Loom Quarterly

Cultural Transformation

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practice for cultural transformation

2026 Q1

Cultural Transformation

A CRISIS OF IMAGINATION

We all know that we live in an age of extraordinary transformation and accelerating change. Heatwaves and floods are occurring more frequently. Meanwhile, intelligent technologies are beginning to communicate, design and make decisions alongside - or even instead of - us, while familiar neighbourhoods and landscapes are transforming beyond recognition. These are not distant trends but fundamental changes that enter and upset everyday life. What seems harder to transform is our ability to collectively imagine, and shape, an alternative.

Many of today's challenges are no longer questions of knowledge alone. We know that our economic systems exceed planetary boundaries. We understand the consequences of rising temperatures, declining biodiversity and increasing social fragmentation. The question is not simply what needs to change, but how societies and individual organisations and people become capable of changing collectively. This is where cultural transformation begins.

Cultural transformation is not about changing culture for its own sake. It is about changing the stories, relationships, values and habits through which people and organisations understand the world and act within it. It creates the conditions in which new ways of being, acting, and collaborating can emerge. Art and culture are not peripheral to these processes: they provide the conditions to rehearse alternative futures before they can become reality.

TRANSFORMATION IS CULTURAL

Major societal transformations rarely begin with investments or technological breakthroughs. Long before institutions and systems change, cultures change. People begin to tell different stories, find new words and forms, adopt new rituals, question established assumptions and imagine alternatives that once seemed impossible. Introducing new values, images, words, and rituals, enables people to question dominant assumptions, experience alternative perspectives, and explore situations that do not yet exist. The capacities this requires – critical thinking, creativity, solidarity, and the ability to deal with ambiguity and build new alliances – are increasingly recognised as essential for societies adapting to rapid change.

This is where artistic methods become particularly valuable. They create temporary spaces in which complexity can be explored without the immediate pressure to reach consensus. They invite experimentation before solution, curiosity before judgement and risk before certainty. Rather than producing definitive answers, they expand the range of questions that societies are able to ask and alternative futures we can imagine. Cultural transformation therefore complements technological innovation and goes hand in hand with political change. It enlarges the realm of what people collectively consider possible and worth pursuing.

REHEARSING DIFFERENT FUTURES

History offers many cases of cultural transformation that challenge and change the systems, imaginaries and social norms that form society.

For example, the transformation of the Netherlands into a cycling nation was not an accident or purely technical issue, but a deliberate response to social and cultural movements. Grassroots activism around the oil crisis and performative interventions calling for traffic safety in the 1970s, and subsequent design and engineering innovations, most importantly the idea to separate cars from bikes, preceded and fuelled the political will to build a network of cycling infrastructure that now covers all parts of the country. This democratised biking as a safe, everyday utility, proving that car-centric societies can successfully reinvent their mobility system.

Oftentimes a transformation is challenging social norms. The activist Kick Out Zwarte Piet movement, which rallied against a black face caricature in Dutch popular culture, combined activism, artistic interventions, public debate and alternative imagery to fundamentally reshape one of the country's most contested traditions within little more than a decade.

Despite their differences, these transformations followed remarkably similar trajectories. They

combined research with imagination, grassroots initiatives with institutional change, and critique with convincing alternatives. They change because people gradually - and sometimes abruptly - begin to inhabit different futures.

CREATING CONDITIONS FOR TRANSFORMATION

At Loom, we understand cultural transformation not as a service or predefined trajectory but as an ongoing practice of creating the conditions in which meaningful change becomes possible. Rather than beginning with fixed solutions, we start by bringing together people, disciplines and forms of knowledge that rarely meet. Artists collaborate with scientists. Architects work alongside local communities. Policymakers engage with storytellers, ecologists and designers. These encounters generate perspectives that no single discipline could produce on its own.

Across our projects, artistic experimentation goes hand in hand with research and strategic thinking. Public walks become forms of spatial research. Temporary performances reveal invisible relationships within landscapes. Collective conversations become tools for imagining long-term futures before they are translated into policies, designs or investments.

