# INFRASTRUCTURES OF CONTROL

**1**
Brownsville, TX
25.945000, -97.328333
Relocatable Remote Video Surveillance System (R-RVSS)
Colter Thomas, January 2024

The sun tears through the clouds over an R-RVSS in big sky Texas, only miles from the SpaceX rocket facilities on Boca Chica Beach. While this version of the RVSS tower was designed to be relocatable, a survey of historical satellite imagery shows that once U.S. Customs and Border Protection installs these towers, they are there to stay. Whether in densely populated urban communities, or the barren expanse of empty deserts, surveillance has become a permanent fixture of the border landscape.

**2**
Brownsville, TX
25.895417, -97.495556
Remote Video Surveillance System (RVSS)
Colter Thomas, December 2023

This RVSS is one of the oldest surveillance towers we've encountered along the border, having been erected between 2002 and 2006. Much of the fieldwork for this project took place during holidays and school breaks. For this particular image, we found ourselves in Brownsville, Texas, on New Year's Eve. When the clock struck midnight, the entire city erupted into a defiant display of dazzling fireballs.

**3**
Brownsville, TX
25.993556, -97.602861
Remote Video Surveillance System (RVSS) mounted on water tower
Colter Thomas, January 2024

This is one of at least five (there are likely more we have not yet located) water towers in South Texas that currently have RVSS camera arrays mounted on them. It is owned by the Military Highway Water Supply Corporation, a non-profit corporation supplying water for rural and domestic purposes in Cameron and Hidalgo Counties, and leased to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). CBP has similar arrangements with at least two other water providers in the region, Webb County Water Utilities and the Roma Water Treatment Plant.

**4**
Mission, TX
26.152444, -98.352694
Relocatable-Remote Video Surveillance System (R-RVSS)
Colter Thomas, January 2024

Part of a 3-mile length of a privately funded border wall, constructed by Fisher Industries with financial and political support from We Build the Wall, the Trump-affiliated nonprofit from which Steve Bannon and three others were charged with stealing over a million dollars (Bannon was pardoned by then-President Trump before trial). The We Build the Wall wall, despite being only a few years old, is already decrepit: It is slowly sinking into the Rio

Grande; the concrete foundations are cracking (and being filled with cocking); the caps on top of each post are not physically attached in any way and falling off in high winds, etc. The best part is that the wall is only 3 miles long and in front of an already existing section of CBP border wall. Three miles of the "Lamborghini of walls" (as compared to the government's "horse and buggy wall") reportedly cost $20,000,000 - $30,000,000.

**5**
Laredo, TX
27.543389, -99.521500
Automated Surveillance Tower (AST)
Remote Video Surveillance System (RVSS) Tower
M113 Armored Personnel Carrier
Colter Thomas, January 2024

Few places along the U.S.-Mexico border encapsulate the sheer performative absurdity of our contemporary border security paradigm as well as this spot on the banks of the Rio Grande in Laredo, Texas. In addition to the two surveillance towers—inexplicably situated less than 800 feet apart, despite boasting effective ranges measured in miles—and the Border Patrol truck visible in the distance in the center of the frame, there are two tactical military vehicles sitting here as well, both silent and unoccupied. These are Texas National Guard M113 armored personnel carriers, "deployed" in this Laredo neighborhood as part of Operation Lone Star, Governor Greg Abbott's made-for-TV, $11 BILLION (and counting) domestic military operation that has transformed thousands of Texas state troopers and National Guard soldiers into de facto immigration police. In his tweet showcasing the arrival of the M113s in December 2022, Abbott explained that they would serve as "enhanced protection for our troops in the face of increasing cartel activity." But things seemed to work the other way around when we got too close to the vehicles and were warned away by two National Guard troops armed with AR-15's who looked to be in their teens. Why were we approaching the vehicles? To better photograph the decals that have been displayed on their sides since they arrived in Laredo: the head of a horse on one, a Trojan soldier's helmet on the other.

