Assessing Surveillance

In April 2017, United States Customs and Border Protection published an Environmental Assessment stating that sixteen Integrated Fixed Surveillance Towers will have no considerable impact on the Tohono O’odham Nation, where they are proposed to be built. For tribal members, however, the towers’ presence will disrupt spiritual practices and daily life, and irreversibly destroy a landscape they hold as sacred. Assessing Surveillance is a project that, in collaboration with Tohono O’Odham tribal members, advocates against these towers construction using the tools of critical practices in architecture: A Counter-Environmental Assessment that documents and describes the actual impact the towers—and the border militarization they bring with them—will have on O’Odham culture and daily life, along with a public awareness campaign. Through mapping, spatial analysis, and oral histories, and interviews, this project works closely with tribal members to bring indigenous voices into the framework of environmental review, thereby challenging the ways Environmental Assessments and Impact
Statements understand terms like landscape and its relationship to people, land use, material and immaterial culture, sovereignty, and environment itself.

The paper we propose for Critical Practice in an Age of Complexity will present these mappings and visualizations for the first time, analyze the ways in which the epistemological framework and administrative process of creating the Environmental Assessment fails to understand land use from an indigenous perspective, and describe how security infrastructure violates indigenous rights to land and culture.

Over the next years billions of tax dollars will be spent on security infrastructure, meanwhile we live in a political climate where environmental protection is at risk, and land is seen increasingly as just a resource to exploit. Our project, then, not only seeks to intervene in the violation of land rights on the Tohono O’odham Nation, it also asks how we can use our skills as designers and scholars to make accepted formats of knowledge production and communication in the field more dynamic, equitable, and accessible, offering a model for the tools of spatial practice to service struggles for indigenous sovereignty in respectful, collaborative ways.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Nina Valerie Kolowratnik is an architectural researcher based in Vienna and New York.

Her practice is situated in the context of migration and claims to land and property, and develops spatial notational systems that operate within human rights debates. Since 2014 she has been teaching graduate courses focused on borderlands and migration at Columbia University GSAPP and TU Vienna.

In 2017, her long-term research on the dilemma of evidence-production within Native American land claims will be published by Sternberg Press and her first solo-exhibition on current return realities in Kosovo was shown at Stacion CCA Prishtina. Recently her work has also been shown at the Venice Architecture Biennale and the Oslo Architecture Triennale and has been supported by the The Architectural League of New York. Kolowratnik holds a professional degree in architecture from TU Graz and a MS in Critical, Curatorial and Conceptual Practices in Architecture from Columbia University.