

"Palabras" means "words" in Spanish.

*"A language is a dialect with an army and navy" - [Max Weinreich](#),*

Language acts like a map – it encodes and decodes information – it traces the edges of borders and walls - it locates a subject in relation to a complex of nationalities and ethnicities, simultaneously representing and producing difference. Words name, label, order, classify, separate and differentiate. Words also connect.

Through categorization objects and ideas, individuals and groups, races and classes are identified, determined, and often over-determined. A category can both describe and prescribe a relation between the subject and objects-of-knowledge. Categorization and Classification systematize the construction of meaning, and demonstrate relations of power.

At one end of the spectrum of classification systems, Taxonomies impose a hierarchical structure or generalized interpretation on the objects they describe. At the other end, Folksonomies (folk + taxonomy) allow multiple interpretations and many associations to emerge among objects and descriptors. Examples of Folksonomic systems online include sites for sharing bookmarks ([de.lirio.us](#)) and images ([flickr](#)). Folksonomies are generated by the creators of content when they name, label or describe the content they contribute to a database. Folksonomies evolve when readers annotate the content items they view.

Content creators and readers or viewers may use many different words or labels to describe one piece of content --- and/or one word to describe many different pieces of content. The labels are commonly known as "tags" and the process is called "tagging".

For example, a photographer may post an image of a family birthday party on a folksonomy-based photo sharing site like *flickr* and "tag" it with words like "family", "love" and "birthday". Her photograph will immediately become associated with all other photos contributed by flickr users that are tagged with any or all of those three words. Say another contributor's photo is tagged with the word "family" and with the word "home" but not with the word "love". The tag "love" and the tag "home" and all the content associated with those two tags will then be related because each is associated with content tagged with "family". Tags are "clustered" or highly correlated when they share relations to a number of different content items. For example, if five images that share the tag "family" also share the tags "love" and "home" then "love" "home" and "family" constitute a cluster of tags. If three of the five images described with the tag "family" are also tagged with "birthday" then "birthday" may also become part of the cluster - (depending on the weight of association prescribed by the system) and images tagged with "birthday" but not tagged with "family" will be included in the cluster. Thus, folksonomic systems map an organically and spontaneously emerging network of semantic association.

*Palabras* <http://palabrastranquilas.ucsc.edu> is a web application that employs tagging to generate a spontaneous or "improvised" map of correspondences and connections between communities in various locations.

The project was based on the concept of the "community computer," first proposed by activist Bruno Tardieu. The "community computer" is a social and technological system much like a typical computer in which words can make things happen and associative memory evolves over time. While the "personal computer" provides a communications gateway to the Internet where communities of interest can evolve regardless of distance, the concept of the "community computer" is intended not to bypass, but to strengthen, communities of place – particularly marginalized communities - and to enable and empower them.

Unlike other Folksonomic media sites (*Flickr*, and *Utube*, for example) *Palabras* employs tagging in the context of place-based workshops designed to allow communities that may not normally have access to the internet to use media and information technologies to represent

themselves and their own circumstances. *Palabras* also adopts the tactics of Do-It-Yourself technology to provide low cost and context appropriate media acquisition tools. Through *Palabras\_* workshops communities not traditionally thought of as scholarly or academic, produce knowledge and interpret their own experience.

