

Academic Labor: Research and Artistry

Volume 3

Article 4

2019

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Recommended Citation

Krieg, Annah (2019) "Review: Natalie Selden Barnes's Honor the Precariat," *Academic Labor: Research and Artistry*. Vol. 3 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/alra/vol3/iss1/4>

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Review of Natalie Selden Barnes's *Honor the Precariat*

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Abstract

This review details the fall 2017 exhibition of Natalie Selden Barnes's installation, *Honor the Precariat*, which took place in the Directions Gallery in the Department of Art and Art History at Colorado State University. By combining data with plexiglass figures in an immersive artwork, Selden Barnes compels the viewer to engage with the complex reality of the majority of university educators, those who are adjunct instructors.

When discussing the position of adjunct faculty (a position that she and I share) in the university, Natalie Selden Barnes relates the precarious nature of our professional identity—feeling compelled to teach as one's life's calling yet existing in a liminal space of the institution—to the marginalia found in medieval art. From the subsidiary figures embroidered along the edge of the *Bayeaux Tapestry* to the often raucous scenes of debauchery in the margins of illuminated prayer books and psalters (imagery that would make even many 21st-century viewers blush), these motifs confound any rational, ordered understanding of medieval history. So too do the non-tenure track faculty who teach the majority of courses at most colleges and universities upend the conventional view of the academy, one in which educators are afforded a comfortable life of the mind.

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Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 3.1 (2019)

Just as scholars like Michael Camille and others have shown us that medieval marginalia is often where the subversive power lies to transform the center without completely undermining it, so too does Selden Barnes's installation *Honor the Precariat* confront the viewer with a nuanced, complex reality of university teaching. Ultimately, her work demands that we all, regardless of rank, take meaningful action to make our institutions of higher learning more just and equitable places.

Unlike a figurative sculpture placed on a pedestal, or a painting, print, or photograph framed neatly on the white wall of a gallery, Selden Barnes's work functions as all installation art does: invading the lived space of the gallery visitor and breaking down the artificial barriers between art and life. This choice of multi-media installation to tackle a topic that tends to be overlooked and repressed in public discourse is particularly powerful. It leaves us no space to avoid the painful truth: non-tenure track faculty are the invisible and underpaid yet crucial and valuable members of the teaching core of most university departments and schools. Furthermore, in the relatively small, low-ceilinged space of the Directions Gallery, with its single entrance, we immediately enter into the immersive space of the installation. It exists above and beyond us, in front of us, and behind us. Selden Barnes uses all surfaces to present a potent combination of data and imagery to rally her cry.

Plexiglass silhouettes suspended from the ceiling and mounted on the walls comprise the bulk of the installation. Representing the silent majority of the precariat itself, these figures express their marginalized position by their very transparency and unsecure dangling. There is an impersonal nature to these figures, as there is not enough individual detail for the viewer to forge an emotional connection—as is often a possibility with photographs or paintings. I found myself feeling lost in a sea of dense plexiglass refracting the light and making it impossible to see visitors on the other side of the gallery. The transparency of the material does not withstand this critical mass, perhaps suggesting to us that the illusion of transparency in our institutions belies the lived reality of the most vulnerable and neglected members.

I have one of those plexiglass figures hanging from my desk in the office I share with six other non-tenure track faculty members. I don't mind sharing the space, and I enjoy working with students in those cramped quarters, fine-tuning a research topic, discussing test strategies, or just connecting and hearing about their lives. Sometimes, after those meetings, I think about my students, all majors in art and art history, and how they will soon enter this brave new world of the gig economy, continued wage gaps, and increasing socio-economic stratification. These are the critical labor issues of our time. However, like most of the faculty precariat, I know I am meant to be a teacher. Like the figures on the margins, I navigate the contradictions and complexities of my profession and strive for the transformational, institutional change that *Honor the Precariat* reveals as a moral imperative.

Academic Labor: Research and Artistry 3.1 (2019)