Abstract In this chapter images are argued to be motions—motile extensions of practice—rather than static representations or vehicles for communicative acts. The images in question are anthropo- and zoomorphic ceramic vessels from the La Candelaria archaeological culture of first millennium AD northwest Argentina. The argument made draws on the theory of perspectivism developed by anthropologists working with groups in the Amazon basin. Combining this theory with insights from new, “vitalist” theoretical approaches in archaeology opens up the possibility that process united disparate practices, in which bodies of all types—ceramic or flesh; human or non-human—are ontologically equivalent. As such, images are not separate layers of meaning applied to a material foundation but both meaning and material are extensions of practice.

Introduction

Visual imagery can be understood to work in a number of registers. Most commonly, archaeologists have taken it as symbolic expression, inventive ways to substitute for language or communicate ideas (Bahn 1998; Whitley 2011). Similarly, imagery can be understood to be organized in an isomorphic sense to social structure and ideology (e.g. Shanks & Tilley 1992). There is also the question of how imagery actually works: what is it that moves us or works on us? Cognitive impact, conceptual play, or the effect of the abduction of complex intentionalities and the establishment of social relations are some candidates (e.g. Gell 1998; Lau 2011; Malafouris 2007).

Which register is appropriate for understanding the material that interests me – anthropo- and zoomorphic pots from first millennium AD northwest Argentina (e.g. Fig. 1)? What such approaches share in common is a focus on a particular type of audience and a finished object – on the effect of a completed work or image on a separated subject or recipient. There is latent, however, another possibility: that the visual imagery communicated and worked at the level of practice. I argue that the imagery in the pottery communicated not solely as a completed object aimed at
a particular audience but was efficacious insofar as the practices associated with its production – and the place of those practices in a broader world of practices – were specifically embodied and understood. Drawing on an approach within Amazonian ethnography, I illustrate by discussing a parallelism between the incisions and moldings on pots and the painting of bodies, activities which can be understood as instances of non-representational image making.

In this chapter I would like to reverse some of the basic assumptions that underlie studies of artworks in archaeology, that images in their finished forms are predominantly about communicating, undergirding identities, and structuring social relations. The essence of my argument is this: images are motions. That is, the underlying principle that guides the appearance of things – in the case I discuss – is one of transformability. Images must obey the logic of this principle in at least two ways: first, the image functions in a motile fashion – it does not sit still. The image is motile because one cannot trust either meaning or matter to “be” in a consistent way precisely because transformation is the default mode. An image cannot, therefore, represent statically and in any straightforward sense. And second, the image itself must be a motion. That is, it is never complete – in fact, the goal is not completion, but rather to participate in the wholesale repetition of acts and practices that forestalls or directs change. The image is not itself a static thing.
I claim, then, that what these pots depict and how they depict is better thought of as practices than static images. The pots do not represent anything within their archaeological context (clearly they do to us); they are congealed action, acts, and practices. Moreover, they are performative co-conspirators in a world conceived as founded on practice and not substance, as we would understand it (for similar approaches that challenge a substance-based ontology, see Alberti & Bray 2009; Barad 2003, 2007; Latour 1999, 2005; Witmore forthcoming). The communicative act occurs during the making. Doing the art is where the meaning lies, not in the finished object. Furthermore, I will use a central conceit to make my argument, one adapted from Amazonian ethnographies. What you do to a pot when you make and decorate it is equivalent to what you do to a body when you modify or work on it (Alberti 2007). This is not an analogical usage but rather a theoretical one: it is a tool for thought to get around a conceptual issue.

Fig. 2. Map of northwest Argentina including extent of the La Candelara material. Map constructed by the author.
The archaeological materials around which I make my argument are pots and human mortuary remains from La Candelaria archaeological culture (Fig. 2). First named as a culture in the 1930s by Alfred Métraux (1930), the material is found predominantly in Tucuman and Salta provinces of northwest Argentina, in the foothills of the Andes (see also Heredia 1968, 1975; Ryden 1936). The “core” area is the Yungas or “bosques tropicales” (tropical forests) in Tucuman, which is an intermediary ecological zone between the high valleys that lead to the Andes and the Chaco lowlands to the east. They are one of a mosaic of cultures from the area and period. The material ranges in approximate date from AD 0 to 1100, is widely distributed but never particularly densely present. Sites consist mainly of sherd scatters overlain by later Santamariana material. Architectural elements are ephemeral, although urn, direct, and the occasional cist burial are fairly common and from which a number of important collections of material have been constituted. Whole vessels are almost exclusively from excavated burial contexts or collected from such contexts (when that information is available). One intriguing element is that form and iconography both share elements with other, presumably more “Andean” cultures, but also lowland themes. There are no jaguars, but peccary, frogs, and birds abound. As a result, its position relative to the lowland-highland direction of influence has been debated (Ortiz & Ventura 2003).

