I/ Many years ago, toward the end of the 1980s, the architect Tony Fretton and I went on lots of walks, looking at ordinary buildings and interiors in London. When I say ordinary, they had appearances that could be described as fusing expediency, minimal composition and unconscious newness. The ‘unconscious’ modern architecture of the 1960s in the city were particularly interesting, as were places that were similarly, ‘unconsciously’ beautiful. We were the ones that were conscious of their raw, expressive beauty, and the basis of this beauty lay in the work of minimal and conceptual artists of that precious period between 1965 and 1975, particularly American artists, such as Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin and Dan Graham. It was Tony who introduced (or re-introduced) me to these artists: I had a strong memory of Minimal Art from visits to the National Gallery in Ottawa, and works of Donald Judd, Claes Oldenburg and Richard Artschwager as a child. There was an aspect of directness, physicality, artistry and individualized or collective consciousness about this work that made it very exciting to us. This is the kind of architecture we wanted to make; and in my case, this is how I wanted to see, make pictures and make environments. To these ends, we made trips to see a lot of art, and art spaces, and the contemporary art spaces in Germany and Switzerland in particular held a special significance for us. I have to say that very few architects in Britain were doing this at the time, or looking at things the way we looked at them. We also visited other architects who seemed to be sympathetic to this feeling. We met Roger Diener; we met Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, when their office only had seven people working in it.

Over time, this produced different things for the two of us: Tony designed the second, and iconic Lisson Gallery in Bell Street, and I made art: photographs, installations, films. I think we shared a broad aim: to make work which reflected the place in which it was made, and made one highly conscious of one’s body and one’s place in the world. The Lisson Gallery was bound to the street it was in: from the street, its galleries presented themselves as empty shelves that one could almost touch; from the interior, these same spaces were either viscerally connected to the street or spatially connected with a schoolyard opposite (a little gem of 1960s architecture by Leonard Menasseh). This work emerged from a practice that was already ten years in the making, with origins in Tony’s experiments in performance art, and small projects that attempted to extract the maximum of attention from very subtle adjustments of ‘ordinary’ materials and equipment. In my case, I tried to make work that was bound to the city in its imagery and its settings, work that would look at the city and state that it was continuous with it. For a time, this was articulated in architecture,
or more precisely, interiors and furniture; then it would be presented in sculptural installations, and ultimately in film, in texts and in photographs.

In parallel to this, things were happening in London and in its art world. There were beautiful shows, and some beautiful spaces, too. Victoria Miro’s gallery in Cork Street felt like the spaces Tony and I had seen in Köln and Basel before she asked Claudio Silvestrin to re-design it. This transformation turned out to be representative of some larger movement: Charles Saatchi had a huge space in Boundary Road, a bus maintenance depot, which was converted into an art factory by Max Gordon; John Pawson was making a Minimal Style, which Tony and I frowned upon. But it was too late for frowning: the aesthetic of Minimal and Conceptual art had been consumed and transformed into the ‘look’ of Minimalism and Conceptualism. And this had happened to the spaces for art and the art it contained. The warehouse shows organized by Damien Hirst (‘Freeze’, ‘Modern Medicine’ and ‘Gambler’) and those that followed, such as ‘East Country Yard Show’, curated by Henry Bond and Sarah Lucas, turned the warehouse into a kind of commodity—it provided the image of the archetypal art space—that would render Max Gordon’s Saatchi Gallery a safe and expensive simulacrum, and ultimately generate the idea that a decommissioned power station could become a Museum of Modern Art. The choice of the Bankside Power station by the Tate Gallery, and the ‘language’ that set about converting it (with little alteration) by Herzog + De Meuron, was the commodification of an idea that had, from Marfa (Donald Judd) to Schaffhausen (Urs Raussmüller), been authentic. The idea had become a movable aura.

