



# Poetic Feedback<sup>1</sup>

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Dear reader,

Staring at an almost empty paper, I realize I need something to respond to. And since I do not have any content yet, I respond to the form: the empty paper. I imagine a form: a letter. Writing a letter forces me to think about the addressee: you. You are relevant to me, since you make relevant what I write. Clearly what I write has no meaning when it is not read, when it is not heard. This is one of the reasons I started writing this text. This is one of the reasons I started to write poetry as a form of feedback.

In this text I would like to share with you how I developed a feedback method that is affirmative and formative rather than summative; a feedback method that generates new insights, rather than sums up what was already there or what was lacking; a feedback method that takes poetry as a starting point. I believe that arts education is about formation: it is about people looking for their own voice and vision. To be able to do so, they will need to experience a certain amount of space and time and in the end is not necessarily measurable.

To contextualise poetic feedback, I would like to point out two other forms of feedback I have been working with in my practice as a tutor and lecturer in the last years. These methods should be placed within a larger discussion on feedback in the arts as an approach that is affirmative and/or formative rather than summative. I wrote about these forms more elaborately in an article written for ArtEZ Academy for Theatre & Dance (Naafs 2018). These feedback forms stress the position of the artist and, more importantly, the work of art itself. They aim to rule out the first flush of opinions, either relevant or not, and postpone them to a moment in which the artist might be ready to work with these. Still they also emphasise the position of the responder as well.

Towards the end of this letter I would like to share three conclusions with you and through it invite you to start writing as well. But to give you an idea of what I mean with poetic feedback, I would like to share one of the poems I wrote first. In February 2016 I wrote two poems after I visited the performances *Both Sitting Duet* and *Body Not Fit for Purpose* by Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion.



Both Sitting Duet. Photo: Luca Ghedini

Next to each other	Two men on stage
Two men on stage	Both bold
Sitting	Almost
Both sitting	Wearing identical shoes
They are both sitting	Almost
Still	Moving identically
Two men on stage	But just
Moving	Hand gestures
Both moving	And arm gestures
They are both moving	And poor gestures
Still	Rich gestures
Still they are moving	No legs
On their chairs	They are too expensive
On their stage	Two men on stage
To the sound of	Sitting
No music	Both sitting
A score in a notebook	They are both sitting
The rhythm	At home
The tempo	Rehearsing and repeating
A score in a notebook	Repeating and rehearsing
The words	They are not meeting
And numbers	Yet
The words	They are not meeting
Are actions	Often
The words	They are just sitting
Represent actions	Next to each other
And they	And moving
They are	
Acting	

### Affirmative and formative feedback methods

Before I will elaborate on poetic feedback, I would like to discuss briefly two other feedback methods that are used in contemporary arts education: Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process and the DAS Theatre Feedback Method.

#### DAS Theatre Feedback Method

In 2014 I was introduced to the DAS Theatre feedback method, developed at the master of theatre formally known as DasArts in Amsterdam: A more expanded process with a wide variety of possible forms of giving feedback. The website of the DAS Theatre states the following:

"Feedback is a core activity for all the players in the DAS Theatre Master programme – students, staff and external advisors. In individual exchanges people can opt for an informal conversation, an interview or some other strategy. Collective feedback has to deal with many different views of the work, which somehow all need to be articulated and exchanged within one session. The latter becomes very important when dealing with hybrid, cross-disciplinary artistic practices which are often met in the context of the contemporary performing arts (DAS Theatre)."

Indeed, within DAS Theatre students often have practices that go beyond the scope of theatre. The school organizes feedback sessions in which a large group of people are allowed to give feedback to the works (in process). In 2014 a session was organized in Berlin. Frederik Le Roy and Inge Koks describe the method in their report:

"The DasArts feedback method has several stages: 1) the presenter explains the status of the work and formulates the artist's questions, 2) presentation of the work, 3) immediate responses are channelled in a 5-minute, one-on-one venting session between feedback givers, 4) three of the ten modules of the toolbox developed by DasArts are picked (agreed upon together with the artist) and used to give feedback. These range from 'Affirmative Feedback', 'Open Questions', 'Point Reflection', 'Gossip Rounds' and 'Alternative Perspectives'" (Le Roy and Koks 2014).

