

**passus exilii** or The steps of exile  
<http://www.passusexilii.com.ar/>

to explain with words of this world  
that a boat carrying me has set sail  
Alejandra Pizarnik

### Exile

(From the Latin *exilium*).

1. Separation of a person from his/her native country.
2. Expatriation, generally for political reasons.
3. The effect of a person being exiled.
4. Place where the exiled person lives.

*exsillium* – "From the Latin: *To leave the chair, or leave the cradle, leave the bed. So, when this transformation occurs, it becomes banishment.*"



### The Experience / The Installation

The visitor<sup>1</sup>, or the exile, enters a partially dark space, where there are words projected on the floor. He/she approaches, walks among the words, the words tend to flee and move away from his/her feet. The exile tries to pursue a word, the word moves away, and then he/she *steps* on the word. The word splits into two words that then transform. The exile now tries to grab another word which proceeds to break, leaving the letters on the loose. Suddenly, words appear that seek out and follow the exile, attempting to touch him/her, and stick to him/her. Some words are fast, others are slow and heavy.

The words (hereafter referred to as word-objects) are written in languages that may appear similar, such as Spanish, Catalan, and French, or English and German, or in very distant languages such as Basque, Chinese, or Nahuatl; they describe moods, places, and names of things familiar to people who move from one place to another.

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1. The *visitor* is in fact an *immigrant* or *exile*, since the purpose of the installation is to put the visitor in the shoes of someone who migrates, or is exiled, and seek the words that are getting away *with* the feet.

The *word-objects* possess behaviors. For example, when two *word-objects*

meet that can *pair up*, they form a new word. The *word-objects* are a representation of artificial life. *Foot* and *work* can meet and form *footwork*.

Without the exile realizing, the System is present, which takes into account what the exile does, which *word-objects* he/she steps on, and records statistics of which *word-objects* are stepped on most frequently. The System *knows* which words are stepped on in one city or another. The System *watches* the exile with the security camera installed on the ceiling.

The System, in *let's be politically correct* mode, puts at the disposition of the general public, but not the exile, a website where the data obtained can be viewed in real time. The statistics for the *word-objects* can be viewed, and the general public is able to add new words that make reference to the feeling of exile. In this way, the System attempts to "save itself" from its authoritarian condition.

The installation itself consists of an overhead projection where the *word-objects* move about on the horizontal plane of the floor. There is a camera located on the ceiling that captures images of the position of the visitors. The system analyzes these positions and determines if the *objects* are close to or far from the visitors.

The *word-objects* move away or approach in accordance with predetermined settings. Nevertheless, their weight changes as they are "stepped on" by the visitor. The more the words are pursued, the more they move away. And those *word-objects* that are avoided tend to stick to the visitor.

There is also a website where the statistics of the System are available for viewing. Additionally, on this website, new words and words derived from those that are projected onto the floor of the physical installation may be added.

### **Justification**

When I was one and a half years old, due to the preludes of what was to later become the bloodiest dictatorship in the history of Argentina, my family had to go into exile in Mexico. This trip, which initially was supposed to last 29 days, turned into an exile of 11 years. Upon returning to Argentina, I was a preadolescent, more Mexican than Argentine, with words, verb forms, thoughts, and attitudes that belonged to the place where I had been raised. Those first years after returning were very hard because, among other things, I was unable to be like my classmates (or at least I thought so at the time), because we didn't have turns of phrases, jokes, and little anecdotes in common. In relation to the precept that states, "Identity is constructed in the dialogue with other people,"<sup>2</sup> when I faced a group of people very different from the one with which I was familiar, I rooted myself in different aspects of Mexican culture in my day to day pursuits. I felt that my exile had begun in that moment, not before.

Nevertheless, there was a "before". Mexico had presented me with its own set of obstacles. A childhood lisp, one word or another that was out of place in Mexican culture revealed to others something that I wanted to hide: the fact that

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2.(Ivonne Bordelois, [http://congresosdelalengua.es/rosario/ponencias/aspectos/bordelois\\_i.htm](http://congresosdelalengua.es/rosario/ponencias/aspectos/bordelois_i.htm) )

I was a foreigner in the land where I was learning to be, exiled from a place that wasn't familiar to me except through stories, some nostalgic and others not so nostalgic.

Back in March of 2001, while I was on vacation in Barcelona, the economic reality of Argentina caused me to be dismissed from my job in Buenos Aires. In that moment, I willingly accepted and made my best effort to stay. The fact was, the life I was going to construct in this distant, unknown, and hostile place was not going to be a family achievement but rather a personal triumph. Perhaps it was just a late attempt at post-adolescent resolution of my identity. I imagined that by being in Barcelona, I would find myself in the way that I had done upon returning from exile in Mexico.

Finally, I returned to Buenos Aires in 2007. Here also, I found a barrier to be crossed in daily communication. Even though things were simpler, perhaps due to the matter of nationality, but above all because of previous experience, I still noticed a great gap between speech and understanding.

