

THE CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION MOVEMENT (CTM) PROJECT  
REFLECTION WORKSHOP #6

**The forgotten data lab**

TEH Camp Meeting 100 'SHIFT + CULTURE'

Friday, October 31, 2025, 5:00 pm - 7:00 pm

Venue: Tiger Room, Second Floor, Rīgas Cirks, Riga

Report by:

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TEH Camp Meeting 100 'SHIFT+CULTURE' took place between Thursday, October 30, 2025, and Sunday, October 2, 2025 and hosted by Kaņepes Kultūras Centrs, Latvia.

**About the TEH Camp Meeting in Riga:**

SHIFT + CULTURE marked the 100th Camp Meeting of Trans Europe Halles (TEH), a network that has been connecting independent cultural spaces across Europe for over four decades. This special gathering, hosted by Kanepes Kulturas Centrs in Riga, invited participants to pause and reflect on how culture can help us adapt to a constantly shifting world. Under the theme SHIFT + CULTURE, the Camp Meeting asked:

- How can we use the knowledge, stories, and data we already hold to make clearer decisions and nurture stronger collaborations?
- What happens when we treat data not as a tool for certainty, but as a bridge to connection?
- How might we reshape our relationships with change, technology, and each other?

**About the CTM project:**

Cultural Transformation Movement (CTM) project is a context-based process to diversify artistic production and its destination starting from within the organization. It is led by Trans Europe Halles with four of TEH members, Brunnenpassage from Austria, VIERNULVIER from Belgium, Zo centro culture contemporanee from Italy, IZOLYATSIA. Platform for Cultural Initiatives from Ukraine. With the Cultural Transformation Movement project, we are taking real steps, making genuine

commitments and openly sharing experiences with the other TEH members about how to make social justice a priority in arts, culture and creative industries.

## **On Reflection Workshop: The forgotten data lab**

### **1. Introduction**

At 5 pm on a Friday, participants began to gather in the Tiger Room on the second floor of Rīgas Cirks. The room, though warmly welcoming in atmosphere, was only accessible via a flight of stairs. This immediately highlighted a practical and ethical consideration for workshops of this nature: accessibility. *Physical barriers can limit participation, and this experience underlined the need for organizers to insist on fully accessible spaces for future sessions.*

As participants slowly trickled in, they chose their seats one by one. The chairs were arranged facing each other, two by two, with barely 50 centimeters separating them. *The intimacy of the seating arrangement subtly framed the workshop's approach: a space of close observation, reflection, and relational awareness.* This setup immediately challenged participants to inhabit the physical space thoughtfully, noticing not only the presence of others but also the subtleties of proximity, posture, and spatial dynamics.

At first there was resistance to sit so closely in front of a stranger, but little by little the chairs were filling up.

### **2. Workshop framing: What is data?**

After a brief introduction of the Cultural Transformation Movement project and its partners, even before the facilitator opened the discussion, one participant directly asked a simple question: **What is data?**

The question so simple and yet fundamental was the best framing for the workshop. It sparked a wide range of responses and reflections. Some participants instinctively associated data with numbers, attendance counts, or demographic statistics. Others considered data as qualitative observations, emotional responses, and relational signals.

- Is data different from knowledge? Is it opposed? Or is it the foundational building block of knowledge?
- Is data an apparatus of capitalism?

- Why is there the need of collecting more and more data? Should we need to forget instead?

The workshop's aim was to broaden understanding of what counts as data, especially in cultural work where subtle, invisible, or relational phenomena are often overlooked. In other words; an invitation to *re-thinking what counts as data*.

For that reason the facilitator emphasized that data is not neutral: it is socially constructed, historically shaped, and carries the footprint of the history of colonizations. Traditional frameworks often reflect eurocentric or colonial legacies, reproducing inequities in whose voices are documented, remembered, and acted upon.

