

Ontopolitics of Equality and Xenoaesthetics of Abstraction

Gonzalo Vaíllo, Arqu. MSc. Dr., Innsbruck Universität

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between metaphysics, politics, and aesthetics in relation to *technē* within the context of equality. It presents two interconnected arguments. Firstly, it emphasises that equality is situated within the framework of ontopolitics, understood as the convergence of metaphysics and politics. This fusion is grounded in a shared systematic structure within the object's internal dynamics. Secondly, the article underlines the importance of the mode of human cognition and object presentation in implementing equality. It proposes the xenoaesthetics of abstraction as a regime of action for perception to effectively establish the ontopolitical framework of equality. By challenging prevailing notions of transcendence, the article advocates for a non-hierarchical interior of the object that embraces the mutual constitution of object and subject. It recognises the thing's capacity to reveal itself to us and be realised through us, emphasising the mobilisation of subjectivities as additional manifestations of the object. This perspective offers a complementary pathway to contemporary critical and activist discourses, promoting the advancement of equality through an ontopolitical focus on objects.

Keywords

technē, object-oriented ontology, aesthetics, metaphysics, politics, transcendence

1. Introduction

The concept of *technē* has traditionally been approached from a human-centred perspective, focusing on the skills and techniques used by us in conjunction with instruments and devices, namely, technology. Unlike the pre-modern era, when the term was associated with artisans and craftsmen who fused technical expertise and artistic creativity, the modern era has prioritised efficiency and control over aesthetics. In this way, scientists and engineers have gradually become the standard-bearers of *technē*, emphasising problem-solving knowledge. Critiques of this functional approach prompted alternative perspectives. Notably, Martin Heidegger's interpretation returned to its Greek origins, elaborating an idea of *technē* that extends beyond a mere collection of techniques for manipulating the material world but as a way of revealing it.¹ On another note, *technē* has also been examined for its role in informing social relations and cultural development.² On this front, feminist studies have extensively explored technology's contribution to shaping society, emphasising liberation and challenging power structures through more inclusive and collaborative uses of technological tools.³

This overview offers three preliminary scenarios of *technē* as procedures concerning utilitarian production, deep revelation, and socio-political emancipation. The first scenario aligns with modern pragmatism in so far as it seeks to fulfil prescribed standards and functional requirements. The second engages in ontological studies, acknowledging the gap between reality and appearance while revealing the depth of things in experience. The third scenario, especially on its current feminist neo-materialist front, employs alternative uses of technology to empower marginalised actors, allowing them to forge new connections and relationships free from culturally imposed norms.

In light of this, the third scenario's techno-scientific feminist approaches strive to challenge the directives of the first scenario. Critics argue that the technological positivism and functionalism of the first scenario disregard social and ecological concerns, prioritising economic objectives over

1 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. Wililam Lovitt (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977). For another notorious critique of the modern concept of technology in its utilitarian and effective orientation, see Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage Books, 1964).

2 See, for example, the milestone works: Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) and Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994).

3 For example, Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 149–81; and Laboria Cuboniks, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation*, eBook (London: Verso Books, 2018).

environmental well-being and favouring select elites who determine the worth and significance of goals pursued through technology. On a more specific note, techno-scientific feminism also critiques current realist ontologies inherited from the second scenario, particularly Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), for their indifference and neglect of urgent socio-political and ecological issues of our time.⁴

Techno-scientific feminist critiques have played a vital role in challenging the biases and power imbalances inherent in certain historical understandings of *technē*, advancing the promotion of equality by proposing alternative conceptualisations and practices of the term. However, it is important also to recognise that, despite their significant impact, these critiques have not completely abandoned the anthropocentric framework. Their methods often rely on moral and rational approaches to constructing and implementing new senses of justice, inclusion and equality that, while expanding human-centred perspectives, still operate within them. In view of this, one possibility to overcome these limitations and explore new avenues on the question of equality is to address the question of *technē* from the point of view of the objects themselves. How does shifting the focus of *technē* from an anthropocentric perspective to considering the autonomy and transformative potential of objects contribute to exploring political equality beyond the human realm? Within that, what is the role of the human subject in this schema, and how does this shift affect the human quest for equality? Furthermore, do ontological realist concepts really lack political scope as the feminist new-materialism claims? Is it really so that the *technē* of revelation of the second scenario, which underpins OOO's cognitive approach through aesthetics, have no chance of making any meaningful contribution towards achieving conditions of equality?

To address these questions, the article first hypothesises that the condition of equality lies in the overlapping of metaphysics and politics, here termed *ontopolitics*, within the framework of the object. Therein, it posits that *technē* refers to the thing's internal dynamics, which may include human and non-human participation depending on the object at stake. Secondly, the article identifies that the mode of human cognition and presentation of the object plays a crucial role in activating the condition of equality within this interdisciplinary fusion and introduces the notion of *xenoaesthetics of abstraction* for such purposes.

4 For example, Rosi Braidotti laments that “ontological realists,” in reference to Object-Oriented Ontology authors, “...ignore and dismiss feminism, post-colonialism, race and ecological thinking.” Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, eBook (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2019), chap. 2. A similar critique, albeit with a milder tone, can be found in Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 164. Or Marko Jobst and H el ene Frichot warn of the influence of this realist philosophy on architectural theory and its apparent lack of political scope, describing it as “a third wave of depoliticised phenomenological work [that] risks overcoming our field via object-oriented ontologies.” Marko Jobst and H el ene Frichot, *Architectural Affects After Deleuze and Guattari* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 1.