Loom works with a self-developed transformation model (see insert) that places artistic imagination and cultural processes at the heart of achieving gradual and collective change. The model seeks to capture this outline for gradual but thorough transformation, while acknowledging real change is always a complex and multifaceted process.

This model and methodology inform everything we do. Whether exploring new possibilities for Amsterdam’s historic city centre through the Opwallen project, developing long-term collaborations between heritage organisations and artists in Art Landscape Herlaar, or connecting grassroots urban initiatives across Africa and Europe through the Grounded Urban Practices network: our projects share a common ambition to expand our collective imagination through which places, people and organisations understand themselves and transform collectively.

Transformation, however, rarely follows a linear path. It unfolds through reflection, dialogue, experimentation, disagreement and collective action. Our role is not to determine outcomes, but to cultivate the conditions that facilitate change.

A CONTINUOUS PRACTICE

The future will not only be defined by technological innovation or economic development. It will probably be remembered as a period in which societies were forced to rethink many of their most fundamental assumptions and reimagine and reshape their world accordingly. Cultural transformation happens when something that once seemed normal gets questioned, and something that once seemed unconventional becomes the new norm.

Transformation also implies (re)aligning with emerging realities. How do we live with more water instead of endlessly fighting it? How do we want to coexist with artificial intelligence? How do we share increasingly scarce space and resources in our crowded cities? How can we bring together different interests in our efforts to restore ecological balance?

These questions cannot be answered by engineers, economists or policymakers alone. They require new cultural capacities: the ability to imagine together, to navigate uncertainty, to collaborate across differences and to develop new relationships with each other and the more-than-human world. Cultural transformation is therefore not a straight path with a clear end point but a continuous practice that brings together different trajectories. It asks us to remain curious, to question what appears inevitable, to learn from mistakes and to collectively rehearse and shape futures that do not yet exist.

This Quarterly is an invitation to join that conversation. If these questions resonate with your organisation, your community or your own practice, we would welcome the opportunity to engage with them together.

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FURTHER READING

*Thinking in System*s, Donella Meadows (Chelsea Green, 2007) — One of the clearest introductions to systems thinking, explaining why lasting change rarely comes from fixing isolated problems but from understanding the relationships and assumptions that produce them.

Where to Land?, Bruno Latour (Polity, 2018) — Latour explores how ecological crises require entirely new political imaginaries rather than incremental policy adjustments.

Imagination: A Manifesto, Ruha Benjamin (W. W. Norton & Company, 2025) — Drawing on art, activism and technology, she demonstrates how creative practice can help dismantle systems of inequality while envisioning more just futures.

Culture|2030 Indicators, UNESCO (2019) — Rather than arguing abstractly for the importance of culture, UNESCO developed a framework for measuring how culture contributes to environmental sustainability, social inclusion, governance and economic resilience.

Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds, adrienne maree brown (AK Press, 2017) — Drawing on the science fiction of Octavia Butler and on patterns found in natural systems, brown argues that large-scale transformation emerges not from master plans but from small, adaptive, relational practices that shift how people relate and act together.

*Verantwoordelijk voor de toekomst, Op zoek naar een planologie van de lange termijn (*Responsible for the Future: Seeking a Long-Term Approach to Spatial Planning), Peter Pelzer (Trancity Valiz, 2021, in Dutch only) — Pelzer's approach opens up the possibility of viewing planning as a way to engage with various possible futures and to harness cultural imagination for institutional change. (PDF: https://bit.ly/3ZwClfE)

OTHER PRACTICES

Assemble — demonstrates how architecture can emerge from long-term collaboration with local communities instead of predetermined masterplans.

Bureau Vergezicht — a Dutch theatre collective that creates research-driven, immersive theatrical works focusing on power, the climate crisis, and shared responsibility, aiming to engage and provoke dialogue among citizens, corporations, and politicians.

Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research (CLUSTER) — an independent urban design and research platform with a focus on urban informality and the role of creative initiatives in urban regeneration.

Forensic Architecture — investigates human rights violations through spatial research, showing how architecture can become a tool for public accountability.

The Rebuild Foundation — founded by artist and urban planner Theaster Gates on Chicago's South Side, the Rebuild Foundation serves as a premier example of cultural transformation by using art, cultural preservation, and creative placemaking to revitalise marginalised urban neighborhoods.

Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination — brings together artists and activists to co-design and deploy creative forms of direct-action, which aim to be as joyful as they are politically effective.

Metro54 — offers space for global sonic, cultural and artistic practices, gathering(s), (un)learning, histories, grassroots community work, spatial politics and transformative justice.

SWARM Movement — SWARM's ambition is, through the (social) choreographies of swarming, to build awareness and recognition of each other's existence (gender, diverse ability, sexual orientation, ethnic-cultural background, migration background and religion), experiences and ideas.

Turenscape — reimagines landscape architecture as ecological infrastructure, combining scientific research with powerful new imaginaries of living with water.

COLOPHON

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Loom works with a self-developed transformation model and diagram that places artistic imagination and cultural processes at the heart of achieving gradual and collective change. It seeks to capture this outline for gradual but thorough transformation, while acknowledging real change is always a complex and multifaceted process. Within this model, we distinguish the following four phases:

1. RESEARCHING
Gaining knowledge of local conditions and global challenges

We believe that structural and sustainable transformation always requires different forms of knowledge, on both the specificities of the local conditions as well as the larger developments at play. By applying a wide range of different research methodologies, from data-driven desk research and participatory mapping workshops to deep listening sessions, we aim to develop a multi-perspective and multi-sensory understanding of a certain situation, while always taking the broader context into account. How can we include as many relevant perspectives as possible? Which examples and references from the past can guide us into the future? What knowledge do we need to prepare ourselves for a process of collective reorientation (see next step in model)?