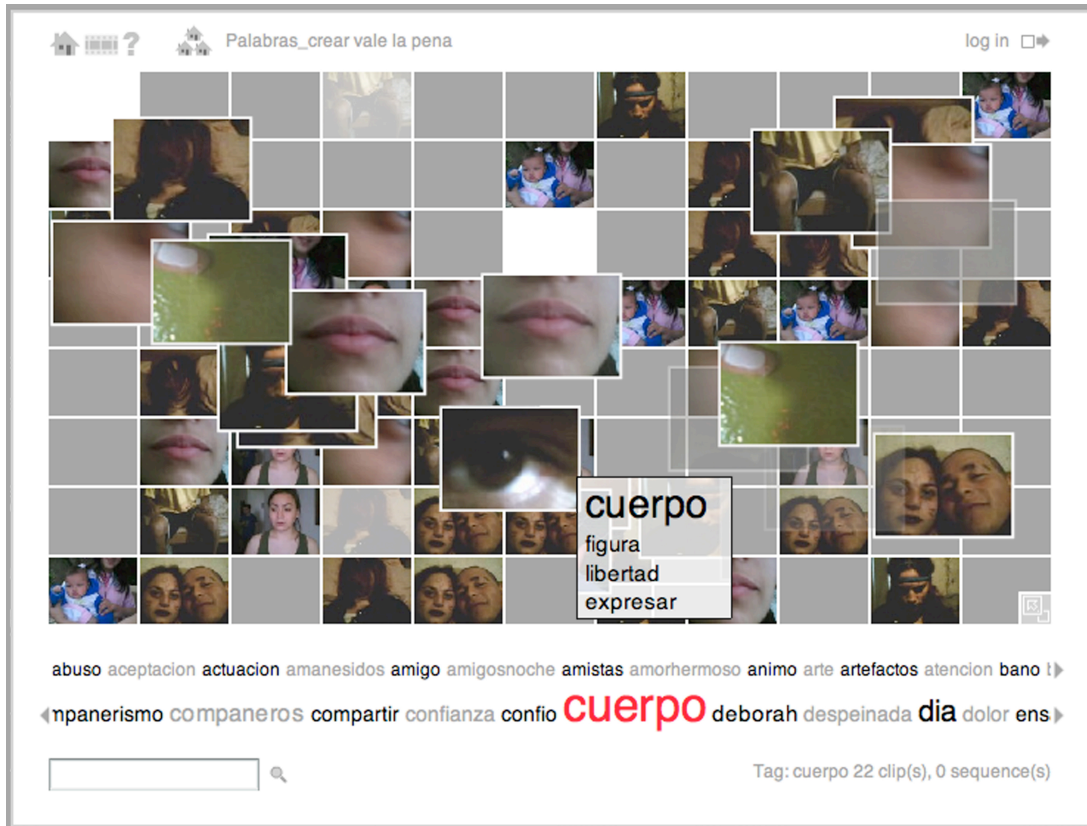


## Background

*Palabras\_* was initially developed during an intensive six-week residency at cheLA, the "Centro HiperMediatico Experimental Latinoamericano", in Buenos Aires Argentina. The residency, supported by the University of California Digital Arts Research Network (UCDARnet), the University of California Institute for Research in the Arts (UCIRA), and cheLA, was initiated to stimulate research and experimentation in the area of public and community art utilizing new technologies and focused on building technology-based, community arts projects in Buenos Aires. The *Palabras\_* project development team in Buenos Aires included Sharon Daniel – principal artist and project director, Digital Arts/New Media MFA student Michael Dale – research assistant, software developer and translator, two professors at the University of Buenos Aires who consulted and facilitated community contacts – Artist Carlos Trilnick and Anthropologist Carlos Masota, and two University of Buenos Aires students – Cecilia Velasquez Traut and Emilce Alvalos – who assisted in workshops.

Our goal was to develop media and information technology tools that would be useful to residents of economically and politically marginalized squatter communities or "villas" in Buenos Aires. Our project concept required the use of inexpensive image capture devices. Using R&D from the Do-It-Yourself technology community online we identified a "disposable" digital video camera marketed in the US that could be "hacked" to be re-usable. We also took advantage of open source software available online for downloading and playing the video thus recovered from these cameras.<sup>1</sup> Each *Palabras* workshop participant was loaned one of these inexpensive digital video cameras, which are capable of recording up to 20 minutes of digital video per use. We designed and built a custom web application (described below) for editing, sequencing and tagging the videos that participants produced.

