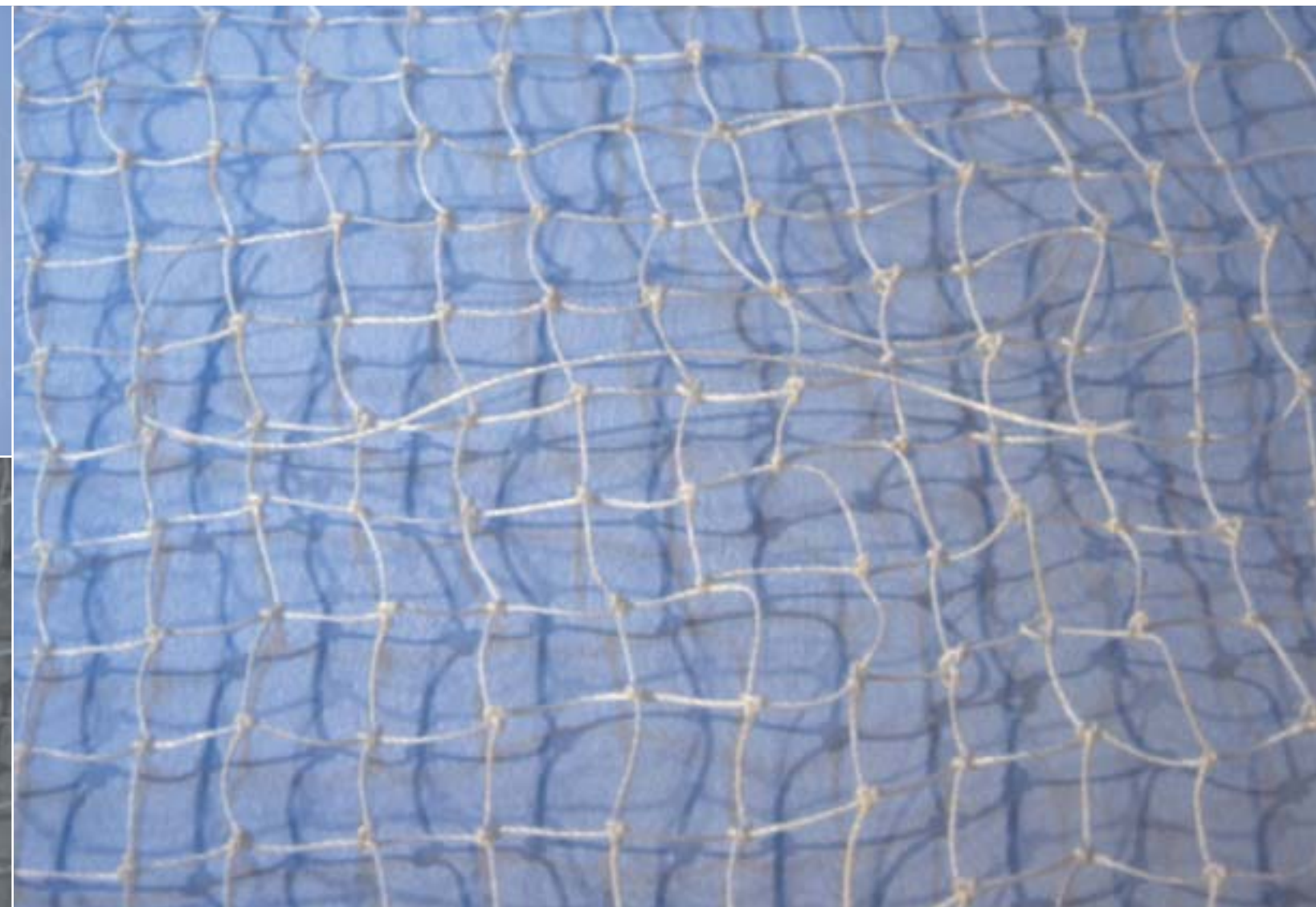
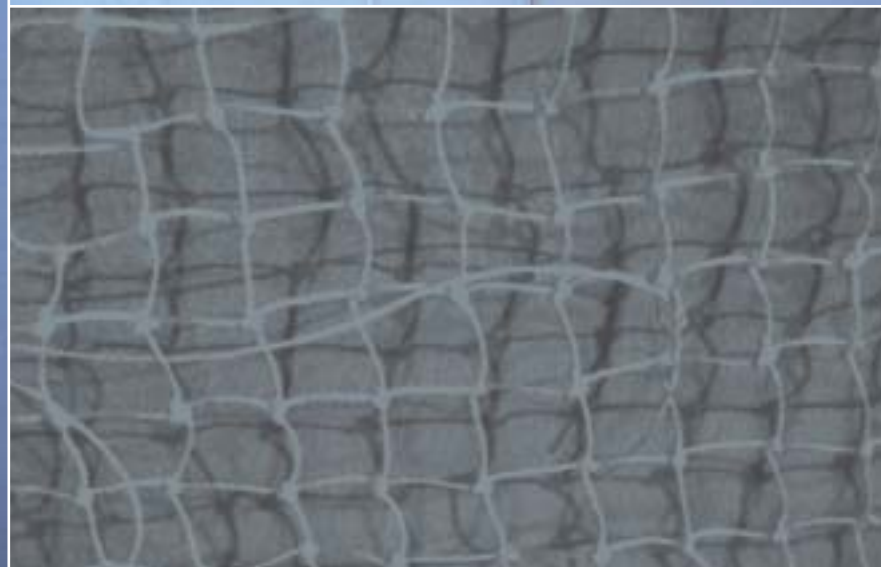
Today Stratford Ontario exists as a simulacrum of its sister, the town's streets, parks, pubs and schools bear Shakespearean characters' names in a Disney Land reality; seeming superficially even more Stratford than Stratford-upon-Avon.

