

THE  
STEPS



**C**ritical Response sessions are initiated in a variety of ways: artists schedule dialogues among peers or informally gather a group of responders to see a work-in-progress, teachers adopt the practice for the benefit of their students, and institutions offer sessions as a dimension of their programming in artist support and audience development. The Process can be applied multiple times in the development of a particular work, or employed in combination with other modes of feedback. The focus of a Critical Response session can be a full work or an excerpt, presented in formal performance, informal presentation, or in-class showing. As Critical Response has evolved, we've come to spend more time explaining the steps and sequence before starting the

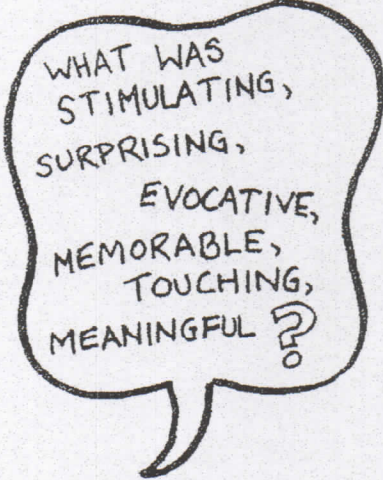
Process, even before experiencing the work under consideration. Knowing what to expect and how each step supports the succeeding ones helps participants to make better use of the Process. Responders who know they will have a chance to express opinions by the end will experience the rigor of the earlier steps as stimulating rather than limiting. If participants follow the sequence of steps with a little patience, mutual respect naturally emerges. Over the course of the Process, even the most disparate points of view can be taken into account through dialogue and response.

When conducted in its formal structure, the Critical Response Process consists of four steps. We will describe each one, followed by ideas for optional activities that can happen after a session.

### The meaning of meaning

When I first introduced the Process, I named step one "Affirmation," which encouraged facilitators to start the Process by saying something like "Let's start with affirmations. What did you like about what you just saw?" But now I discourage this approach, as it tends to put the emphasis on the artist's feelings rather than the art itself and how it is communicating. When we start by naming the fact that the work has meaning at all, and offer options for responding to that meaning, we broaden the lens by which responders can experience and comment. The new phrasing encourages responders to be more specific by enabling them to name their experience and affords artists a different way of accepting that information. The whole dialogue becomes less about individual psychology and more about the power of art.

—Liz Lerman



WHAT WAS  
STIMULATING,  
SURPRISING,  
EVOCATIVE,  
MEMORABLE,  
TOUCHING,  
MEANINGFUL ?



## CORE STEPS

### Step One: Statements of Meaning

No matter how short the presentation, how fragmentary the excerpt, or how early the stage of development, artists want to hear that what they have just completed has significance to another human being. This natural condition can be so intense at times as to appear desperate. It makes sense, then, that the first response artists hear should be one addressing the communicative power of the work just presented. So the facilitator starts step one by asking the responders either "What has meaning for you about what you have just seen?" or "What was stimulating, surprising, evocative, memorable, touching, meaningful for you?" Other adjectives can be employed in this question: "challenging," "compelling," "delightful," "different," "unique." The point is to offer responders a palette of choices through which to define and express their reactions.

