There is a perception in the contemporary art world that seriousness is a state of ponderousness; that it is isolating, that it is not sharable, that it is to some extent stigmatizing, and is used as a device to set apart and to distinguish. In other words, it would seem that seriousness is the ultimate negation of collaboration and sharing. So how can it be social, be collaborative, be a force rather than a quality? To a degree this discussion of seriousness in the art world is an attempt at finding a non-individualistic, shared social ground through the modalities of attention and attending to seriousness—this in a world that seems defined by individual acts of creativity, invention, excelling, and branding rather than by notions of common ground, or through what Jean-Luc Nancy calls “being-in-common.”

A couple of years ago I thought of applying for the position of director of a cultural institution in London. Knowing how laborious these application processes are, and not wanting to waste time on an effort that was not going to go anywhere, I decided to set up a meeting in advance with a few people I know who either work there or sit on the institution’s board, and whom I knew shared my concerns for the future of the place. We met and I presented my ideas for the development of the institution, which I felt had been drifting rather aimlessly for a few years. They listened carefully, asked questions, we had a lively discussion about the issues, and at the end the chair of the board said to me, “These are really interesting initiatives; we are just not sure we actually want to hire someone quite as serious as you are.”

I was at a complete loss for words at this response, never having heard such a thing before. In the world I come from, seriousness has been perceived as an accolade; together with “interesting” it is the most
complimentary thing we can say about someone. So you can imagine my surprise that what I always saw as a positive attribute was seen as undesirable in another context.

Surprise and slight disappointment aside, that moment was the beginning of a train of thought that has since gripped me, mainly for its wider implications regarding the practice of thinking, and whether there are appropriate and inappropriate sites for such practices to take place, appropriate or inappropriate densities and intensities for its unfolding—and particularly for the opportunity that it provides for viewing this other context, the so-called art world, through a different prism. If seriousness was unwelcome in the art world, I was not so much interested in the why as in the by whom, the to what ends, and the being replaced by what. I would like to know if we can have a seriousness that is not constituted out of pomposity, earnestness, or “performances of expertise.” And if so, if we can have it without these tedious characteristics, then what would it be? And furthermore, can we locate different modes of seriousness that are specific to their milieu, location, practice?

There are a lot of annoying habits that seem to permeate the art world that, on the face of it, are linked to the refusal of seriousness as an attitude: the fact that people might turn up to conferences unprepared, not having done any work in advance, and simply chatter about their projects; the fact that some event programmers operate by peppering their programs with famous names despite very little understanding of the work that might have led to the fame in the first place; the fact that every important issue in the world can be reduced to a display trope in an exhibition. These are all annoying, but they have little to do with seriousness in the way in which I am struggling with it here. Whether such habits have to do with a behavioral code, or with an awareness of the fact that a broad and expanding field called “art” could not possibly have one solid mode of grounding itself in terms of intellectual protocols, is not necessarily the most important argument for this discussion. For if it were viewed as a set of behaviors or attitudes, seriousness would end
up as nothing more than descriptive. What I have in mind, in contrast, is seriousness as a rupture, and as a shared rupture at that.

Recently, someone on whom I was rehearsing my various dilemmas concerning seriousness reminded me that when he was told of John Lennon’s murder, Paul McCartney’s comment was “Oh, what a drag”—a statement, which, superficially, lacks the tragic gravitas such an occasion demands. But, in what way is “Oh, what a drag” inferior to “Oh, what a terrible tragedy” in terms of expressing the recognition of an event’s meaning? Here we have to acknowledge the performative nature of seriousness—its taking place through a series of gestures, stances, and poses that implicate the performer into the problematic. These gestures and stances produce the subject as “serious,” and produce the focus of their attention as “worthy of seriousness.” Consequently, I have also been wondering about the opposite of seriousness, which I think is triviality (or perhaps it is lightheartedness, I am not sure)—the ability to reduce something’s import, its momentousness, its gravitas, into another, more breezy modality. And this has allowed me to understand that what can masquerade as seriousness is often a convention of piety (i.e., strong, respectful belief and strict observance of religious principles in everyday life). The slorting of a death into a category of tragedy, and the production of a set of poses around that tragedy, belong to the realm of piety. Again, this is an attitude that polices the limits rather than being a force in its own right, so obviously it is not the path into seriousness as I would wish to see it at work within my immediate domains of engagement.