The most important aspect of this trans-territoriality was always language and communication. Trying to speak in the same language but with different norms was one of the greatest frustrations that I faced. The sensation of not understanding and not being able to make myself understood led me to develop what I thought of as different conversational tones: an Argentine tone for my day to day conversations with people from Buenos Aires, and perhaps for conversations in my love life; a Mexican tone for more humorous moments, and for conversations with my older brother and my younger sister, and of course, when speaking with my Mexican friends and colleagues; and a Catalan tone in order to survive out in Barcelona, a city that is so magnificent and so arid at the same time; and above all, a tone that I have named "Standard Spanish", which is what I have become aware of since then. This is a type of neutral Spanish that I resort to when I want to speak to someone who is not from Buenos Aires, is not Mexican, and is not Spanish. I also resort to this tone with I speak about work, when I teach, when resolving bureaucratic problems, and when I meet new people. It is something of an amalgam where I can protect myself from any linguistic problems (in Spanish, obviously).

This installation has the goal of recounting this experience in a playful way. It has the intention of presenting the problem of communication comprehension for those who are in a place that is not their native country. The area of discourse dealt with is that of individuals and families in political exile, and those who immigrate for economic, ethnic, professional, environmental, and cultural reasons. Exile is understood as being a change of location, of country, or region. Exile is also understood as part of tourism for those escaping their day to day routine. Those who arrive to unfamiliar places, with the same or different languages, with physical unsteadiness, and above all with language barriers go through a difficult process of being segregated due to not being able to communicate well. There even comes a time, when they in between two places, that they are unable to communicate well in their new location as well as in their native country. They mix up words, concepts, ideas, and manners of seeing the world. Some words elude them and others stick.

Exiles are often originally from a different country than their children are, they speak more than two languages, and find it impossible to fully communicate with people that speak the same language that they do but use different words. There are many questions that arise from these ideas: What is the role that all of us play in taking in those who have to or want to live in a different place? What words do we allow them to use? What liberties do we grant them? How arbitrary can we be with those who try, but are unable, to communicate with us in the way that we have established as being necessary? To what point are we responsible, at what point do we cease being responsible?

### **The Words**

Words will be sought that have a clear and exact meaning, and in some cases, are universal.

Some words move away from the visitor, such as *Freedom* or *Passport*. Others chase the visitor, such as *Police* or *McDonald's*. Some words simply ignore everything that happens, such as *Citizen* or *Electorate*.

absentia (which means *absence*) / ab-sentia / becomes a verb = ab-sentire (does not exist) / the prefix "ab" detaches = sentire (which means *feel*, and now the meaning has changed) / the prefix "pre" is added = pre-sentire (*presage*) / and becomes a noun again = pre-sentia (which means *presence*, and a full circle has been made).

The words proposed by visitors to the website are automatically added to the database and to the installation.

Words sometimes appear in one typeface and sometimes in another; this plays with the idea that certain relationships the immigrant establishes with language can suddenly change completely, contrary to what was expected. Assumptions on which the person has based him/herself suddenly lose validity, words that were thought to be understood and learned become volatile and are lost.

### **Technical Requirements**

Computer with Core 2 Duo processor, with Windows XP Service Pack 2  
2 GB of RAM memory  
20 GB of free hard drive space  
Video camera (3.8mm lens)  
3000 ANSI XGA projector (with 1024x768 pixel resolution)  
Internet connection

### **Installation Instructions**

The installation is designed to be projected on a white floor, in a dark room. The projection area should ideally be 3.50m wide by 2.63m high (minimum height of 2.50m). For a project with a lens of approximately 22mm, the distance from the projector to the floor is roughly 5 meters. The camera selected must have a

corresponding lens so that it can be placed together with the projector. The image