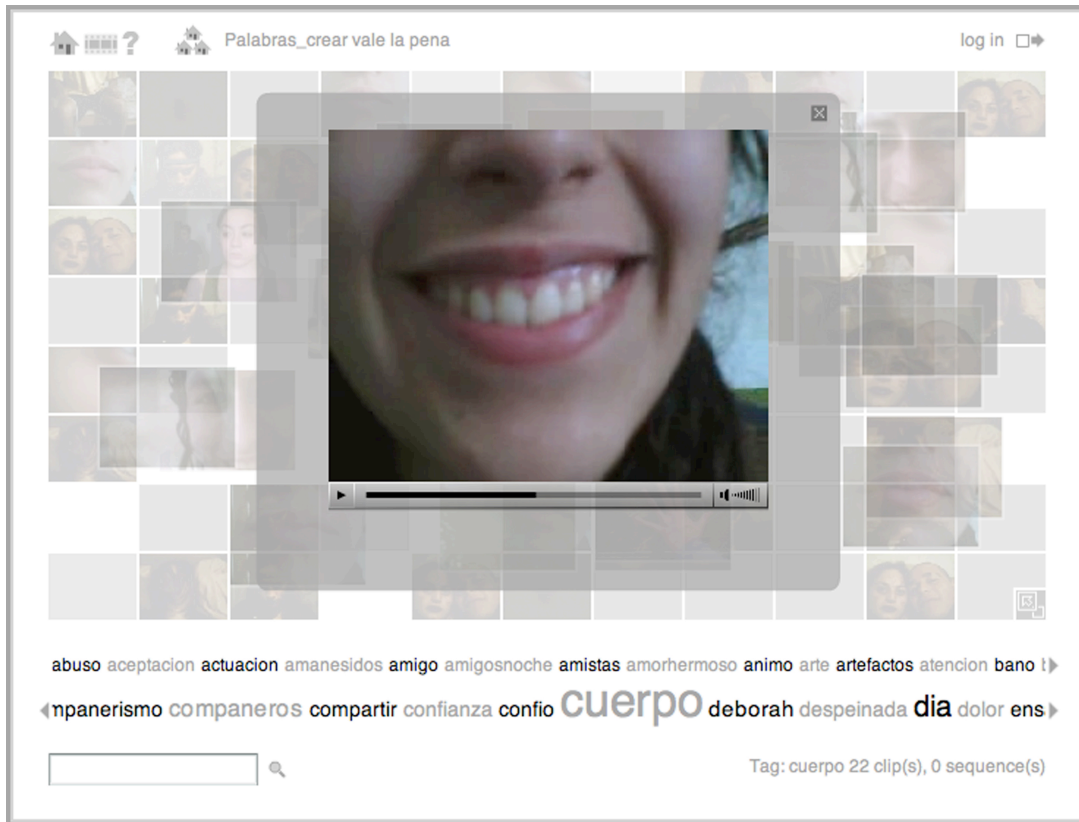
After approximately three weeks of intensive development – of hardware, software and of relationships with cultural centers in target communities we initiated a series of workshops at two sites - del Centro cultural “El Envion” at villa Tranquila in the Municipalidad Avellaneda and Fundacion Crear Vale la Pena in Boulogne, Provincia de Buenos Aires. The work we began at both sites is now continuing with the support of the staff at each of the cultural centers and Palabras is being used at a number of new sites.



The Palabras\_ website currently provides access to an archive of over 2000 video clips created in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Kiel, Germany, San Francisco and San Jose, California (US) and Darfur, Sudan, through the folksonomies participant-communities have evolved. The Palabras workshop tools and database browser adopt the folksonomic method to give participants the opportunity to interpret and classify their own content. This method also simultaneously generates a map of semantic associations between the self-representations created by participant-communities across languages and cultures.

At each site Palabras\_ workshop participants document their daily lives with the inexpensive, disposable digital video cameras we “hacked”. They subsequently “tag,” organize, and share their videos online using the Palabras\_ “editor”. This custom-built web-application was designed to facilitate the discovery of relationships and connections between participants’ personal stories by allowing them to label or “tag” their video content with a shared vocabulary that is both originated by, and familiar to them. The web-application also provides simple tag search, editing and sequencing tools participants may use to create video sequences using clips created by members of their community as well as their own clips. Participants can search for relevant clips from their site by tag or browse via their site’s tag cloud. The tag cloud visualizes all of the tags that belong to a site using a distribution algorithm, which scales the size of a tag related to the number of times it has been used. For example, a participant at Crear Vale la Pena in Buenos Aires might scan the site’s tag cloud and decide to make a sequence of clips tagged with “cuerpo” or “body” by which is very large in the site’s tag cloud – indicating that there are many clips associated with this tag. The

participant may select a tag and then choose from the clips that are subsequently displayed. The clip editor also lists related tags for each clip – all the other tags associated with the clip – and the participant may choose to search these tags to look for clips in order to construct a sequence based on this network of semantic associations. Visitors to this site may also add tags to clips and sequences in the archive.

