



Pigs and mobile phones: a conversation with Marilyn Strathern

PROA: First we would like to propose a general ground for our conversation, specifically regarding the concepts of gender and aesthetics, both of them discussed in some of your works. Could you tell us a little about them?

Marilyn Strathern: The two key concepts that you have picked on, and I appreciate you for doing it, aesthetics and gender, are both really my analytical solutions or my analytical terms for what seems to be very much a preoccupation of people in Mount Hagen, in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. These people create moments of performance when they very deliberately display objects to one another, so they are creating a context of display. And of course when we think about art we are talking about objects, whatever sculptures, or paintings, or whatever they are, that have been produced to be seen. In the context of the New Guinea Highlands, there is a lot of ambiguity about what can be seen and what cannot be seen. I really cannot avoid giving you some ethnography. These people base their lives on exchanging wealth, so when a child is born or when somebody is killed, or whatever, you make reparation, you exchange wealth between two clan groups. This wealth has an aesthetic form, that is, it takes the form of huge mounted pearl shells, mounted on big boards, alongside pigs and these days alongside money. Wealth has to be grown as well as exchanged,

so there are two sides to any action: there is the wealth that you have grown as it were by accumulating it privately and secretly, and then there is the wealth you reveal at the moment of transfer. Now, that alternation between what you conceal and what you reveal is at the heart of their thinking about creativity, about reproduction, about the perpetuation of society, about the perpetuation of relations, and so forth. So that, what has to be there at the moment of revelation is something that other people would recognize as appropriate. It has to take a proper form and that is where I use the term aesthetics, that other people have to respond. I mean it is a faint or distant cousin of the European notion of aesthetics as eliciting a sense of appreciation of beauty: this is an appreciation of the appropriate form. So, for example, if it is bridewealth, -- if there is a marriage and there is a bridewealth prestation -- the pigs and the shells are all kept in the house of the groom, then finally they are produced and they are taken to the house of the bride, and the bride's people look at them, they look at how high the pigs are, they look at the quality of the shell, and they count the money. That gift has to make aesthetic sense, it has to be acknowledged by everybody that this is appropriate -- and it is not just a matter of the number, or the size, or the colour, it is all those things together that create an appropriate form. That was what I used the term aesthetics for.

It is wider than that, when a clan mobilizes itself, whether in warfare or for one of these exchange situations, it has to appear in a certain form, otherwise people will not recognize it, otherwise they fail to impress people.

PROA: These ideas are really close to what Alfred Gell proposes, are they not?

Marilyn Strathern: Yes. That is right.

PROA: And if we look over time, do you think there are changes that create new relations and new forms of display?

Marilyn Strathern: That is absolutely correct. I mean there is change over time and people, younger people, invest value in different things from what older people do. There is no doubt about that. But, as soon as you move away from that traditional system that I was talking about, you are entering a very different arena, in which younger people are impressing one another in terms of consuming or participation in sports, or mobile phones, or whatever, and it does not have the same role in the conduct, visibly, it does not have the same role in the conduct of relations. They create different kinds of relations.

PROA: But the object itself has some kind of intention? So the object would not only be defined by its external characteristics but would also have an intention.

Marilyn Strathern: I don't require "intention".

PROA: So maybe "agency"? You have given the example of mobile phones. Since the "objects" themselves are quite different, what would be the difference between pigs and mobile phones as aesthetic objects in these contexts, if there is any?

Marilyn Strathern: Let me go back to traditional system first, and then I will come back to the comparison between pigs and mobile phones. It is possible to specify what the appropriate form should be. So, for example: people look at the size and the fatness of the pigs, they look at how much, when they kill them and eat them, they look at how much white fat, they eat and they look at how much fat there is. On shells

they look at the sheen, the shine on the shells. The money they just count, money is just number, money does not have anything else but number, nonetheless... This is something that would get me into gender but I will take another route. So, these qualities, particularly of things that shine, things that glisten, things that sparkle, is actually a sense in which these objects give off a presence, and people are affected by this, they are attracted, and the whole point of the display is to attract, to attract the audience you are displaying to, and particularly people you are giving to should be overwhelmed by the splendour of what they see. And that is all in the context of the fact that this quality of shininess, particularly associated with the colours red, yellow, and white, indicate the successful intervention of ancestral spirits, so it is also a spiritual condition, in the sense that it is acquainted with health. "You are healthy, you are going to have many children, your garden is going to grow", and so forth. So you are in the state of... a successful display is also a divine state in a way. An unsuccessful one will bring you no end of bad luck. I mean, there is the obverse, and the risk that people take is when they finally display their wealth. The risk is: is it going to work? You know, if the recipients say: "you know, this is lousy", or "I am not going to accept", or "you know, this is nothing, we will take this, but we want the proper gift the next time". Then the donors are in trouble, and that is the sign that the ancestors have left them, abandoned them. Now, the thing is, when we move to mobile phones or Nike shoes, or whatever, people borrow the surface qualities of things that shine, are pleasant to hold, and so forth, but those surface qualities do not have any reference anymore, to the sense of health ...or the involvement of the ancestors. It is simply a superficial borrowing of the... I could say that is sparkling, could not I? It is simply the superficial borrowing of these qualities. So these objects, it would be wrong to do a study of mobile phones and Nike shoes, and imagine that they were in some sense substitutes. One would need to look at the whole arena in which cell phones and Nike