In this context, my pursuit of seriousness has been informed by the work of Gavin Butt. His inquiry is driven by the need to divest “attention” to something that is recognized as meaningful from the trappings of gravitas, decorum, and the protocols of what is proper conduct in front of a deserving object. To recall his words, “In general terms we probably all feel we know what it means to prize something by taking it seriously:

i.e. to value and give credence to it; to confer value upon it by suggesting that, for example, it is worthy of our time and attention, or that it requires from us a just and respectful attitude. In the context of the specialised endeavours of cultural criticism, this just and respectful attitude we might broadly label ‘Leavisite’ to signal the importance of close scrutiny, rigorous judgement and sustained reflection to now received understandings of critical seriousness in the English-speaking world.”

And he goes on to ask, “What if, instead, seriousness is as much about—or even more about—the perpetuation of certain forms of cultural relations, of certain attitudes and ways of being? Is being serious just a way, then, of reproducing seriousness itself?” Butt sees seriousness in a Foucauldian vein as a “normative technology of conduct”: “In considering seriousness as a Foucauldian technology of the self, we can highlight the routine ways in which it operates and makes subjects of us, principally through compelling us to act—and act seriously—in the face of those things that we take to be important.”

So to go beyond piety and back to McCartney and his response to Lennon’s murder: why on earth would we expect someone who had spent their entire life sending things up, debunking authorities and rewriting myths, exposing conventions and hypocrisy, inventing sly and poetic insinuations, as the Beatles did—why would we expect such a person to suddenly respond through a series of pious conventions? In actual fact, I think McCartney’s “Oh, what a drag” is a very serious response. It takes the event and incorporates it into the life and the work, it doesn’t miss a beat when he refuses the demand to be serious as a “normative technology of control”—are we not judged by how we respond to the most extreme events in our lives? Well, McCartney responded to this one by continuing the project that he had begun with Lennon, by living it out and living by its values. And nothing could be more serious than that.

Seriousness is utterly bound up with the attribution of value and with the allocation of power. As Allon White argued in an essay on lexicography
(the writing, editing, or compiling of dictionaries), on the production of the language of knowledge as “High Language,” and the relegation of low language outside the realms of the reproducible:

What in fact is happening in this distinction between two kinds of language is the creation of a hierarchy by the high language such that seriousness—what is to be taken seriously—is defined, literally, in its own words. These dictionaries encoded in their very form a decisive ideological manoeuvre: they installed, in the very heart of language, not only a distinction on the grounds of seriousness but the very principle of seriousness itself. Words and things in themselves are neither serious nor comic [the comic is always seen as “non standard” English], but the ability, the power, to legislate what shall be deemed serious, is a key to hegemonic control.

So if not pious, not earnest, not pompous, and not authoritative—what then could seriousness be and where might it be practiced? And is seriousness in the art world a doomed project? Could it be revived strategically as a tool by which to insist on some things without involving the reams of critical analysis that expose, unveil, blame, and reveal power relations, and ensure that we know in a socially responsible way what’s what? Most importantly, how can seriousness function as a rupture and as the vehicle for the intellectual intensity we discussed in our introductory conversation—as a shared entity rather than as an isolating pensiveness?