Image as communication, bodies as social constructions

In presenting his study of Goldwork and Shamanism, Reichel-Dolmatoff (1988) suggests we cautiously use an ethno-archaeological methodology to get back to the intentions and norms that guided the makers of pre-Hispanic objects. He then provides commentary on the possible shamanic associations of the images depicted on the wonderful works of gold at the Museo del Oro in Bogotá, Colombia. It is common to interpret imagery in this way, as symbolic expressions of underlying beliefs (e.g. DeMarrais 2007; González 1977). An object is divided into support and image (in the present case, it would be a pot and its decorative elaboration). The object, then, in such an approach embodies a dual process of meaning making: initially, a pot is formed from clay, water and temper by a maker; at some point afterwards the same or another maker inscribes lines or pinches additional clay into shapes that are applied to the body of the pot, and finally, after firing we have a finished pot. From raw material, to functional object, and finally to functional object plus image.

Objects – especially decorated or elaborated ones – are also said to materialize beliefs or ideologies. Objects are the making solid of ideas or ideologies, their materialization (e.g. DeMarrais et al. 1996). They can then “act” by reinforcing sociopolitical structures, reminding us of our place. Their specific materiality becomes a key part of their ability to take on this role: large, hard monuments, or the apparent durability of fired ceramics, reinforces claims to truth and power. The assumption driving theories
of art objects or artistic production in archaeology has thus been largely that the objects are about communicating and undergirding identities and/or social relations. When faced with a body of material such as the La Candelaria pots, the question, then, naturally becomes what is the purpose or impact of the pots as images? In what ways can they be said to communicate or support social relations or identities?

There is an interesting parallel here to how bodies are conceived within a broadly social construction frame. Recent approaches to embodiment in archaeology stress the vulnerability of the body to constructive practices, as well as the idea that cultural meanings are inscribed onto biological bodies (see Joyce 2005; Boric & Robb 2009). In an influential work, Sofaer (2006) has written that the human body can actually be treated analytically as equivalent to material culture; essentially plastic human matter can materialize the effects of social norms through practices, such as grinding or carrying heavy weights, through its changing form and development. Both the conceptualization of bodies and that of artworks rely on the imposition of meaning by an agent or subject onto a dumb object or body. There is assumed to be a common physical substratum to the world that is acted upon by different cultures in different ways, constructing social bodies and artefacts. This model, as Ingold (2010:92) has shown, is hylomorphic – the notion of the imposition of form onto dumb matter by a human agent: “Form came to be seen as imposed by an agent with a particular design in mind, while matter, thus rendered passive and inert, became that which was imposed upon.” Reversing Sofaer’s premise, releasing the body from the social construction model may well serve also to bring the object (the pot) along with it and allowing its associated “imposed” image which is rendered complete and fully dead, to be conceived differently.

Bodies and pots as ontological equivalents

The hylomorphic model does not work in Amazonia: neither the body nor matter is considered an inert, stable substratum for human play. In typically Western substance ontology, people and things are quite distinct. People are animated by mind; things are variously inert, animated, if anything, by external forces that are demonstrated by mechanical movements and growth. The broad range of Amazonian theories of bodies and persons and objects are quite different, as Amazonianists have been indicating since the 1970s onwards (Seeger et al. 1979; Turner 1995; 2009; Vilaça 2009). One claim is that bodies are the seat of difference, the root of perceptual difference among peoples and other beings, in differentiation from a Western focus on mind as the arbiter of point of view (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 2010). If you change body you change perspective, and a changed perspective is indicative of a changed body. One manifestation of this metaphysics is the theory of perspectivism, developed by Viveiros de Castro (1998; 2004a; 2010) and colleagues (Lima 1996; Vilaça 2005, 2009). The
basic idea behind perspectivism is that there is one way that all beings perceive their world, but multiple worlds – one epistemology and multiple ontologies. This is what Viveiros de Castro has referred to as “multinaturalism,” a metaphysical claim that reverses common Western assumptions. Whereas the notion of cultural construction, for example, envisions multiple views or interpretations – ways of knowing – depending on culture and background, but one natural world that is being interpreted or given meaning, perspectivism acts on the assumption that all peoples and animals have the same way of seeing the world but see different worlds. In this view, many species have a point of view or perspective given to them by their bodies. Bodies are the product of behavior, habits, foods, and so on, that are species-specific. But all species are united by a common background of undifferentiated subjectivity that existed before specific differentiation. One sees oneself and one’s kind as same – humans being the model – and others as different. Inter-species transformation is a constant threat; one usually signaled by a change in one’s perspective – seeing something strange that one ought not, such as a tail or jaguar spots on a family member (Vilaça 2009; Viveiros de Castro 2010). The world is not a solid, unchangeable substratum to behavior but is the product of one’s practices.

