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Exhibition as a Form of Writing

On “Discreet Violence: Architecture of the French War in Algeria”

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Abstract +

In 2017, I published a book and inaugurated an exhibition, which unexpectedly traveled to seven institutions across three continents over a period of two years. The book, *Architecture of Counter-revolution: The French Army in Northern Algeria*, investigated the spatial operations that the French army and colonial administration enforced in colonized Algeria during the Algerian Revolution (1954–1962), or the Algerian War of Independence, the war to gain independence from French colonization that began in 1830.^[1] Structured around ten chapters, the manuscript focuses on the politics of three interrelated spatial counterrevolutionary measures: the massive forced resettlement of Algerian rural population; the mass-housing programs designed for the Algerian population as part of General Charles de Gaulle's Plan de Constantine; and the fortified administrative new town planned for the protection of the French authorities during the last months of the Algerian Revolution. These spatial counterrevolutionary measures were conceived and executed by the French civil and military authorities to prolong its colonial presence in Algeria, oversee the Algerian Revolution and populations, and defend its politico-economic interests in Algeria, including the extraction of oil and gas and the execution of France's nuclear program in the Algerian Sahara.

The exhibition “Discreet Violence: Architecture and the French War in Algeria,” presented first at the gta Exhibitions, ETH Zürich (April 13–June 12, 2017), was concerned with the parts of the book that examined the massive forced resettlement of Algerian rural population.^[2] The show turned this secluded facet of France’s spatial and psychological wars on Algeria’s countryside into an exposed platform, giving a vivid account of military and colonial sources that are highly problematic because of their nature and the absences they contain. “Discreet Violence” displayed the history of the making of militarily controlled spaces that the French army had called the *centres de regroupement* (regrouping centers), and what anyone who has some historical knowledge would call *camps*.^[3] The secret establishment of these *camps* began in the aftermath of the onset of the Revolution. In February 1959, more than four years after the onset of the Algerian Revolution, Michel Rocard, a young Inspector of Finances in French Algeria—who later served as Prime Minister from 1988 to 1991 under President François Mitterrand—drafted a confidential document, *Rapport sur les camps de regroupement* (Report on the Regroupment Camps). Rocard reported on the disgraceful conditions in the camps. The report was leaked, provoking a massive media scandal. The existence of France’s *camps* in colonized Algeria shocked the French people, and was ultimately debated in France. The exhibition historicized the various stages and policies and outrages around France’s creation of the *camps* in colonized Algeria during the Algerian Revolution.

During the same year of the media scandal, the French army had lost count on the number of the camps that it was demarcating and building. As the Inspection générale des regroupements de population (IGRP, or the General Inspection of the Population Regroupment) admitted, it was clear that “by 1959 we had found ourselves facing a very serious situation: it had become impossible to quantify even approximately the volume of the displaced rural populations that had occurred since 1954.”^[4] The exact numbers of camps that were constructed during the war, of persons who were forced to leave their homes, and of devastated villages are disputed to this day. One estimate for 1960 counted 2,157,000 such forcibly relocated persons.^[5] Another evaluation from 1961 considered that at least 2,350,000 people had been concentrated into military controlled settlements, and that an additional 1,175,000 people had been coerced into leaving their original homes due to constant and violent military operations, meaning that altogether over 3.5 million people had been forcibly displaced.^[6] Another figure for February 15, 1962, just a few weeks before Algeria’s independence, reported that 3,740 *camps* had been built in French Algeria since the outbreak of the Algerian Revolution in 1954.^[7] Some of these camps still exist.

“Discreet violence: Architecture and the French War in Algeria” consisted of texts, maps, photographs, films, and voices distributed across thirteen table exhibit cases, nine flat screens, and three headsets, all of which surrounded by a wallpaper of newspaper articles. In this paper, I reflect on the making of “Discreet Violence,” and offer a reading of the entanglements of the sources, voices, and the modes of display employed to tell the stories and histories of the *camps*. As part of my research practice, I suggest that this exhibition was an essential form of writing that the text of the book could not accommodate. Conversely, the form of writing that the various iterations of the exhibition have produced in the exhibition spaces cannot be expressed and transmitted through the writing of this very text. This is because this text is about certain aspects of the exhibition, and not the exhibition itself.