2. REORIENTING
Learning to see and collaborate differently

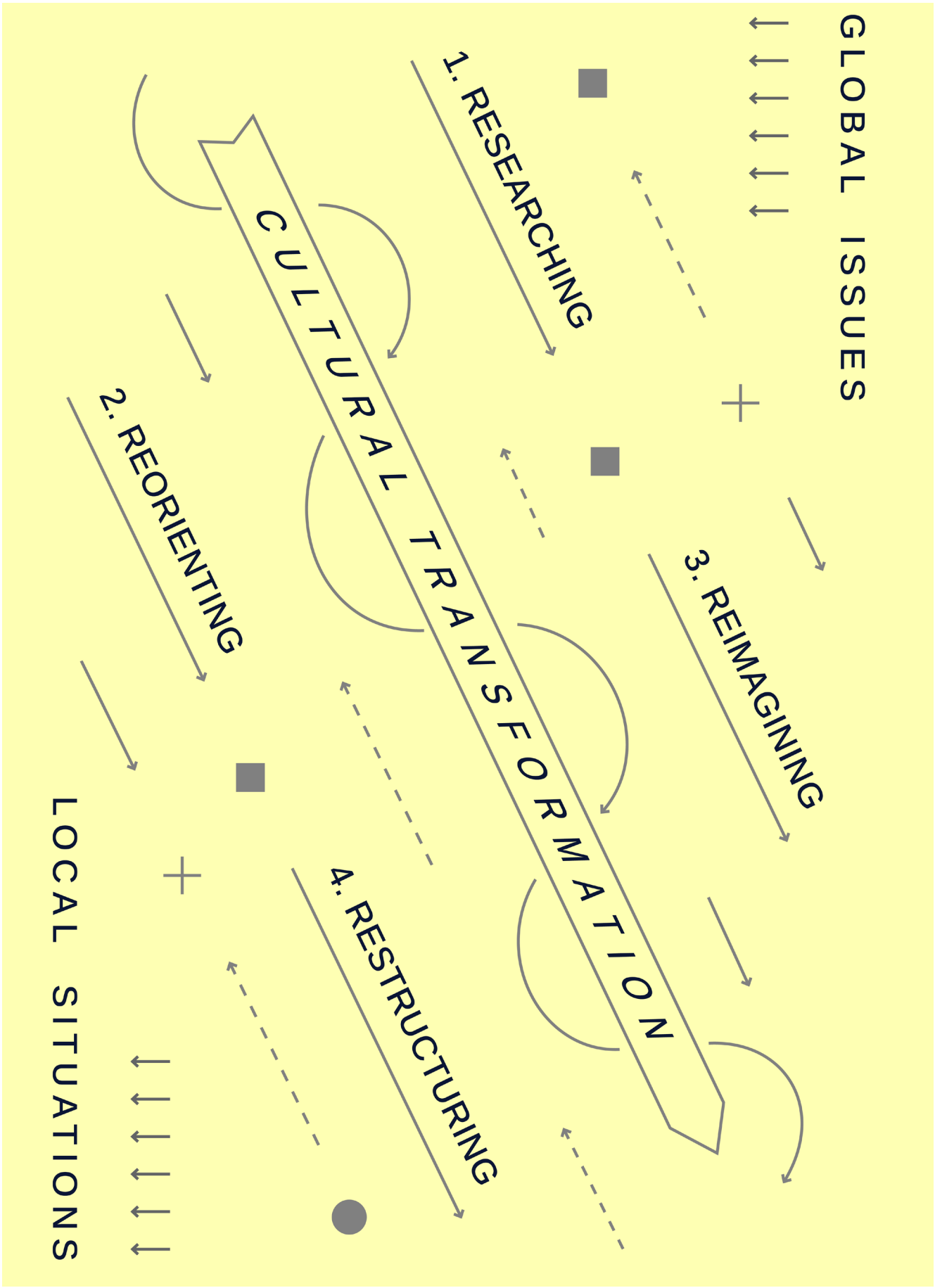
Loom is interested in finding ways to reorient ourselves towards all the looming questions of our time. Through inviting different perspectives and practices, including artistic ones, and by troubling dominant narratives, as well as taking the time to pause, we facilitate situations where people are introduced to and actively take on different roles and perspectives, in order to position and reposition themselves. How can we recalibrate our relations to others and our environment? Which paths are leading in which directions, and which detours allow us to orient ourselves differently? How can alternative perspectives inspire us to take next steps in complex processes?

3. REIMAGINING
Developing new imaginaries and possibilities

Loom believes imaginative practices allow us to prefigure different ways of living together, and doing things differently altogether. Often in collaboration with artists, writers, designers, architects and other practitioners, Loom develops images, stories, scripts, spatial interventions, audio essays, walking routes, or other works and instruments that inspire us to rehearse and test alternatives, and to enter shared processes of transformation. When breaking with dominant social and economic values, what could our cities look like in the years to come? How can we imagine new ways of coming together in public space, or ways of living with too much water? Can we listen to the future?

4. RESTRUCTURING
Shaping and guiding concrete processes of change

In this fourth phase we facilitate the implementation of newly gained insights in everyday practice. We translate the results of previous steps into actionable plans and practical guidelines. Loom ultimately aims for real-world change, in a way that matters to the people and places we work with. By gradually weaving local contexts together with critical knowledge, inspiring practitioners and imaginative possibilities, we're creating solid organisational, ecological or urban structures that will be able to stand the test of time. We will make sure to involve all stakeholders by facilitating a collective process and by ensuring that all the conditions for a structural and sustainable transformation are met. What is necessary in terms of organisational capacities and systems to turn new ideas into effective actions? How can we create a sense of collective ownership and responsibility? How can we anticipate, absorb and adjust to changing circumstances? And what are important learning objectives and feedback loops?



Cultural Transformation model (diagram developed by Loom)