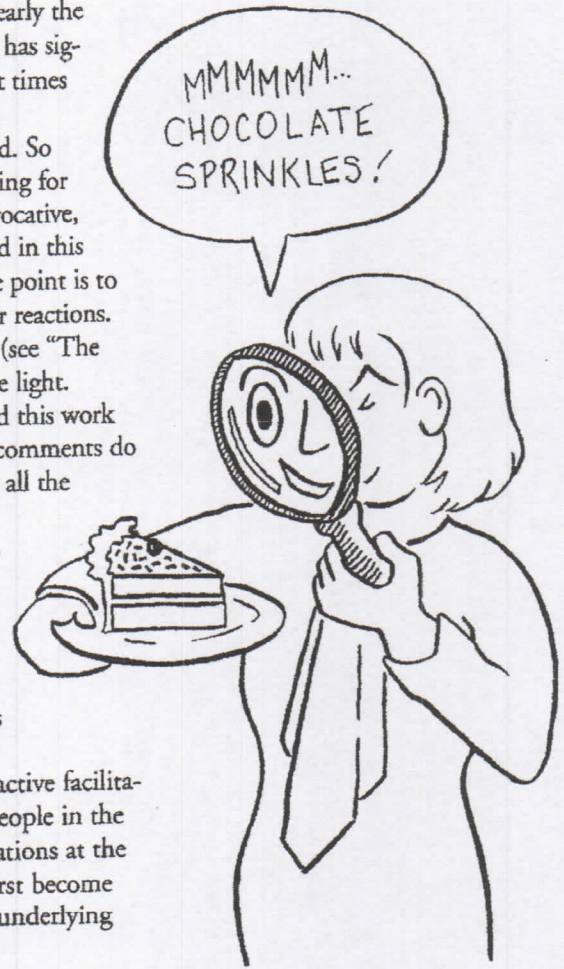
Though we discourage facilitators from explicitly asking for "affirmations" (see "The meaning of meaning," opposite page), step one should be framed in a positive light. Contrary to this spirit a responder once said, "It is meaningful to me how bad this work is," a statement that definitely required facilitator intervention. But step one comments do not need to begin "I liked..." If artists only wait for "I liked..." they can miss all the other ways that people communicate.

Thus the Critical Response Process begins with the philosophy that meaning is at the heart of an artist's work, and to start with meaning is to begin with the essence of the artistic act. Meaning is a huge category that can hold a wide range of response, a fact often demonstrated by step one. Responders may feel called upon to make broad pronouncements about the work, but artists invariably value hearing about details as well. Nothing is too small to notice.

It is in step one that we can first notice people's different values. A very active facilitator might draw attention to the variety of aesthetic and social values that people in the circle bring to their role as audience by asking participants for their observations at the end of step one. It is in that moment of group reflection that responders first become aware of the numerous ways people see art, and the array of value systems underlying their differing visions.

### Step Two: Artist as Questioner

This step is the first of two rounds of questions and answers. The creator asks the questions first. The more artists clarify their focus, the more intense and deep the dialogue becomes. The facilitator can actively assist artists in forming their questions. Some artists are quite able to analyze their work, and form their dissatisfactions or dilemmas into questions with ease. For others, it is a new experience.



**REMEMBER:  
NOTHING IS TOO  
SMALL TO NOTICE.**



In the act of clarifying, the artist has a wide range of choices from general to specific. Facilitators can make artists aware of their options along this spectrum, and how those choices will yield different kinds of answers. General questions often elicit more varied responses, which can be helpful if the artist is seeking a broad survey of reactions to a particular aspect of the work. But when an artist poses her inquiry broadly, she may find that the response is not addressing the issue that is really at the root of her question. Specific questions, naturally, bring forth a more focused and precise commentary. While no prescription dictates which kind of question will be most effective, artists can consider several factors in formulating their questions: Where am I in the process of developing the work? Working from the base of information I've heard in step one, where would I like to expand or focus the response? Do I want an overall gauge of the work's effectiveness, or focused guidance about particular challenges?

Artists should approach the furthest extremes on the general-to-specific spectrum with caution. The most general sort of question—"Well, what did you think?" can mire the Process in some of the usual pitfalls of an open discussion where any topic is fair game and those most insistent about expressing their opinions dominate. Far from opening up the discourse, the breadth of possibility can shut both artists and responders down. By the same token, the use of very specific questions, such as "Did it work when I shifted the mask to the back of my head?" or "Should I have my arms up or down in the final image?" amounts to an opinion poll. This can be useful if the artist is trying to resolve the choice between options and if responders justify their choices. But if these are the only kinds of questions that an artist has, the either/or brand of specificity limits the potential of the dialogue.

Playing a bit closer to the middle of the spectrum can be very fruitful: "How did you experience my transitions from one character to another?" or "I'm working right now on the way I express a strong feeling, so what did you think of the closing section?" Such questions offer responders the opportunity to say exactly what they think and to name some of the specifics themselves.