Historicizing the Camps

In the course of the Algerian Revolution, the French civil and military authorities established and built militarily controlled *camps* dubbed the *centres de regroupement* in Algeria's rural areas. These spaces resulted from the creation of the forbidden zones—free fire zones—and engendered massive forced relocations of the Algerian population. Special military units called the *Sections administratives spécialisées* supervised the evacuation of the forbidden zones, the regrouping of the Algerian population, the construction of temporary and permanent camps, the conversion of a number of permanent camps to villages, and monitored the daily life of Algerian civilians. The aim of this regrouping was to isolate the Algerian population from the influence of national liberation fighters and to impede possible psychological and material support.

To oversee the activities of the Algerian rural population and to prevent the moral and material support of Algerian militants and liberation fighters, the French colonial regime created new regions, departments, districts, and municipalities during the Algerian Revolution. This administrative reorganization was coupled with the strategic designation of new regional centers designed to address pressing security issues and to facilitate regional communication and the enforcement of French regulations. Parallel to this civil territorial reorganization, a military territorial “zoning” was designed. The entire territory of colonized Algeria was gradually permeated with modifiable infrastructures and hermetic cobwebs of checkpoints, watchtowers, military posts, border fortifications, mine-fields, and electric fences, all of which enabled constant counterrevolutionary military operations. The French army progressively allocated particular areas of the territory of Algeria to one of three main military categories: *zones opérationnelles* (zones of operations), *zones de pacification* (pacification zones), and the *zones interdites* (forbidden zones).

Within the zones of operations, officers were ordered to utilize any possible means to restore national security. In the militarily controlled zones of pacification, the army employed *action psychologique* (psychological actions) against civilians, who were coercively administered, supervised, and indoctrinated, as well as being induced to collaborate with the army. And finally there were the forbidden zones, sectors designated to be cleared of any living beings—including animals—and consisting of free-fire areas for French military air and ground forces. The prohibited regions were frequently isolated places; they comprised not only immense woodlands and highlands, but also vast, inhabited rural areas from which Algerian civilian populations were relocated en masse to secure a “national security” zone for the French army.

These various hypothesized territorial categories spawned frequent spatial misunderstandings and demarcation conflicts between the civil and military authorities involved. The French civilian administrative subdivisions consisted of departments, districts, and municipalities, while the systematic military *quadrillage* (grid system) was composed of zones, sectors, subsectors, quarters, and sub-quarters. The military grid system was intended to mesh with one of the aforementioned military objectives: operations, pacification, or the safeguarding of forbidden zones. The most unmistakable directive was to empty the forbidden zones, forcing civilians to leave their homes, villages, and arable lands. This military operation not only damaged countless existing villages and uprooted numerous Algerian peasants, but also engendered the establishment of what the French army termed the *centres de regroupement*.

With the issuing of the first centralized military policy of 1957, under the command of General Raoul Salan, official documents stamped “secret” or “secret-confidential” or “top-secret” began to regulate the creation of the forbidden zones, and to normalize the forced resettlement of the civilian populations; this was particularly the case with the construction of the defensive perimeter known as the Morice Line. Named after French Minister of National Defense André Morice, the Morice Line sealed off Algeria’s eastern and western borders with neighboring Tunisia and Morocco in order to prevent human movement and material exchanges. Running approximately 450 km along the border with Tunisia and 700 km along the border with Morocco, the Morice Line triggered a rapid and massive expansion of the camps. In 1958, the military Plan Challe fortified the Morice Line with additional electrified wire, minefields, barriers, and checkpoints—systematic counterrevolutionary measures that intensified the imposed evacuation of civilians from the forbidden zones. The number of the *camps* thus continued to increase throughout the course of the Algerian Revolution.

