D:G

HS'BI

BEING ON THE EDGE

DURATION 7 MIN.

TONY FRY

A PROVOCATION

Humanity and indigenous people who define their being as otherwise than *Anthropos* are on the edge of the age of unsettlement.[1] The combined impacts of climate change – heat, loss of surface and groundwater, drought, fire, sea level rises, storms surges, cyclonic events, riverine flooding, loss of biodiversity, pandemics – are, in various configurations, going to displace hundreds of millions of people over coming decades and centuries. The thirteen climate models reviewed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)[2] show temperatures continuing to rise to 2200, some to 2300. All curves on the graph point upward. For almost all of our species' existence, and all the other hominoids before, we were, in various ways, nomadic. The move to settlement only began around ten thousand years ago. As a species, we cannot return to what we were, but neither can we stay as we are. Unsettlement falls between nomadism and settlement. It is impermanence and a normative condition of awaiting; it is a psychology and ontology already present. Vast numbers of people have been physically displaced, but so many more feel uncertain and insecure about their future and the future overall. Unsettlement is thus a physical condition and a state of mind.

[1] Anthropos entered Western thought via translation of Greek thought into Arabic, then Latin – this between c1355-c1455. During this period, the Greek word Anthropos was translated into the Latin as Humano. The Early Renaissance, beginning in 1400, denoted the period of emergent modernity and humanistic thought. The cardinal date in the arrival of modernity was 1492 with the »discovery« of the New World. It also marked a crucial moment in the universal designation of all homo sapiens as »humans.« The specific naming of our species to that moment, and residually after it, was particular to a people's cosmology. See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2015), The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds, Chicago: Hau Books.

[2] See IPCC, AR6 Synthesis Report, Climate Change, 2023: https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-cycle/ and visual material https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/graphics/