One of the most significant things to have happened over the past two decades is that the art world has devolved into numerous terrains and widely differentiated practices. From gigantic museums that operate as entertainment machines for middle-brow populism to independent public spaces that see themselves as responsive to their contexts; from conglomerates of art galleries selling at international art fairs to small corner-store spaces addressing untapped, local audiences; from self-organized groups that intervene within existing social and cultural forums to gatherings that mimic institutional structures in order to achieve their goals; from reading groups huddled over Xeroxes to the endless “think tanks” devoted to “the state of the arts in...” or to “the role of the museum in...” or “the new spirit of curating.” And all this is before we take into account the openings, the parties, the auctions, the fund-raisers, the lectures, and the self-constituted “committees on this and that.” All of this circulates under the aegis of “the art world” and it is homogenized by its proximity to art, or by a view that its final product is art, or circulates as art. A friend, Leire Vergara—who has been curator of Sala Rekalde, a small, publicly funded municipal space for contemporary art in Bilbao—told me that their space and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao were spoken of as the same by the city’s administration. A small, municipal space and a gigantic, private, multinational corporation were perceived to be the same, because what they were thought to produce, display, or focus attention on was “art.” And art is, again and again, brought into one single category whose ultimate expressions are visual excitement, displayable objects, or other “consumables.”

This means that any protocols of self-questioning, or that the dissolution of objects into processes, or critical readings of cultural and social spaces, institutional critique, attempts to project the “generative” instead of “the creative” or “the inventive” (which are always humanistic, always individual, always attached to the name of “the creator,” and served up to market forces), or a privileging of reading, or writing, or publishing, or disseminating, as circulating practices—all these get flattened by the category “art,” which cannot sustain or hold within itself these differentiations. It is barely worth reiterating in this context that it is the proximity of the institutions to the market—the internalization of market values and neoliberal values about “transferable knowledge,” “cultural entrepreneurship,” and “application”—that makes this the dominant reality of the art world. But it is also through the unacknowledged universality of those on the receiving end, the eternal hankering after some kind of
redeemptive qualities that are able to transcend given conditions after commenting on them critically, that produce our very situation. Every time some well-intentioned person starts to speak with me about “art” and its potential powers, I wonder to what extent they understand that they are partaking of the logics of the market, reproducing them, supplying the necessary affects on which such economies are dependent. My sense is that seriousness can be strategically deployed here as another modality by which to operate in relation to generative cultural practices, in relation to the desire to make cultural and psychic processes “manifest” in the world. The seriousness I mean here is an attitude, a stubbornness that refuses to acknowledge the rule of power while fully understanding its dominance. It is a mode of “criticality,” of being able to analyze a set of conditions while living out their realities—that is, an insistence on inhabiting complexity without necessarily articulating it discursively or spelling it out in a didactic manner. And, most importantly, it is a shared entity that does not have a declarative program.

Bruno Latour uses the term “atmospheres of democracy” to characterize a democracy not sustained by institutions and protocols but by the gathering of people around something. And of course he sees in this some way of renewing our understanding of how we govern and are governed, the potential for democracy’s renewal other than through its own bureaucratic confines—a recognition that democracy takes place in unexpected places that we need to learn how to read as such. And I, in this instance, might want to think about “atmospheres of seriousness” with reference to the stubborn refusal to be indoctrinated into the law of the market as the single principle of thought available to us, while recognizing that we are fully immersed in the logics of the market and that to be working is to be enfolded but unconvinced by its logics. Perhaps this quality of remaining unconvinced is one stratum of the sharing of seriousness—not instrumentalized as either protest or analysis, but rather as a state of being.

Within the logic of the market and its relation to institutions of art and culture, a discussion of seriousness is always brought into relationship with the imagined problem of accessibility—and always as its perceived opponent. For some time now I have struggled with trying to understand how we, in the art world, might be able to shift from a dictated imperative to provide accessibility to displayed culture, to another possibility, one of forging through it, some form of access to the culture at large. In contemporary Western culture we labor under the constant exhortation from funding and policy-making bodies and liberal politics to be “accessible.” By this I think they mean that we should be providing easy points of entry into culture for mass audiences. In part this has followed on from a democratizing impulse of inclusiveness, of trying to find ways in which “everyone,” regardless of origins or particularities, might have an entrance into culture. This has gone hand in hand with the politics of representation and the desire to bring into representation those who might have not seemed themselves adequately mirrored within mainstream or hegemonic culture. The assumption is that “inclusion” necessarily means this kind of process by which one sees oneself and one’s identity group reflected in culture and therefore taking up a rightful place within it. The tension between accessibility and access is that the first instrumentalizes the second, turning it into a simple system by which you can consume rather than experience. But perhaps, yet more importantly the endless demand for accessibility implies that there is something impossibly complicated here, something that needs mediation and explanation, so that the entire experience is framed by a stated determination to avoid complexity at all costs.