The confidential document, *Rapport sur les camps de regroupement* (Report on the Regroupment Camps) that Michel Rocard wrote was submitted in February 1959 to Paul Delouvrier, the newly appointed Delegate General of the French Government in Algeria. In this 1959 account, the 28-year-old Rocard denounced the outrageous conditions of the French colonial “*regroupment* camps in which a million villagers are parked, more than half of them children.”^[8] The report was leaked to the media in France, who belatedly revealed the existence of the militarily controlled *camps* in Algeria that until then had been kept secret from national and international public opinion. In 2003, Rocard published his report in a book titled *Rapport sur les camps de regroupement et autres textes sur la Guerre d’Algérie* (Report on the Regroupment Camps and Other Texts on the Algerian War). Among the reasons that prompted Rocard to publish his 1959 report on the camps over four decades later was, as he said, the alarming invasion of Iraq in 2003. Using the examples of the fiascos of the war in Algeria and the violence inflicted during the forced civilian relocations, Rocard attempted to demonstrate the impossibility of solving political problems by purely military means, as had occurred in colonial Algeria.

In the aftermath of the media scandal of 1959, planning “technicians”, as the military officers called them, became directly involved in transforming the permanent camps into what the army termed “villages”, as well as in designing new settlements for the forcibly relocated populations. Under the authority of General Charles de Gaulle and in prompt reaction to the public outrage, Paul Delouvrier launched an emergency resettlement program dubbed the *Mille villages* (One Thousand Villages).^[9] Delouvrier ordered immediate improvements in the development of the *camps*’ economic conditions. To this end, he established mobile teams comprised of a military officer and two skilled rural planning professionals, which he called *Équipes itinérantes d’aménagement rural* (mobile rural planning teams).^[10] These were expected to study: (a) the future of the regrouping process; (b) the economic viability of the camps; (c) the legal status of the occupied lands; (d) the administrative needs of the education and healthcare sectors; (e) the extent of immediate assistance that was required; and (f) the military concerns of protection and self-defense.^[11]

Central to the French military doctrine of the construction of the *camps* were the Sections administratives spécialisées (SAS, or Specialized Administrative Sections). These extraordinary army units were deployed in rural areas in order to carry out both military and civilian assignments. In one sense, the SAS officers' military missions entailed the gathering of intelligence, the diffusion of propagandistic information, the ensuring of law and order, and the direct control of the civilian population. By contrast, their civil functions were to provide social, economic, educational, sanitary, and medical facilities, as well as organize and build the militarily controlled *camps*. Similar units also subsequently served in urban areas in order to cope with the alarming numbers of *bidonvilles* (slums, or literally can towns) in addition to accomplishing most of the aforementioned civil-military responsibilities; these divisions were named the Sections administratives urbaines (SAU, or Urban Administrative Sections). By the end of 1961, twenty SAUs existed in the urban neighborhoods inhabited by the Algerian population, including in the Casbah of Algiers, and more than 700 SASs were spread across the vastness of Algeria's countryside and the immense Sahara.

Competing Narratives

To tell this little-known history of the French military *camps* in Algeria, I used public and private audiovisual and textual records that complement or contradict each other. Among these various sources were films and photographs produced by the propaganda teams of the French Service cinématographique des armées (SCA, or Cinematographic Service of the Army); textual archival documents from the Service historique de l'armée de Terre (SHAT, or Historic Service of Land Forces); various newspaper articles and documents from 1959; private collections of photographs and maps by people who witnessed the *camps* during the 1960s; and interviews with former and current employees of the SCA. Today, the SCA is called the Établissement de communication et de production audiovisuelle de la défense (ECPAD, or Ministry of Defense Department of Communication and Audiovisual Production). The ECPAD is located at the Fort d'Ivry, near Paris, and is still active in warzones where the French army is involved.

It was a deliberate choice to work almost exclusively with institutional and private, military and civil, colonial and post-independence sources that were produced and disseminated by the colonizing power during the Algerian Revolution. This choice helped in juxtaposing the controversies and contradictions among these French sources, and in highlighting the absences that they embodied. My intention was to: (1) display France's planned staging of the majority of the visual representations of its *camps* in colonized Algeria; and (2) expose the deliberate omission of certain information from these orchestrated French colonial and military imageries. This included the astonishing absence of armed officers in uniform, guard towers and barbed wire from these audiovisual records, in order to avoid echoing the then recently ended World War II—and notably the French taboo of the violence of the Vichy regime. To this end, one of the aims of the exhibition “Discreet Violence” was to thematize France's visual censorship and the French law of April 3, 1955 that declared a state of emergency.