shoes themselves circulate, and that would be extremely interesting because you would then learn about quite different networks of people in an urban context, or what it is that gives people a career, what they must display to be regarded as worthwhile, which you need to do in its own terms. I do not think you could just read off from a traditional system. In fact it would be much more interesting not to. It would be much more interesting to start with mobile phones and say, "right, you know, what is going on here, what is their value, how are they circulating, how do people regard them?". Then you would have a very interesting question of wanting to know if mobile phones are art or..

I should ask that back to you. Are mobile phones art? Because if you are able to answer that, then you would probably answer, you would probably then know whether these objects are art or not.

PROA: This is an interesting point. It is the social life of things.

Marilyn Strathern: Yes, it is the social life of things, that is right. That is good.

PROA: Then we would like to come back to our first question. Now about the second concept we have picked on: gender. If we try to complexify the very notion of objects of art, accepting the idea that they have a gender, maybe it could give us another way of thinking about the relations between the processes of producing and consuming art.

Marilyn Strathern: Ok. Let us talk about gender. And if you do not mind I will stay with what I am talking about, because having established this basic ethnography, you now have got some information that I can now build on. I should just say that in Hagen you gain prestige in what you give, not from what you accumulate, so people

are always trying to give things away, but in giving away you also make yourself very vulnerable, because at the moment you are giving away you expose yourself, ok? So it is a risk. The people who make these exchanges, who give away this wealth, are always men. And they are men acting very much in a male way, they are representing the clan group, which is a patrilineal group, so people belong because their fathers belonged and so forth. And what they give away, the shells, can be regarded as female, in the sense that -- the shells, or the pigs, or the money -- in the sense that these items that have come into men's possessions; through the hard work that they have done with their wives [in producing food], or through the links through women with other the clans, or whatever. But also the shells will not walk by themselves, they have to be given, so the shells are passive objects. In fact women are, well, they were, traditionally, classically regarded as objects in a similar way and were given the names of shells, but before one starts getting upset about women being treated as objects, we need to ask what these objects are. And these objects turn out to be persons, because those shells in fact refer to female fertility, and they are in fact treated like persons, so although they become objects in a transaction, they are not objects in the Western sense of non-personified entities, ...as the kinds of 'things' we are used to. The exchange, it is worth adding, is between one lot of men and another lot of men, but there is also a way that you can regard that lot of men, the recipients, as female because the active position that you take is a masculine position, and the men who are receiving the wealth are in a receptive, female, feminine position. So you can regard the wealth as female and you can regard those men as female. Or you could regard the wealth as male, because you could also say, well, actually the men are taking part of themselves as men and giving it to this other clan, and in that sense is a part of themselves as men. So the notion of what is male and what is female is not stable, is established by social relations, or the particular context and so forth. And I became

interested in gender through just seeing all the different contexts in which ideas of what was male, what was female, played off against one another, and I actually came to the conclusion, though this may not be very helpful, that the basic contrast in this society was not between male and female, it was between same sex and cross sex relations. That is, same sex relations refer to brothers of a clan, or a woman and her sisters, while cross sex relations always involved a marriage, or a relation between in-laws, at the heart of which was the union between a man and a woman. And this contrast actually organized a lot of relations in this society. So I arrived at a very special understanding of gender that probably is not of any use to you people interested in art.

PROA: On the contrary, surely it is. And how are these exchange processes nowadays?

Marilyn Strathern: Yes, very interesting. When I was last there, well, I was there this year, but really in the field in 2006, many of these exchanges no longer operated. But one thing that remains very important are payments at funerals, and what happens is that when somebody dies the mourners come and gather, and other people, other relatives, come and feed the mourners, and then the mourners have to pay everybody who has fed them. So they make these prestations for the food in the form of money. Well, in fact the people who come and help them, give money, and then later they receive money, and giving and receiving money at funerals is one of the most important contemporary contexts in which we can see exchanges working. And I saw in 2006 among the many men who would get up, [who] would take out their rolls of notes, and hand them over, and the other person would receive them and count them, a couple of women got up and did that on behalf of a whole group of women, and this was said to be that we are in a new time. This is a new way of doing things, everybody

was very happy. I mean, nobody complained, it was regarded as the right thing. And there I suppose we could again reintroduce the notion of form: I mean there is a whole protocol to do with this, who stands up, who talks, how the money is handed over, and there were one or two cases of people who was inappropriately handing over money and it was regarded as, "oh, they really should not have done this", and so forth. So there is a certain sense of what is right and what is not right.