Accessibility also assumes that beyond the politics of representation we also have a commitment to translate that which goes on outside directly to those spaces of display directly into them—that we need to ensure, through these strategies of inclusion, translation, representation, and easy access, that our visitor numbers and visitor satisfaction measurements meet the required targets. At the heart of accessibility is the model of a client-based
relationship with consumers who know what they want and can evaluate their satisfaction from it. Within such a set of relations there is no room for the unexpected, the speculative, or the seductive. Most importantly, the possibility of shifting paradigms through and within the work as jointly experienced by makers, displayers, and viewers is entirely lost. We often encounter critical responses to this prevalent mode—responses that insist on artistic and curatorial freedom that is not stifled by the bureaucratic demands of satisfying target numbers and providing pleasing experiences.

I would counter these critical responses by saying that they represent (or are informed by) a nostalgic desire that persists through conventional oppositions between creativity and institutions in a classical modernist mode. While there is probably not much harm in such backward-looking approaches, they block any newly forged understanding that we are living out a complex entanglement of practices in which it is almost impossible to chart the boundaries between imagining, making, theorizing, questioning, displaying, being enthralled by, administrating, and translating. The field we currently call art consists of the intersections between all these, and it takes the form of a huge conversation. The insistence on accessibility does not allow for the inhabitation of this processual and ongoing conversation, opting instead for entry points that assume a fully completed entity that can be entered frontally.

Equally important is that the insistence on making things accessible through easy points of entry totally disregards the fact that the more difficult the conditions of people's lives, the greater their understanding of complexity. Hardship of any kind involves the constant adjustment of relations to the outside world in terms of existential conditions, consciousness and subjectivity, and relations to others. This in turn entails forms of coming to terms with complexity that are not externally defined by learnedness or achievement. And again, this understanding of complexity allows for a degree of sharing, for a common ground in the social that does not isolate or privatize.

What I am struggling to articulate here is a cultural practice that eschews the simplicity of accessibility to information, experience, or cultural capital, and replaces it with questions about access. What, you might ask, is the great distinction between these two words? Why hang an entire bid for a radical shift on the slight semantic difference between two related terms? I would say in response that there is an enormous difference, one that signals the limit of culture as a readily available culmination of information and stimuli, and its potential opening toward a rearticulation of the questions we know how to ask. In the university we know that the questions we ask are far more important than the answers we might provide, that the questions are our potential for changing the basis of our thought. The question is how to translate this notion of access to the site of the museum. How can criticality operate in the museum, turning it into a space of learning in the real sense rather than in one of information transfer, aesthetic satisfaction, or cultural edification? Equally, in dealing,
with existential complexity, issues of access are of fundamental import. They are the difference between putting up with, accepting, and trying to slightly improve a set of conditions on the one hand, and, on the other hand, locating oneself within the larger framework and allowing oneself to speculate on how it might be different.

If the museum or any similar space of contemporary art can become another mode for access—if we can ask our questions entirely differently from these spaces (because those questions force us to inhabit the spaces differently, to communicate them to an entirely different set of conversation partners and interlocutors)—would that change the nature of these spaces? As always, I know that this is the wrong question to ask without knowing what the right one might be. Perhaps it does not really matter if the museum changes or not, as long as we do—as long as we occupy the museum in the same way that we occupy spaces of learning as I have described them above: less programmatically and more as inhabitations that last for the duration of our presence. Perhaps we are after an ontological understanding, one that perceives our being-there as important, regardless of what we may be doing or not doing—our being-there as what Giorgio Agamben has called “whatever singularity.” And in this we have ample license to fail in our endeavors, unspecified as they might be.

