

The Dynamics of Auction

Each year some billions of pounds of art and antiques are sold at auction. These auctions consist of numerous intense episodes of social interaction that rarely take more than thirty seconds and yet they enable the valuation and exchange of goods worth anything from a few pounds to many millions. Analyzing video recordings of auctions in Europe and the United States, Christian Heath examines the fine details of the participants' talk, bodily comportment and their use of various tools and technologies. He addresses such matters as order, trust and competition and demonstrates how a complex institutional arrangement with its substantial global turnover is accomplished through embodied action and multimodal interaction.

Christian Heath is a professor at King's College London and codirector of the Work, Interaction and Technology Research Centre. He is co-editor of the Cambridge University Press Learning in Doing series.

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The Dynamics of Auction

Social Interaction and the Sale of Fine
Art and Antiques

CHRISTIAN HEATH

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Contents

<i>Series Foreword</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
1. Auctions: Institutional Form and Interactional Organisation	1
A Brief History of Auctions of Art and Antiques	3
Auctions and Social Interaction	15
A Note on the Approach and Presentation of Materials	23
2. Orders of Bidding	27
Projecting Prices	29
The Run	33
Transitions in the Run	40
Preserving the Run	44
Reconfiguring Increments	47
Differentiating Contributions	50
Ordering Contributions	54
3. Trust and the Integrity of Bids	56
Declaring the Source of Bids	56
The Sequential Organisation of Bidding	63
Establishing the Integrity of Commission Bids	68
The Pace and Rhythm of Bidding	71
The Ecology of the Saleroom	73
4. Establishing Competition: Creating an Impression of Demand	78
Tempting Prices	82
Turning the Opening Price into Bid	86
Starting on the Right Foot	89

viii	<i>Contents</i>
Creating Bids	91
The Design of Vendor Bids	99
Encouraging Bids	104
5. Bidding and the Pursuit of Bids	108
Securing an Opportunity to Bid	110
First Noticed, First Served	114
Ways of Bidding	117
Preserving Anonymity: Surreptitious Bidding	122
Declining an Opportunity to Bid	125
In Pursuit of Bids	129
Participation in Auctions	135
6. Remote Presence and Online Participation	140
Fragile Runs	143
Managing Online Participation	151
The Attribution and Integrity of Online Bids	156
An ‘Intelligent’ Gavel: A Small Experiment	160
Orders of Remote and Local Bidding	162
The Transparency of Online Contributions	164
Co-presence and Remote Participation	165
7. On the Strike of the Hammer	168
The End of a Run	171
The Declaration to Sell	174
Occasioned Bids	177
Encouraging the Underbidder	182
Handling the Gavel: Unresolved Gestures	190
Witnessing the Close of Sale and the ‘Winner’s Curse’	196
8. Embodied Action and the Order of Markets	200
Social Interaction and the Operation of Markets	207
Normal Prices	214
<i>Appendix I. Glossary</i>	221
<i>Appendix II. Transcription Notation</i>	226
<i>References</i>	231
<i>Index</i>	241

Series Foreword

This series for Cambridge University Press is widely known as an international forum for studies of situated learning and cognition. Innovative contributions are being made by anthropology; by cognitive, developmental, and cultural psychology; by computer science; by education; and by social theory. These contributions are providing the basis for new ways of understanding the social, historical, and contextual nature of learning, thinking, and practice that emerges from human activity. The empirical settings of these research inquiries range from the classroom to the workplace, to the high-technology office, and to learning in the streets and in other communities of practice. The situated nature of learning and remembering through activity is a central fact. It may appear obvious that human minds develop in social situations and extend their sphere of activity and communicative competencies. But cognitive theories of knowledge representation and learning alone have not provided sufficient insight into these relationships. This series was born of the conviction that new exciting interdisciplinary syntheses are under way as scholars and practitioners from diverse fields seek to develop theory and empirical investigations adequate for characterizing the complex relations of social and mental life and for understanding successful learning wherever it occurs. The series invites contributions that advance our understanding of these seminal issues.

Christian Heath

Roy Pea

Lucy A. Suchman

Preface

As part of their series of regular sales of art, antiques and general effects, Bainbridge's, a small auction house in Ruislip, West London, had the opportunity to sell a Chinese *yang-cai*, or double-walled vase. The vase had been consigned as part of the house clearance of a bungalow in Pinner not far from the auction rooms. It was one of more than 400 lots to be sold that day. The sale included furniture, pottery, silver, plate, jewellery, pictures, small collectables and the like – the stuff of auctions of art, antiques and general effects sold throughout hundreds of salerooms in Britain, mainland Europe, North America and Australasia each week. Most lots sell for less than £1,000 and many for less than £100. During the days running up to the sale, the vase was on view to potential buyers in the cluttered storeroom at the auction house, placed on a table close to the kitchen. On the day of the sale itself, the auction room was remarkably busy with people sitting on the furniture that was to be sold, standing at the back of the room and crowded along the staircase that rises to the mezzanine floor above. By now the auctioneer, Peter Bainbridge, realised there was substantial interest in the vase but had little idea what price it would achieve.

