

# Academic Labor: Research and Artistry

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## Honor the Precariat

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# *Honor the Precariat: An Art Installation*

Natalie Selden Barnes  
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**I** am an adjunct

I exist in the margins

I am part of the new faculty majority

I am the precariat

Like my colleagues, I work with students at every undergraduate level providing a service essential to the mission of the university. There is but one word that distinguishes me as faculty on the margins. The big “non” word. I am a non-tenure track faculty member, one of the precariat, seen and often treated as adjunct to the purposes of education.

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Natalie Barnes is the Key Academic Advisor and an instructor holding a Senior Teaching Appointment in the Department of Art & Art History. She earned her undergraduate and graduate degrees at Boise State University and has been teaching at the university level for more than 20 years. In addition to her studio practice, her professional academic interest focuses on writing-integration. Ms. Barnes is active in faculty governance, currently serving on the College of Liberal Arts (CLA) Adjunct Faculty Committee and represents the CLA on the University Committee on Non-Tenure Track Faculty. She has received the Jack E. Cermack Advising Award, is a writing fellow for CSU’s Institute of Learning and Teaching, and has been awarded a course-redesign grant for ART100. She also serves as NTTF director for the Center for the Study of Academic Labor at CSU.

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*Honor the Precariat* was born from this philosophical approach to the world of academia. A cadre of colleagues that fly under the radar. Stealthily trying to go with the flow and simply exist because teaching is not just a job for us. It is a vocation. It must be. We certainly aren't in it for the money or academic prestige.

As a visual artist I bring to fruition artworks that capture the essence of what my world is about. To give form to the internal exploration of what defines me. By way of marrying my academic identification as an adjunct, to my internal definition as educator, the concept of marginalia seems to best define the essence of my academic world.

*Honor the Precariat*, while a huge technological step from my current interest in fiber arts, aligns with the idea of marginalia I first uncovered while researching The Bayeux Tapestry. The text on the edges of the tapestry, in a sense "adjunct" to the images themselves, not only reinforces the story of the Norman Conquest inherent in the embroidered dialogue but adds another dimension to the visual narrative itself. Viewers are first informed by the meticulously embroidered images that vividly capture the action of the storyline. The marginalia, crafted with less drama and adjunct to the story, confirms to the viewer there is indeed more here than meets the eye.

For me, the connection between this story, woven onto fabric, and the complexities of the university system is clear. Tenured faculty typically reside in the spotlight, but there are scores of adjuncts populating the academic margins that flesh out the story of the university. And, like the tedious work of the fiber artist building a narrative one silent stitch at a time, the work of finding equity for all faculty at this university is a tedious process, wrought with frustration. But the work is essential to the precariat which is to say we members of the new faculty majority resolve to prove that we are not, indeed, adjunct to the process of education.

For the past decade I've served on college and university level committees representing non-tenure track faculty. Like "regular faculty," the scope of my committee work involved not only the everyday grievance sharing that serves as a pressure valve allowing us to burn off steam but also requires involvement with faculty governance, conferences, workshops, and a multitude of related activities. Without the commensurate faculty mentoring gifted to my tenure track colleagues as they entered the system, I, being adjunct to the system itself, forged a self-taught journey to mine the university political system and Institutional Research site in search of data supporting whatever the particular adjunct cause of the day might be. Data mining, while not exciting, is essential. Beginning with a particular depth of knowledge about my home department, exploration beyond the home field was enlightening.

As an artist, full-understanding of the big picture required development on my part of a visual response. "...artists can serve as creative role models who identify themselves not just as makers but as learners, thinkers, engaged citizens, and the 'critical eye' of society"

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(Hamlin 8). With nearly two decades of ‘adjuncting’ under my belt, and ten years as an advocate working on adjunct issues, I felt the need to express my experiences artistically. Art educator Michael Parks has raised a question about how student artists handle the abstract movement past a literal interpretation of concept or theme and into a more abstract aesthetic (Parks 55-61). This is a challenge not limited to students and which soon became my personal mission.

Over time in my role as an adjunct representing my department within the College of Liberal Arts, and later as a representative serving on the University Committee on Non-Tenure Faculty, I gathered a significant chunk of statistical information. Evidence of how department by department and college by college, the university depended on the precariat to shoulder the financial burden of an institution clearly moving from an academic model to a business model. Unfortunately, this is a model where the individual becomes ever more secondary to the financial bottom line.

Data mining not only reinforced the social justice side of the issue but opened my eyes to the feminist nature of the situation as well. In a very “can’t see the forest for the trees” scenario, it wasn’t until I compiled the data that the abstract fact that nearly 60% of the 765 adjuncts at my institution are women became concrete (“Infact”). Many women academics, like myself, get trapped in the adjunct lifestyle simply because of “...a combination of work-life reasons they were often not at liberty to relocate” (Burns 3).

My main artistic interest lay in translation of statistical data into a visual that would evoke feeling. And so began my journey to forge an aesthetic path, starting with the abstraction of intellect and feelings and ending with the concrete creation of a visual that encourages the viewer to understand the dynamic of the individual as separate from the morass of the institution.