You surely all know Leo Tolstoy’s famous saying that “all happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” My argument should, to a certain extent, be called a “search for the unhappy viewer.” It is neither melancholy nor pessimism that is sending me on this quest, for the unhappy viewer I am in search of is also, by definition, the impassioned viewer who is violently enraged, or disenchanted, or critically agitated. Many of today’s mainstream institutions of display, such as Tate Modern or various biennials around the world, seem to privilege an image of “grinning hordes” exiting the museum or congregating inside it: excited legions happy with their museum experience, happy with how it’s been served up to them as an accessible entertainment that nevertheless references both cultural capital and “critique lite.” Now obviously these institutions and their animated viewers are working against a previous pious trope of bourgeois culture. A culture in which educated audiences were lost in reflective contemplation in front of artworks that compelled their complete concentration and served to privatize them outside of any social realm. Against this common demand for, and celebration of, accessibility, I am struggling to pull together a notion of access as another modality of entry into culture, one that we construct for ourselves and in which we produce through a relation of active thought. And it seems to me that this is necessary because at its heart is the potential of actualization, one of the most slippery, but possibly rewarding, terms that Gilles Deleuze has introduced to the stage of thought. Deleuze’s term does not concern what is already there simply waiting to be excavated; rather it refers to the actualization of the potential immanent to any component of the culture.

But to somehow unravel this notion of access I need to mobilize a notion of what I have been calling “criticality,” as well as complex notions of “the social” and “the public.” And finally I will need to try and articulate how access is always an effect of “passion” in Michel Foucault’s sense of the term.

Now you might think that passion is an odd quality to invoke when one is talking about institutions of culture and the possibilities of display. I take my cue from a conversation I read between the French philosophers Claire Parnet and Deleuze, a conversation that was about Foucault, whose work and being Deleuze found endlessly inspiring and fruitful. Parnet asks, “Is there something dangerous in Foucault’s thought that also explains the passions that it continues to arouse?” “Dangerous, yes,” says Deleuze. “There’s a violence in Foucault. An intense violence; mastered, controlled, and turned into courage. He was trembling with violence at some demonstrations. He saw what was intolerable in things. [...] He was a man of passion, and he himself gave the word ‘passion’ a very precise sense. [...] Foucault always evokes the dust and murmur of battle, and he saw thought as a sort of war machine.”
Thinking, says Deleuze, is always experiencing, experimenting—not interpreting but experimenting. And what we experience, experiment with, is always actuality.

Foucault, in an earlier conversation, differentiates between love and passion, and identifies himself as a creature of passion. This has nothing to do with humanist characteristics of constancy or inconstancy, or with behavioral identities of homosexuality or heterosexuality. It is a distinction between two kinds of individuation: love is invested in persons, whereas passion takes the form of intensity. It is as though passion dissolved persons, not into something undifferentiated but into a field of various persisting and mutually interdependent intensities. "Passion," says Deleuze of what he learned from Foucault, calls forth "the instruments of our 'actuality.'"

Reading about the passionate intensity of thinking as made manifest in Foucault, I wonder about its place within the art world. I absolutely refuse the idea that the art world is not a place to practice thinking, and I also refuse the idea that thinking, or even "excessive thinking," is by definition oppressive to generative, imaginative modes of operating. Thinking is a practice that always addresses a problem or an issue, whose drive is to bring about the genesis of something better—not more valuable, or more logical, or more "right," but better in that it opens up into numerous possibilities through imaginings, or desirings, or wishful projections, or most importantly through the ability to shift paradigms, to suggest another set of assumptions, another driving logic. So in focusing on "the location of this thinking" as the problem, and not on its inherent properties, we can begin to discern that what is not being embraced, and what is often denigrated by the powers that dominate the art world, is the fact that thinking is an ethical practice. (It is important to differentiate here between the "moral" and the "ethical," between wishing to do or think "the right thing" and between opening it up as a set of questions. Morality is behavioral, and ethics is a philosophical mode of thought.)

Ethics, by definition, is the practice of a certain skepticism—which of course does not sit all that well with either the logics of the cultural markets or with those of cognitive capitalism, or with the hyped-up circulations of the latest fashion, or with the ferocious drive of branding. Within the mainstream, homogenized space of art—with its reliance on objects, brands, momentary heroes, fashionable terminology, or other commodified consumables—thinking, and seriousness as its affect, are perceived as problematic. These alien habits are imported from elsewhere: from the university or the madrassa or the reading group or the communal organization forum; they are the voice of what Jacques Lacan called "the insistent," which is the voice of heterogeneity.