**6**
Eagle Pass, TX
28.702139, -100.506028
Remote Video Surveillance System (RVSS)
Colter Thomas, January 2024

This photograph was taken in Shelby Park, Eagle Pass, which has now been partially closed to function as a 24-hour staging ground for Operation Lone Star personnel and vehicles. Colter took this photograph with his back to that section of the park, looking past a memorial erected by the Eagle Pass Border Coalition to honor migrants who have died along the border, toward a surveillance tower standing on the far side of a public golf course. Overhead is the Eagle Pass International Bridge, connecting the United States and Mexico. Visitors to this location will see a striking spatial representation of the so-called border crisis: not the front line of a war between cartels and brave American troops but parallel routes across the same river, one safe and legal for those lucky enough to have the right paperwork, and another just underneath it, this one potentially deadly and increasingly criminalized.

**7**
Eagle Pass, TX
28.732889, -100.499889
Remote Video Surveillance System (RVSS)
Colter Thomas, January 2024

In recent years, Eagle Pass has gained national attention for its border crossings. This heightened attention has led to significant changes in the way of life for the city's 30,000 residents. Policing and surveillance are inescapable. The tower, a symbol and tool of heightened security and control, stands as a constant reminder of the broader dynamics at play in the borderlands, where the quest for vigilance and security has become a dominant force in shaping the way of life for millions.

**8**
El Paso, TX
31.727472, -106.375972
Remote Video Surveillance System (RVSS)
Colter Thomas, May 2023

The predominant conception of the border is that of a sparsely populated desert landscape, dotted with cacti and sand dunes. While large swaths of the border fit this description, there are also hundreds of miles of densely populated landscapes with communities ripped apart by a militarized border policy. Relics still remain of a time when the two lands existed as one. Surveillance cameras instead capture a new reality, where the border has become a living tapestry of division and control, documenting the ongoing transformation of a once seamless landscape into a fragmented and closely monitored frontier.

**9**
El Paso, TX
31.756472, -106.435722
Remote Video Surveillance System (RVSS)
Colter Thomas, May 2023

Surveillance infrastructure has quietly integrated into our border landscapes, often going unnoticed to the untrained eye. Towers easily mistaken for cell phone or radio infrastructure but equipped with cutting edge high-resolution cameras and radar systems blend into the background. This network of technology becomes visible only when you know where and how to look—it is hidden in plain sight. Surveillance towers can be found watching over backyards, playgrounds, schools, children's hospitals, churches, and everything in between.

**10**
El Paso, TX
31.762389, -106.444944
Remote Video Surveillance System (RVSS)
Colter Thomas, May 2023

Installed sometime around the year 2000, this RVSS is one of the oldest we are aware of, predating many of the homes in the surrounding area. For those who moved into their newly built homes after the tower was erected, it has always been a part of the landscape. Most of our work mapping this surveillance network focuses on locating the new towers that CBP is constantly erecting. However, this tower, and a few others like it, offer a glimpse into the future of the United States borderlands, trapped in perpetual and eternal surveillance.

**11**
Santa Teresa, NM
31.820667, -106.699778
Tactical Aerostat System (TAS)
Remote Video Surveillance System (RVSS) on unclassified tower type
Colter Thomas, May 2023

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) uses two main varieties of aerostats, which are lighter-than-air aircraft held aloft through the use of a buoyant gas. They allow for surveillance equipment to be raised high in the air, vastly increasing the range of these technologies. All CBP aerostats are tethered to the ground and do not have an operator on board. The aerostat pictured here, deployed over the Border Patrol's Santa Teresa Station in southern New Mexico in May 2023, is part of the Tactical Aerostat System (TAS), which uses video-equipped aerostats that are smaller and more relocatable than those of the Tethered Aerostat Radar System (TARS), a radar-based system that has been in use for more than 40 years. TAS vessels are manufactured by the privately-held American military contractor Peraton, based in Reston, Virginia. Peraton was formed in 2017 when the private equity firm Veritas Capital acquired the government services division of the now-defunct Harris Corporation. The company has since acquired a number of other IT businesses, and as of January 2024 is the largest privately owned federal IT contractor according to market research firm TBR.