My way of working is wholly organic. I get an idea, then tuck it away to stew. The physical act of sketching lies dormant until form and content coalesce with a flash of insight. That particular flash occurred while passing through the department’s digital fabrication studio and came in the form of discarded scraps of acrylic. These were individual, generic scraps, insignificant in solitude that took on new life when viewed as a whole.

And thus my precariat was born. With this spark of inspiration, the mundane task of data mining took on a more relevant role. Data became the embodiment of living beings, and the form of the work dovetailed seamlessly into the story I wanted to tell. I admit to being a bit obsessed with the fact that my figures need to exactly represent the correct gender ratio of 453 female and 338 male adjuncts. It was crucial that the visual representation presented the truth of the situation, thus allowing the image itself to coax the viewer to the conclusion that of the total 791 figures, the women far outnumbered the men.

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Earlier frustrations—such as lack of a listserv through which to contact adjuncts, the inability to identify adjuncts through HR because of inconsistent job titles, and the lack of uniform treatment across departments and colleges—reinforced the transparent nature of the individual. The transparency of the figures themselves represents the work of adjuncts that is clearly visible. There is a notable irony to the university administration claiming their own transparency in the “clear and straightforward” way in which it deals with people and politics. Each symptom of abuse, while often seen as a minor slight, adds up. Each infringement fortifies the weakness of the individual highlighting that no matter how large our numbers, we, as adjuncts, are easily invisible when viewed in solitude. And yet when hung in a gallery, collecting and refracting light, the impact and importance are undeniable.

The voice of the installation grew from the external processing of data, the internal processing of my own feelings, and a wide variety of anecdotal experiences (both my own and those of colleagues) gathered over many years. In the end, the piece needed to represent individuals, most of whom I’d never met. So, while I would have liked to create a likeness of each adjunct, practicality, like life, demanded compromise. Each adjunct is represented by a transparent figure—one of several generic representations of both female and male figures. Perhaps, in the end, the anonymity of the figures speaks most poignantly to larger issues.

Over the course of nine days I was joined by other adjuncts and adjunct allies who carefully strung each figure on fishing line and hung them from an open metal grid installed in the ceiling. Execution of the installation relied on representation of each and every individual. Figures ranged from four to thirty-six inches in size, their stature representing the varying presence of our colleagues—an acknowledgment that while our individual obligations ranged from a handful of students taught in a single class, to hundreds of students taught across a full-time schedule, we all contribute to the united mission. Each hour the ranks of adjuncts grew as installation continued. Hour after hour, day after day until the tedium of the process itself became a statement to the volume of our numbers. Until, in the end, hundreds of transparent figures, and specifically 791, melded into a rising army of generic academics. Interchangeable, yet indispensable—individuals lost in the crowd. Numbers that grow with each subsequent semester, and this installation simply marking a point in time.

Straightforward text identifying the colleges within the university that employ adjuncts (all of them) is displayed on the floor beneath the figures. Simple text is sized appropriately to reflect the degree to which each college perpetuates the problem. Colleges with larger numbers of adjuncts are easy to distinguish simply by the size of the text. Larger NTTF percentages equated to larger text.

The floor text creates the institutional foundation upon which the figures rise. Juxtaposition of text and figures is an intentional dynamic, a dynamic that subtly represents institutional issues and serves as a silent

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judgment about how the precariat exists across the university. The floor text uses the university's own public data to make concrete the abstraction of the figures that are suspended above:

- College of Business NTTF teach 58% of undergraduate credit hours.
- Walter Scott Jr. College of Engineering NTTF teach 20% of undergraduate credit hours.
- College of Natural Sciences NTTF teach 33% of undergraduate credit hours.
- Warner College of Natural Resources NTTF teach 31% of undergraduate credit hours.
- Intra-university programs NTTF teach 29% of undergraduate credit hours.
- College of Agricultural Sciences NTTF teach 20% of undergraduate credit hours.
- Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences NTTF teach 16% of undergraduate credit hours.
- College of Liberal Arts NTTF teach 60% of undergraduate credit hours.

The single doorway leading into the small gallery allowed a dual intellectual access point. It offered a portal, setting up the viewer at a prime viewpoint from which to observe the distinctive separation between the individual and the institution. But it was essential that the figures were accessible, encouraging the viewer to engage with the work on a personal level—not just walking around the proximity, but leaning in for a closer look, much like Rodin intended for viewers of his *Burgers of Calais* to walk up to his figures, look into their faces, and feel the angst and terror they felt as they walked towards death. I wanted my viewers to be intimate enough to distinguish the figures as individuals, but to also realize that while there was a nod to individualization, the figures were necessarily institutionalized and thus generic representations. Recognizing the ambiguity that their individuality is lost amidst their numbers, lending an awkward anonymity to the statement, making each individual ever easier to overlook.

Finally, around the perimeter wall a separate army stands quietly at attention. Dozens of additional faceless adjuncts await. These figures were installed to provide a silent response to criticism that historically reinforces the precariat's silence. Words from the uninformed: "if you're not happy with your situation there are plenty of wanna-be adjuncts ready to take your place," offer an ominous warning to those adjuncts who dare to think about rocking the boat. To those adjuncts who dare to think that they themselves might not actually bear the blame for the problem. Rather, this is a social, academic, and humanitarian problem.

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We are adjuncts

We exist in the margins

We are part of the new faculty majority

We are the precariat



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