In Amazonian perspectivism, the default mode would appear to be transformation: work must be done to keep things stable. One’s perspective – and we could extrapolate from this to a generalized relational ontology – is inherently unsteady precisely because you can never tell if your perspective is your own as the world will change in accordance with it. While some anthropologists continue to conceive of body practices among Amazonians, broadly construed, as the construction of a social person in opposition to a “dumb biological individual,” to use Levi-Strauss’ terminology (in Fortis 2010:480; e.g. Turner 2009), the recently popular theory of perspectivism allows for an alternative to the hylomorphic model. If transformation is constantly feared, and bodies are the root of one’s being, then acting on or with the body is both a means of ensuring bodily integrity but also a means to transformation. The notion that bodies become enculturated through human action – as the hylomorphic model has it – does not fit the ethnographic accounts. When an individual body is worked on it is not in order to rid the body of its animal essence, i.e. it isn’t culture working on nature, human on matter. Rather, it’s about particularizing a too general body (Viveiros de Castro 1996:131), differentiating it from other groups and other species.

Chronically unstable bodies
I have written elsewhere (Alberti 2007; Alberti & Marshall 2009) that the burial and ceramic evidence from La Candelaria suggests a concern with “chronically unstable bodies” (Vilaça 2005). I argued for an equivalence between bodies and pots, both of which demonstrate a concern to shore up an uncertain and untrustworthy
materiality (see Figs 3 and 4). La Candelaria bodies were variously marked, shaped through cranial modification in life and then disarticulated, mixed, and burned at death. Pots show an equal concern with the instability or plasticity of form, in which biomorphic protuberances, exaggerated or fantastical bodies proliferate. The pots are a discourse, I argued, on the instability of matter illustrated through the treatment of bodies in life and death.

Fig. 3. Chronically unstable bodies: modified crania from La Candelaria urn burials (redrawn from Rydén 1936, Figs 144 & 147).

But that could introduce an additional problem: are we now talking about social construction? Is the world a world that is brought about through human thought and action? That would be an error. As Viveiros de Castro (2004b) has shown, such a position brings us full circle to a single world of brute matter and variously wrong interpretations of it. Bodies are inherently social, but not as an opposition between a common physical substrate and culturally specific ways of understanding that body. Fortis (2010:481), in a study of Kuna body and design, has argued that “Amerindian aesthetics deals with a particular way of conceiving the body.” To be human is to have an appropriate body, a body that has come into being through particular actions and through the help of designs inherent to it.

A parallel can be drawn: in arguing against the hylomorphic model, Ingold (2010) and others (Alberti 2007) have claimed that social construction leaves the object as dumb. To release the body can also imply releasing the object, the pot, usually considered in the same way as the imposition of a human design (cultural) onto raw material, giving it meaning. Extending the Amazonian model as I have to pots, and adding Fortis’ contention about aesthetics and design, results in a pot that is enabled, brought into being, through appropriate actions and the relationship it entails with other beings. Design is inherent in the pot, just as it is in the body. It is not something imposed on the pot – or on matter itself.
The inherent dynamism of the world

Viveiros de Castro does not rate artefacts or objects in his account. They appear as “cultural instruments,” but secondary to the human-animal transformative relation; mere props for the action. Other anthropologists disagree, however, arguing that in a number of groups cultural artefacts preceded humanity’s differentiation, actually providing the raw material in many cases that transformed into humans and animals (see contributions to Santos-Granero 2009). Body ornaments, for example, can be key to the complex play of visibility/invisibility that characterizes shamanic practices. According to Miller (2009:61), black bands of internal (invisible) and external (visible) body beads among the Mamaindê define the subject, “conferring upon her consciousness, direction, intentionality and memory.” The beads are not intrinsically visible or invisible – their status results from the “visual capacity of the observer,” that is, her perspective.
There are also interesting parallels to perspectivist thinking that are emerging in methodologically scientific archaeology. In a recent book on materials analysis, Conneller (2011:3) argues for a radical châine opératoire approach: the properties of an object that are considered essential are historical and socially specific, related to the techniques for engaging with materials. More to the point, she argues that “properties cannot be uncomplicatedly grasped by an analyst because they arise through the process of people’s very different interactions with matter” (Conneller 2011:8). In other words, certain properties remain invisible due to perspective and equipment.