Certainly, exploring the connection between a metaphysics of objects and politics within the framework of equality and pluralism is not without challenges. The current scholarly emphasis on egalitarian and pluralist political models predominantly revolves around direct and tangible dispositions, mostly framed in the neo-materialist paradigm. These approaches rely on activism and criticism derived from meticulous analyses of specific sociological imbalances. While recognising the significance of these methods and their indispensable role, this article contends that alternative routes exist for advancing socio-political goals of equality. One of these ways is ontological realism, which is admittedly interpreted in a particular way here.

The article is structured into two main parts. The first part will explore the concept of *ontopolitics of equality*, focusing on how democratic and pluralist aspects are embedded within an ontological model that views objects as diverse and abundant manifestations unified by a singular being, i.e., as One/Many structures that span vertically and horizontally simultaneously.⁵ The connection between metaphysics and politics will be found in a *systematic structure* shared between the two fields. Defining such a structure will require re-evaluating the object's interior, for which four strategies will be proposed. In this context, by considering the inner heterogeneity and differences of the object, which we will capture through the prefix *xeno-* as “stranger” in Greek, the article will conceptualise the object's internal dynamics as simultaneous relationships of fellowship and disagreement. This oxymoronic or xenological schema will result in an ontopolitical pluralism characterised by exchange and agonism. Moreover, the general notion of *technē* will attend to the object's inner vertical movements along the One and horizontal movements along the multiple coordinates of the Many. In this regard, the article will identify that the *technē* of revelation of the second scenario is also one of revelation: it is not only that the object reveals *to* us, but it also realises *through* us. This point of view will result in a *technē* in which the object and the subject instrumentalise each other.

The second part of the article will focus on *xenoaesthetics* as a cognitive or relational regime operating within the object's internal movements. As a *technē* of revelation/realisation, this regime of perception and action will demonstrate a capacity to simultaneously address the thing's vertical and horizontal developments as a means to implement ontopolitical equality. To this end, *abstraction* will be claimed as a mode of presentation best suited to elicit the xenoaesthetic cognitive mode.

5 Although argued differently, my idea of “ontopolitics” as an overlap of metaphysics and politics resembles that of David Chandler, who instrumentalises the term to move beyond a human-centred politics. See, David Chandler, *Ontopolitics in the Anthropocene: An Introduction to Mapping, Sensing and Hacking* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018).

The conclusion will underline the reciprocal relationship between metaphysics and politics, highlighting the human anti-exceptionalist vocation of ontopolitics for the purpose of equality. It will also stress the emancipatory potential of the xenoaesthetics of abstraction as a regime of perception and action based on the mobilisation of subjectivities.

2. Ontopolitics of Equality

A politics of equality takes place in activating the object's multiplicity.

Justifying this statement that highlights the centrality of the object and its inherent diversity in the political requires defining a framework where the role of the object's ontological multiplicity coincides with the political concerning equality and pluralism. To detail this framework, we have first to open the pathway of the possibility of a general relationship between metaphysics and politics.

Carl Schmitt's theory of political theology is a notable example in this regard. His argument for connecting the two disciplines lies in identifying the analogy that modern political concepts have to theological ones, both in their historical development and "systematic structure."⁶ For instance, just as God holds ultimate authority in theology, the sovereign occupies a comparable position in politics. By highlighting this similar "systematic structure" between politics and theology (which extends to metaphysics), Schmitt suggests that understanding the metaphysical foundations of political concepts and practices—the "metaphysical kernel of all politics," as he terms it—is key to understanding the nature and dynamics of politics, even in ostensibly secular contexts. He writes: "The metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges of the world has the same structure as what the world immediately understands to be appropriate as a form of its political organization."⁷

It is from the general framework provided by Schmitt regarding the possibility of connecting a specific socio-political structure with its corresponding metaphysical worldview that an ontopolitical argument can be developed. In our case, the achievement of this connection relies on elaborating a "systemic structure" centred around the concept of *multiplicity* as the foundation of equality. To this end, the following question arises: how does multiplicity contribute to the realisation of equality in ontology and politics? The answer lies in recognising the concept of multiplicity as a means of embracing egalitarian pluralism without imposing homogeneity or erasing differences. By valuing diversity, multiplicity

6 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36.

7 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 46.

creates an egalitarian milieu in which manifold manifestations—and the individuals upholding them—coexist, engage and participate in the issues or objects at stake but also oppose each other, as each contributes differently.

Against this background, our proposed metaphysics for multiplicity embraces the One/Many concept from a discrete perspective.⁸ In its broad sense, this approach involves the relationship between a singular and unified existence developed vertically (the One) and the plurality of individual instances developed horizontally (the Many). Certainly, most traditional interpretations of this model adopt theological perspectives, emphasising the supremacy of the One over the Many by placing being beyond tangible apprehension. This view is thus immediately consistent with Schmitt's arguments connecting metaphysics and politics. However, upon closer examination, the issue of equality remains unresolved, and the nature of politics is diminished. These problems stem primarily from the hierarchical nature of any theological disposition, which contradicts any possible principle of equality. Rhetorically asked: if, as hypothesised, metaphysics and politics resemble the same "systematic structure," how is it possible to arrive at a condition of political equality based on an inherently hierarchical metaphysical proposition? Moreover, prevailing notions of transcendence—which underpin every theological proposition that attributes superiority to domains, entities, and realities beyond the material and sensuous realm—tend to neglect politics, perceiving it as symbolic or ontologically unreal because of its focus on tangible, pragmatic, and worldly aspects. Therefore, politics cannot attain a status of reality within the traditional metaphysics of transcendence.