Le Roy and Koks point out six characteristics of the method<sup>2</sup>:

- "The methodology works best if feedback givers are familiar with the methodology, knowing which aspects can be used to offer critical, supportive, or contextualising feedback.
- The method answers to specific questions rather than random criticism.
- The perspective of the person giving feedback is highlighted.
- Different forms of articulation in feedback supports in observing/seeing the work differently.
- For close working peers it might not be the best methodology with regard to objectivity and concurrence.
- This method implies that it works best when used as a regular practice" (Le Roy and Koks 2014).

What becomes clear is that the DAS Theatre feedback method is more than just one method. The underlying idea is about creating a community that is able to speak about work in a similar matter and it allows for several formats within this. It deals

specifically with the educational setting in which a collective of students and teachers discuss many works within a certain time frame. It furthermore deals with an environment that offers a platform to students with various backgrounds.

“[The student’s] practices are often hard to be defined and their product [hard] to be discussed; DAS Theatre is an educational institution which brings these artistic practices in the foreground of today’s art discourse, also by implementing this feedback method. Together with the philosopher Karim Benammar, DAS Theatre first defined the major obstacles which, in a collective setting, often prevent critical exchanges from having a stimulating learning effect” (DAS Theatre, 2018)

DAS Theatre expects the students they educate to be on the foreground of the contemporary art discourse. From my own experience this meant that the criticism the work and the student received, or the way it was given, did not always help. This is why DAS Theatre sought a form that empowered the student. Many art schools are struggling with how to give feedback within the educational setting. Representatives of DAS Theatre share the method in the Netherlands and abroad. Giving and receiving feedback is a fundamental part of the artistic practice and therefore DAS Theatre provides a method “to increase the enjoyment of giving and receiving feedback” (DAS Theatre, 2018). The method does not only empower the artist, it also educates the audience. One of the aims of the DAS Theatre feedback method is to create a sense of (self) discipline in formulating precise and clear

critique. DAS Theatre mentions several central aims for feedback situations on their website: “to empower the artist who is getting feedback on his or her work, to go beyond the pronouncement of judgments, to allow fundamental criticism [and] to create a sense of (self-) discipline for the sake of precision and clarity”. Interestingly enough the method hardly consists of any proper dialogue. During the sessions it is mainly the feedback giver that speaks. The artist receives the feedback by listening and is able to choose what is relevant or not. Some of the forms used within the method do challenge the artist to relate to the feedback en plein public. Next to the artist and the group of people giving feedback there is always one person that guides the exchange.

The method proposed by DAS Theatre enables the student to reflect on his/her own work through the feedback of others. It offers the student the possibility to use the thoughts of others and through these contemplate on his/her work. This is particularly relevant when someone performs in his or her own work. By using this method not only to reflect on finished pieces, but also (and mainly) on work in process, it stimulates the artist to use the feedback constructively.

Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process The DasArts feedback method offers a variety of formats, some always used and some are optional. It is a relatively complex method. Liz Lerman offers a somewhat simpler format. I was introduced to Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process (CRP) in 2009 and had a more thorough experience with it in 2011 when John Borstel visited Utrecht to work with a small group of professionals in the dance field. CRP empowers the

artist, by putting him/her in the central position of a feedback session. It is best described as a highly structured and designed interview. In this method there are three roles: the facilitator, the artist and a group of responders. The method consists of four steps, which are set in a fixed order. When the artist wishes to return to a previous step, this is possible. The facilitator plays an important role both previous to and during the conversation. Liz Lerman emphasizes the importance of a well-explained method by the facilitator. The four steps are the following: ‘Statements of Meaning’, ‘Artist as Questioner’, ‘Neutral Questions’ and ‘Opinion Time’ (Lerman and Borstel 2003: pp. 19/22). On the website of Liz Lerman the steps are described:

**“Statements of Meaning:**  
Responders state what was meaningful, evocative, interesting, exciting, and/or striking in the work they have just witnessed.

