

MICHAEL SMITH

'The Year in Education', Artforum, December 2010

## The Year in Education

Michael Smith



*Sometimes people are good  
And they do just what they should.  
But the very same people who are good sometimes  
Are the very same people who are bad sometimes.  
It's funny, but it's true.  
It's the same, isn't it, for me and ...*

**Fred M. Rogers, 1967**

*Sears Class Portrait, Fall 2010*



## Labor Day Weekend 2010

### Yes! No school for a few days!

Just got an invitation to do a project for the December issue of Artforum. Of course I misread the e-mail and thought they wanted a best-of list for 2010. Thinking I would try mixing it up, I came back at them with an idea inspired by Mister Rogers: I'd list stuff that was both the best and the worst of the year. But I shelved that half-baked plan after being reminded that Artforum had done something similar but different for years. Uh-oh, now what do I do? I'm overwhelmed with possibilities to the point of being frozen.

### Later in the semester . . .

Whew! This Artforum thing seems like it's coming together! When I first started thinking about it I felt that I was truly at one with my students, empathizing with the confusion they must feel when I hand them yet another open-ended assignment. My default response to most problems is to check my e-mail, so I was soon wading through volumes of correspondence from Art&Education and e-flux. As I distracted myself with reading and deleting, I reflected on the year, and it occurred to me that in 2010 our community had paid an inordinate amount of attention to school and to pedagogical activities. As for me, in addition to teaching full time, I attended a workshop held in Anna Craycroft's installation *Subject of Learning/Object of Study* at the Blanton Museum in Austin, Texas; saw a talk by Mary Walling Blackburn, the founder of the experimental, interdisciplinary Anhoek School; and was included in the exhibition "Substitute Teacher" at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. I also taught a workshop at Centro de Investigaciones Artísticas, an artist-organized educational project in Buenos Aires, read about the art school reality-show competition on Bravo, and heard about James Franco's MFA dreams. Last but not least, I engaged in extracurricular activities, founding, with writer-curator-gallery director Jay Sanders, Omicron Sigma Phi—a fledgling fraternity near the campus of the University of Texas, Austin (thanks to Fluent-Collaborative, an Austin nonprofit and their program Testsite, which allows artist-writer teams to establish a frat house with Greek roots and national aspirations). I understand the importance of education and I am also very grateful to have a teaching position, especially during these times of economic uncertainty. In fact, I have always thought of teaching as a calling, but lately the volume and pitch have intensified to the point where the call is starting to sound like a late-night car alarm. Now, every time one of those Art&Education announcements pops up in my in-box, I mentally attach a refrain of my own: "And how!" It's fun and even appropriate, like adding "in bed" after reading the fortune in a fortune cookie.

### Art and education . . . and how!

Since I was not a very good student, the last thing I expected to be doing was imparting knowledge and sending eager young artists out into the world with a handshake and some final words of encouragement like "Keep up the good work" and "Good luck!" In particular, organization and collating have never been my strong suits, so maintaining order in the classroom is definitely a challenge. When people ask me what I teach, I have to stop myself from saying, "Very little"—it's better just to be direct and say, "Performance art." Most people usually respond with, "Huh. How do you do that? That must be difficult." To which I respond, "Actually, it is a kind of a layering process. Rather than learning and refining a technique, students learn how to develop their ideas. I encourage them to look for inspiration from a variety of sources, including popular culture, current events, art, and the routines of everyday life. There are assignments, readings, exercises, screenings, field trips, and, always, a final event, which, by the way, always surprises me." An explanation of this sort shuts down conversation immediately, with the person



looking at their half-empty glass and politely wandering off to get a refill. My evolution as a teacher has been ongoing; over the years, I have taken a kind of open-ended approach in the classroom and have learned to tweak my syllabi each semester to accommodate the abundance of raw and unexamined talent before me. I try to give the students a lot of wiggle room while setting parameters. Experiment is a word that gets bandied about a lot and offered as an all-purpose answer to many technical and creative questions. To avoid confusion, complications, and questions about context and the limits of experimentation (since these can lead to extra committee work and potential legal problems), I have come up with three rules that appear on all my syllabi:

1. Clean up after yourself.
2. You cannot physically hurt yourself or anyone else in the classroom.
3. You cannot jeopardize my job.

One great thing about teaching is that I learn from my students. I feel out of it most of the time, and my contact with them plugs me into a current that is thrumming with constantly updated information and references that I otherwise would never know. This year I was introduced to Facebook and to Blackboard, the academically approved online e-learning tool, which I integrated into my curriculum and teaching methodology. To give a sense of how this works, perhaps it is best if I just describe the first day of the semester. Normally I start my intro classes by announcing that if you're taking performance art in hopes that it will help you land a part in the road show of Rent, you should probably take another course. After this, I ease into the semester with a general meet and greet, and then I pose broad questions about performance art, e.g. if they have seen any, and if so where and when. Then I briefly go over the syllabus and ask for questions.

This year was a little different. I told them we'd be using Blackboard for posting assignments and for discussions. There was one student who was a devoted fan of Marina Abramović, and I suggested that she post a picture of Marina to get the conversation going. The ensuing, ongoing online discussion has been very fruitful for both the students and me—so much so that I thought I might use excerpts from our online exchange for this project. Since these discussions and thoughts can't be separated from what we used to call, in my elementary school, "current events," I feel their inclusion will make this piece topical for the art world (and how!) and beyond. I thought long and hard before submitting this project for fear that it would cause people to liken my pedagogical methods to those of Lucky Jim. But rule number three, "You cannot jeopardize my job," was trumped by the fear of missing the Artforum deadline and/or submitting a series of blank pages labeled "For Notes." Why not take the risk?

As I mentioned previously, my students often surprise me, and so I think it best to start out with a bang by sharing their online discussion about Marina Abramović—observations that'll keep me thinking long and hard into 2011. Also, the discussion helps me understand the urgency of all the texting that goes on during class time. The two pages that follow are kind of a scrapbook of class postings, documentation of field trips, and proposals that provide a glimpse into my open-ended approach to research and pedagogy, plus a sampling of student projects that try to reconcile and understand personal issues against the backdrop of the wider cultural landscape.

School and education not only have given me incredible freedom and opportunities but also have reset my internal clock to operate on the semester plan—a cycle that always culminates in the panic of finals week, when I constantly ask myself and my students, "Where's the joy?" Thus the frat house: a site-specific project and a reminder of the importance of extracurricular activities, which are such a crucial ingredient of a well-rounded college experience. Evidently, at least one of my students has taken this question and advice to heart, as evidenced in the last page of this project, that student's final evaluation of my methods and procedures in the classroom. In light of all this, I plan to renew my commitment to my calling and look forward with renewed vigor to the upcoming semester.