



Interview with Sally Price

by Ilana Seltzer Goldstein

(**SALLY PRICE:** First of all, thank you for the opportunity to contribute to PROA. I've always enjoyed dialogues about art with my Brazilian colleagues!)

PROA: How did your interest for the anthropology of art begin?

SALLY PRICE: That's a three-in-one question: art, anthropology, and the anthropology of art. My interest in art began when I was in school, taking weekend art classes, submitting pieces to art contests, and dreaming of becoming an artist; by the time I got to college, I realized that my talents weren't quite sufficient for a full-time commitment, and I began studying literature instead. (I did, however, make one brief return to hands-on art by providing 50 pen-and-ink drawings for a 1992 book about museum collecting called *Equatoria*. That was fun!) My interest in anthropology began when, quite young, I married Richard Price, a graduate student in anthropology, and we began going to "the field" together – first Martinique, then Spain and Mexico, and finally Suriname. I became an active fieldworker years before starting graduate school in anthropology. My interest in the anthropology of art was sparked during the first several years that Richard and I lived with the Saramaka Maroons of Suriname. They were the first people I'd done fieldwork with who cared a lot about the aesthetic dimension of life, not only producing beautiful woodcarvings, engraved calabashes, and brilliant patchwork textiles, but also viewing everything from a rice garden to an imported enamel bucket with an attention to its aesthetics. I can't imagine being interested in Saramaka culture without being very interested in art.

PROA: You and your husband Richard Price work together in various projects. You have written together, for instance, the book on *Maroon Arts*. Do you and Richard have a clear division of roles? How do you manage to separate personal life from intellectual cooperation?

SALLY PRICE: We don't! It all goes together. Over the years we've developed slightly different writing styles, which makes our solo-authored books a little different, but when we write together that difference tends to evaporate. Sometimes we each do the first draft of part of a book and then exchange them for rewriting. Other times we basically talk through part of a text in enough detail so that entering it in the computer is already a co-authored process. One of the most fun collaborations we did was a novel about art forgery called *Enigma Variations* (Harvard University Press, 1995). That book has some parts that are "pure Richard" and others that are "pure Sally", but I think we're the only ones who can tell the difference.

PROA: Your book on *Maroon Arts* shows how descendants of rebel slaves from diverse African origins living in Guiana and Suriname have kept alive pan-African aesthetic ideas while adapting them creatively to changing economic and social circumstances. It seems amazing that even facing much adversity (civil war, a plummeting economy, drugs, mining companies) they still care about artistic mastery. How do you explain it?

SALLY PRICE: People don't lose their culture just because they hit hard times. Think about the descriptions we have of Africans suffering through the horrors of the Middle Passage and arriving in the Americas where one 18th-century writer observed: "todos os escravos são levados para o convés ... e seu cabelo é raspado em diferentes imagens de estrelas, meia-luas etc., o que eles geralmente fazem uns com os outros (sem dispor de lâminas), com a ajuda de uma garrafa quebrada e sem sabão." [J.G. Stedman, quoted in S. Mintz and R. Price, *O Nascimento da cultura Afro-Americana*, Pallas Editora 1992, p. 72]. I would guess that equivalent examples could be found in the open-air camps where victims of the recent earthquake in Haiti don't even have food to eat. People are surprisingly resilient in the face of adversity. It was, for example, around the time that their villages were being bombed in the civil war that Saramaka Maroon women developed openwork carving in calabashes



PROA: In your book *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* you use authors and concepts from different academic fields, such as Sociology, Ethnology and Art History and you mention a kind of resistance against art within Anthropology. Do you still practice this interdisciplinary approach? Do you think that anthropologists are now more open to discuss artistic and esthetical issues?

SALLY PRICE: The climate of interdisciplinary work by art historians and anthropologists is definitely improving. Rather than giving you a short (and therefore inadequate) answer, I'll send you a brief essay I wrote as an afterword for the second (English) edition of *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (**see interview online**). If you'd like to translate it for PROA, you would have a better reply to the question than anything I could provide in the context of this interview.

PROA: In the first chapter of the same book, you display different senses and definitions for "primitive art". In Brazil, the category "primitive art" can encompass many different things, like pre-historical rock signs, *naif*

paintings, popular handcraft, works signed by psychiatric patients and finally the indigenous arts. In which specific way do you use this controversial expression? Is it still present in some museums discourse and among *marchands* nowadays or has it become old-fashioned in post-colonial and globalized times?

SALLY PRICE: It's a thorny expression with an ignoble past.... I use it to refer, not to any artistic traditions, but rather to a distinctly Western ethnocentric gaze. After all, when people talk about "primitive art", they're talking about artistic traditions that have absolutely nothing in common – not geography, not symbolic meaning, not historical period, not the social structure or religious beliefs of the artists.... All they have in common really comes down to a kind of simplistic stereotype of the Exotic Other.

PROA: *Paris Primitive*, your most recent book, deals with the controversies around the Musee Branly, showing that it was in fact a personal project from two Jacques: ex-president Jacques Chirac and his friend, the "primitive" art dealer Jacques Kerchache. The book suggests that there were misunderstandings in many levels during the process – the debate about providing or not ethnological information along with the artifacts is just one example. How did you have access to internal information of the commission? Did you live in Paris at that time? Were French anthropologists involved in the decision-making process?