In the screen was projected the quote from "Data Colonialism: Rethinking Big Data's Relation to the Contemporary Subject":

***We are often told that data are the new oil. But unlike oil, data are not a substance found in nature. It must be appropriated. (...)The result is nothing less than a new social order, based on continuous tracking, and offering unprecedented new opportunities for social discrimination and behavioral influence. We propose that this process is best understood through the history of colonialism. Thus, data relations enact a new form of data colonialism, normalizing the exploitation of human beings through data, just as historic colonialism appropriated territory and resources and ruled subjects for profit. Data colonialism paves the way for a new stage of capitalism whose outlines we only glimpse: the capitalization of life without limit.*** (Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2018).

Participants were invited to reflect on their positionality: *From which perspective are we gathering data? Whose stories are centered, and whose are marginalized or silenced?*

#### **Key framing points included:**

- Gathering data is a way to understand others. It is knowledge of others: a way to understand communities, practices, and experiences beyond oneself.
- It is relational, layered, and includes both seen and unseen phenomena.
- It can be used to allocate resources, monitor programs, inform policy, or support creative practice, but also carries ethical responsibilities.

### 3. Seen the other

To begin exploring these ideas in practice, participants engaged in a simple exercise. They were asked to look at the person seated across from them for two minutes, without speaking. The instruction was not merely to observe but to *imagine what kind of data they could gather about the other person: what is visible, what is invisible, and what exists in the space between.*

This exercise foregrounded the subtle, relational, and ethical dimensions of data collection: attention, care, and respect were as important as observation itself. But also the awareness of carrying our own bias and positionality when seeing the other. Participants were asked to notice their own limits, that shaped what can be known and how assumptions can shape understanding. It also highlighted that data is not only about capturing but about engaging responsibly with the other(s).



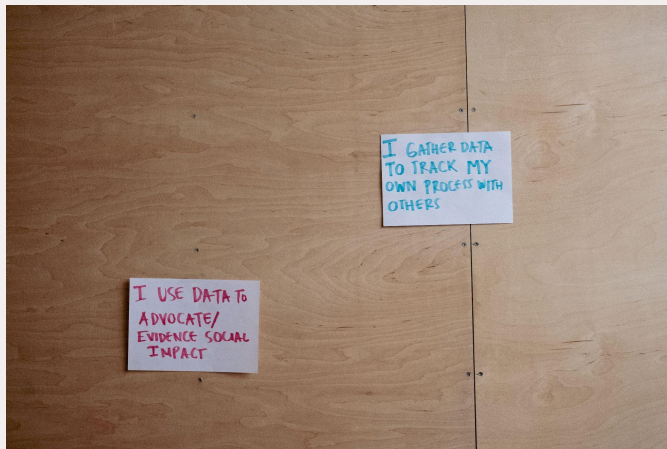
Photo: Léo Lethielleux.

#### 4. Phrases on the wall: mapping approaches to data

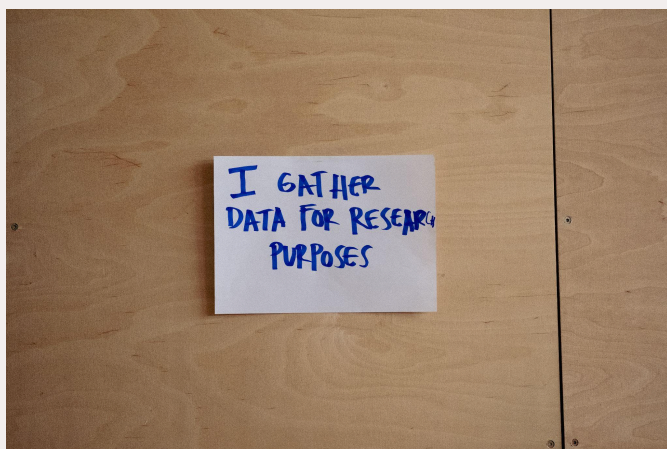
Participants were asked to stand up from their chairs and slowly move towards the wall. This reflective exercise used written phrases displayed on the walls, representing different approaches to data collection in cultural contexts. Participants were invited to read, and situate themselves in relation to these statements. Examples included:

- “I collect data mainly for reporting / funder requirements.”
- “I use data for evaluation and research (to improve practice).”
- “I treat data as part of the creative process”
- “I avoid collecting personal data because of risk to marginalized participants.”
- “Traditional metrics are inadequate / feel outdated.”
- “Capacity and resourcing limit what we can record or preserve.”
- “We prioritize community control and co-design of data practices.”
- “We use data to advocate / evidence social value.”