However, although Stratford-upon-Avon in colonial arrogance claims to be the genuine article, it too is guilty of artificially manipulating and exaggerating its historic significance – after all recent research has challenged whether the Shakespeare ever inhabited the town. Both Stratfords optimise their tourist appeal; like two stage sets they fabricate, to a greater or lesser extent, historical value that has more to do with creating 'Stratfordness' than referencing Shakespeare's birthplace. The twin towns exploit this British icon's legacy: Stratford Ontario using its annual Shakespeare Festival: Stratford-upon-Avon its few remaining timber dwellings to transform otherwise unexceptional towns into international, cultural centres. Although Stratford Ontario did initially steal its name and inspiration from its counterpart, it is now surely

just as valid a Stratford as Stratford-upon-Avon? It seems true of Stratford-upon-Avon as it is Valdrada that 'at times the mirror increase a thing's value, at times denies it. Not everything that seems valuable above the mirror maintains its force when mirrored.'

In conjunction with the Commonwealth Games, Manchester 2002, The Gallery hosts an exhibition exploring the relationship between Stratford-upon-Avon and one of its five siblings around the world Stratford, Ontario. In recognition of the Commonwealth values of friendship and inclusion, Distance Made Good unites two places, historically bound, yet existing and evolving in parallel. Artists Jen Hamilton [Canadian] and Jen Southern [British] interact with the towns and their inhabitants, to create installations via GPS [Global Positioning Systems] that consider the relationship between 'location' and 'place'. The Gallery would like to thank the artists for their immense energy and commitment to this project. Our gratitude extends too to Emma Posey for her insightful essay Memory Maps which explores in depth the artists' collaborative response.





MEMORY MAPS

Memory Maps Emma Posey

The installation *Distance Made Good* by Canadian artist Jen Hamilton and British artist Jen Southern focuses on two sites; the town Stratford-upon-Avon in England and the city of Stratford Ontario in Canada. Stratford Ontario derives its name as one of many British colonies that formed Canada. There are six sister Stratfords around the world. The method of naming things twice, or more, is called 'anabaptist', a practice that was popularly used by many settlers who named their site of relocation by borrowing the name of their hometown¹.

Although the historical connection between the two Stratfords offers a starting point for the installation, Hamilton and Southern focus on the sites in their present form as 'social spaces'. The artists track their own movements through the spaces of three distinct 'groups' of people who inhabit both Stratfords; the actors on stage, the townspeople moving between suburb and centre, and the tourists who explore the town centre. Social spaces often occur simultaneously, in a form detailed by Lebevre. They 'interpenetrate one another and / or superimpose themselves upon one another'². In the installation, the artists represent their movement in a series of embroidered 'lacs' works.

In order to track movement the artists employed a technological device, the Global Positioning System [GPS] which is a world-wide radio-navigation system formed from a constellation of 24 satellites and ground stations. By accurately measuring the distance from three satellites, any position on the earth can be determined. Although, as with many technological innovations, GPS was developed as an instrument of war, it is now incorporated into many domestic devices such as car navigation systems and handsets. The installation's title, *Distance Made Good*, is taken from GPS terminology meaning 'the distance from departure point, last position to present position'³. Hamilton and Southern link a series of GPS positions to represent their movement. It is the relationship between a series of positions and how these can be used to express activity, or more specifically the relationship between notions of location and place, that is the installation's central theme.