To address these flaws, it is then necessary to seek a One/Many schema that refrains from relying on an ultimate and concealed authority to legitimise events that are seen as purely symbolic or referential on the "surface" of the world; otherwise, "that would make it an idealism," as Lars Spuybroek points out.⁹ In other words, to arrive at a multiplicity of equality while retaining the realist One/Many system, the hierarchical foundations of this model need to be overturned. Drawing on some of Spuybroek's concepts, we introduce the prefix *xeno-* (Greek for "stranger") as an instrument to capture the relation of familiarity and otherness both on the front of the vertical and horizontal development of the thing, as well as between the multiple manifestations of the latter axis. To elaborate on this perspective, we propose four strategies for rethinking the interior of the object in order to establish an ontopolitical framework of equality. First, we advocate an equal distribution of the real between the domains of being and manifestations. Second, we emphasise the equal importance of each manifestation by considering them as the object's fragments that are both real and referential. Third, we recognise that

8 For an alternative approach to the notion of multiplicity, see Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum, 2001).

9 Lars Spuybroek, *Grace and Gravity: Architectures of the Figure* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 242.

our experiences, actions and decisions are themselves object's expressions. Fourth, we conceptualise the relationships between manifestations, including our impressions, as one of fellowship and disagreement, two opposites resulting in a simultaneous politics of exchange and conflict.

2.1. The Internal Xeno-distribution of Reality

The first departure from theological perspectives involves establishing an ontology that is not holistic but discrete. Following Graham Harman's insights, the world is seen not as a singular One/Many structure, like Heidegger's Being/beings system, but populated by a myriad of discrete and autonomous One/Many entities.¹⁰ On this basis, we subscribe to one of the general lines of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), whereby, although not always explicitly formulated in these terms, entities are seen as a vastly finite and particular constellation of manifestations (the Many) unified by an immaterial and singular being (the One).¹¹ But unlike the authors that defend this view, we do not situate reality in an asymmetrical internal distribution between these two domains, as if reality only involves the vertical axis. Instead, we conceptualise the object as an indivisible conjunction where both the One and the Many intervene *equally* in its ontological definition. Such a distribution is the basis for building a metaphysical argument for a politics of equality.

For example, unlike Levi Bryant, our proposition does not attribute the object's reality solely to its "virtual proper being" (here called the One), thereby relegating its "local manifestations" (or Many) to mere instruments of inference.¹² As a result, Bryant's theory explicitly marginalises the political sphere as an epistemological concern devoid of any ontological significance for the object.¹³ Similarly, in contrast to Harman, our proposition does not endorse the notion of *essence* as a selective set of genuine or "real qualities" that dismiss the implications of "sensual qualities" in constituting the object's reality.¹⁴ Such an internal ontological hierarchy hampers any endeavour to connect metaphysics

10 The world as a myriad of discrete objects is one of the points of departure that Harman draws between his theory and that of Heidegger; see Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2002).

11 Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Alresford, UK: Zero Books, 2011), 86–87; Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 69; Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 12; and Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1–24.

12 Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 88.

13 Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 16–17.

14 See Harman, *The Quadruple Object*, 99–102.

and politics within a framework of equality. In other words, while these approaches ground equality through the concept of *flat ontology*, which recognises the same ontological status for each entity, the path to equality goes halfway as it operates exclusively from the object to its outside. There is equality *between* objects, but not *within* the object. In light of this, we applaud the (new)materialist view of recognising the entire horizontal development of the Many as real. But we disagree with their view that reality involves only the horizontal axis and, consequently, their rejection of the unifying One and its participation in the real.

In the face of these internal imbalances that prevent any complete ontological attempt at equality, we espouse not only through the concept of flat ontology a state of existence equal to everything in the world. In addition, we acknowledge the same importance of both the domain of the One and that of the Many in the construction of things' interior, situating reality in the multiple and irreducible connections between being and each of its manifestations. In this respect, the connections between the One and the Many are seen as *xenological* in character.¹⁵ This relationship entails a simultaneous condition of familiarity and otherness: despite being completely alien to each other, these domains are united by the same object, coming together to construct the thing's internal bonds.

In this context, the object's reality appears in the *whole* object—rather than some selected corner of its being or some essential features—with the One and the Many as domains of the same importance in its ontological constitution. We can illustrate this xenological perspective through Joseph Kosuth's renowned installation *One and Three Chairs* (1965), which consists of a physical chair, a photograph of it and a textual description of the word "chair."¹⁶ Reading it from a realist ontological perspective rather than from the American conceptualist artist's semantic and linguistic motivations, we reject the idea that the Chair as an object equates with the One and the three chairs are some of its floating and referential expressions without any constitutive role, as well as its opposite where the chairs lack a common ontological unifying framework in a One. In contrast to these positions, redistributing the object's reality equally in its interior implies that the Chair finds its self-ness in two opposing poles entitled to coordination: that of the singular being and that of the multiple expressions. In this view, the three chairs are three exposed coordinates of the largest Many of the Chair, with the One serving as the unifying element—rather than the Chair-in-itself—of such a Chair's multiplicity.

15 For an alternative and complementary treatment of the notion of *xenos*, see Jordi Vivaldi, "Xenological Subjectivity: Rosi Braidotti and Object-Oriented Ontology," *Open Philosophy* 4 (2021): 311–34, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2020-0187>.

16 Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965, <https://shorturl.at/tyST3>.