1.



2.



This exercise made visible the diversity of approaches and the tensions that cultural organizers navigate daily: balancing ethical considerations, practical constraints, creative ambitions, and institutional requirements.

Some important questions were underlined by participants:

- The power of data remains an untapped resource usually ignored in the cultural sector?
- Are the cultural organizers and artists just gathering data for reporting purposes and often that data remains forgotten on reports?
- It highlighted the power of the cultural sector, and especially organizers and artists that work with underrepresented communities, to activate the data that is collected via an intersectional optic. Data alone can lead to misinterpretation of reality to an untrained/unaware eye.



As the chairs were moved into a large circle, one empty chair stood in the middle. Its presence was striking. Evoking those who are absent, the stories that remain unseen, outside of the archives. Forgotten.

Photo: Léo Lethielleux.



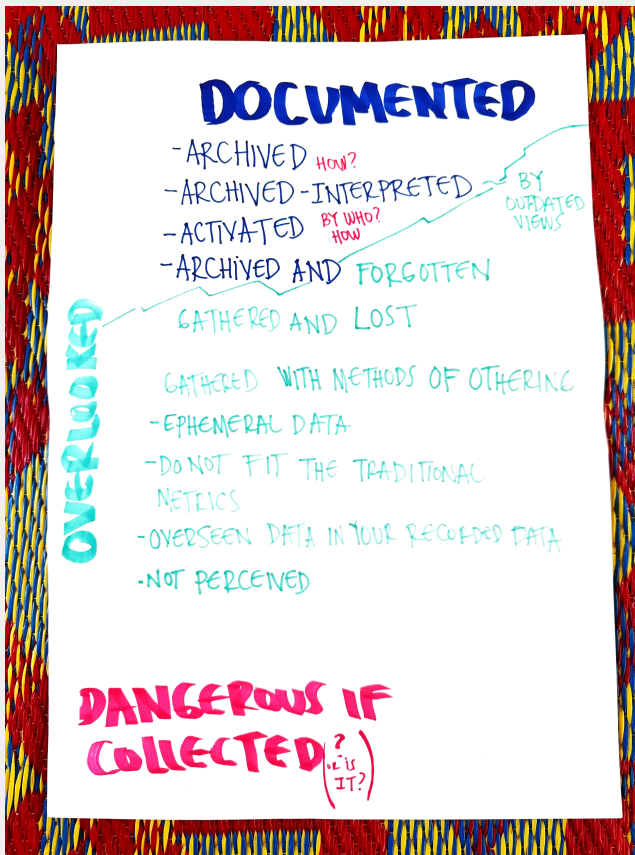
Photo: Léo Lethielleux.

When occupied, the chair took on a new meaning: all eyes were suddenly fixed on a single person. It revealed both the importance of being seen and the oppressive weight of being seen all at once. It underscored the need to acknowledge and address the power dynamics involved when gathering data from the other(s).

## 5. Breakout sessions: visual mapping of the forgotten data

After a short break, participants moved into smaller groups for hands-on practice.

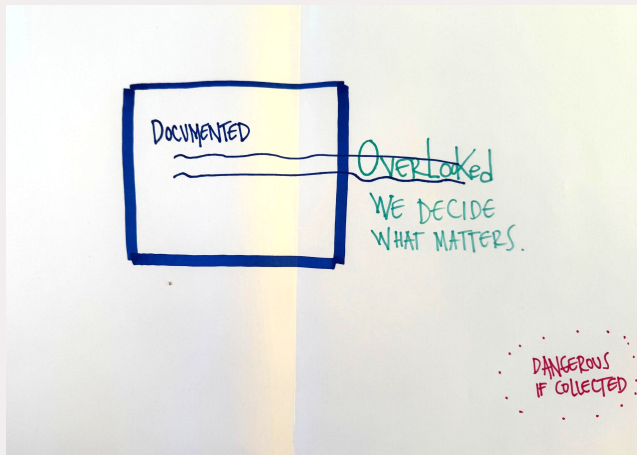
The focus shifted to *visual mapping*: representing paths of unseen, forgotten, or potentially harmful data.