Artists can always broaden or narrow their exploration with a follow-up question if the original query doesn't yield the infor-

mation they seek. Here the facilitator may need to probe with more questions—not answers—to help the artist find the heart of the matter. (See Sample Dialogue, page 56 for an example of this kind of facilitator guidance.) Often we observe that the artist has the same questions as those watching. When the artist starts the dialogue, the opportunity for honesty increases.

### Step Three: Neutral Questions from Responders

The dialogue is now reversed, and responders can ask the artist informational or factual questions. Further, if they have opinions, responders can take this opportunity—in advance of stating the opinion in step four—to form the opinion into a neutral question. Thus, instead of saying, "It's too long," (an opinion) or "Why are your pieces always so long?" (a question that couches an opinion), a person might ask, "What were you trying to accomplish in the final section?" or "Tell me the most important ideas you want us to get and where is that happening in this piece?"

The neutral question presents another aspect of the Process in which the facilitator needs to be active. For many people, forming




### A step toward critical thinking

Before adopting the Critical Response Process at Jump-Start, we would tip-toe around each other and never have substantive dialogue. The Process has enabled us, for the first time, to talk about our work in a profound way. In our educational programs and monthly work-in-progress series we often put particular emphasis on step two: it helps artists develop critical thinking skills by learning to ask astute questions, and that is where one can open the doors for critique.

—Steve Bailey

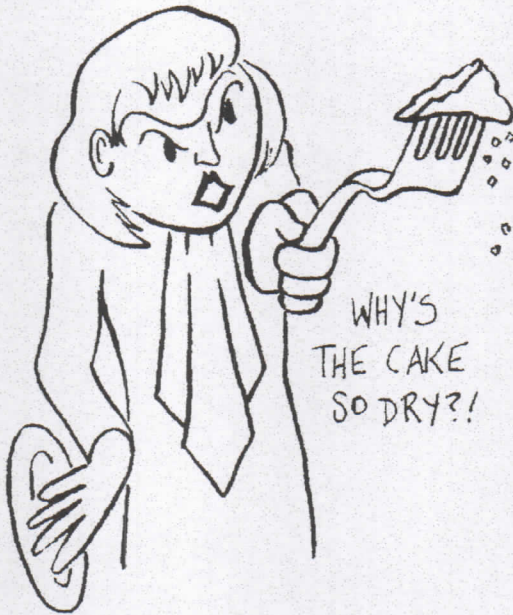
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RESPONDER QUESTIONS:

OPINIONATED...



...AND NEUTRAL



a neutral question is not only difficult, but a seemingly ridiculous task if criticism is the point. But the actual process of trying to form opinions into neutral questions enables the responder to recognize and acknowledge the personal values at play. Often these are the very questions that the artist needs to hear.

The neutral question is a common stumbling block for people. Therefore, it can help, when introducing the Process, to lead the group in practicing how to form neutral questions. To do this, the facilitator might suggest a non-neutral question based on a hypothetical work of art (not the piece under review), by posing something like the following: "Let's say that after a dance showing, a viewer questioned the lighting by saying 'Why was it so dark?' Can you suggest neutral way to phrase that question?" The group will soon arrive at a possibility like "What governed your choices in lighting the piece?" (See chart, page 23 for more examples of neutral alternatives to opinionated questions.)

For some people the neutral question may sound like a cover-up for the real action, and it can indeed function that way. But even the most hard-edged, "I-can-take-anything-you-dish-out" artists seem to become more receptive and involved in the critical

session as a direct result of the neutral question. And the more open they are to the possibility of hearing what others are saying, the more they seem to learn from it.


When defensiveness starts, learning stops. The Critical Response Process emphasizes the benefits of getting artists to think about their work in a fresh way, as opposed to telling them how to improve their work or asking them to defend it. This aim is supported by the discipline of the neutral question. People who are used to giving feedback from a position of authority—teachers, directors, adjudicators—may feel at first that step three makes them sacrifice the right to tell the truth very directly. But many quickly discover that they can say whatever is important through this mechanism, and in the process, get the artist to think more reflectively than he might if the opinion or solution were directly stated. The opportunity for opinions is coming up soon in step four; step three allows the responder to determine the relevance of the opinion and lays the groundwork for the artist to hear the opinion from a non-defensive posture. (For more discussion of "fixing," see "The Challenge of Fixits," Page 42.)