**12**
Douglas, AZ
31.348389, -109.581444
Mobile Surveillance Capability (MSC)
Colter Thomas, May 2023

This is a Mobile Surveillance Capability (MSC)—sometimes also referred to as Mobile Vehicle Surveillance System (MVSS)—vehicle, positioned atop a massive pile of smelting slag on the outskirts of Douglas in Cochise County, Arizona. Together, the surveillance vehicle and piles of slag—a by-product of the mining industry—form part of an infrastructure of conquest and control that has been under construction in Cochise County for more than 150 years and has shaped this landscape into one of extraction, displacement, and expropriation.

**13**
Montezuma Pass, Coronado Peak, AZ
31.349889, -110.285611
Integrated Fixed Tower (IFT)
Colter Thomas, January 2024

Our work to learn about and document America's border security infrastructure began when we met and realized we had similar questions about the towers we had encountered in southern Arizona. Colter, who grew up in Tucson, has been visiting the area around Arivaca with his father since he was a child, so we started there. Looking at this landscape, free for a moment from the geopolitical maps through which we so often see the world around us, it is striking how invisible the border is ... if it weren't for the steel and concrete that has been assembled in the walls and towers that cross the prairie. And as we look up at this tower, noting the IFT technology tailored to the tower hardware of the now-defunct SBInet program, we begin to see something that has become clearer as our work has expanded: Infrastructure like this watchtower does not simply delineate or fortify the border, it is the border.

**14**
San Rafael Valley, AZ
31.359197, -10.302789
Integrated Fixed Tower (IFT)
Colter Thomas, May 2023

Documenting the breadth of security infrastructure along the U.S.-Mexico border has taken us to a wide variety of landscapes, from harsh patches of desert to sandy deltas, from small towns to bustling metropolises, and from residential backyards to public parks, community college campuses, and private ranches. This tower, one of a handful located on the southern foothills of the Huachuca Mountains in Cochise County, Arizona, is a monument to the lengths that proponents of U.S. border policing have been willing to go to construct a system of surveillance stretching across a nearly 2,000-mile border, and to the social and environmental costs of this endeavor.

**15**
Nogales, AZ
31.332806, -110.947417
Remote Video Surveillance System (RVSS)
Colter Thomas, December 2023

This tower is nestled between Nogales, Sonora (Mexico), and Nogales, Arizona (U.S.). It sits less than a block from the location where border patrol agent Lonnie Swartz fired 14 - 30 shots through the border fence into Mexico, killing teenager José Rodriguez. Swartz claimed he feared for his life after teenagers had been throwing rocks at him and other law enforcement agents. The road on the Mexican side sits some 20 feet below the border road in the United States. Swartz was charged with second degree murder for the killing. He was acquitted on the murder charge.

**16**
Nogales, AZ
31.334472, -110.958889
Remote Video Surveillance System (RVSS)
Colter Thomas, February 2024

The cross in this photograph marks the location where the body of Javier Mendoza, 45, was recovered on March 8, 2021. The Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, which works to recover and identify the remains of migrants who die in this region of Arizona, determined that Mendoza died of exposure. Mendoza is one of thousands of people who have lost their lives on the journey north through the borderlands. His death occurred just 500 feet or so from the border wall in one of the most highly surveilled parts of Nogales, Arizona. The surveillance tower visible in this photograph is just one of three such towers that would have had a view of Mendoza's death, which happened in a spot populated by Border Patrol game cameras and regularly patrolled by agents in trucks. In other words, every one of Mendoza's final steps was almost certainly monitored and recorded by the U.S. Border Patrol ... and yet he still died of exposure alone on this ridge. Javier's cross was placed by Tucson based artist, Alvaro Enciso.

**17**
Arivaca, AZ
31.525347, -111.289220
Integrated Fixed Tower (IFT)
Colter Thomas, February 2024

In probably the most damning case of the United States government's surveillance of migrant death, the body of the 33-year-old Martin Zamora Pastrana was found approximately 320 yards from an IFT with a stated range of 7-8 miles. The land was long ago cleared of any sizable vegetation and it is an unobstructed line of sight for miles in all directions. His cause of death was determined as hyperthermia (heat exhaustion). Martin's cross was placed by Tucson-based artist Alvaro Enciso.