Participants were provided with paper, markers, and prompts to draw flows of presence, absence, and barriers, considering:

- Which forms of data are usually ignored or invisible?
- Where does mismeasurement or misuse risk harm?
- How do systems of evaluation fail marginalized communities?
- Who benefits and who is harmed by existing data practices?
- How do colonial or biased frameworks shape measurement?

Groups explored **layered and relational aspects of data**, distinguishing between:



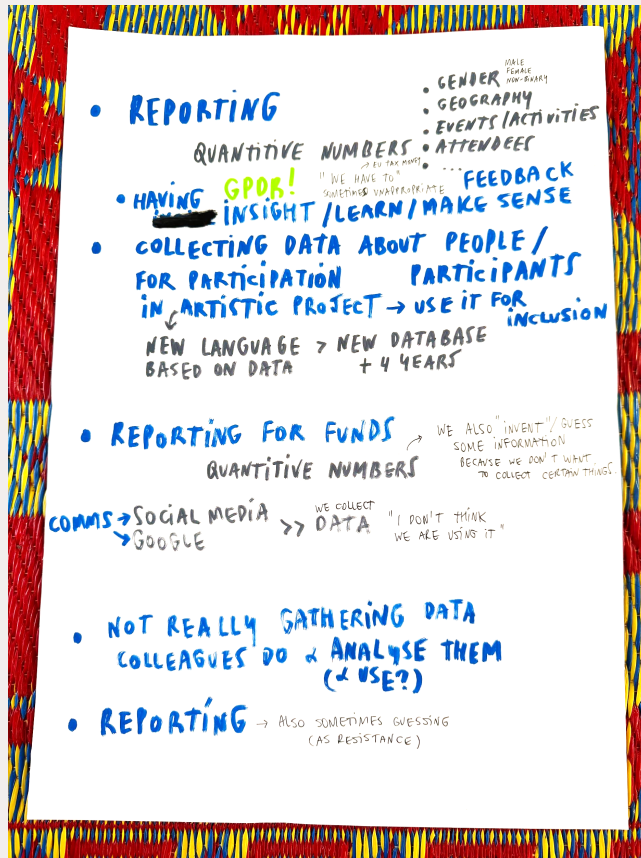
- **Documented data:** recorded, accessible, and recognized.
- **Overlooked data:** collected but ignored or forgotten.
- **Dangerous data:** potentially harmful if accessed or misinterpreted.

During half an hour each group was able to discuss with their peers their own experiences as cultural organizers, programmers, project managers, artists. Reflecting on specific examples to avoid going to generalizations and diving into lived methodologies.

These discussions revealed not only the technical challenges of data work, but also its emotional, ethical, and political dimensions.

One person per group was able to share the highlights of their conversations to the wider group. The outputs were visual, including annotations that captured both data gathered and the unseen data, highlighting systemic gaps and relational nuances. Below some of the key points:

## 5.1. The weight of reporting requirements



Many participants described that most of the data they collect is quantitative:

- gender
- geography
- attendee numbers
- basic demographic categories

This data is gathered primarily because funders require it, not because organisations find it genuinely useful. Several admitted that they often “guess” or estimate numbers: not out of negligence, but as a form of quiet resistance to invasive or unnecessary data demands. Others noted the discomfort of being obliged to ask participants for personal or private information simply to secure funding for their programmes.

There is a shared *unease with the gap between what is reported and what is real and questions about how this distortion affects future funding, policymaking, and sector priorities.*

## 5.2. The data we collect but still don't use

Communications teams, in particular, reflected on the large amounts of digital data they gather. Through social media insights, website analytics, Google tools, but it opened the question: are we analyzing that data in meaningful ways? Some participants admitted: “We collect data, but I’m not sure we’re using it”.

This raised broader questions:

- Do we truly learn from the data we gather?
- Do we sense-make collectively?
- Or does the data simply accumulate in digital storage until forgotten?