### Step Four: Permissioned Opinions

Now the facilitator invites opinions, but specifies that opinions must be offered with a particular protocol: Responders first name the topic of the opinion and ask the artist for permission to state it. For instance, "I have an opinion about the costumes. Do you want to hear it?"


In response, the artist has the option to say "yes" or "no." The artist may have several reasons for not wanting to hear the opinion: perhaps he has already heard enough opinions about the costumes and wants to move to something else; perhaps he is very interested in hearing about the costumes, but not from that responder, or perhaps the opinion is irrelevant because of factors not yet established by a neutral question, i.e., the costumes used for the showing have nothing to do with those planned for the ultimate presentation. In every case artists have the option to say "no," or "not right now."



### Opinions like objects

I sometimes demonstrate one of the functions of the "I have an opinion..." permission requests in step four by doing this: While I'm in the middle of my explanation of the step, I'll wad up a piece of paper and toss it at an unsuspecting group member, who usually flinches and fumbles in response. Then I'll pick up the paper, make eye contact with the same person and say "catch!," then toss again, to a now-deft receiver. Opinions can feel very much like objects thrown at us. If we have no preparation we can often feel affronted rather than engaged. But with a little notice and a moment to adjust to what's coming at us, we can be in a much better position to "catch" the opinion.

— John Borstel



In most cases, however, the artist will say "yes," because the Process has laid the groundwork for this moment. Perhaps an observer has already transformed an opinion into a neutral question, eliciting a rich and informative response from the artist. Such an exchange may have had several different effects: 1) The responder may have discovered that her opinion was irrelevant to the artists' intent, so she no longer needs to advance the opinion. 2) She might discover that the artist is so clearly aware of the issue she has in mind that stating her opinion becomes unnecessary or redundant. 3) Or the artist's answer will leave the responder feeling that her opinion would indeed provide needed information or make the dialogue more specific and hence more useful for the artist. (See Sample Dialogue 3 on page 61 for examples of these scenarios.) This is when a responder will want to take advantage of step four.

Many of our reactions to work, which we may hold to be balanced, informed criticism, can also be viewed simply as subjective opinion. At times artists can use these opinions to help place the work in a larger context. Or artists can hear all of these opinions and use them to weave their own solutions. But artists may not want to hear from everyone, or everyone at that particular time. In step four, the artist can control this moment.

Often during this opinion time, people choose to return to the function of step one and make additional positive statements of meaning. These may reflect new ideas stimulated by the dialogue they have heard since step one.

Throughout step four, the repeated expressions of "I have an opinion about...would you like to hear it?" can strike some participants as stilted and unnatural. Both novice and seasoned Critical Response practitioners have asked, "Do we really have to go through this ritual every time?" But the practice serves several functions. For the responder, forming that initial statement offers a kind of warm-up and mental preparation for identifying and stating the opinion itself. For artists, it affords a chance to readjust their focus to become receptive to a new partner and new idea. Finally, it serves to maintain the Process's dynamic of dialogue through an exchange that keeps both speakers focused and listening. The step may seem formal, but often the formality, discipline and structure inherent in the Process make it safe for people to go into a more challenging dialogue.





## FOLLOW-UP & FOLLOW-THROUGH

### Closure

The Process is now complete. If it has functioned well, the responders feel invested and engaged, and the artist has gained a fund of useful, even inspiring, information. At this point the facilitator has several options to bring the Process to closure. Thank yous to both artist and responder are usually in order, and appreciated. The facilitator may ask for observations or request that the artist or a responder offer a summary of the discussion. This can be done by posing a question to the artist like: "Based on what you've experienced in this conversation, what's your next step in working on this piece?" Though occasionally artists need more time to assimilate the dialogue, they usually respond readily and specifically, often with reference to key points they've heard in the session. This short exchange affords artists the final word in the discussion of their work as well as a moment to consolidate the information they've gathered through the Process, while responders get confirmation of the purpose their involvement has served.