DESIGN

In response to this situation, design could and should have a significant role. But will it? The most direct answer is in a different form. Why? Firstly, because most designers are uncritical service providers, design education is dominant in servicing this practice. Designers are not sufficiently informed about the structural form and agency of design in historically constituting the »world-within-the-world« in which design functions: as an implicit and explicit practice, as a directive of the operational form of »things«, and as an ontological agency (which is to say designed things go on designing – in this respect, it is an event). Design as a »discipline« does not grasp the omnipresence of design because it is predicated on a division of knowledge that de-relationalises design as a worldly phenomenon. Effectively, design practice is restrictive, and its sub-disciplines are complicit in this restriction condition. Design history is an example. It interrogates the history and agency of design – while it is disarticulated from history. Likewise, a grand-deal design theory concerns how to design rather than addressing what designing and the layout do. Which at its most basic is to future or defuture the essential conditions of our collective dependence.
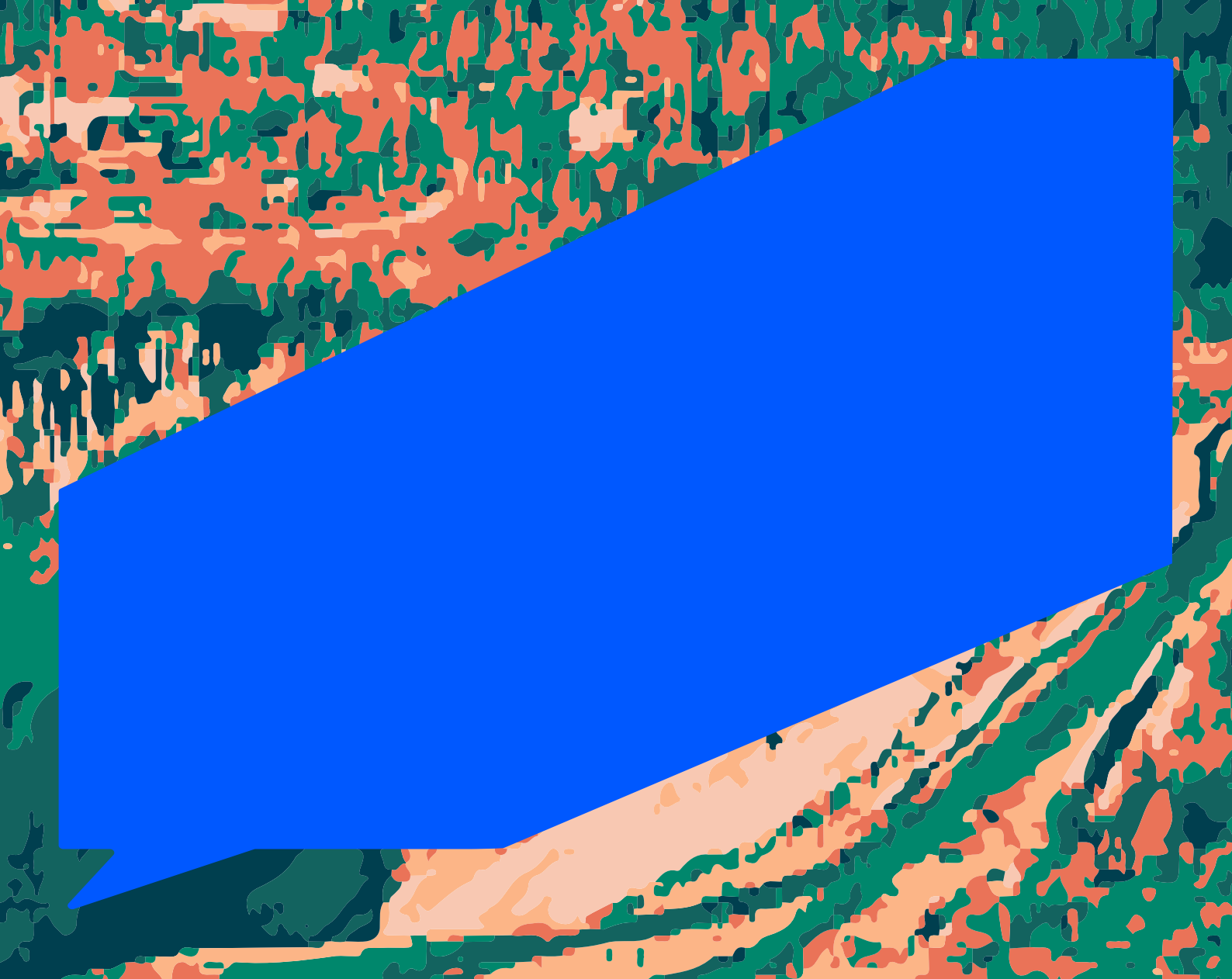
»Effectively, **DESIGN** practice is **RESTRICTIVE**, and its sub-disciplines are complicit in this condition of **RESTRICTION.**«

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THIS NEGATIVE ASSESSMENT OF DESIGN?

»The **HISTORICITY** of **DESIGN** not only discloses that practices claimed as **RESISTANCE**«

Indeed, it must be recognized that most designers are part of the problem. But there are a minority of concerned designers who wish the situation to be otherwise. These »progressives« seek an alternative while dominantly treating design as an independent entity that can be mobilized to solve problems and provide »solutions« within the spirit of humanism. Such voluntarist idealism fails, as is evident in its inability to grasp that design does not have indepen-dent agency. For example, sustainable design, reformist, and transition design all overlook the degree to which design is overdetermined – this by its history

and values as they are inculcated in an ecology of the image of the design, a habitus constituted by design education, professional practice, and the systemic placement of (the) design(ed) within the overall structure of an organization and the milieu of the market. Then there is the directive designing force of a client's brief and design's union with the magnetic power of desire as the essence of consumerism. The histori-city of design discloses that practices claimed as »resistance« are mainly feeds-tock for market innovation (the name of the negation of resistance) and the lifeblood of the »creative« industries.