### 5.3. The data we “choose” not to collect

Participants emphasised the intentional gaps: the information we avoid gathering because:

- it feels intrusive
- it might place people at risk
- it could expose communities to surveillance or harm
- it reinforces tokenism or extractive dynamics

This included especially sensitive or identifying data about marginalized participants. Several stressed that “sharing data can place people at risk,” especially in contexts with shifting political climates or strict funding scrutiny.

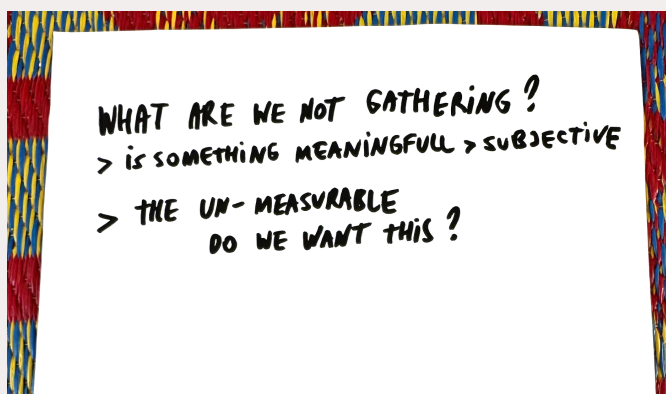
This led to a deeper conversation about data minimalism as a protective strategy, not a lack of professionalism.

### 5.3. Invisible, overlooked, and unmeasurable data

One of the most resonant themes was the value of quiet or subjective forms of data. The kind that rarely enters official reports:

- emotional clues
- pauses and hesitations
- absences
- who lingers at the edge
- shifts in power dynamics
- silence as communication

Participants questioned whether cultural organisations should aspire to measure these aspects or whether their value lies precisely in being unmeasurable.



Some reflected:

“What are we not gathering? And is that where the meaning actually lives?”

This sparked a collective recognition that quality, not quantity, often defines cultural impact. Yet our reporting systems rarely capture it.

## 5.5. Data as strategy, leverage, and status

Participants acknowledged that data is sometimes used strategically:

- to influence policymakers
- to advocate for resources
- to demonstrate social value
- to justify artistic approaches

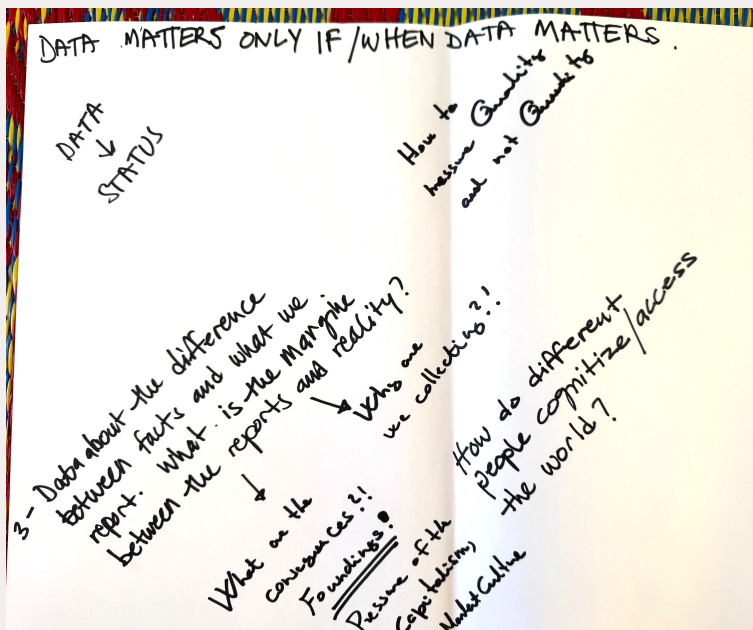
Data can become a form of organisational capital. Something that grants credibility or visibility. But it can also reinforce hierarchies and status, depending on who controls it.

This raised important questions:

- Who gets to define which data counts?
- Who is authorised to collect, interpret, or archive it?
- How do cognitive differences and cultural perspectives shape what is noticed or valued?

## 5.6. Data as a collective sense-making tool

Participants expressed a desire for collective ways of interpreting data, rather than leaving the responsibility to one role (like communication or administration).