**18**
Arivaca, AZ
31.525347, -111.289220
Integrated Fixed Tower (IFT)
Colter Thomas, May 2023

This was the first surveillance tower I visited and photographed for this project—an Integrated Fixed Tower (IFT) manufactured by a U.S. subsidiary of Elbit Systems, an Israeli military technology contractor. Installed sometime between 2007 and 2010, this tower sits on top of the highest point in the immediate surroundings. This is another angle of the tower seen in the background of image 18. The cross of Martin Zamora Pastrana is visible from this location.

**19**
Arivaca, AZ
31.484667, -111.377333
Integrated Fixed Tower (IFT)
Colter Thomas, May 2023

At the start of this project, the guiding philosophy for creating these images was based on the sense of surreality I experienced when encountering the monolithic form of a surveillance tower in an otherwise untouched natural landscape. However, as the project developed, it became clear that these towers are not surreal at all. Surveillance cameras have now become as much a part of the borderlands landscape as the mountains and rocks they watch over.

**20**
Kuuchamaa Mountain (also known as Tecate Peak), overlooking Tecate, Mexico
32.573056, -116.678500
Mobile Surveillance Capability (MSC)
Colter Thomas, March 2024

I found this MSC lower on the mountainside of Kuuchamaa than usual, likely due to hazardous road conditions higher up. Surveilling the entirety of the Mexican town of Tecate, this tower is operated around the clock by national guardsmen. The placement of these mobile surveillance vehicles often serves as a reliable indicator of where permanent surveillance towers will be installed in the future.

**21**
Tijuana River Valley, San Diego County, CA
32.543500, -117.086056
Unknown Surveillance Camera Type
Dugan Meyer, March 2024

In addition to the primary surveillance tower systems used by CBP/Border Patrol, a variety of other surveillance technologies are deployed throughout the region, from underground seismic sensors to remote trail cameras to highly portable camera units like this one, which sits beside Monument Road in the Tijuana River Valley in San Diego County.

**22**
Gadsden, AZ
32.55452378, -114.7877653
Remote Video Surveillance System (RVSS) and Communications Relay Tower
Dugan Meyer, March 2024

The Remote Video Surveillance System (RVSS) program has been active since 1996, making these towers some of the oldest still in use today. Manufactured by General Dynamics (and subcontractors including International Towers LLC), the RVSS sensor arrays have a maximum effective range of between 3 and 7.5 miles and include electro-optical and infrared cameras, radar, laser illuminators (used to remotely guide agents on the ground in their pursuit of targets identified with the tower technology), spotlights, and sometimes loud hailers. In addition to these standard monopole towers, RVSS camera arrays are also sometimes placed on other structures, including water towers and buildings. Communication relay towers like the one pictured here are crucial components of the network of surveillance infrastructure deployed

throughout the borderlands, as they enable the transmission of video and other sensor data to centralized control rooms where it can be analyzed.

The towers in this photograph stand on the banks of the Sality Canal in Gadsden, Arizona, a colonia within the Yuma metropolitan area. Yuma County is an agricultural powerhouse, the highest producing region in the state for crops by dollar value and the producer of a significant portion of the leafy vegetables consumed in the United States. This production relies almost entirely on Mexican agricultural workers; industry-wide, around 40,000 workers cross the border legally each year to perform this labor. In Gadsden, many of these workers gather before dawn each day in company parking lots beneath RVSS towers like this one where they board the repurposed school buses that take them to the fields.

**23**
Arizona Highway 92, Sierra Vista, AZ
31.391360, -110.231729
Automated License Plate Reader (ALPR)
Dugan Meyer, May 2024

Automated License Plate Readers (ALPRs) are widely used throughout the U.S. borderlands and, increasingly, in communities all across the country. Along the southern border, ALPRs are deployed in a variety of ways: Increasingly integrated into police vehicles themselves, stationary deployments of the technology at Border Patrol checkpoints and alongside highways and roads throughout the region remain common. Sometimes the technology operates from specially made trailers, two-wheeled units that can be pulled behind vehicles via hitch and then parked, like the portable security camera units increasingly ubiquitous in retail parking lots. In other cases, like the ALPR photographed here, they are disguised within other objects like traffic barrels. A separate power unit typically sits a few yards from the ALPR itself (this is also sometimes concealed), and remote trail cameras are often positioned nearby to surreptitiously watch over the equipment.