**Artist as Questioner:**  
The artist asks questions about the work. In answering, responders stay on topic with the question and may express opinions in direct response to the artist’s questions.

**Neutral Questions:**  
Responders ask neutral questions about the work, and the artist responds. Questions are neutral when they do not have an opinion couched in them. This step is one of the most fundamental, challenging, and misunderstood steps of Critical Response Process.

**Opinion Time:**  
Responders state opinions, given permission from the artist; the artist has the option to say no (Lerman 2017).”

A conversation begins with ‘positive’ feedback by the responders. This is comparable to the affirmative feedback used in the DAS Theatre Feedback method. But where DAS Theatre chooses to have the artist describe the status of a work (before showing), CRP responds to the questions of the artist him/herself. These questions are asked after showing. Both the questions of the artist and the neutral questions of the responders create the format of an interview. The artist is ‘forced’ to look for words, where this is hardly needed within the DAS Theatre feedback method.

Both forms share some values that I find important and that I will address later in this article. These values I recognize in the four verbs Bart van Rosmalen introduces in *The Return of the Muses* (2016): narrate, play, create and share. The forms underline that a response is a communal act between responder and artist. There is a certain commonality and it asks for a generosity from all participants. Both feedback formats take a relatively long period of time. One session takes 30 to 90 minutes, but to be able to really dive into it, you will need to invest in several sessions to really understand what it is about. And although this is difficult at times, it also allows for a better position of both the artist and the responders. This enables all to become more professional in their role as an artist or a responder.

### Poetic Feedback

Unfortunately I wasn’t able to recite the poems I wrote inspired by the works of Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion that evening. Instead I e-mailed them to Burrows later. He replied: “These are super nice Jochem thank you, precise and open and

rhythmic but not at all insistent. You have cheered my day and livened it with thinking.”<sup>3</sup> Of course I cannot know to what extent he thought about my words or re-thought his own practice, let alone that I know what he was thinking about. But still, it made me aware once again of the power of poetic language. It strengthened me in writing my poetry inspired by others (students and professionals). Not being able to read them back immediately at that time encouraged me to read future poems to the students and makers.

Since, I have developed a method of giving poetic feedback to students in addition to the feedback they will usually get. I often write these texts during or immediately after presentations and read them aloud for them shortly after. Although this form of feedback is not required, and could be considered irrelevant from time to time, it is very much appreciated by my students. It challenges them to take next steps instead of thinking about what they have done already and it stimulates associations rather than prescriptions. How and to what extent this works out is something I would like to find out. To do this I also like to look at some other feedback methods.

Writing poetry is not only about thinking, you have to act; you have to produce something that is also a ‘product’ on itself. You act as you reflect. The combined deed of reflecting and acting is present in both the DAS Theatre Feedback method and in the Critical Response Process, but it is not particularly outspoken. With a more poetic form of feedback, I would like to understand what this adds to the feedback itself and to the understanding and use of the feedback by the artist. Therefore I would like to share something about the Greek muses. In his dissertation Bart van Rosmalen (2016)

introduces the idea of musical professional development and his research group is currently developing the idea of musical research. I use his approach of the muses to understand my own poetic practice.

### Narrate, play, create and share

Van Rosmalen reminds us of how the muses worked. Who else than the muses were capable of creating, of making through translating into poetry the epic deeds of the Greek gods? The muses didn’t just re-tell these stories. They re-created them through reflection. Without the muses neither gods nor men would have known or remembered the stories (Van Rosmalen 2016). Van Rosmalen uses the verbs: narrate, play, create and share to elaborate on the qualities of the muses. I will try and address them shortly as well and connect them to some of the reactions I got from last year’s graduates of ArtEZ Bachelor of Dance.