2.2. Fragmentation and Flatness

Nevertheless, ensuring an even allocation of reality within the object involves recognising not only the equal importance of the One and Many domains on a general level. It also requires extending some of the object's conditions to its specific being/manifestation connections—in this case, that of inseparability, equality and reality. In doing so, the object becomes the sum of disparate *fragments* with equal standing, in which each one is both real and referential for the same reason: because of being a portion of the object as a whole.¹⁷ Let us argue why.

Applying the inseparability of the One and Many domains to the particular connections entails that no manifestation exists without a corresponding being, and vice versa. There are neither orphan images nor isolated beings. In this view, and regardless of the subject's awareness, each of Kosuth's three chairs is argued to be inextricably linked to its immaterial One, a condition extensible to the rest of the Chair's abundance. At the same time, we agree with realist and transcendent theories that the Chair cannot fully manifest itself in the world via any of its embodiments. However, unlike most of them, this incompleteness does not imply a retreat of the Chair into a shadowy core, leaving referential expressions devoid of any sense of genuine reality. Such an approach would reintroduce the theological stance of unequal reality distribution within the object. Instead of condensing the thing's reality leading again to a hierarchical transcendence, we arrive at a non-theological or flat transcendence by extending it equally vertically and horizontally (i.e., xenologically) within the object. In this scenario, the Chair transcends not because of its concealed but *excessive presence*: it surpasses its capacity to manifest all its profiles simultaneously. The thing is "a presence beyond the present," as Spuybroek describes.¹⁸ In this schema, the thing's reserve that is not present, yet is real, constitutes its horizon of the possible.¹⁹

This excessive presence of the object in each appearance—always accompanied by its being—makes the fragment both real and referential. Like cake slices, Kosuth's three chairs are real insofar as the Chair's

17 In this sense, the notion of emergence does not apply to the object's reality, where its totality is the sum of its fragments. Instead, it applies to the formalisation of its instances, where, for example, the physical chair emerges from the various wooden pieces and their assembly process, standing as a fragment of the Chair.

18 Lars Spuybroek, "Charis and Radiance: The Ontological Dimensions of Beauty," in *Giving and Taking: Antidotes to a Culture of Greed*, ed. J. Brouwer S. Van Tuinen (Rotterdam: V2_Publishing, 2014), 136, [emphasis removed].

19 Here, I follow Spuybroek in acknowledging that this reserve beyond the present is not virtual à la Deleuze in a relation between inexistence and existence. On the contrary, the reserve already exists in what he called the "superactual," in which the possible or the potential is the relation between existence in the not-present and coexistence in the present. Spuybroek, "Charis and Radiance," 136–37.

presence is fragmentarily in each of them. Simultaneously, they are referential insofar as the Chair's totality exceeds each of them precisely because they are fragments. In other words, the manifestation—together with its inseparable being—is not only phenomenal and symbolic, but also ontological, whether we are or not conscious of it. Put provocatively, all the object's manifestations are "real qualities," relocating Harman's essentialist terminology into our anti-essentialist proposition. But this ontological gain of phenomena in no way invalidates the condition of being transcended, that is, referential to that which transcends it. As we shall see in a moment, what transcends the fragment is precisely the One and the Many that house it. In this way, we arrive at an internal system of simultaneous passages or turnings of transcendence and referentiality between ontologically real fragments.

It is precisely in these passages that we situate the notion of *technē*. These turnings are mechanisms that gear the internal movements of the object. It is important to note that these dynamics do not need human mediation to function, so the scope of *technē* broadens from subject to object, including non-human connections. Like any other coordinate, humans only intervene in those transitions in which the object requests them as instruments. Moreover, these internal dynamics of transcendence operate at the same time vertically and horizontally due to the One/Many structure. In the vertical, each fragment is equally transcended by the object towards its wholeness. The Chair's totality exceeds each of its chairs in the same way. In turn, this means that each fragment equally represents the object as a totality. Some might see a return to a hierarchical ontology between the whole and the parts. However, the proposed verticality remains flat in that both poles of the part-whole relation have the same real ontological status concerning the object, with the difference that the object is itself completely in the whole and is itself fragmentary in each part.

In the horizontal, insofar as the object is seen as a collective of fragments, each fragment is also transcended by all the other fragments within the object. In turn, each fragment represents and embodies all the others.²⁰ Extensible to the rest of the Many, we observe that each Kosuth's chair stretches threads towards the others forming two-way channels. In one direction of the channel between coordinates, each one (let us say the physical chair) acts as a *gateway* or portal: it has the capacity to trigger all the others, giving transcendence a productive dimension. Each fragment is then part of a pushing or turning mechanism, a *technē* that requires the participation of other instruments (a person, a camera, a typewriter, etc., as the case may be) coordinated in design ecologies to jump between the object's manifestations. In the other direction of the channel between two fragments, the physical chair is "thickened" in that it embodies all the other chairs. It pulls its neighbours towards itself in

20 Somewhere else, I refer to this internal condition of the object as "flat representativity." Gonzalo Vaíllo, "Superficiality and Representation: Adding Aesthetics to 'Knowledge without Truth,'" *Open Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (2021): 48, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2020-0150>.

an act of representation. Accommodating Spuybroek's terminology to this bidirectionality between fragments, each one emits or "radiates" towards the others but also receives the others, shaping itself as a "thickened appearance."²¹ When all these interconnections are considered, we can identify an inner *matrix of exchanges* between fragments based on production and representation (or triggering-embodiment) dynamics.