We have documented concealed and conspicuous ALPRs in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. They are positioned on residential roads, county and state highways, and interstates. Some have been operating in the same spot for years. None display any information identifying the police agency to which they belong.

**24**
Cochise College, Douglas Campus; Douglas, AZ
31.36339049, -109.682431
Relocatable Long-Range Surveillance Tower (Relocatable IFT)
Dugan Meyer, May 2024

To date, this is the only Relocatable Long-Range Surveillance Tower—a relocatable version of the Integrated Fixed Tower (IFT) system—we know to be deployed along the Southwest border. Like the standard IFTs, it was manufactured by Elbit Systems of America. The tower has an effective maximum range of 5-7.5 miles and is outfitted with electro-optical and infrared cameras as well as radar technology. Artificial intelligence is used to assist agents monitoring the system from centralized control rooms.

The tower sits on the Douglas campus of Cochise College, a public, two-year community college in Cochise County, Arizona. College administrators signed a license agreement with U.S. Customs and Border Protection in 2021 that invited CBP to deploy the surveillance tower on its campus free of cost or compensation and for as long as it sees fit (although the college can revoke the agreement at any time with 60 days notice).

**25**
Calvary Memorial Park, Douglas, AZ
31.334186, -109.541211
Remote Video Surveillance System (RVSS)
Dugan Meyer, May 2024

A Remote Video Surveillance System (RVSS) tower in Douglas, Arizona. Manufactured by General Dynamics (and subcontractors including International Towers LLC), these towers can range from 60 to 200 feet tall and support a sensor system equipped with electro-optical and infrared cameras, radar, laser illuminators, spotlights, and sometimes loud hailers.

Douglas is a small border city in southeastern Arizona, adjacent to Agua Prieta, Sonora. Since the late 1990s, this region has been a hotbed for anti-immigration vigilante groups, though the tradition of border vigilantism in the area stretches back more than a hundred years and echoes an even longer history of paramilitary violence that produced the modern American West. Although it may be reassuring to imagine these groups as operating on the fringes of mainstream society, vigilante groups in Cochise County have long enjoyed the support—sometimes implicit, sometimes more direct—of local ranchers and even the Cochise County Sheriff's Office. Learn more about this context in the online exhibition guide at the link on the following page.

**26**
Cochise County, AZ
31.371331, -109.210230
Hedglen Forward Operating Base (FOB)
Dugan Meyer, May 2024

Pictured here is one of many examples of tactical infrastructure developed within a military context and deployed by the Border Patrol within the United States: Hedglen Forward Operating Base (FOB) in remote southeastern Arizona. FOBs are military installations established in strategically or tactically important locations that may be slow or difficult to reach from main operating bases (i.e., Border Patrol stations, in this case). In this context, they enable Border Patrol agents to mobilize more quickly in response to intelligence such as surveillance tower footage. The Border Patrol does not publicly share the locations or names of most FOBs or the smaller, temporary tactical camps it establishes; however, some, like this one, are identifiable in publicly accessible (though sometimes redacted) environmental impact assessments or the occasional news article. According to the most recent reliable documentation I am aware of, as of 2017 the Border Patrol was operating 12 permanent FOBs and 5 tactical camps spread among its southwest border sectors, with an additional 4 FOBs along the border with Canada.

Hedglen FOB has been in operation since May 2013. The site was originally proposed by a local landowner-driven nonprofit that advocates for ranchers called the Malpai Borderlands Group. Similar to other FOBs, the Hedglen facility consists of modular buildings, including living quarters (32 beds, in this case; agents are typically stationed at FOBs for 7 days at the time), dining facilities, and other administrative or support buildings; vehicle parking and all-terrain vehicle (ATV) storage; a helipad; a horse corral; detention facilities; communications equipment; fuel storage; water and power infrastructure; etc.

