DESIGN AND EXCHANGE

In Lyotard's parable, this corresponds to the dinnertime conversation of the "happy few." They are at the lecture, certainly, perhaps even asking a form question, raising a predictable counterpoint. But the exchange that matters, where the cultural capital is really in play, is at the restaurant. As much as the restaurant is the setting for precisely this kind of exchange, it also stands for the broader setting where this exchange is possible. The intense, boffy conversations that cut to the root of fundamental problems and solve them by the end of dessert—this, I think, is a fair analogy for the concentration that is made possible by the proliferation of lectures, galleries, institutes and schools in London, New York, Amsterdam, Milan, Tokyo or New York and, of course, by the underground that cuts across the dominant strands of art and design culture at any given moment.

Physicists use the term "criticality" to describe the moment in which the disparate bits of matter that together constitute a critical mass combine to start a chain reaction. The way we use the term in art, design and architecture is little different. Neither are the conditions. The common thread among the practices profiled in this issue is a criticality that can only possibly occur in those centres that can act like the post-lecture dinner table of Mariel's time in Tokyo, placing themselves in the middle of the forces that shape taste and fashion. The critical fortunes of a practice can be made in a relatively limited number of places, as a site either of that practice or its reception.

Just as some cities serve as the table settings of the happy few, so do others aspire to join that constellation of venues in which culture is subject to definition and critique in the most far-reaching senses of both words. This is what American theory vocabulary has more recently called the "conversation." As at dinner, the more who join the conversation, the tougher and more diverse its content and criticism, the more demanding its call for nuance, the quicker its shifts in attention, and the greater the rewards and risks await those who take part.

The short stories and brief essays of Jean-François Lyotard's 1993 text 'Moralités postmoderne' (Postmodern Fables) register the philosopher's nostalgia for a more meaningful, pre-global age. The book opens with Marie, a writer on the international lecture circuit, who takes an evening stop in Tokyo where she is to give a public address. Lyotard has convinced her that her performance is little more than evidence of the international flow of cultural capital—the content of the lecture matters little. The public poses questions and offers foreseeable interventions. The event concludes with an enough-of-all-this signal to part adequately played. A "happy few" move on to a late dinner where Mariel's performance and the capital to which it gives expression are subjected to silent yet surgical appraisals. Then back to the hotel for a night's sleep, and on to Tokyo where another host, another lecture theatre, another dinner.

Lyotard tells us that this easy, ritualized mobility deserves our attention, our reflection. What does it mean to be somewhere in particular? Less than it once did, Lyotard surmises. One might play out an existential crisis against an array of urban backdrops, each tending (now even more than twenty years ago) towards a normalization of the means by which one can access contemporary culture. I am probably meant to find this depressing and confronting, but I don't. I spend enough time in transit, between one place and another, to draw some perverse pleasure from the systems that let us travel with relative ease. This is, however, more than a simple love affair with the Qantas lamb and rice, the over-chlorinated water in the rooftop pool at Changi Airport, or the gentle putting down in security, which I've come to accept as recompense for sporting a beard. When most of what we do can happen anywhere, then the act of travel itself becomes unimportant.

This is not to say that the devaluing of access to the destinations themselves has undermined the point of travelling; I'm often asked, what about the internet? Skype? Surely this takes away the need to head to the airport. Possibly it does, for some. But I crave the sustained and unexpected exchanges that are only possible by being somewhere and that demand that we fail to plan all of our interactions with fellow designers, architects, intellectuals and so on.