2.3. Experiences as Fragments

By object's manifestations, we should not exclude the subject's impressions. When "we understand [our] impression to be the *expression* of the object," as Heinrich Wölfflin puts it, experiences—in their broadest cognitive sense, encompassing reflective, sensory, and bodily actions—are part of the object's abundance, thus fragments of it.²² From this standpoint, how somebody sits in Kosuth's physical chair, understands the textual chair or engages in any other form of experience as impressions, feelings, thoughts, judgments, and performances with the Chair are not exclusively personal. Like the three chairs and the rest of their Many, this activity of the human subject also pertains to the Chair as an object, a view already held by some OOO authors.²³ Such inclusion makes all that was said about manifestations in the previous point equally applicable to experiences. This means that experiences as fragments are, together with the instruments that endow them, also turning mechanisms or passages. Thus, our experiences, actions, thoughts, and cognitions are *technē* in themselves, fostering movements from one coordinate to another within the object, while being additional coordinates themselves.

This perspective allows us to situate phenomenology within the framework of realist metaphysics. That is, phenomenological experience is not solely a mechanism employed by the subject to unveil the thing. These experiences are also real fragments that participate in defining the thing's reality. In doing so, we also become a mechanism through which the thing realises itself fragmentarily in the world. This means that cognitive processes occur within the object, being an instrument, a technology, of it. Spuybroek terms this condition *phenotechnology*, where "things do not [only] appear phenomenologically for us, they [also] appear phenotechnically for themselves."²⁴

21 Spuybroek, "Charis and Radiance," 136.

22 Heinrich Wölfflin, "Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture," in *Empathy, Form, and Space*, ed. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikononou (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994), 150.

23 Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, 69; and Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 82.

24 Spuybroek, *Grace and Gravity*, x, [emphasis removed].

2.4. The Xenological Character of Fellowship and Disagreement Among the Fragments

The undeniable connection between politics and experience, coupled with the integration of experiences within the object manifestations discussed above, leads to the *merging* of metaphysics and politics under the same systematic structure.²⁵ This intradisciplinary relationship goes beyond being a mere “analogy,” as Schmitt suggests, highlighting the vital and not merely referential interaction between the two fields.²⁶ In our case, the concept of multiplicity captures the equality condition within this ontopolitical systematic structure, where experiences have been argued as both real and referential fragments with the same ontological relevance to the object’s reality and have been inscribed in a non-hierarchical, hence flat, matrix of representation and production.

Further elaborating on the object’s ontopolitical character, the dynamics between its fragments can be understood as simultaneous relationships of *fellowship* and *disagreement*. To demonstrate this dichotomy, we reintroduce the concept of *xenos* to cast the tension between familiarity and otherness, this time not between the vertical and horizontal axes but between the object’s multiple coordinates. In other words, the idea of the Many as strangers living together highlights the coexistence and interplay of heterogeneous positions inside the object, resulting in an ontopolitics of equality characterised by exchange and conflict.

On the one hand, fellowship characterises the vertical unity and commonality shared by each manifestation towards the same One, as well as their equal fragmentary involvement in the constitution and exercise of the object’s wholeness. Horizontally, fellowship sets the “thickened” condition of the fragments, which, as noted, embody and trigger each other within the object’s internal matrix of exchange. From our human perspective, if each of my experiences encompasses all possible expressions of the Chair, just like any of Kosuth’s three chairs does, it implies that other people’s impressions about something are also within mine. This “ability to truly *see* topics from various sides—that is, politically,” Hannah Arendt writes, “results in people understanding how to assume the many possible perspectives provided by the real world.”²⁷ In our case, this politics of gaining consciousness of the others’ positions becomes effective ontophenomenologically in gaining consciousness of the thickness of the object’s manifestations (starting with noticing the thickness of my own experience), which means

25 As almost all philosophical schools have explored, experience and politics are interdependent, as our individual and collective experiences shape our political beliefs and actions, while politics, in turn, influences and shapes our experiences through the policies and decisions it implements.

26 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

27 Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 167, [grammar adapted].

gaining consciousness of the thing's amplitude and existence, i.e., of its xenological being/multiplicity or One/Many structure as a whole. Here is where the opening statement of this section that "a politics of equality takes place in the activation of the object's multiplicity" finds its full meaning.

On the other hand, while fellowship among manifestations is found in the commonality of these vertical and horizontal endeavours, there is also a state of disagreement in the way each fragment carries them out. Vertically, the physical, the photographed, and the verbal chairs—and along them, the entire Many, including our impressions and actions—offer different, even contradictory, standings of the Chair. Stripped of their assumed semantic interplay, these expressions are certainly strangers to each other, to the point that each fragment can be seen as a "hegemony" towards the thing's totality. Introducing Chantal Mouffe's notion of agonistics into this framework, the conflicting aspects of the object's vertical dynamics are marked by the irreconcilable "hegemonic struggles" in how each fragment exerts its equal excessive presence differently.²⁸ Attached to that is the establishment of particular horizontal orders or masks by which each chair determines its own routes and processes particularised to every subject to reach the other manifestations. In other words, relocating Jacques Rancière's famous ideas on "disagreement" and the "redistribution of the sensible" within the object, the conflict in the horizontal development lies in the different *experientable gradients* that a fragment's mask of exchange offers.²⁹ Although each chair is "thickened" in the sense that it "radiates" or spans routes to all of its colleagues, each of these routes may be more direct, convoluted, or even blocked depending on both the manifestation's and the subject's characteristics to transit them together—a transit or turning which, as a reminder, has been argued to be a *technē* of both revelation for the subject and realisation for the object. For example, it is evident that for a human subject as an activator instrument of turnings, the passage from the physical to the textual chair differs from the one leading to the photographed chair. Each passage requires different conditions for its execution. If particularised to the extreme, this means that each fragment, together with each subject, establishes unique pathways towards particularised horizons of the possible within the same object, a possible or reserve that we already know from Spuybroek to be an exceeding reality that is always there. In short, the conflicting character between fragments rests in their distinct postures to facilitate or hinder representational and triggering functions for each different subject.

