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MATERIAL PROBLEMS: THE PUBLIC ART INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

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Mentors: Ila Sheren and Angela Miller

This thesis approaches public art as a complex matrix of regulations and relationships—zoning laws, building permits, licensing, ordinances, white papers, insurance, et cetera—that go toward the assemblage of the material monument. I consider public art projects as physical and abstract systems, which organize time and space pursuant to legal bureaucratic protocol. These systems are neither entirely human, nor entirely nonhuman. They consist—just for example—of confederations of labor, energy, aesthetics, legal documents, artists, architects, elected officials, state-appointed committees, economy, public policy, sewage, furniture, lighting, data, and other material and non-material phenomena. Such projects, moreover, are never entirely complete. Beyond the completion of physical construction, public art projects continue to “live” and accrue commercial, political, and symbolic values—which fluctuate in and out of contention over time.

I argue that public art is fundamentally an infrastructural technology. I refer to infrastructure in an expanded field: not just its physical coordinates—highways, capital construction, et cetera—but its materialist legal and economic syntax. This holistic image of infrastructural technology, as the substratum for contemporary urbanism, is the prism through which I view the American public art complex. In order to surface the fluid elements of this system, I approach the American public arts establishment with a materialist methodology, exploring the bureaucratic processes and economic structures that undergird contemporary public artworks. Specifically I compare and contrast recent projects that appropriate funding from the various jurisdictional bodies of the U.S. criminal justice system. I take up traditional Percent for Art (PFA) projects within this context—e.g., commissions at courthouses, city jails, and detention centers—and I also take up publicly funded projects that demonstrate different approaches. As a form of infrastructural critique, I explore how the visible activity of public art is invisibly systematized.