Michel de Certeau's concept of "heterology,"—a term that has come to designate a philosophical countertradition deeply suspicious of the identity or unity of thought and being—seems very pertinent here. Philosophically it is in argument with Parmenidean principles (that anything rationally conceivable must exist, and that nonbeing is not a thing; it can neither be thought of nor spoken about in any meaningful or coherent way), and with the workings of Hegelian dialectics. More relevantly here, this is a body of thought that is of great importance for those of us concerned with the present state, and the future possibilities, of knowledge—and especially with the organization of knowledge. In his foreword to *Heterologies*, Wlad Godzich remarks that de Certeau's efforts have a decidedly atheoretical quality. This is "not because of any opposition to theory as such, but because the old construction of the opposition of theory and practice is part of the speculative edifice that de Certeau no longer finds hospitable or, perhaps more accurately, affordable. It exacts too high a price for the amenities that it provides.

De Certeau argues that knowledge is dependent on language and language is dependent on experience. Today we would argue that experience is the performance of a subjectivity. In the most beguiling of the essays in *Heterologies*, "The Laugh of Foucault," de Certeau quotes
a sentence from *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in which Foucault, being baited about his intellectual, scholarly identity, says, “No, no, I’m not where you are lying in wait for me, but over here, laughing at you.” He goes on: “What, do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think that I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing—with a rather shaky hand—a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself.”

Foucault’s “laughing at you” is a form of trumping “the existent” with “the insistent.” David Crownfield explains that “‘Real,’ for Lacan and [Julia] Kristeva, indicates the insistent, inescapable, heterogeneous; ‘reality’ ordinariy suggests that which conforms to a consensual discourse about what is real.” So, speaking theoretically, it is a problem of a world unable and unwilling to deal with heterogeneity while constantly indulging in representations of difference—exhibitions representing this or that group, projects of cultural “discovery” of parts of the world distant from oneself. Instead we might wish for a practice of heterology, and for its inherently shared social character.

In conclusion, I would say that perhaps seriousness in my sense of the word resonates with Lacan’s distinction between the existent and the insistent. Speaking of Lacan’s dislocation of the site from which truth is able to manifest itself, Gilbert Chaitin says: “Only slips, dreams, jokes and symptoms reveal the insistence of something that disturbs the total harmony of the totalitarian. Truth must emerge from the mistake because it does not actually exist, at least not before analysis. These disturbances can be confronted, however, only if the insistent can be made existent, if the latent signifiers can be made patent, if the subject’s questioning of her desire can be metaphorized.” So seriousness cannot be the digging for truth in the conventional sense of it waiting around to be found and declared; it is subject to this metamorphosis from the existent to the existent. And there is, or there must be, a performative dimension to this metamorphosis. It is a creative gesture; it brings something into being through transformation.

There is a passage on Foucault in the de Certeau quoted above that has resonated with me for a while. Talking of Foucault’s ability to invent the *loci* of new problematics, de Certeau says, “It is a question of ‘discontinuous practices,’ born of inventions that arise from chance encounters. The event that is elicited by the ‘wild profusion of beings,’ adds to each carefully constructed map another possibility.” The continuing resonance of this passage for me has to do with seeing in it the potential I have always recognized in the operations of art when it is serious—of adding another possibility to carefully constructed maps of knowledge.

Laughter, attention, invention, and vigilance are the animating qualities of the insistent, and they make a very good substitute for piety, gravity, earnestness, and truthfulness as the true hallmarks of seriousness as it might be practiced here, among us. So in conclusion it seems that now I need to think about the distinction between the “one-liner” work circulating in the art world, and the “over here, laughing at you” advocated by Foucault, which embeds his thought in numerous webs of social relations. It seems to me that this might be the perfect practice of seriousness for those of us situated in the arena of creative and intellectual practices.