IS A FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE OF DESIGN PRACTICE POSSIBLE?

Yes, but not from reform. Instead, it will emerge from a combination of contested circumstantial change, new directive political forces, a contestation over technology, and critiques that will unfold in different moments and then converge.

The combined impacts of climate change will take social, cultural, and economic life and design within them over the edge. This will happen as a drawn-out process over and beyond the next century. It will be experienced as systems failure and breakdown, unevenly and globally. The speed and scale of the analysis of, for example, agricultural systems, urban water supply,

emergency services, the construction industry, and the capability of humanitarian NGOs to deal with the displaced. A differential provision of preventative action and crisis response capability will determine the extent of impacts. By implication will redirect design action toward repair and adaptation to deal with what already exists. Innovation will veer away from the new and toward bricolage. New urban development will, by necessity, be replaced by retrofitting (social and material retrofitting taken to an urban scale), vast numbers of settlements (including many huge delta-cites) will require relocation, and utility will displace style (Fry, Remaking Cities, 2017). There will
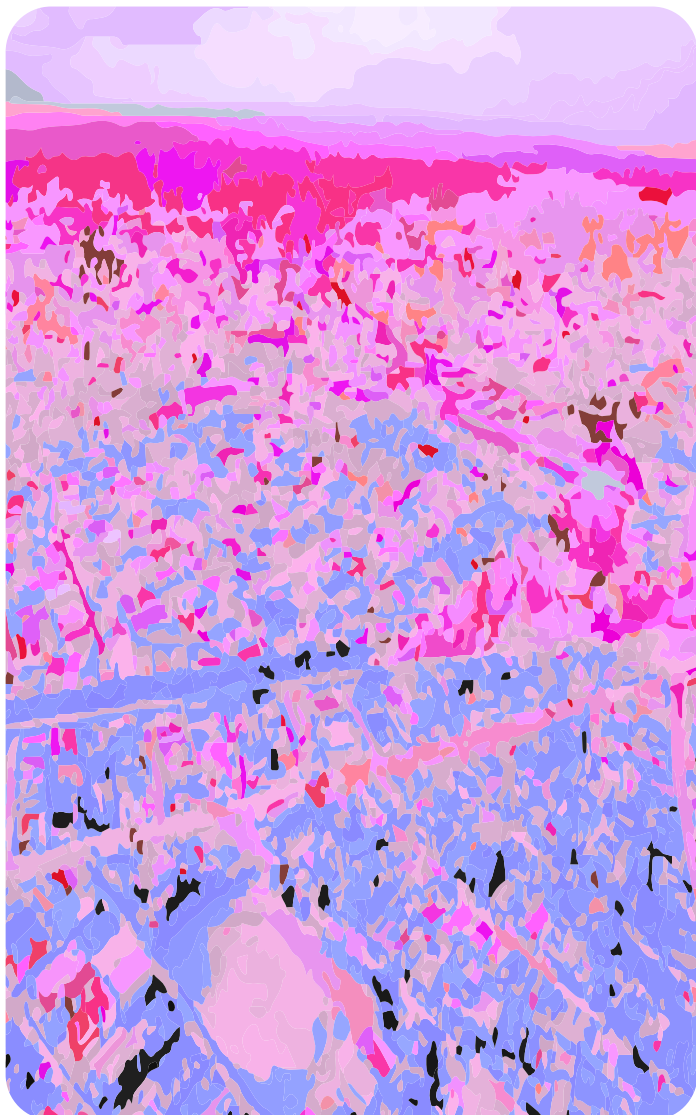
be an explosion of informal settlement – Lagos, Nigeria, is projected to have a population of eighty million by 2100, and most of it will be informal. At the same time, immaterial technologies will rage on, obviously, especially in the global north. Artificial Intelligence will be belatedly recognized as a significant agent of defeaturing, while its reach will continue to be extended. In large part, it will override existing design practice. Starkly, the ravaged worlds of the future of this planet will look and be very different from those of the present. Hundreds of millions of people will have been displaced, and conflict will be a primary condition everywhere; degraded environment will be commonplace, as will protected habitats for the privileged. Such views are not the product of a crystal ball but simply a reading of existing signs.