The French law declaring the state of emergency allowed the French authorities to “take all measures to ensure control of the press and of publications of all kinds, as well as radio broadcastings, screenings of films, and theatre performances.”^[12] Accordingly, texts, images, audio sequences, films, theater pieces and any information about the Algerian War of Independence, including the *camps*, were by law subject to control, censorship, seizure, penalties, and police measures.^[13] Therefore, a propaganda office called the *5e bureau* (Fifth Bureau) provided tactical information aimed at influencing people's attitudes, beliefs, emotions, motives, values, and behaviors. This campaign of psychological warfare also included the visual and textual representation of the *camps* prior to the media scandal of 1959, an effort that continued until the office's dissolution in February 1960. The Fifth Bureau supervised and guided the textual and audiovisual productions made by the professional army photographs, cameramen, and filmmakers hired by the French SCA. The SCA's teams covered key events, such as the French Generals' putsches of 1958 and 1961, and produced propaganda material on particular topics, including the French so-called “centres de regroupement.”

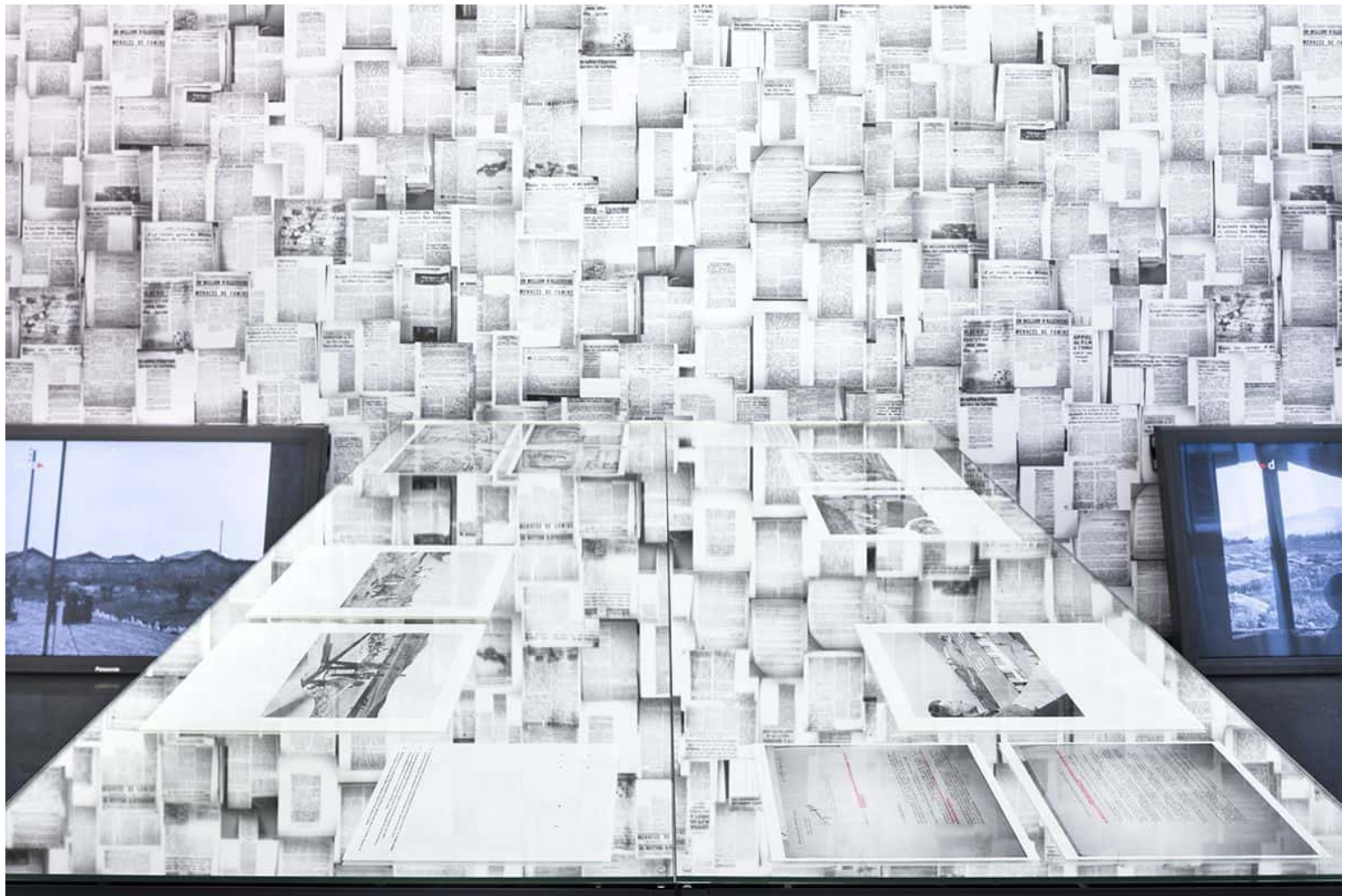
The exhibition refused to call the *camps* “centers.” Rather, by means of various voices and narratives, it demonstrated that the French appellation, “centres de regroupement,” not only poses translation problems, involving as it did both the displacement and concentration of civilians in extrajudicial detention, and within an enclosed and surveyed space, but it also entails precisely that which it is not. The show highlighted that the terms “concentration” and “camp” were appositely circumvented in official military nomenclature, and, as a result, by the majority of the French media and in subsequent history books. In 1957, Maurice Papon, the General Inspector of Administration in the Extraordinary Mission in Eastern Algeria, and the Prefect of the Department of Constantine—who was convicted in 1998 of crimes against humanity for his participation in the deportation of Jews in Bordeaux to concentration camps during World War II—vigorously requested the immediate suppression of the word “camp” from all road signs in the Algerian department under his authority.^[14] In Constantine (in eastern Algeria), where Papon was in charge of both the civil and military authorities, he banned any use of the word, ordering “the term ‘camp’ will have to disappear from the terminology.”^[15] The term *regroupement* seems to have a purely military sense, however, in that it coincides with the meaning of “concentration.” According to one dictionary of the French language, *regroupement* is the action of “regrouping,” which means: “1. To group, to unite anew (what was dispersed): *To regroup officers of an army...* 2. To group (dispersed elements), to gather. To reassemble: *To regroup the populations.*”^[16] “Concentration,” logically enough, is the action of concentrating, which means, according to the same dictionary, “to gather in a center. Military: *The concentration of troops in an area of the territory.* Grouping, roundup, regrouping. Special: *Camps de concentration.*”^[17] Concentration camps.