I will start with creation. As I mentioned before the act of writing poetry is not just an act of reflection. It is an act of creation. The deeds of the gods are done, but the translation of these deeds into poetry, words, music or something else, is an artistic act on itself. One of my recent graduates, João Dinis Pinho commented:

“I’m thinking if I should answer you in a poetic form, but somehow poetry for me has more to do with intention than anything else. Perhaps that’s what links it with contemporary dance, or the dance I am interested in. A work that might have no visual references, no movement beauty, nor harmony, but has an intention. Poetry has a role there too: when writing or reading a poem, one invests in abstraction, useful when performing or choreographing.

Poetry works on form and content - known elements for a dancer/choreographer.”<sup>4</sup>

The muses create a performance through narrating the stories they wrote. Their poetry is there to be told to others. This does something with both listener and narrator. Madelyn Bullard commented:

“Words become more like a material to work with, as opposed to relying on the connotative definitions of the meaning of words when strung together... Meaning stems also from their rhythm and sound. Experiences, which happened over broad gaps of space and time, can lie together on the same line. In that way, having a poem read at graduation felt like a mystic funnel used when cooking, a small but specific open space where important ingredients, gems of information, can collide like powder before mixing into the bowl of shared information that was the experience of the day...”

Within this action of narrating there is also a certain amount of playfulness. The story told calls for recognition of the experience, associations and new interpretations. The audience is not passive; it is actively involved in the act of performing. This is even more the case if the text that is narrated is about them. Van Rosmalen writes: “Just for a while, during the performance, the normal dividing lines and restrictions are suspended, from the rules of protocol to the pigeon-holes within which work is fittingly carried out, from the hierarchical power relations to everyday cares” (2016: p. 14).

In his chapter on play Van Rosmalen refers to Hans-Georg Gadamer when he describes some fundamental aspects of the experience and the sensing when we play. In this

context he describes the concepts of *Bildung*, *Sensus Communis*, Judgement and Taste. For me these concepts very much relate to feedback in the arts. For this article I chose to limit myself to how Van Rosmalen defines *Sensus Communis* and Judgement and how I can relate it to feedback.

*Sensus Communis* refers to a communal sense, a sense that allows us to be part of a community. Van Rosmalen states that: “The vehicles of language and speech allowing us to be mutually understood play a central role” (2016: p. 85). According to Gadamer the humanist ideal of rhetoric (talking eloquently) is not only about the art of speaking, but it also about saying the right thing or talking the truth. This truth does not refer to a universal truth, but rather to a practical truth. This truth is situated and context-bound.<sup>5</sup> The story of the individual does not stand on itself, but is part of a community and the *Sensus Communis* is about a common direction. In that sense a poem about a member of a community read by a member of a community in front of the community as a whole tries to establish this. Through this, the playing is also about sharing. This might be considered as the underlying act. Madelyn Bullard wrote to me:

“I think because of the abstract nature of poetry, its permission to tie together disparate jewels of information into a ramshackle necklace, without having to ad-here to a totally transparent/cohesive logic, your poem did lend another kind of intelligence of message to me on graduation.”

The muse-like activity of reading out a poetic text to an artist or student in reaction to her work, creates commonality and strives for shared values. Descriptions, inspirations,

associations are shared and there is a certain form of sense making. It is not about the beauty of the words and form. It is neither about the beauty of poetry as such. The second aspect of play that Van Rosmalen refers to is Judgement. He concludes that within a community of the Sensus Communis it may seem to be about postponing a judgement, when it actually is about judging differently (Van Rosmalen 2016: pp. 90-91). If our judgements arrive from values and from speaking well and true, if they stem from what worked well or what is fitting, they may be shared as well. For her graduation I also wrote a poem for Sophie Mayeux. The first two strophes were the following:

*Somewhere in France lives a girl named  
Sophie  
Who studies at an academy of dance  
But here, at ArtEZ, she is rarely seen  
So it might be just a small chance*

*It is said that she creates choreography  
With actual bodies on stage  
But just as this little girl named Sophie  
They've never been seen on the stage*

The poem made her aware of something, she didn't realize before. She observes:

*"I never made the connection between the fact that I can seem often away or absent and the fact that I work with the disappearance of the body on stage. Now, this seems to me obvious and logical but I've never thought about it like that before. So, yes, poetry can be seen as useful feedback."*

This poetic feedback does not wish to replace feedback methods, but for me it is an important addition to these methods. It

generates material that might prove useful and inspiring for both the artist and the responder.