Even if only a fraction of what has been outlined is correct, it demands a different stance toward design than is current. To even partly recognize this emergent situation invites alienation from design as it is. Such a sense of absolute otherness from design begs to be seen as the wellspring of the possibility of design as futural. Equally, the development of practices of »material ethics« is pressing and invites development – this to trace and obstruct, where possible, the defeaturing consequences of the already designed and made and the designing of the to-be-made. Here is the sensibility of a collective project of enunciated criticality of design education and subordinated design practice. In this context, design education needs to become based on the understanding of design as a world directive (its compound impact), the creation of a
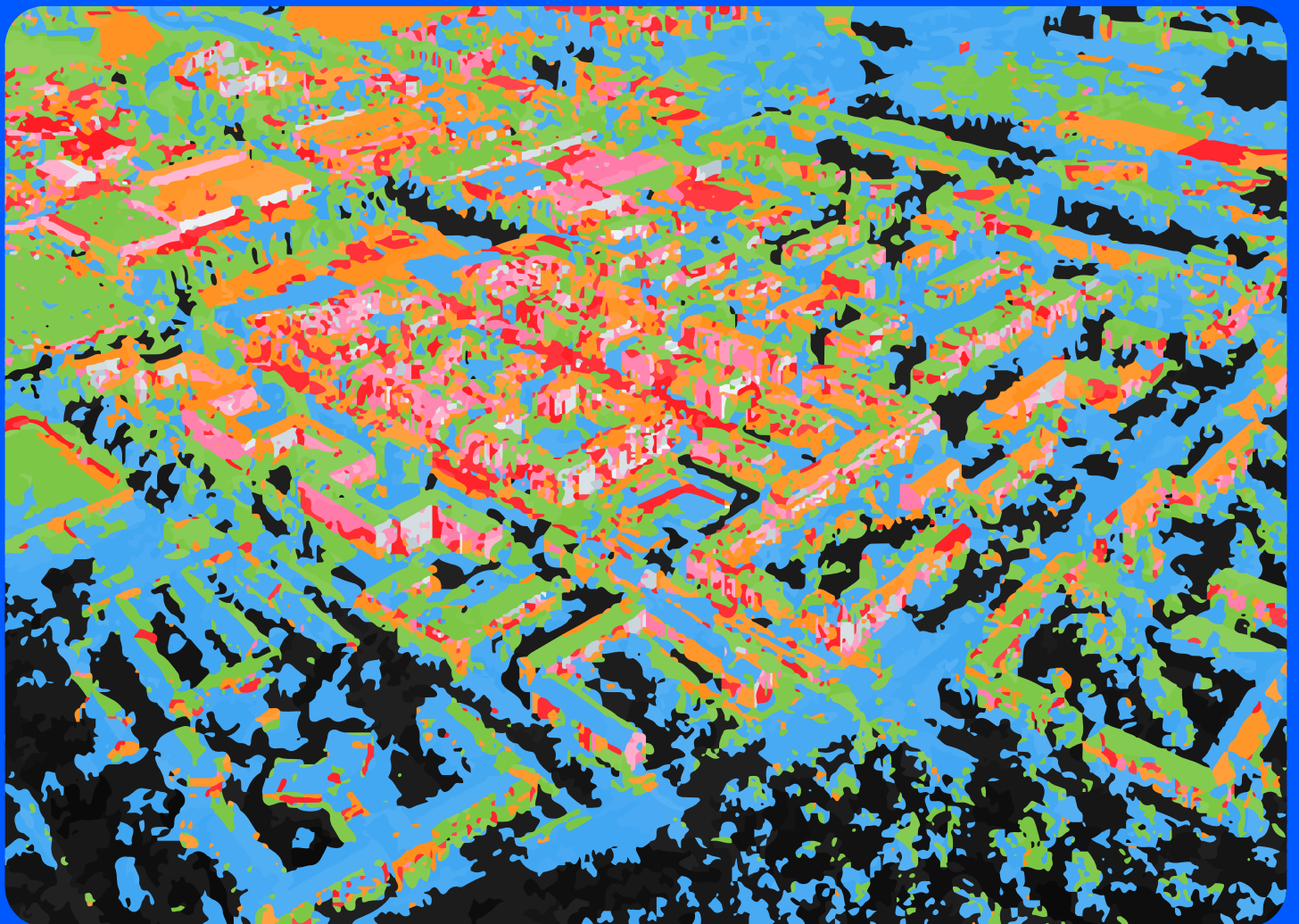
critical framework of design wherein creation/nurturing and destruction/ defeaturing are seen and understood as the essential ethically key evaluative figures of design. There can be no fundamental change in design education unless design educators recreate their understanding of design and their habitus. Doing this requires a catalytic project to be forged, which is most likely when environment-climatic breakdown and the »capture« of design practice by Artificial Intelligence are both seen as imminent. Repair arrives in this context as a contra practice to mainstream instrumentalized market-based design practice and as the ethos directing the remaking of design education. Restoration, so understood and placed in the company of futuring, implies distinguishing between what should and should not be repaired (thus destroyed). Gestural appeals to such action are of little value. The liberation of design from its current limitation condition and gaining recognition of its coming importance demand insight, foresight, and institutional leadership. It also requires recognizing how design is situated in time, that is, design in the medium of time and its transformation with a sense of urgency. To see design naturally in the coming crisis is to recognize the redundancy of current design education and practice and to feel and live such a sensibility.