The French ban of the use of the terms “concentration” and “camp” in Algeria is associated with the recent history of the Vichy regime. According to Sylvie Thénault, historian and author of *Violence ordinaire dans l’Algérie coloniale: camps, internements, assignations à résidence* (Ordinary Violence in Colonial Algeria: Camps, Internments, and House Arrests), pointed out in 2012 that this categorical ban on *camps* derived from two essential facts. The first was that certain elected members of the French Assembly had themselves been victims of the Vichy regime in France during World War II. And second was a renewed series of polemics provoked by the comparison between Nazi concentration camps and the gulags in the Soviet Union, including an article in the right-wing daily *Le Figaro*, written by a former deportee and founder of the Commission internationale contre le régime concentrationnaire (CICRC, or International Committee on Concentration Camps).^[18]

To make sure that the visitors were alerted of the contradictions of the military appellation as well as the absences that the visuals expressed, a wallpaper containing newspapers articles from the 1959 media scandal covered all the walls of the exhibition spaces. The unprecedented flood of photographs, figures, and descriptions documenting the forced resettlement of Algerian civilians that resulted from the scandal, was included in the exhibition to inform audience members about the violence that some of the exhibited sources excluded. The titles of the various articles alone—published simultaneously in both left- and right-wing French newspapers—are testimony to the alarming numbers involved and the precarious circumstances that the French army was inflicting upon Algerians: “Dans les camps d’Algérie des milliers d’enfants meurent” (In the Camps of Algeria, Thousands of Children Die); “Un million d’Algériens ‘regroupés’ par l’armée menacés de famine” (One Million Algerians “Regrouped” by the Army Threatened with Famine); “Un million d’Algériens dans les camps: c’est la guerre” (One Million Algerians in Camps: Such Is War); “Un million d’Algériens parqués dans des camps de ‘regroupement’” (One Million Algerians Parked in “*Regroupement*” Camps); “J’ai visité, près de Blida, les villages de regroupement” (I Have Visited, Near Blida, the *Regroupement* Villages), “Un million d’Algériens derrière les barbelés” (One Million Algerians behind Barbed Wire); “Algérie: un million de personnes déplacés” (Algeria: One Million People Displaced); “Un million d’Algériens de l’Atlas ont été rassemblés dans mille villages” (One Million Algerians from the Atlas Mountains Have Been Gathered in a Thousand Villages).^[19]