**27**
El Paso, TX
31.812083, -106.542667
Lightweight Vehicle Surveillance System (LVSS)
Dugan Meyer, May 2024

The Lightweight Vehicle Surveillance System (LVSS), also referred to as the Mobile Surveillance Capability Lite (MSC-Lite), is another type of truck-mounted, mobile surveillance tower. Radar technology and electro-optical/infrared cameras sit atop an articulating, rapidly deployable tower apparatus, and the operator can view the sensor feeds on monitors within the vehicle's cab. These units are often operated by National Guard or other military personnel.

This LVSS is positioned on a ridgeline beyond the farthest parking lot of a shopping mall on El Paso's northwest side. From its perch, it looks out over Interstate 10, past car dealerships and a casino onto Sunland Park, New Mexico, a residential area at the foot of Mount Cristo Rey, one of the most actively surveilled zones in the region. A segment of the border drawn over this mountain is an increasingly rare, unfenced section, and the vantage points provided by the altitude has made this a common entry spot for those trying to evade the dense assemblage of security infrastructure designed to deter and capture them. A recent report from the group No More Deaths has documented the surprising number of deaths that occur here amid houses and businesses. Many take only a small amount of water with them as they attempt the treacherous descent. When they are met by border police waiting below—guided by surveillance assets including this LVSS—many do not have the strength to make it back.

**28**
Rio Bravo, TX
27.362859, -99.477178
Webb County Sheriff's Office Vehicle and SkyWatch Mobile Surveillance Platform
Dugan Meyer, January 2024

Pictured here are a Webb County Sheriff's Office vehicle and a SkyWatch mobile surveillance platform deployed outside of United Step Academy, a public high school with a student population that is more than 99 percent Hispanic/Latino. SkyWatch platforms have been used by the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan, by the U.S. Border Patrol, and by local police agencies across the country. This model was made by ICx Technologies, which has since been absorbed by Teledyne FLIR. In long-term use cases such as this, the platform will not contain a live operator; instead, surveillance footage can be transmitted to a control room or stored on hard drives that are periodically harvested.

**29**
Roma, TX
26.399997, -99.01317
Relocatable Remote Video Surveillance System (R-RVSS)
Dugan Meyer, January 2024

This relocatable version of the Remote Video Surveillance System (RVSS) is part of a dense network of surveillance technologies and police officers deployed throughout the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) in southern Texas. Spread across the four counties that comprise the region, 91 percent of the population here identifies as Hispanic or Latino according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Residents have long complained of discriminatory and brutal treatment from police, and recent research has demonstrated that such experiences remain disproportionately common under Operation Lone Star, Governor Greg Abbot's $11 billion (and counting) border security operation, which has flooded the region with National Guard soldiers, additional police, and a range of surveillance and enforcement infrastructure.

The scale and intensity of the police presence under Operation Lone Star is difficult to describe. Nowhere else along the border—and, for that matter, anywhere else—have we encountered so many police, from CBP and Border Patrol agents to National Guard soldiers, Texas Department of Public Safety troopers, sheriff's deputies, local municipal police officers, and scores of others without uniforms and in unmarked cars, trucks, and vans. They roam the state highway that runs through many of the towns in this region or park and wait in countless semi-concealed positions, like behind this auto supply store (follow the link to our online exhibit guide for a photo of that vehicle).

**30**
Mission, TX
26.164914, -98.333968
Mobile Vehicle Surveillance System (MVSS) / "Scope Truck"
Dugan Meyer, January 2024

A Mobile Vehicle Surveillance System (MVSS) unit, often called a "scope truck," deployed beside the boat launch at the Chimney Park RV Resort on the banks of the Rio Grande in Mission, Texas. The MVSS system is widely deployed in Texas, especially in the Rio Grande Valley, and is often operated by Army and Air National Guard soldiers in support of CBP. Another version of the scope truck is also being used by the Texas National Guard as part of Operation Lone Star.

The first contracts for the MVSS were awarded by CBP in 2015. The system consists of day and night (infrared) cameras, ground radar, and laser range finders attached to a telescopic pole that can be raised and lowered in minutes, allowing the units to relocate quickly. It has an effective maximum range of 3-5 miles. Manufacturers have included Mistral, Tactical Micro (part of the Secure Technology Company), Strongwatch Corporation, and Teledyne FLIR.