REALISTICALLY, CAN SUCH THINKING, SUCH VIEWS, GO ANYWHERE?

The answer obviously depends on the reader's viewpoint and disposition. If it focuses on the horizon of »the now« and the immediate future, it will be a resounding NO! But if the reader has grasped a sense of the end traveling toward us all, there will be a moment of hesitation and deferment. Left aside, the moment will be forgotten, but events will resurrect it. Then, there will be those few readers who will want to say YES and who will want to find a way. For myself, I know such thinking has somewhere to go. The past and the present tell me so in numerous ways. For instance, looking at our species's distant past, our distribution around the planet was driven by a changing climate and a related search for food. Wherever regionally people stayed, the environment, what they ate, their conditions of life, modes of adaptation (including biological changes in the color of their skin

[3] See Tony Fry (2022), Writing Design Fiction: Relocating a City in Crisis, London: Bloomsbury. Australian National Climate Change Relocation Strategy Discussion Paper forthcoming August 2023.

and their size), as well as habits, rituals, methods of communication, and form of worldly dwelling all produced the evident differences with which are all familiar. What this past is as the climate changes, so in time will we be in our contrast. However, looking at the present naturally and staying with climate impacts, I learned a stark fact as a result of working with a group of architects, designers, and scientists from two universities and industry on the issue of the displacement and relocation settlement (large and small)[3]. It is that the global population is in the very early stage of being redistributed, perhaps matching the scale of its original distribution. Over the next several hundred years, some nations will cease to exist, and borders will be redrawn. Our differences will likely be more significant and dramatic than they are now.
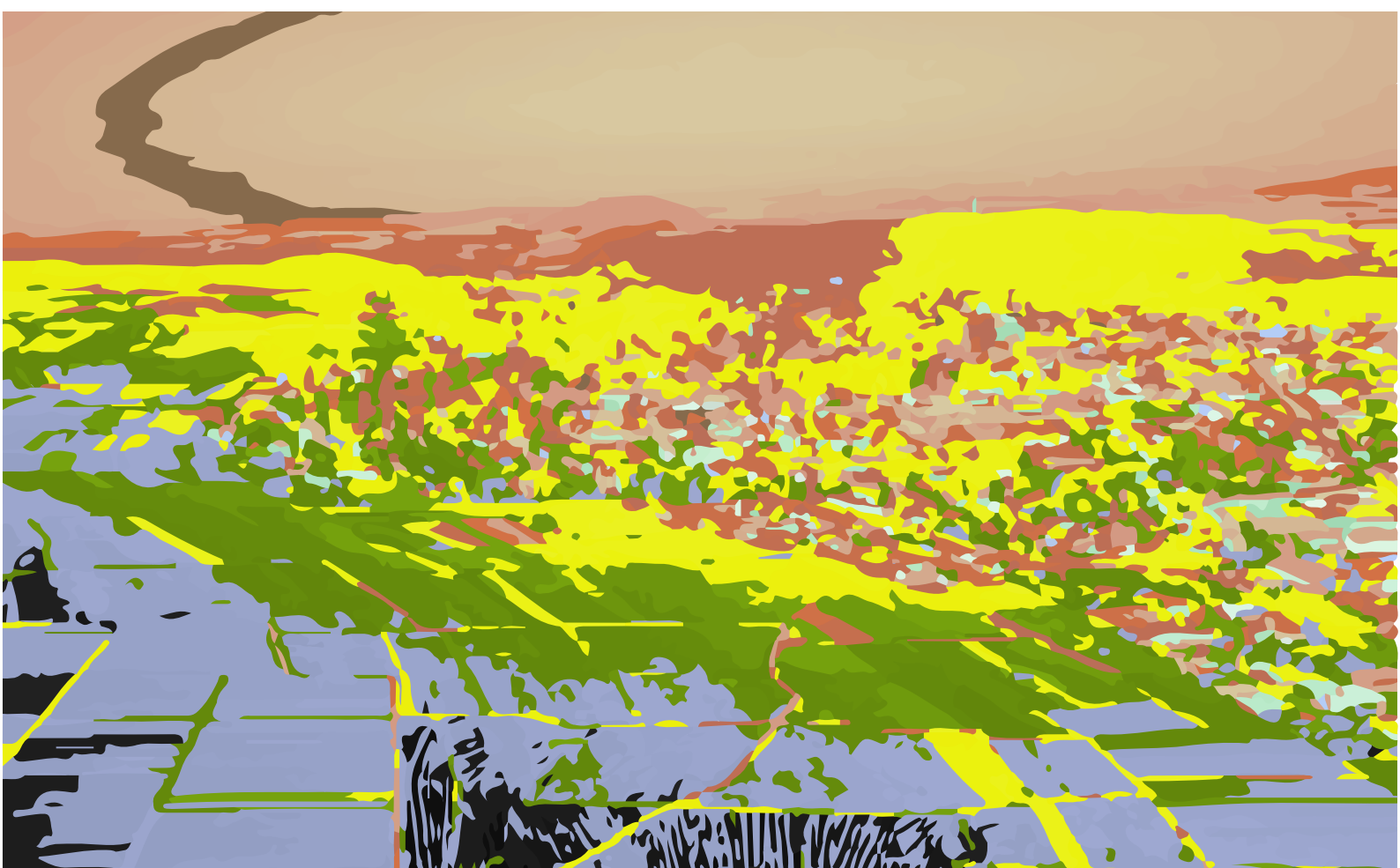
TONY FRY

THANK YOU FOR READING

Text

Tony Fry

Illustration

Maya Brinkmeyer

Layout

Tom Herzog,

Marius Gieske,

Paul Ring

Graphic

Tom Herzog

**Further information
on the rights to text and images
can be found in the imprint
of our website.**

TOPIC 01
SUSTAINABILITY

DIALOGUES
ABOUT
DESIGN