### New Business, Unfinished Business

At times in the course of a Critical Response session, responders want to get into a discussion about the subject matter of a work, particularly if it broaches an area of social or political controversy. On other occasions an issue of aesthetic perspective or artistic technique will seize attention. The resulting discussions may or may not relate to the specific evolution of the piece, and the emergence of such topics may require the facilitator to make a judgment: Is the emerging issue central to the discussion of the artist's work and can it be discussed within the protocol of the four steps? Can the varying opinions be addressed directly to the artist rather than exchanged responder to responder? Are strong feelings about the issue hindering the Process and will a time-out for a short, managed discussion enable the Process to resume on track? Or, on the other hand, does the group have a need for a conversation about the issue which can nonetheless be clearly separated from the content of the work? In such instances, a subject matter discussion can be added to the session following completion of the Process's four steps. This added discussion is often a viable option as it avoids breaking the momentum of the peer response but addresses the needs of the group. For example: During step three at a Critical Response reviewing a show of regional art at a Midwestern arts center, a responder questioned



SOMETIMES AN ARTIST MAY FEEL READY TO EXPERIMENT RIGHT AWAY.



the idea of “regional” in relation to New York as the supposed national center for visual art. This sparked a flurry of reactions. It was clear that the topic was vital to many of the participants and that the discussion, if pursued at that moment, would derail the response to the program itself. To meet both of these needs, the facilitator guided the Process through step four and then initiated a discussion of the group’s vital topic.

A discussion that follows completion of the Process can be fruitful for both the artist and the group even when the content is not stirring controversy. An artist discovering that the circle contains people with personal experiences related to the subject of the work might benefit from an added discussion to hear about some of those experiences. When workshoping a piece among peers, an opportunity to discuss points of technique or aesthetics is a chance to draw from the collective wisdom of the group. Facilitators can pose such options to the artist.

### Back to Work

By virtue of the fact that we are using Critical Response, we can usually assume that additional work remains to be done on the art under consideration. How the work advances to its next stage is up to the artist. But first steps can be taken during the gathering, and if the group is a class, support circle, or ensemble that regularly meets, a thread can be sustained from the formal Critical Response session into other activities.

Sometimes, depending on the scope of the work and the medium, an artist can feel ready to experiment with changes to the work right away. A dancer/choreographer wants to see what happens if he alters the facings in a section of his work. A poet decides to try reinstating a passage from an earlier draft. A photographer realizes she can re-edit a series by replacing two of her images with other prints she has brought to the session. These changes can be presented to the group on the spot, and the session can return for a few moments into step two to entertain the artist’s questions about new approach.

In teaching settings, the Process can transfer into a coaching mode. Following the four steps, the teacher asks the student where she wants to take the work, or may give directive guidance for next steps, moving immediately to a coaching session where various options are tried and reviewed. The group may continue to be involved as responders, or simply serve as witnesses. Another variation is to engage the group in trying some of the approaches suggested by the session. (see “Sustaining the Critical Response spirit,” below.)

At times work can be developed through a series of Critical Response sessions. When the same group is involved in multiple dialogues about a developing piece, it observes how the artist is using the response to evolve the work. This typically gets the responders highly invested in the outcome and leads them to a deeply informed response.

## Sustaining the Critical Response spirit

After Critical Response sessions, I encourage student artists to re-enter the rehearsal/creation process in a similar spirit of inquiry and discovery. The activities I recommend fall into three inter-related, but not necessarily sequential categories: 1) Labbing the work, usually driven by a dialogue between artist and teacher/facilitator and thus engaging skills from steps two and three of the Process. The entire class or ensemble can be involved in this experimentation, sometimes splitting into smaller groups, each seeking its own solution to the same problem. 2) Subject matter discussion, often exploring artistic ideas or social context and drawing on different perspectives in the observer pool. 3) Generating a research list for information that can’t be gleaned from immediate lab or discussion. These activities are not about the teacher making decisions for artists or the group taking over; the goal is to give the artist more: more information, more choice, and a wider view.

—Peter DiMuro

Liz Lerman Dance Exchange