Conneller’s work is part of a growing trend towards a contemporary form of vitalism, a desire to see materials as properly lively and not slaves to form. Ingold (2010:92), who is representative of this new approach, wants to replace substance ontology “with an ontology that assigns primacy to the processes of formation as against states of matter.” In this, Ingold (2010:92) aims to generalize from the notion that skilled practice is not about “imposing preconceived forms on inert matter” but rather about “intervening in the fields of forces and currents of material wherein forms are generated.” Ingold’s world is that of a generative flux, a relational ontology, not a substance ontology. The perspectivist world inverts the hylomorphic model: the substratum – solid ground to us – can be flipped. Ingold’s and Conneller’s emphasis on skilled practice in a shifting world of materials when combined with the perspectivist insistence on the inherent instability and shifty nature of bodies and hence perspectives suggest a further step: that matter in general can be conceived of as performed into being through practice. If this is the case, then images – as practices – are onto-generative (productive of reality) and not simply assigned meanings or simple representations.

Performative bodies, performative practices

If worlds are formed by practice, then what is an image? What kind of practice is it? Gell (1998:199) in *Art and Agency* makes the argument that Marquesan art is a technique for enhancing the person (Fig. 5). When the same designs used on people appear on house posts, they do not stand for that principle, they are not an analogue or metaphor, but are themselves enactments of it: the house post becomes a means of enhancing the house. I have argued that the same is the case for the La Candelaria pots – modifying or enhancing the body obeyed a perspectivist logic of resisting transformation. Pots, when marked as bodies, were being treated in the same way. That is, marked faces or bodies were enactments of a protective principle and not representations of it.

In relation to Amazonia, Viveiros de Castro (1996:131) writes: “Bodies are thought of as deeds not facts.” There is a widespread emphasis on the fabrication of bodies in Amazonia. Kinship is conceived as active assimilation through fluids (Conklin & Morgan 1996; Vilaça 2002; Viveiros de Castro 1996:131). Memories are written in
flesh. As such, the body is more performed than given (Viveiros de Castro 1996:132). Bodies suffer a broad range of enhancement, designed to continuously support one perspective and prevent a shift to another. Affects – behaviors, foods, actions – are one way to stay the same as those around you. The surface of the body is fully social as well as a direct indicator of your true self, such as your health or emotional state.

![Image of a tattooed native of the Marquesas Islands](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/3/3e/Tattooed_native_of_the_Marquesas_Islands.png/1200px-Tattooed_native_of_the_Marquesas_Islands.png)

Fig. 5. “Tattooed native of the Marquesas Islands” (Reclus 1890:614) [Wikipedia File PSM V37 D632].

The wide range of practices that target the surface of the body include body painting, face painting, lip piercings, ear piercings, cheek piercings, as well as enhancement with body adornments, masking practices, and so. Bodies are also kneaded, massaged, and manipulated in various ways to ensure appropriate growth and prevent ontological predation – lose of perspective – at the hands of the animals.
and spirits (accomplished through various means and manifested as sickness and death). Bodies are created through these external interventions; they are “a graphic and physical penetration of society in the body” (Seeger et al. 1979: 15, as cited in Fortis 2010: 482), where “decoration is part of the creation of the body” (as cited in Fortis 2010:483).

If we read “pot” in place of body, the image begins to make sense. We can see the skilled practices applied to the forming, shaping, and molding of the pot. No two pots are identical although broad classes separate them. More-or-less recognizable motifs exist, although rarely unambiguously. The way in which the clay was manipulated or enhanced includes extensive incised marks (Fig. 6) that resonate with face painting designs. Incised lines are not limited to facial features, and are used to indicate other features of bodies, often in combination with molded or applied pieces. Molding and applications are widespread and often anthropo- or zoomorphic in theme, but rarely easily recognizable except, on occasion, as features of the face. Decorative techniques and use of material unites apparently disparate forms.