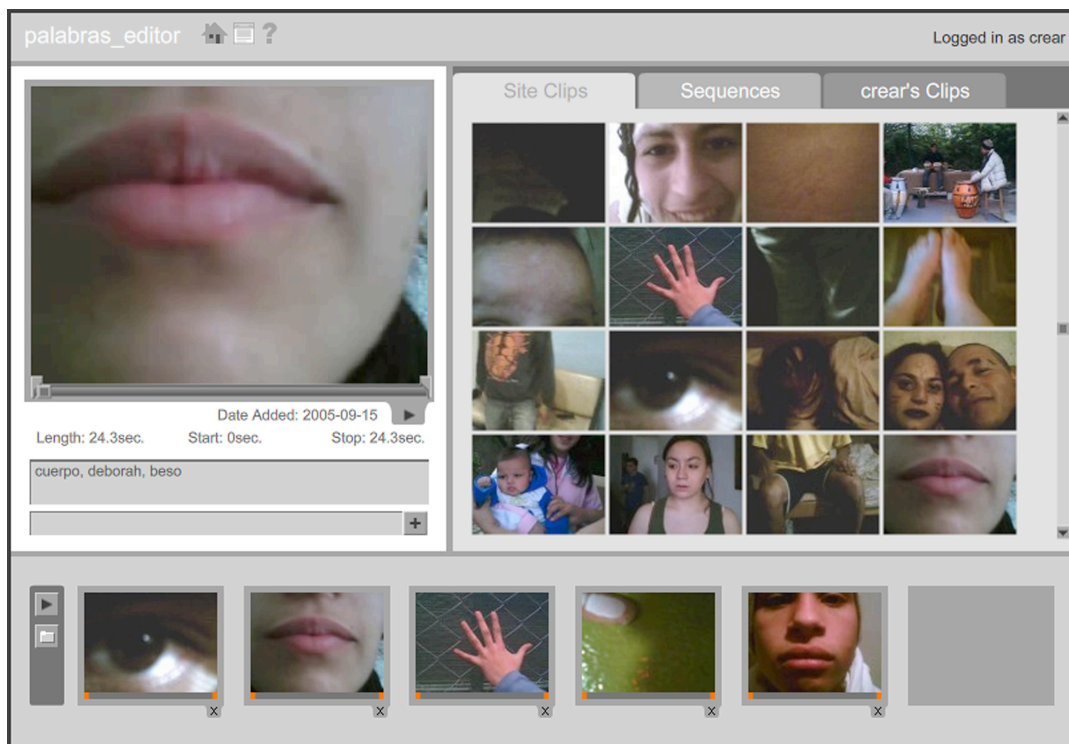


Palabras\_ workshops in local cultural centers at each Palabras\_ site have focused on strategies for collective self-representation. Most recently, Palabras\_ was used by participants in a ten day workshop/residency in Kiel, Germany. Dancers and Musicians from Foundation Crear Vale la Pena (creativity is worthwhile) <<http://www.crearvalelapena.org.ar/>> in Buenos Aires traveled to Kiel to collaborate with young people from the Mettenhof neighborhood on the development of a media and dance-theater presentation exploring the concept of "respect." Participants used Palabras\_ video cameras, tagging and editing tools in a series of "investigations" of the concept which were incorporated into the media/dance-theater presentation developed over the course of the residency. The results of these investigations are accessible through the Palabras\_ browser under the site named "respect". The Argentinian dancers and musicians from Crear Vale la Pena and the young people from Kiel did not speak the same language. For several of the young people from Kiel, German was a second and relatively new language. Therefore, discussions on the meaning of respect were conducted in several languages simultaneously (Spanish, German, English, Romany, Kurdish and Russian) first in translation and then through the development of extra-linguistic means of communication in exercises designed to develop trust and mutual respect among the participants. These exercises engaged the participant pairs in a joint effort to articulate and represent their own experiences of social exclusion and inclusion through movement, music making, video making, discussion, and analysis.