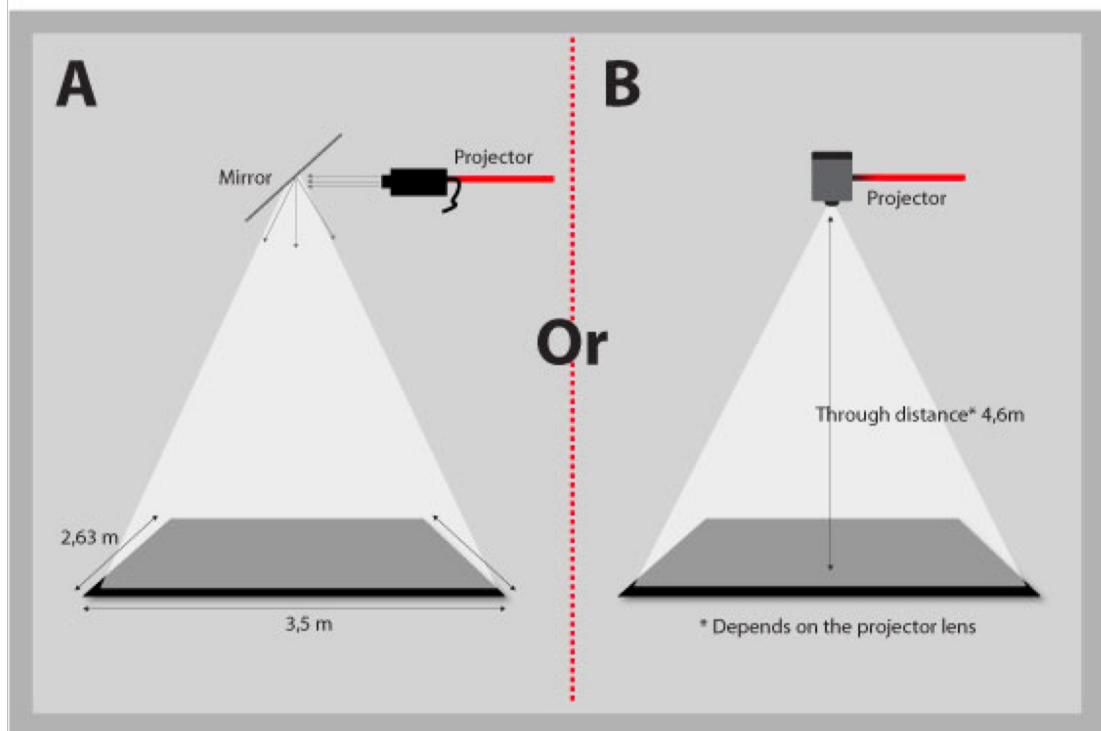
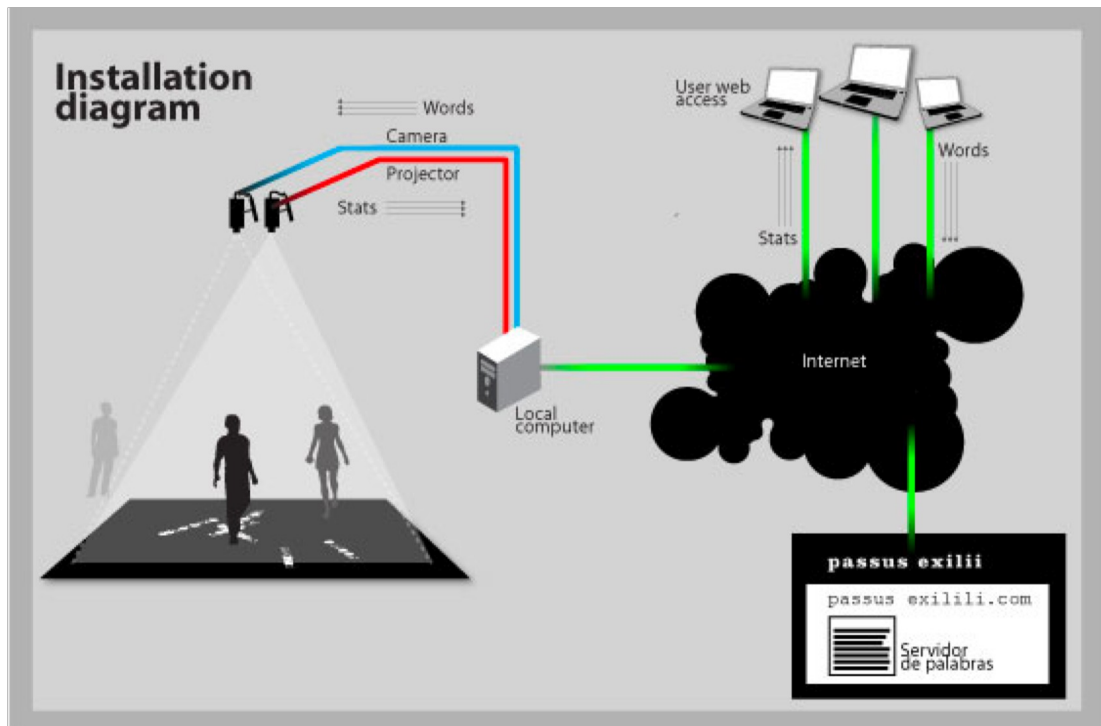
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captured by the camera must be the same as that projected by the projector. The room must be lighted in such a way that visitors can see significant contrast with the floor. The lighting must not be pointed at the floor or be such that the words are difficult to see clearly.

The computer used for the installation must have Internet access.



### Bibliography

- Poéticas de la distancia*, Sylvia Molloy and Mariano Siskind (editors)
- Cambiar el pasado o resignificar la historia*, Dr. Alberto C. Cabral
- Kafka y sus precursores*, J.L.Borges
- The Computational Beauty of Nature*, Gary William Flake
- Riesgos ciertos y falsos en la vigencia de la lengua*, Ivonne Bordelois
- La carga*, Jeanette Winterson







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