28 Chantal Mouffe advocates for embracing conflict in politics and proposes a pluralistic view of hegemony as temporary power relations. See Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London and New York: Verso, 2013).

29 Rancière argues that disagreement plays a crucial role in politics, as it disrupts the established order and creates spaces for political transformation. These disruptions are political in that they reconfigure what is considered visible, thinkable and possible in society. See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); and Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004).

3. The Xenoaesthetics of Abstraction

Within this framework, inequality stems from the fixation and normalisation of certain experiential routes or masks as the only possible and true ones of the object, with the consequent empowerment of those who authorise such fixations. In turn, this reduction neglects all other pathways and turnings, hampering—or more directly, nullifying—both the subject’s navigation and revelation capacity and the object’s realisation possibilities. From a socio-political point of view, predefined routes ground inequality in forcing a subject to assume others’ modes of experience. As a result, the subject is oppressed in that their bodily and mental ability to perform the object’s existence and abundance in their own way is suppressed. When so, the subject’s possibility of awareness of the object’s existence and amplitude, i.e., of seeing it politically in its One/Many dimension, vanishes. Whether imposed or consensual, these fixed masks turn cognition into *recognition*. In this context, the *technē* of revelatory exploration becomes institutionalised and canonised in a reduced set of automatisms that systematically use the same coordinates to arrive at the same coordinates. From an ontological point of view, the reductions of experienceable trajectories lead to inequality by preventing the realisation of the object’s richness and diversity. Such an approach is often accompanied by the annulment of the sense and awareness of the object’s autonomous existence in the subject, who unfortunately confuses the thing as their unilateral, anthropocentric construction.

To counteract these scenarios, it is worth asking how the ontopolitical framework of equality discussed above can be made effectively present. We noted earlier that, from a human perspective, the implementation of this framework hinges on the subject’s awareness and activation of the thing’s singular existence and its multiple coordinates. We have also seen that there are multiple ways to achieve this, so many as different subjects involved in the object to exploit the maximum of what the object’s amplitude offers. Moreover, these ways have been characterised by a condition of fellowship as they occur inside and about the same object and by a condition of disagreement insofar as they occur in each case differently. Thus, is there a cognitive or relational mode capable of this? Additionally, is it possible to identify characteristics of manifestations that are more effectively conducive to such a regime of action, thereby enacting the development of the subject’s capacities of revelation as well as those of realisation of the object? Our proposition in this regard is the *xenoaesthetics of abstraction*. Before giving a joint definition, let us look at their terms separately.

3.1. Aesthetics

In this context, aesthetics extends beyond stylistic and calligraphic analyses of appearances, encompassing the object's internal relational dynamics. These dynamics, described above as the "mechanisms [or *technē*] that gear the internal movements of the object," involve fragments of disparate nature. Consequently, aesthetics applies not only to the human realm and the arts but more ambitiously to the sphere of life. We thus side with those positions for which aesthetics permeates non-human interactions and our everyday experiences, underlining the broader scope and ontological importance of aesthetics.³⁰ Within this framework, one may question the implications of this account of aesthetics for the human subject.

It is argued that aesthetics establishes a cognitive mode or regime of action to engage with the object's being and abundance. It is a *technē* of the object's vertical and horizontal movements. As fragments, we actively participate in and from the object by encountering its exposed phenomena. These encounters become aesthetic when they go beyond the tangible and presentational characteristics of phenomena. In other words, the exposed manifestations that serve as the basis of our cognition evidence their radiant and thickened condition when acting as gateways or triggers for our navigation through the object's interior. Aesthetic relationships are thus not passive observations but active mechanisms that require emotional, intellectual, sensory, and bodily mobilisation. Our affective sensibilities and capacities enact personal explorations of the object and, in the process, also of our own subjectivity, as we have conceptualised our personal experiences not only as ours but also as other coordinates or manifestations of the object (Section 2.3).

3.2. Xenoaesthetics

In this context, the turn from aesthetics to xenoaesthetics resides in recognising, first, the capacity of aesthetic experience to embrace the xenological One/Many condition of the object (Section 2.1) in the same cognitive act, and within this, secondly, the familiarity and otherness of the forms and executions

30 Among the authors mentioned in this article, Spuybroek, Morton, or Harman acknowledge in some way or another the aesthetic relationality beyond the human, no less than its presence in ordinary human experience. Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Lars Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design*, 2nd edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 214; and Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Penguin UK, 2017), chap. 2. For an extensive treatment of the aesthetics of the ordinary, see Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007).

of each of these aesthetic cognitions—and by extension of the subjects who carry them out (Section 2.4). In other words, xenoaesthetics is claimed as the relational mode that operates simultaneously in the verticality and horizontality of the object for each experience of and with the object differently. In this conception, formalist aesthetic theories that pursue aesthetic judgement as an end in itself situated in the One (e.g., Kant, Fiedler, Greenberg, Fried, or Harman) meet those with a vocation for openness found in the Many (e.g., Eco, Calvino, or Rancière) for the same aesthetic act.