These headlines surrounded and occupied all perspectives for visitors of the exhibition. The repeated black and white articles of the wallpaper haunted the imagination of the exhibition viewers and suggested that the so-called “centres de regroupement” were in no way “centres” but *camps*. Moreover, the shocking facts, maps, tones, reports, testimonies and opposing terms contained in the wallpaper were reflected on all other exhibited materials in order to remind visitors about the violence of this military measure. Thanks to mirrors that served as backgrounds to military and civil photographs and textual archival records, the 1959 media scandal, denouncing France’s violence, was omnipresent. This call for explanation and investigation forced the French army and government to further monitor the camps, as well as the production and dissemination of textual and audiovisual records, which the exhibition challenged and revealed. To help better grasp the scale of this military operation, a map of Algeria containing thousands of dots—each dot representing a camp—and a slideshow displaying aerial photographs were also exhibited. Making these competing narratives sit side by side was a way to *de-propagandise* France’s images, videos, brochures, and texts, and to expose them *against the grain*.^[20]

Inclusive Exclusion

To appease the French public opinion following the media scandal, the SCA produced and broadcast a myriad of films and photographs, lauding the “socioeconomic” missions of the SAS officers and self-legitimising the “civilising” role of the army. To avoid reproducing this colonial and militarised imagery, I asked permission from the ECPAD’s representatives to consult the dailies, the raw and unedited footage shot in the 1950s and 1960s for a specific propaganda film. In these film dailies, I was able to search for absences and signs of the French war in Algeria, which were not present in the edited film. These snippets of evidence were selected and cut, forming a new film montage that included the exclusion and excluded what was until then included, comprising the voice of the narrator. The new short films were composed of short disharmonious sequences with sometimes odd scenes, such as armed officers looking directly into or workers laughing at the camera. The motion pictures offered visitors silent scenes and landscapes of the conditions of the creation of the forbidden zones, the bombardment of existing villages, the evacuation and displacement of the Algerian population, the construction of the camps, the daily life in some of the camps, the arming of Algerian youth to “defend” their camp, and the role that Algerian women played in the transportation of material construction from their village to the militarily controlled camp.

The short films were projected on large screens placed on the floor of the exhibition spaces in front of the wallpaper, close to the table displays containing the archival records and mirrors. The single or double screens showed and juxtaposed the multiplicity of exclusions and inclusions. The series of short sequences, interrupted by gazes or rapid, blurred moving images, documented some of the mechanisms of forced displacement and constant surveillance that the French army practised in Algeria's countryside. The films made of daily rushes showcased the actor's performance and made the reading of other exhibited materials suspicious. Visitors had to pay greater attention to the film captions and the military directives exhibited in the table displays. These black and white scanned documents reproduced the French military orders that defined the camps, regulated their creation, correcting the confusion among the army officials about the different categories of the camps, and dictated the behavior of the soldiers. I had highlighted in pink all key notions, terms, institutions and instructions. To further reveal the exclusions and bring them in the exhibition, other voices were added. Interviews with former and current SCA employees about the filming of the camps and the people forced to inhabit them, and the role of the SCA were included. Moreover, by means of private documents and photographs that belonged to an SCA cameraman, one of the table cases uncovered the making of a propaganda film. In these photographs, the cameramen and film crew were clearly armed.







To historize the camps, present competing narratives, and include the absences contained in institutional sources, each film, interview and table display focused on a specific episode of the camps as a French military counterrevolutionary measure implemented in the course of an armed conflict. These chapters ranged from the military spatial planning guidelines of the camps, their military *raison d'être*, their mass construction, their failed conversion to villages, to the military psychological actions implemented in the camps. They were presented with their war constituent as well as France's economic and political interests in Saharan resources. Through various voices and contradictory documents, “Discreet Violence” disobeyed the commandment of colonial and military archives. It refused to accommodate the colonial domination of historical accounts and systemic marginality of certain groups and histories. While writing the intrinsic relationships between architecture, military measures, colonial policies and the planned production and distribution of visual records, “Discreet Violence” exposed the biases of the alibi of “civilizing mission” and the violence that is anchored in the ideology of “modernity.”