Pierced clay is relatively common – lips, ears, and especially the nose; even in the smallest example care is taken to pierce the clay through and through. Nostrils, eyes, and occasionally mouths are indented, as were non-identifiable elements (Fig. 7). The marks and lines visibly reference the maker or makers of the pots. They and their instruments are an integral part of the image as practice, lending
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their perspective to the task of transformation. Tools have left their trace: the ends of small bones leave distinctive indentations; tubular indents for eyes may have been made with bone or hollow sticks. Incisions often show an uneven surface or shape that corresponds to a quasi-circular tool applied at an angle. The same tool may have been used for various features on the same piece.

Clearly, choices were made. The piercings obviously resonate with the piercing of human bodies. But why incise instead of paint? The question, I argue, is moot: the image is it not about representing a practice that exists elsewhere, but about a new practice that emerges in company with this material. The piercings are deceptive, I think: they are not referring to a body prototype, a real body somewhere else. The pot’s emergent properties – fully relational and inclusive of the maker and tools – are the target and means of the specific transformation. The marks are different to marks on a body because these are different images, different on-going material practices, or technologies – clay is pushed aside, indentations are made, the surface solidifies in ways human bodies do not. They are referring to process, acts, performances. Bodies and pots are not the same substance or matter waiting to be enhanced: rather, they are equivalent because they obey the same ontological principle of motion.

A final clue to how to think of these pots as images is offered by the Amazonian ethnographies. Design can be inherent to bodies and personhood (Fortis 2010; Lagrou 2009). Lagrou (2009) writes of design among the Cashinahua, where free floating images can cause bodies to change shape, and designs are integral to the development of children. For example, face painting designs on neophytes are painted with broad lines to ensure that propitiatory songs can enter their permeable bodies (Fig. 8). Design or image is not a representation of the source of transformation but the act of transformation itself.
Conclusion: Imaging making

The notions of skillful making and chaîne opératoire are important reminders that completed pots are never a given. A host of decisions, strategies, ideas, experiences, and material constraints are negotiated on the way to a complete object. But the assumption often remains of an increasingly elaborated object accumulating social and symbolic significance alongside technical efficacy. The connections established across domains, such as potting and metal working (Gosselain 1999), or potting and burial (Sillar 2004), are often couched in term of metaphors attached to the technical processes. The steps in the chaîne opératoire become “the locus of symbolic discourse” (Gosselain 1999:205).

My argument is different. Technical acts do not comment on each other metaphorically but are ontological equivalents; they are the same process. The technical elements and tool kit – bones of birds or animals, sticks, stones for burnishing, etc. – are not metaphorically pointing to other activities and ideas but are ontologically part of the image itself. So, when I say images are practices I do not mean to come down on the side of practice and against the side of the finished object. That would simply restore the balance between the terms. Rather, I mean to do away with finished objects altogether. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1988) used ethnography as direct historic analogy to reconstruct the past lives of his golden objects. I am more interested in the theoretical possibilities than the analogical. The principles I develop from perspectivism are ontological in nature. Everything, therefore, must be inflected by this logic: all is movement, or instability. Static forms or images in a world underwritten by a logic of motility and transformation make no sense. And it is not just the image that is motile but image making itself. Ingold (2011:210) quotes the artist Paul Klee, who wrote, “Form is the end, death [… ] Form-giving is life.” To cut, pinch and pierce are ontological, transformative acts and an on-going process of image-making in which even finished forms are only ever apparent.

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Notes
1. In this chapter I write about “Amazonia” in quite general terms, given the huge variety of groups in the region. The area is incredibly linguistically and ethnically diverse (see Hornberg & Hill 2011). My reasons are twofold: analytically, it is useful to cast the net broadly in order to set up a contrastive case that highlights the point I want to make about the archaeology; and Viveiros de Castro (2010) in his work on perspectivism is clear that what he is after is a system of thought rigorous enough to confront the preeminence of other traditions of thought that have dominated anthropological theory. Insofar as his theory resonates with approaches that adopt various forms of animism in archaeology (e.g. Brown & Walker 2008; Harrison 2012), the differences lies in how he approaches the material: not as a resource for analogy building but as a source for theory building (see Alberti & Marshall 2009). To do so requires general statements, nor particular cases. He has been criticized by other established Amazonianists for his generalizing approach (e.g. Turner 2009).

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