PROA: Then we could talk about another pair of concepts from your work as well: gifts and commodities. In *Gender of the Gift* you make a difference between gifts (that participate in and generate internal relations) and commodities (that participate in and generate external relations). Thinking of the market of indigenous art, the circulation of indigenous artefacts in the Western art market, could we call it a case of gifts becoming commodities?

Marilyn Strathern: I think that is a very interesting question, and I think my firm answer would be yes. Haven given my firm answer, I would then go back and say why do I make a difference between gifts and commodities? Now, if you think about what I have just described, these shells -- I wish you could see them because they are quite beautiful, they are about this size, the whole board is about this size, it is covered with red ochre, and the shell is a mother of pearl and is bigger than this, if you could imagine a mother of pearl shell like that on a board, and you hand over the whole thing , so it is bigger than this paper ... and it is laid out on the ground. -- Never mind. If you think about what I have been talking about, and if I say to you, these shells circulate at bridewealth, they circulate at funerals, they are exchanged, in homicide payments and compensation, you cannot use them to obtain food, there are certain kinds of exchanges where a whole lot of shells can be exchanged for a pig, but these

processes are separated. And if I then said to you is this money? What would you say?

PROA: We would think about the relations that they are in.

Marilyn Strathern: You would have to think about it. Ok. If there is no simple answer to that question: is it money? Then you have to say, "well, what am I describing?" And if these items are not money, then I cannot start using the economics of the market to describe what I am talking about. So what terms are we going to use? And I thought, well, in the vocabulary of gift exchange I may be able to find the vocabulary of analysis. It is like an artist choosing the colour. What colour am I going to use? The vocabulary of gift exchange might give me the vocabulary by which to start describing, so my choice of talking about gifts was an artificial choice. These things in themselves are not gifts, I am calling them gifts because I cannot call them commodities. Now, I have been criticized very heavily because people say, "of course these people also have commodities, if somebody wants to get some bananas from somebody else they may give sweet potatoes in return, or they may go and work for them for one day or whatever". They have a very clear notion of the equation between the value of certain things, and that is just like commodities. And why am I making a special case and talking about gift? I have been criticized for this. I would defend my position by saying, is a question of a choice, a choice of terms, and the vocabulary of the gift economy gave me a lot of terms in which to understand. But those terms are only useful for the purposes of understanding that particular set of data, and if I then leave that data, and if I follow these objects as they move out of the Highlands, and if they became, if they came into an art market, then absolutely what we would be dealing with is commodities, so the answer to your question is yes. I would be fascinated to learn what you make of the notion of Anthropology of art in your journal.

PROA: By the way, what do you think about the field of Anthropology of art today?

Marilyn Strathern: One thing that I think is very interesting is that the anthropology of art for many, many years, and this is why Gell became interested, occupied a little field all of its own And what is interesting is that into that field, that was like a dustbin, was tipped all kinds of things: sculptures and figurines and pots and whether you were dealing with decorative art, or whether you were dealing with personal adornments, or whether you were dealing with monuments, it all went into this pot. And that pot, until it is opened up, was actually a really rather interesting reservoir of objects and issues in Anthropology that had not really become investigated. Now that it has been opened up, and it was sort of conserved, precisely because it was not theoretically integrated, it has remained uncontaminated, there are not so many preconceived ideas, so it is a huge open field, and some of it has been taken off by people who are interested in art, other people interested in things, other people interested in materiality, other people interested in substance and so forth.

PROA: For you what did Gell do? To a certain extent he eliminated this, as you said, this....

Marilyn Strathern: That is absolutely correct. I mean there is change over time and people, younger people, invest value in different things from what older people do. There is no doubt about that. But, as soon as you move away from that traditional system that I was talking about, you are entering a very different arena, in which younger people are impressing one another in terms of consuming or participation in sports, or mobile phones, or whatever, and it does not have the same role in the

conduct, visibly, it does not have the same role in the conduct of relations. They create different kinds of relations.

PROA: It is an open field.

Marilyn Strathern: An open field. I think it is an open field. And I think it is very exciting this open field.

PROA: Yes, but at the same time it is really hard to be defined.

Marilyn Strathern: But you don't need to define it, you see? You do not need to define. You do not need to define that field. You do need to define what you want to make of, what to take out of it. That's what you need to. I wish you all good luck.

PROA: Thank you a lot for granting us this conversation.

Marilyn Strathern: Thank you for allowing me to talk about Mount Hagen. I always enjoy doing so. Thank you, thank you very much.

Como citar esse texto:

SIMONI, A. T & CARDOSO, G. R. & OLIVEIRA, L. P. & BULAMAH. R. C. Pigs and mobile phones: a conversation with M. Strathern. IN: Proa - Revista de Antropologia e Arte [on-line]. ano 02, vol. 01, n.02, nov. 2010. Disponível em <http://www.ifch.unicamp.br/proa/EntrevistasII/marilyn.html>, acesso em: dd/mm/aaaa.