All photos: The first iteration of *Discreet Violence: Architecture and the French War in Algeria* (April 13 –June 13, 2017) by Samia Henni, gta Exhibitions, ETH Zurich © Photos by Martin Stollenwerk.

Footnotes

- 1 The book was published by the gta Verlag in Zürich, received numerous awards, including the 2020 Spiro Kostof Book Award from the Society of Architectural Historians, the 2018 Silver Book Award from the Festival International du Livre d'Art et du Film (FILAF), and the 2018 Best Book Award in Theory of Art from the FILAF. The book was translated into French and was published by Les Editions B42 in 2019. It received extensive media coverage, including in *Mediapart* and *Le Monde*. ↑
- 2 Following the gta Exhibitions, at ETH Zürich, the exhibition took place at Het Nieuwe Instituut (The New Institute) in Rotterdam (September 8, 2017–January 1, 2018), the Archive Kabinett in Berlin (December 19, 2017–January 23, 2018), The Graduate School of Architecture at the University of Johannesburg (April 19–June 20, 2018), ~~La Colonie~~ in Paris (June 19–July 14, 2018), the VI PER Gallery in Prague (September 26–November 10, 2018), AAP's John Hartell Gallery in Ithaca, NY (March 7–April 11, 2019), and the Twelve Gates Arts in Philadelphia, PA (September 6–October 23, 2019). The exhibition was supposed to be shown in Algeria in April 2020, but it was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and travel restrictions. ↑
- 3 Both works are the outcomes of my PhD thesis in the history and theory of architecture that I defended (with distinction) in 2016 at the Institute for the History and Theory of Architecture (gta), ETH Zürich. The dissertation was awarded the ETH Silver Medal in 2017. ↑
- 4 Service historique de l'armée de terre (hereafter SHAT) SHAT 1 H 2030. Florentin, J., Bataillon's Chief of General Inspection of the Population. *Regroupement. Les regroupements des populations en Algérie*. Algiers, December 11, 1960. p. 13. ↑
- 5 ↑
- 6 Bourdieu, Pierre and Abdelmalek, Sayad. *Le déracinement: La crise de l'agriculture traditionnelle en Algérie*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit. 1964. p. 13. ↑
- 7 Cornaton, *Les camps de regroupement*, p. 121. ↑
- 8 Rocard, Michel. *Rapport sur les camps de regroupement et autres textes sur la guerre d'Algérie*. Paris: Mille et une nuits. 2003. p. 13. ↑
- 9 After his experience in Algeria, Paul Delouvrier was appointed General Delegate of the Metropolitan Region of Paris between 1961 and 1969, and then Prefect and Deputy Director of the Aménagement du territoire (Spatial Planning) between 1966 and 1969.

Delouvrier is considered to be the father of the *villes nouvelles* (new towns) in France. ↑

SHAT 1 H 2030 D 1. Delouvrier, Paul. Directive no. 3.444 CC, *Regroupement de Populations*, April 24, 1959. ↑

Ibid., pp. 2–3. ↑

Law No. 55–385 of April 3, 1955, Article 11. ↑

This strict control did not prevent a few Algerian and French filmmakers from directing films during and about the Algerian War of Independence. ↑

Interview with Michel Cornaton by Samia Henni, May 18, 2013. ↑

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“Regroupement, Regrouper.” *Le Nouveau Petit Robert: Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*. Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert. 1993. p. 2143. ↑

“Concentration”, *ibid.*, p. 482. ↑

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SHAT 1 H 2485 D 2. Newspaper clippings, 1959. ↑

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Contributors



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Redefining the Exhibition

Dave Beech



On “Past Disquiet” and “NIRIN”

Nick Aikens, Anthony Gardner, Kristine Khouri & Rasha Salti

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[Themes](#)

[Audio & Video](#)

[Conferences](#)

[Collaborations](#)

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