### Vulnerability

What the muse creates is not about herself. It is not the poet that matters; it is the subject of her work. Furthermore it is not about protocol, results or assessment and evaluation forms. The poetry of the muses is about experiencing, about rapture; it is about aesthetics and ethics, not about personal opinions. And although it is not about the poet, it actually is about the poet as well. It is the poet who chooses to be just as vulnerable as her object. Just as vulnerable as Burrows and Fargion, just as vulnerable as first or fourth year dance students at one of our academies or conservatoires. The poet performs. I prefer to read my poetry to my students, but even the writing itself could be considered as being performative. Or the text performs through being read by someone. So I have been thinking of what I do when I write my poems. In the actual words I tend to combine two main things. In my poems I include many descriptions. I write words and sentences down that I have heard. I name the objects or actions I see. Sometimes I make connections, but very often just enumerate all of these. Next to the description I include, more cautiously, associations I have when watching and listening. These can either connect various descriptions or can be connected to something else. Next to these I tend not to reflect through content alone, but also through form. Working with repetition, tempo, dynamics et cetera. This challenges me not only to consider pragmatics and formal issues, but also aesthetics and ethical issues, which I consider important in giving feedback as a teacher.



Die Verwandlung. Photo: Sophie Mayeux

### Performing written words

As I have written in previous articles I also developed a method for writing that I labelled 'Associative Writing'.<sup>6</sup> To some extent this associative writing is related to how I write my more poetic texts, although I aim more at writing in a discursive way. Being challenged by some of my colleagues I started to explicate my method in such a way that others could use it. I use it to write texts for performances, but also to rewrite minutes and to reflect on input of others. So my next step would be to see what is needed to give enough to hold on to for others to write poetic feedback, without coming up with only restraints.

In communal sessions I have been challenging others to write according to this method and to read what they write to others. In some of these sessions I have challenged the group to respond to what has been read out loud through another session of writing and again read this out loud. I have noticed that how people write is influenced by the input

of others. Poetic input leads to poetic output and since this output is input for the original sender. Through this a progressive system evolves. These words are no descriptions, but rather symbolic data as Haseman calls it (2006, 4). And like symbolic data the words are input for the next writing session. At the same time these data exists mainly in the moment. They are performative and therefore disappear (partially). Of course the words are written down, but the question is, if these written words represent the actual value of what was said during the session. What Latour writes about dance, might be true for the performance of these words in these communal sessions:

*If a dancer stops dancing, the dance is finished. No inertia will carry the show forward. This is why I needed to introduce the distinction between ostensive and performative: the object of an ostensive definition remains there, whatever happens to the index of the onlooker. But the object*

*of a performative definition vanishes when it is no longer performed – or if it stays, then it means that other actors have taken over the relay (Latour 2005: pp. 37-38).*

As a performative moment it disappears, but the data does live on: in a next writing session, or in the case of my poems, in the next performance of a piece, hopefully.

### Students writing poetry

These thoughts and insights made me experiment with the next step of this practice-led research: challenge students to write poetry inspired by performances. In January 2018 I invited for the first time a group of students to write poetry inspired by a performance. At the COMMA Master of Choreography of Codarts and Fontys, I presented a lecture performance about artistic research. I asked the students to write poetry during my performance. We used their poems and my performance

as the starting point of a contemplative dialogue on the next day. This contemplative dialogue turned out to be very open, associative and poetic.