SALLY PRICE: I began the research at home in Martinique when the idea of a new museum had just begun to be discussed. I never could have launched the project without the Internet and my university library's long-distance services such as Inter-Library loan and electronic access to newspapers and journals. Also, friends and colleagues in France who knew I was working on the project sent me clippings as they appeared. Then in the spring of 2003 I was a visiting professor at the Sorbonne, and that allowed me to make some important contacts and get a sense of where things were headed. It wasn't till 2005 that I began intensive on-site research. During an extended stay in Paris I interviewed both the staff of the museum-in-the-making (all of whom generously granted me time, for which I am very grateful) and outside observers, many of whom had been participants in the process but had quit out of frustration at the direction it was taking and were eager to let me know what kinds of problems they had encountered.

PROA: *Primitive Art in civilized places* criticized that non-Western artifacts had been often exhibited in museums and galleries without indicating the name of their authors neither their precise dates. Did the new Parisian museum solve the problem of anonymity?

SALLY PRICE: Not as consistently as I would have liked. I give examples in *Paris Primitive* – for example the display of two impressive works seized by the French when they conquered the royal palace of Abomey in 1893. The statues of King Glele as “the lion king” and King Gbehanzin as “the shark king” were made by a famous Dahomean artist named Sosa Adede. But when the museum opened the only name associated with the statues was that of the conquering French general, “General Dodds”. But there’s improvement on this question at the Quai Branly: I noticed on a recent visit that Sosa Adede’s name has now been added to the museum label. I don’t know whether my critique might have sparked the change.

PROA: Do you know if the opening of Branly influenced the international art market?

SALLY PRICE: People who have familiarity with the market (sale prices at auctions, etc.) argue that it has caused serious inflation. One example is the statue at the opening of the permanent galleries, which was sold for four million euros.....

PROA: You wrote that Branly has a “general tendency to privilege harmony over social criticism and interests of particular ethnic groups”. Is this conciliatory tendency related to the universalist (and sometimes homogenizing) way France deals with cultural diversity? How (or where) could it be different in such a museum?

SALLY PRICE: I wouldn’t call it conciliatory. The particular French approach to cultural diversity (its famous “*laïcité*”) and the attempt to foster greater appreciation of cultural difference that led to the Quai Branly museum are rather strange bed fellows, in that they’re working in opposite directions – one aimed at promoting cultural assimilation and the other aimed at celebrating cultural distinctiveness. I tried to sort out some of the points of contact in *Paris Primitive* by looking at France’s treatment of ethnic minorities outside of the museum context as well as within it.

PROA: *Paris Primitive* is very well written and pleasant to read. But I have noticed a didactic strategy that is not very common in Anthropology books: there are many small boxes along the pages, explaining facts, terms or biographic profiles for non-initiated readers. Did you choose to communicate to a broader audience?

SALLY PRICE: The English term for those boxes is "sidebars". The first time I remember seeing them was in Lucy Lippard's 1990 book, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*. Since then, Richard Price and I have used them in several books. They're nice because they allow the inclusion of information that doesn't fit easily into the main text, and they don't have the academic formality of footnotes.

PROA: This book has many contact points with another one by Benoit de L'Estoile (*Le Gout des autres*), reviewed in the first edition of *Proa Journal*. Was it by chance or did you two exchange information?

SALLY PRICE: In 2007 I gave a talk at the Quai Branly museum in the context of a big international colloquium organized to celebrate the museum's first anniversary. My talk included a quote from an article by Benoit de L'Estoile. Afterwards he rushed up to me and thanked me, saying that he hadn't been invited to speak at the colloquium, but my talk had served to make his voice heard. So now we're in touch, but that all happened after my book was finished. (My talk is available on line at: <http://actesbranly.revues.org/352>)

PROA: Have you heard about a German project to build an equivalent of Branly in Berlin ?

SALLY PRICE: Yes. The organizers of that project invited me to give a public lecture in 2008 on the idea that, as they put it, I could help to "spare them some of the worst mistakes" that they might otherwise make as they moved ethnographic objects into a new setting. It will be interesting to see what they come up with.

PROA: Your internet site says that you live half of the year in Martinique (making field research and writing) and half of the year in the United States (teaching) and your geographical area of interest covers the entire

Afroamerica, from Toronto to Brazil. Have you ever been to Brazil? Do you know Brazilian indigenous arts?

SALLY PRICE: Richard and I have been to Brazil many times, most recently last year for "Simpósio Internacional: Territórios Sensíveis: diferença, agência e transgressão", at the Museu Nacional in Rio. And we've each had two Fulbright-supported stays (4 months in Salvador and six weeks in Rio), which gave us the opportunity to meet students and colleagues and do lecture trips to about a dozen Brazilian universities, from Maranhão to Porto Alegre. After 2011 we'll be retired from our teaching posts in the US, so we're looking forward to having more time free for more visits to Brazil!

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