They emphasized:

- making sense together
- creating shared language
- recognising different cognitive styles
- developing new forms of data for artistic participation

This led to the idea of building entirely new forms of databases. Not based on extraction or compliance, but on meaning, inclusion, and creative interpretation.

## 5.7. The tension between necessity and care

Ultimately, participants described a complex balancing act:

- the need to secure funding
- the desire to protect communities
- the pressure of capitalist productivity metrics
- the responsibility to be truthful and ethical
- the creative urge to work beyond numbers
- the practical limits of time, capacity, and skills

*Data matters: but only when it is cared for, read with context, and used to strengthen relationships, not to extract or control.*

## 6. Reflections on safety, and positionality

Throughout the workshop, ethical questions were foregrounded:

- How do we protect vulnerable groups when collecting data?
- How should data be stored and who controls access?
- How do we avoid reinforcing existing power imbalances?
- What creative methods allow invisible stories to be represented ethically?

Participants discussed various approaches to data safety and governance, including encrypted digital storage, participatory community oversight, and anonymization. While time constraints prevented fully exploring these practices, the conversation raised awareness of the responsibilities cultural organizers and artists carry when handling human and cultural data. Hopefully this point will be explored in future workshops.

## 7. Observations and reflections

- **The Room and space:** The physical setup matters. It influenced both participation and awareness. It highlighted accessibility challenges and the ways the physical environment shapes relational experience.
- **Timing:** Beginning at 5 pm on a Friday created a reflective atmosphere, but also meant participants were transitioning from a day fully packed with meetings, talks and workshops. It took time to connect with each other and navigate the topic in depth.

- **Methodology:** Exercises emphasized presence, observation, mapping, and dialogue rather than predetermined outcomes. However it was a big group and when talking in the group there were many that remained silent at the beginning, it took time to open up and to follow all the different methodologies. For next workshops a less ambitious methodology should be revisited.
- **Collaboration:** By observing each other and mapping relational data, participants developed empathy, highlighted diverse perspectives, and explored shared responsibilities for ethical data practices.

## 8. Objectives achieved

- **Reflection on data in cultural work:** A shift from “data for certainty” to “data for connection,” aligning cultural work with the needs of each one rather than institutional pressure. Participants deepened their understanding of what counts as data and why subtle signals matter.. Rather than treating data as fixed, numerical, or funder-driven, the workshop opened the door to a broader repertoire: emotional signals, quiet gestures, absences, tensions, and relational dynamics.
- **Positionality and bias:** Through discussion and observation, participants examined how their own identities and institutional roles shape what they notice and prioritize. The session foregrounded power, historical bias, colonial legacies, and the risks of collecting data uncritically. **Should we collect this? For whom? With what impact?**
- **Surfacing invisible voices and the forgotten data:** Through exercises and mapping, marginalized or overlooked perspectives were made visible.
- **Creative translation of data:** Visual mapping and discussion offered methods for exploring their current ways of approaching data.
- **Awareness of data risks and community safety:** Discussions revealed that data can become dangerous when saved without context, when governance changes, or when communities lack control. Cultural organisers recognized a need to minimize, anonymize, or creatively translate sensitive information.

## 9. Closing reflections

*The Forgotten Data Lab* in Riga was an exploration of what is often overlooked in cultural work: the quiet, invisible, and relational signals that shape communities. The session revealed that data is not simply a matter of numbers, but a living, ethical, and relational practice: something to be observed, cared for, and translated with sensitivity.

By combining observation exercises, reflective discussion, and visual mapping, the lab created a space where participants could slow down, experiment, and consider the ethical implications of their work. It reminded us that transformation in cultural practice is not only about measurable outcomes, but about attentive care, ethical responsibility, and curiosity toward the unseen.

### Sources and framework for the workshop:

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Cocq, C. (2022, November). Data colonialism and data sovereignty in Indigenous spaces [Conference paper]. AoIR 2022: The 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers, Dublin, Ireland. <http://spir.aoir.org>

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Human Rights Council. (2025). Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the High Commissioner and the Secretary-General: Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development (Sixtieth session, 8 September–3 October 2025). United Nations.