GPS is an objective device, determining co-ordinates to denote a location. Co-ordinates present locations as if they are uninhabited – their configuration eludes an individual's perception and recollection associated with locations. Such is the distinction between location and place which is usefully illustrated by the terms 'house'

and 'home'. A house is mapped using co-ordinate points or postal addresses and yet home, though alluding to house, is a perception and recollection. The geographer Tuan believes 'Location is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning'⁴.

In linking co-ordinates together Hamilton and Southern represent the movement of people's lives as patterns of activity carried out in relation to various locations over time. These are 'memory maps', an inversion of maps. They recollect activity as opposed to inform navigation. Sociologists Donald Parkes and Nigel Thrift carried out research which aimed to distinguish between location and place by comparing maps drawn from measurements with maps drawn by individuals from memory. Their investigation resulted in the affirmation that 'Location is determined outside the individual. Place is constructed from inside the individual, as mental maps and personalised images of time.'⁵

In the installation, destination is delineated by a thread's end, the lacs works detail movement – between A and B – rather than specifying A and B. The lines seemingly meander and, in this way, correspond to the activities of a flâneur, recognised as a wanderer rather than a traveller. The movements

paced out by the artists on-foot are then traced out by them by-hand in the embroidered works. Hamilton and Southern's installation offers an insight into the repertoire of movement or kinesthesia, which means a sense of movement or of muscular effort. Their movement follows static routes such as railways, roads, pavements and paths. Whilst also, at times, disengaging from these pre-determined routes on foot, all the movement is carried-out within an infrastructure. The interweaving of transitory and grid is reflected in the artists' choice of embroidery to represent their movements within both Stratfords.

Although sometimes detailing walking and therefore muscular effort, Hamilton and Southern's choreographic works are tainted by technology – only vehicles enable one to manoeuvre without moving one's limbs. This reinforces the important point that although a negotiation of location is central to understanding place such activity need not be physical – either muscular or bodily.

Continuing with a trend in contemporary fine art, Hamilton and Southern's working process became configured in the work itself. Necessitated by the physical distance between each other, the artists

constructed a shared online studio – a non-physical place of expression and collaboration with a location in the form of a URL [Universal Resource Locator]. Much current debate focuses on whether technology disrupts a sense of place. For instance, Virilio claims technology 'leads to uncertainty about the place of effective action'⁶ but only if one assumes that a sense of place can only be derived through touch [haptics], action or movement. Although place is reliant on notions of position, these need not be physical – hence the URL or 'string' which makes reference to pieces of data that make up the virtual studio. Indeed, technology can be seen to propagate place because, as in the instance of the internet, it provides new frameworks for negotiation.

Virilio echoes a popular futuristic fantasy that is challenged in *Distance Made Good*. He claims, 'From here on, people can't be separated by physical obstacles or by temporal distances [...] distinctions of here and there no longer mean anything'⁷. Hamilton and Southern's work employs GPS to define rather than defy locations. It is a technology designed to determine between here and there because here and there will always mean something even if they never mean place.

¹ Nilsson, J. and Ohmer, A., 1995, *Collaboration 1994*, Index, No.1

² Henri Lefebvre, 1974, *The Production of Space*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., p.87