The general aesthetic approach of the first group pivots on feeling the thing's singular existence and reality beyond its appearance and material effects. This experience is typically discussed as immaterial in that it escapes any accurate qualitative formulation, which matches our case because the One has been defined as singular and non-articulated. However, it is important to recall that, unlike these formalist theorists, our concept of being does not refer to the thing-in-itself-as concentrating the object's reality at some point(s). On the contrary, we have referred to being as an internal unifying element. Thus, as I think Kosuth's installation explicitly points out, the verticality of aesthetics is characterised by the sensation of the *unity* of the thing rather than of the thing as such. In this context, the vertical aesthetic axis is claimed to be xenological and, with it, ontopolitical: while the result of the unitary sensation is common to all aesthetic experiences of and within an entity, the trajectories and subjectivities that invoke it are disparate, or more precisely, agonistic, as described above.

This celebration of a myriad of subjectivities under a single unity, which can be found in Harman's aesthetic theory, is opposed to the aesthetic formalism of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³¹ Against these traditional stances, the xenological character surrounding the One is, for example, particularly evident in Franz West's installation *Passtücke* (or *Adaptives*), where, also in line with our expanded scope of aesthetics, the artist considered the plaster and metal pieces not only as works of art but, more generally, as everyday objects.³² It is argued that by inviting users to interact intuitively with them without prescribing correct forms of manipulation, the pieces elicit aesthetic experiences performed in contrasting ways that nonetheless immaterially reveal a common being.

31 The dissolution of subjectivity is especially present in the formalist aesthetic theories of Fiedler, Greenberg or Fried. These authors homogenise or universalise the subject by neglecting the diversity of subjective-aesthetic possibilities for arriving at the same unitary sensation of an object's being. See their positions in Conrad Fiedler, *On Judging Works of Visual Art*, trans. Henry Schaefer-Simmern and Fulmer Mood, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1957); Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988); and Clement Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000). For a formalist aesthetic approach in which subjectivity as theatricality is celebrated, see Graham Harman, *Art and Objects* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020).

32 Franz West, *Passtücke Mit Box Und Video*, 1996, <https://shorturl.at/uFMV9>.

Consequently, the paths leading to the sensation of the One of the Adaptives are as varied as the individuals engaging with them, highlighting the shared yet diverse, i.e., xenological, vertical nature of these experiences.

On the other hand, the second group of authors adopts a general aesthetic approach that also incorporates the diversity of experiences. However, in this case, their emphasis is on horizontal development, wherein the abundance of the Many assumes importance as the prevailing aesthetic currency. In this regard, the value of a manifestation or appearance lies in its ability to function as a gateway, that is, in making its inherent radiance that offers multiple pathways to other fragments evident and effective. Umberto Eco aptly expresses this notion when he asserts that “the work of art gains aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood.”³³ The active and creative participation of a heterogeneous audience is then necessary to activate the thing’s inherent multiplicity. As fostered in West’s pieces, where each manipulation is different as each user handles them in their own way, the apparatus of material revelation undergoes a process of pluralisation that, in turn, expands the object’s possibilities of material realisation. Consequently, a thing’s experiential gradient, masking, or horizon of the possible is constantly reconfigured according to each performance. It adapts to each subject’s different cognitive capacities, while each of these xenoaesthetic experiences is another coordinate that becomes excessively present in the world.

In light of this, xenoaesthetics is a cognitive mode or regime of action that experientially accounts for the object’s totality by engaging with its vertical and horizontal domains in the same encounter. Xenoaesthetics is considered as *technē* insofar as it reveals to us the double One/Many condition of the object, while at the same time realising it or making it excessively present through us. Moreover, it does so from within, since the xenoaesthetic process is another fragment in the constitution and representation of the object’s reality.

3.3. Abstraction

Yet as we know, not every phenomenon can bring us backstage beyond its factual presence, that is, of acting as a gateway exercising its radiance and thickness. It is, therefore, worth asking what can be the postures or coordinates in what we encounter a thing for a subject to engage with its One and the Many. If we have previously identified that recognition is a form of perceiving and acting that repeats itself mechanically without extending previous or imposed experiences, i.e., that it always uses the

33 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3.

same coordinates to arrive at the same object's coordinate, a cognition free from such a limiting and standardised framework can be achieved through the mobilisation of subjectivities. Learning from West's Adaptives, *abstraction* stands for such a possibility. This approach assumes that the less specific a manifestation is, the more difficult it will be to achieve any predefined objective. Therefore, the more personal and intimate the subject's approach to the thing, the wider the access to its horizon of the possible.

In this way, *asemicism* and *asyntacticism* characterise abstract phenomena as gateways. For example, West's pieces are asemic in that they lack any semantic prescription in evaluating or using them. Their structure is concrete, but their reception is vague and open. Abstract phenomena thus lack any predefined meaning or valuation category to bias experience or determine its validity. In parallel, Adaptives are also asyntactic in that they do not point to their presentational qualities and compositional aspects as their *raison d'être*. Unlike many understandings and critiques of formalism in the arts that focus attention on the structural features of the work, the asyntactic expression performs its excessive presence precisely by renouncing its own presence to attend to its excess, i.e., to make evident to the subject the One and the Many that it embodies. Nevertheless, this standpoint of abstraction is not exempt from risks. Its central paradox is, perhaps, to be too abstract. In such cases, an overly distant presentation may not elicit the thing's abundance and existence but will lead to indifference. Hence, the design challenge lies in articulating abstract expressions appealing enough to engage the user with maximum intensity without recognition techniques, while keeping the encounter on the brink of disengagement collapse.