In April 2018 I taught a workshop on Dance & Poetry at ArtEZ Bachelor of Dance. 24 Second year students created four short physical dance performances based on a poem. On the final day the four groups presented their work to each other. During and after the presentations students wrote poems inspired by each other's work. For every performance six students would write during the performance and six would write directly afterwards. During one of the performances we were sitting in a circle with our eyes closed. Some of us may have opened our eyes at one point while others did not. We heard noises coming closer and fading away, we felt the presence of the dancers. A few minutes later the students who were not performing were writing. Ischa Statie and Rosy Lupiano both wrote a poem that I would like to share here:

Dark woods

Shuffling slowly, is it?  
Bloody red eyes  
A hand slipping away  
Lower, back  
The darkness  
Takes you,  
takes you,  
takes you,  
takes you,  
takes you,

## A FALLING LEAF

Creatures of the night  
Together

– Ischa Statie

Where are you going?

Going nowhere but I know, you are there!

Coming close,

close enough,

close so far,

close away,

close no way.

I can hear you,

I can feel you,

but I don't know you.

– Rosy Lupiano

### A small stone to jump from

Dear reader, it seems that I have drifted away a bit. But here I find myself addressing you again. This journey started with an empty paper. I don't only mean the empty paper I addressed in the introduction, but also the empty papers that have been used by others and myself to start writing poetic feedback on. Now I would like to invite you as well. Get yourself an empty paper and a pen or pencil. Start writing during or after performances you see. I often hear that what I did has a specific quality, and that perhaps only I could do this. To a certain extent this might be true, since it might be different how you write and how I write. But since I have challenged students to write as well, I came to one of the three conclusions of this research: Anybody could do this. There might be a hurdle to take, the threshold may be high, but I hope you give it try. Allow your observational skills and your associations to meet each other in a poem. Write a poem and recite it in the presence of others.

This is the second conclusion I wish to underline: The importance of commonality in feedback sessions. As both Critical Response Process and the Das Theatre Feedback Method also show, there is a quality in receiving and giving feedback in a communal setting. In the end this is also about creating a culture in which all involved are open to receiving and giving feedback. By doing this in a situation where the artist, the audience and the one that wrote a feedback are all present, you stress this aspect.

Within this shared space there is also room for a third and final conclusion that is important to me: performativity. I experienced the strength of performing a text by reciting it in

front of an audience already with my method of associative writing. Then you perform the feedback as symbolic data, as a formative and affirmative reflection on what you have seen, as a poetic output based on the poetic input from the original performance. And let this resonate in the room and hopefully in the work that it reflects.

Sometimes you just need a small stone to jump from, don't you? While you actually fall for the briefest amount of time, you seem to float in mid air for much longer. Like in a dream you deviate and associate. You imagine all possible pathways and desired lanes. You wonder and forget about the original stone for a while, thinking about cliffs or cleavages, about lava or sediment you address other formats and other origins, you go over your own memories and experiences and in between you realize you are falling, you realize you are jumping, you realize you are the observer and not the performer. Nevertheless you perform; you perform your own story, your own plot, your own relation to that what you witness. The performance is temporary, but it may live on within you. Through witnessing you create valuable observations, memories, reflections, ones that are relevant to share with the creator of a performance.

Yours sincerely,

Jochem

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- 1 This article was written with support of the Professorship Art and Professionalisation of HKU University of the Arts Utrecht and the Bachelor of Dance of ArtEZ University of the Arts.
- 2 I chose to call it a method, although I understand that it could be understood as a methodology as well, since it is actually an overarching idea containing various feedback methods.
- 3 Taken from a personal email conversation between Jonathan Burrows and the author.

- 4 The comments of the ArtEZ alumni João Dinis Pinho, Madelyn Bullard and Sophie Mayeux come from personal email conversations between them and the author.
- 5 In that sense that the focus of "speaking truthfully" is actually on a pragmatic validity or a validity of usability, rather than a validity of truth (see also: Naafs 2017 pp. 57-58).
- 6 In the article "Associative Writing and the Lecture Performance" (2015) I wrote extensively about this method.