For example, the first video making exercise began with a discussion (translated) on the meaning of respect and social inclusion. Everyone present participated in developing a series of ten questions on the nature of respect, which were written down in Spanish and German. The participants were then organized into pairs – one Spanish speaker and one German



speaker – and given one of the “hacked” video cameras. The partners used the camera to record each other’s answers to the questions and then to record each partner attempting to interpret the other’s answers. Since the partners did not speak the same language they had to develop extra-linguistic means of both communicating and interpreting meaning in order to complete the task. Over the first five days of the residency the same pairs were given several other tasks in video making, movement and music making, which involved extra-linguistic communication. There were also many other translated discussions and rehearsals. When all of the video exercises were complete the pairs worked together to tag and sequence their clips using the Palabras\_ editor. The clips were incorporated into the public media/dance-theater presentation primarily as segments displayed in a projection of the Palabras\_ browser between each dance or musical segment. During the performance each workshop participant triggered a clip to play by selecting a tag and told the story and meaning of the clip to the audience while the clip played. In the dress rehearsal there was a moment of confusion. One of the narrators, Vanessa, whose first language is Romany and second language is German, could not remember the tag she had used for the clip she was to narrate and was searching for her password instead of the tag. Confusion increased as the problem was translated in English, Spanish and German - to no avail. Finally, Cachito, Vanessa’s video making/tagging partner, who’s only language is Spanish, was called upon to help. Vanessa and Cachito sorted things out in a few seconds, communicating by means of idiosyncratic gestures, facial expressions and un-translated Romany and Spanish ‘key’ words.



Through the tagging, editing and video exercises, Vanessa and Cachito, and all of the Spanish/German speaking pairs, improvised a method of communication that used *translation*, not merely in its linguistic sense, but in the sense of "a motion across, a traversal." Their method of translation reflects its mathematical definition -- "a transformation in which the origin of a coordinate system (in this case, the complex coordinate system of nationality – language, cultural identity, political citizenship, class, and race), is moved to a new position or across a boundary, while the direction of each axis (in this case, each individual’s subjective identity), is maintained (respected, recognized, accepted, and acknowledged)."

*This is mode of translation mapped in Palabras\_.*

The "hacked" disposable cameras provide the means by which participants can document and represent their own experience. The browser interface allows a global and international audience online to examine the ways in which place-based communities and individuals describe their own social contexts. Visitors online can contribute to the evolving folksonomy that organizes these representations in clusters of semantic association.

What is shared among and between participant communities, and interpreted by both visitors and participants alike, is visualized in the tag cloud and seen in the video clips and sequences as an improvised map of correspondences across cultures.

The folksonomy generated here constitutes an emerging language – a common language that is associative and cross-contextual – a hybrid language that merges word and image into a kind of mediatized Esperanto. This common language – this folksonomic Esperanto – is the result of the use of media and information technologies and it *is* the use of technology.

The Palabras tools and interfaces translate - shifting the social location of knowledge to produce critical consciousness necessary to challenge existing relations of power.

The fundamental premise of Palabras\_ is that the images through which we view the experience and perspectives of others should be originated in context, interpreted, organized and disseminated by those who are represented. In this way communication, exchange, awareness and understanding can be generated from the bottom up, not the top down.

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**Dispatx "improvised maps" will constitute a new Palabras\_ "site". Readers that visit Palabras\_ through Dispatx, issue \_\_\_ can record and tag clips for this "site" by connecting a USB camera to their computer and navigating to the Palabras\_record interface [here] – [see instructions here]. The editors of Dispatx and the Palabras\_ project team ask that participants record, tag and contribute their own video commentary on the concept of "improvised maps" and/or record an original improvised map – 'by identifying yourself in a specific context' for inclusion in the improvisatory mapping project of Palabras\_dispatx.**

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.makezine.com/blog/archive/2005/08/how\\_to\\_cvs\\_vid\\_e\\_1.html](http://www.makezine.com/blog/archive/2005/08/how_to_cvs_vid_e_1.html) for details - please note that Pure Digital, the manufacturer of the cameras, released a series of newer versions of the camera shortly after the Buenos Aires residency and the cameras currently on the market have been found to be un-hackable thus far. The link to Ops, the open source software we used to download clips from the cameras has been removed from the site.)