3.4. The Xenoaesthetics of Abstraction

In this context, the xenoaesthetics of abstraction stands as a deep and transformative cognitive or relational mode that operates within the object's ontological framework. This mode acknowledges and engages with the thing's singular existence and its multiple manifestations, embracing the inherent heterogeneity and diversity present in aesthetic encounters. By spanning across both the vertical and horizontal development, the xenoaesthetics of abstraction offers a holistic sense of the object's existence and richness. Drawing on the object's xenological condition characterised by fellowship and disagreement within the realms of the One and the Many, as well as between the object's fragments, xenoaesthetics enacts the interconnectedness and interplay between the object's diverse coordinates. It recognises that each experience can engage with the object's being and abundance in multiple ways by establishing particular organisations of pathways and routes among fragments. By rejecting fixed and normalised routes, which limit the cognitive encounter, the xenoaesthetics of abstraction encourages an open and personalised exploration of the object through interaction with its abstract phenomena.

Therefore, special attention is paid to asemic and asyntactic phenomena as gateways to the thing's interior. These phenomena do not rely on prescribed forms and meanings but instead create spaces for individual interpretation and engagement.

For this reason, the xenoaesthetics of abstraction opens up the thing's excess beyond its past and present condition, enabling individuals to access the object's horizon of possibilities in their own unique and personal ways. The emphasis on individualisation and personal engagement within the xenoaesthetics of abstraction leads to constantly reconfiguring the thing's experiential gradient, masking, or horizon of possibilities. In other words, the xenoaesthetics of abstraction promotes the mobilization of subjectivities beyond recognition-based presentations. This call aims to uncover the maximum extent of the object's complexity and diversity for a given subject.

At the same time, each performance and aesthetic encounter, as it is a fragment of the object, possesses an inherent capacity for excessive presence in the world. It thus functions as a *technē* of revelation and realisation of the object's unity and diversity. As seen in the performances with West's pieces, abstract phenomena act as gateways, triggering a cascade of xenoaesthetic experiences. Each of these xenoaesthetic experiences, if sufficiently abstract in someone else's eyes, becomes a catalyst for further engagements with the thing. This chain of multiplicity rooted in interconnected interpretations and involvements expands the object's realisation, thus exposing its intricate matrix of exchange.

4. Conclusion

The article has examined the intersection between metaphysics and politics in relation to the question of equality based on the concept of multiplicity and has proposed a cognitive regime for implementing such an ontopolitical framework. From there, the first concluding point highlights the reciprocal interplay between the disciplines and practices of metaphysics and politics. Our approach refutes the notion that metaphysics unilaterally grounds and legitimises all other practices, including politics, as evident, for example, in Schmitt's view that politics functions as an "analogy" of metaphysics. Adopting such a perspective leads to the unconditional elevation of metaphysics as the governor of all other discourses while at the same time exempting itself from critical scrutiny. It would paradoxically be the only discourse that legitimises itself, as it would be the only one authorised to deal with the question of the real. Similarly, we reject the counter-proposal that material practices, including politics, are the exclusive foundation of metaphysical concerns. Instead, we acknowledge the complex interactions between metaphysics and politics in shaping each other on the basis of a shared systematic structure of the object's reality, which has been characterised by vertical and horizontal movements.

The second concluding point emphasises a complete commitment of ontopolitics to human subject anti-exceptionalism by addressing the object on its own terms without neglecting the subject's condition and needs. As in the previous point, this approach does not imply subjugation, in this case, of the subject to the object. On the contrary, it foregrounds the reciprocal interaction between the two entities in their respective constitutions. This metaphysical perspective on the socio-politics of equality then responds to feminist posthumanist and neo-materialist critiques of an alleged passivity of object-oriented approaches to such questions. Indeed, critics and activists within these frameworks typically fall short of fully embracing a non-anthropocentric discourse as they continue to elaborate maxims of justice and equality from subject-based moral and rational positions. In this sense, such a difference in approach also extends to non-human entities. The shift from politics to ontopolitics includes *by default*, rather than by moral and rational compulsion, non-human actors in the object's construction of reality and its political sphere. This expansion is made possible by recognising the heterogeneous and disparate population in the thing's multiplicity. In any case, it is crucial to underline that the ontopolitical approach is not intended to replace contemporary critical and activist positions. It rather offers a complementary perspective that opens up additional avenues for achieving the shared goal of equality, despite differences in method.

This point brings us to the third and final observation, which focuses on the emancipatory capacity of the *technē* of revelation, which has also been argued to be one of realisation for the object. Within the framework of ontopolitics and the quest for equality, the xenoaesthetics of abstraction has been presented as a mechanism for achieving this goal. Rather than attempting to rectify specific imbalances or address predefined notions of inequality, this approach relies on enacting the object's inherent egalitarian condition. Practically speaking, it does so through insertions of abstract revelations/realisations into the ubiquitous situations of inequality of our time without any objective other than the activation of multiplicity. This strategy allows personalised, hence multiple, reconfigurations of the horizon of the possible of the confronted entity. In other words, through disseminating abstract propositions, xenoaesthetics establishes a framework of perception and action that encourages individuals to engage with the object on their own terms. The mobilisation of their unique perspectives and capacities activates the thing's abundance and accounts for its singular existence. The multiplicity of the object calls for a multiplicity of approaches, which not only acknowledges the object's reality but actively contributes to its formation. In this context, the thing's singularity and diversity become evident and acquire a political significance through xenoaesthetics by pluralising the subjective encounters as expressions of the object. The fellowship and disagreement not only between such human manifestations but also between all the other non-human coordinates of the object mark the thing's internal dynamic operations, which in its verticality and horizontality, articulates the ontopolitical systematic structure of equality.

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