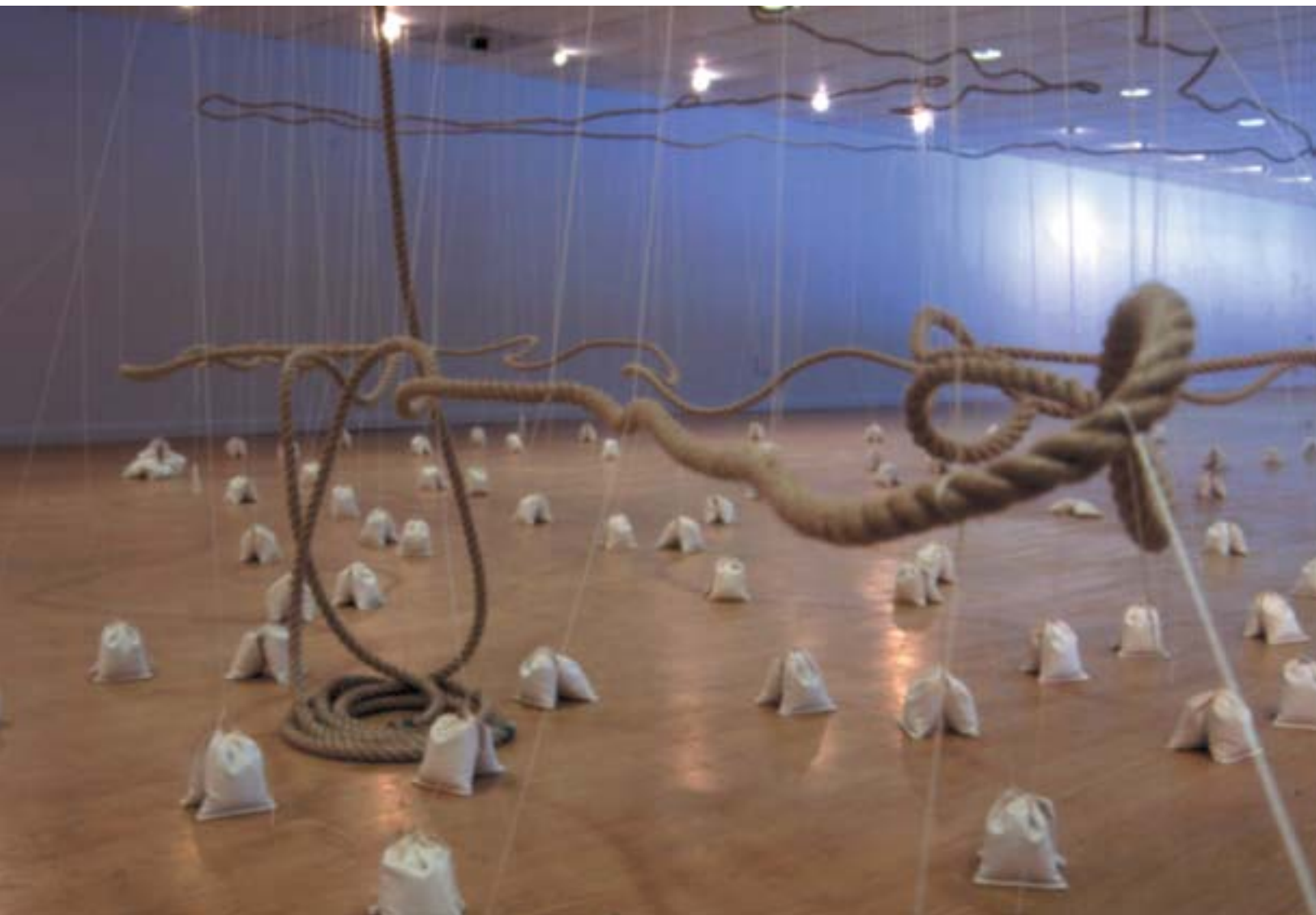
³ Conrad Dixon and Geoff Hales, 2001, *Using GPS*, Adlard Coles Nautical, p.107

⁴ Yi-Fu Tuan, 1977, *Space and Place, The Perspective of Experience*, University of Minnesota Press, p.136

⁵ Donald Parkes and Nigel Thrift, 1980, *Times, Spaces and Places: A Chronogeographic Perspective*, John Wiley and Sons, p.138

⁶ Paul Virilio, 1995, *The Art of the Motor*, University of Minnesota Press, p.155

⁷ Paul Virilio, 1991, *The Lost Dimension*, Autonomedia, p.12





Jen Hamilton lives and works in Regina, tutoring at the University. She completed a MA in Fine Art, Open Media Program at Concordia University Montreal, 1993.

Recent exhibitions include:

- Curler, Blender**
Neutral Ground Artist Run Centre, Regina [2002]
- Pong@goonhilly**
Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina [2002]
- Kinesthetic Exercises**
Art at Harbourfront, Toronto [2002]
- Two Opinions of Space**
Petri's Quadrille, Regina

Web projects include:

- Sasketchbook**
www.neutralground.sk.ca/soil
- Fleas House**
www.gas.u-et.com/kihomes/flea.html

Jen Southern lives and works in Huddersfield and teaches at the University of Huddersfield. She completed an MFA at the Fine Art Open Media Program at Concordia University, Montreal in 1996. www.gas.u-net.com

Recent exhibitions include:

- ROAM**
Yorkshire Sculpture Park [2002]
Centro de la Imagen, Mexico City [2001]
CF01, Plovdiv, Bulgaria [2001]
www.roam-wear.com
- Greylands**
Centro de la Imagen & Arte Alameda, Mexico City [2002]
The Photographers Gallery, London [2001]
Artengine Gallery, Ottawa, Canada [1999]
www.greylands.com
- Urban Cycles**
Slippery Surface – library walk Manchester [2002]
www.idea.org.uk/urban/
- Ryhope Walk**
Salford Museum and Art Gallery [2000]
- Autoparts**
Idea, Salford [2002]
www.idea.org.uk/autoparts

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the gallery

stratford-upon-avon

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