II/ The aura gathers effects to it. In the case of the Tate Gallery at Bankside, the galleries, which are intended to suggest the occupation of an existing industrial space but are in fact displaced Herzog + De Meuron gallery ‘types’, are the auralic infrastructure—or the brand image—of something called ‘Tate Modern’. This brand is broadly about a culture surrounding contemporary art, or more precisely, a marketing buzz around an aura that can be consumed by all. This marketing device should not be confused with the noble task of making art available for all, making it part of the life and consciousness of each and every citizen, a conquest of the idea of ‘elites’; it is about generating crowds that will consume. There is nothing particularly new or sinister about such a strategy: the ‘consumption environment’ was germane to the department stores and ‘grands magasins’ of the nineteenth century in the United States, France and Germany, in which an ‘eventful’ atmosphere would be used to attract customers to spend substantial amounts of time enjoying themselves. Musical and theatrical events, combined with monumental spaces and spaces to
rest, in stores like Marshall Field, Au bon marché and KaWeBe, were designed to hold people’s imaginations (and wallets) captive. The department store was to be regarded not only as an emporium of goods, but a kind of popular palace that they would identify with and regard as a public resource: a place of entertainment and leisure as well as a place of consumption. The Crystal Palace of 1851 dazzled in this way, as a popular palace of goods; the arcades of Paris and the rest of Europe were essentially artificial streets of harmonized architecture and studio-style day-lighting that offered milieux for heightened attention to goods and fellow-citizens alike; Ebenezer Howard’s plans for an ideal Garden City (and Garden City network) imagined a circular Crystal Palace at the core of each ‘node’. In effect, such artificial environments built around the project of consumption were intended to be focal points of urban pleasure, whose counterparts would be the ‘opposite’ and ‘natural’ spaces of parks, which the city ‘preserved’ on behalf of its citizens.

In fact, these ‘escapist’ leisure environments have been considered as antidotes to the brutish nature of the city, or the vague terrains of its regions. In post-War America, shopping centres were developed as kinds of town centres, positioned in the midst of widely dispersed suburban populations, and served by newly installed motorway infrastructures. Victor Gruen was the pioneer of such spaces, which, originally open to the elements and resembling village squares, were developed to become enclosed environments. His Southdale Center, in Medina, Minnesota, was the first of these: its interior spaces offered imagery that mixed elements that would have been familiar to its users. So-called ‘village’ pieces, such as practical and fanciful street furniture were set in what could be called corporate spaces. Its central interior resembled a village that had been brought into a corporate lobby, and so somehow continuous with the total environment experienced each day by the suburban housewife, her children and her commuting husband, whether this experience was first-hand or derived from watching the carefully coordinated environments featured in television programmes and advertising. Its imagery was reassuring, and anathema to what the real city was perceived to be: chaotic, uncontrollable, and dangerous. It was hardly surprising, then, when the city centre itself would become the subject of the shopping centre or shopping mall treatment: Gruen’s plan for Fort Worth, Texas proposed that the entire downtown area was closed to traffic; car parking would be held around its edges; the streets would be furnished and ‘harmonised’ as though they were in a shopping mall. The mall ‘replaced’ the city and offered a preferable ‘reality’. Environments that embraced consumption allowed consumption to effect its transformations. As unreal as they might be, they would always be better than the real thing, and so they could continue to proliferate
separate from the cities and regions that hosted them: their gargantuan expressions, such as the Mall of America, by Jon Jerde, were realities or worlds unto themselves. Their proliferation and their usurpation of authentic urban fabric, such as might be described as Main Street, for example, has yielded an increasingly publicity-oriented public environment, from Las Vegas (not only the Strip, but Fremont Street, ‘mallified’ by Jon Jerde) to Shanghai (and Liverpool?). The comfort that people experience in these environments made by imagery for consumption has made them the ready currency for any public facility that depends on ‘consumption’ or its aura to survive. Public interiors associated with infrastructure, such as train stations and airports, have used shopping facilities to generate income that are not provided by central government funding, and have quite naturally assumed the forms, topology and tropes of shopping malls to make them work. Their obligation to process flows of people has been neatly integrated with its obligation to earn money. Efficient passenger movement has become allied with effective design strategies for getting people to pause and shop along the way (a science in the design of retail environments).

Perhaps it is only natural under such pressures, which brought entertainment palace imagery to the city, nature imagery to the city, city imagery to the suburbs, and suburban imagery to the city, that the space for art should become just another of the identifiable tropes for consumption, and through the suggestiveness of consumption, its promise of self-realisation, a site of leisure, and a source of ‘pleasure’.

One must ask if it is still possible, or worthwhile, or relevant, to seek authentic experience, beauty, sublimity. My argument, returning to the history I outlined earlier, is that consciousness is necessary; and that this consciousness should not be mistaken for the mastery of or acuity for negotiating signs or media. Rather, it is about finding a kind of personal freedom in the encounter with the World.

III/ Bluecoat and Liverpool One