The auctioneer began the sale of the vase at £500,000 and bidding soon rose by increments of £1 million. As the price rose past £20 million, it fell to two buyers, or at least their representatives, sitting alongside each other on a settee that was to be sold as part of the same sale. The vase was finally sold to a 'leading mainland Chinese collector' for £43 million, surpassing the previous record for a Chinese work of art, £37 million paid earlier the same year for an eleventh-century calligraphic scroll sold at the Beijing Poly auction house. The hammer was brought down to gasps and applause. In his excitement, the auctioneer struck the gavel a number of times on the rostrum. After the sale, when a television crew turned up to film a short piece for the evening news, it was reported that the auctioneer removed the

masterpiece from its carrying case – a cardboard box from a local supermarket – a masterpiece that with the premium had cost the buyer some £51.6 million and may well have increased the auction house's coffers by some £10 million.

The sale raises a number of interesting issues, not least perhaps how a vase believed to have been commissioned for one of the palaces of the Qianlong emperor during the eighteenth century happened to find a home in a small bungalow in West London. It demonstrates the remarkable way in which an auction can establish the price of a rare work of art or antique through open competition and legitimately transfer its ownership – in this case – from the niece of a deceased relative to a leading collector on the Chinese mainland. This seemingly simple mechanism in which the price of goods rises in response to bids from interested parties seems almost anachronistic, more characteristic of traditional, agrarian societies than twenty-first-century capitalism. Yet each year auctions serve to establish the price and exchange of art and antiques worth many billions of pounds. Indeed, the prices achieved at auction are frequently used as 'reference values' and serve as a barometer of the market for works of art and antiques – whether paintings by Dutch masters, early eighteenth-century walnut chairs, long case clocks or, as in the case at hand, Chinese *yang-cai* or double-walled vases.

Over the centuries, auctions of art and antiques have become institutionalised with numerous provincial, national and international houses in Europe, North America, Australasia and, increasingly, the Far East holding sales of art, antiques, objets d'art and general effects on a regular basis. The press and publicity that arise when a Picasso or Turner, the jewellery collection of a Hollywood actress or a Chinese vase sells for many millions of pounds draw attention from the hundreds and thousands of pictures, paintings, clocks, toys, posters, bronzes, sculptures, cameras, classic cars, musical instruments, watches, tea caddies, books, jewels, costumes, garden ornaments, pieces of china, silver and the like sold each and every year through auction. Each one of these transactions, transactions that may involve the sale of goods worth anything from a few pounds to many millions, is accomplished through a brief intense episode of social interaction, an episode that rarely lasts for more than a minute and, in most cases, significantly less.

It is this interaction, its characteristics and organisation, that forms the focus of this book. Drawing on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, it considers how a complex institutional arrangement is accomplished through embodied or multimodal action and interaction. It examines

the ways in which participants – auctioneers, buyers and sale assistants – through talk, bodily comportment and the use of various tools and technologies determine the price and exchange of goods worth many billions of pounds each year – transactions that rarely lead to dispute or difficulty. It addresses matters of *order, trust and competition*, matters central to economic action and market activity, and explores the ways in which they are managed and resolved within the practicalities of the event itself, the routine and recurrent forms of social interaction through which auctions are accomplished.

The book is primarily based on the analysis of a substantial corpus of video recordings of auctions in Britain, mainland Europe and North America gathered over a number of years. Recording was accompanied by extensive field work of both auctions and the activities that arise behind the scenes – in preparing and cataloguing auctions, in displaying the goods for sale and in dealing with vendors and buyers before and after the event. Much time was spent talking to auctioneers, experts, saleroom managers and administrative staff concerning such matters as securing consignments, planning and structuring sales, listing commissions, dealing with accounts, negotiating fees, introducing technical systems and a whole host of related issues that arise in the operation of an auction and auction house. Field work also included numerous discussions and meetings with buyers, members of the trade as well as collectors and private buyers, many of whom provided highly insightful observations concerning the operation of auctions and their own participation and buying practices. On a personal note, having been in the antiques trade for a few years and having attended auctions on a regular basis since I was young, the video recordings proved a remarkable ‘aid to sluggish imagination’, to borrow Harold Garfinkel’s phrase, revealing features of the auction’s accomplishment that had passed unawares to myself and others who frequently participate in these events. While analysis primarily involved extensive transcription and scrutiny of the video recordings, the recordings also provided a useful resource in provoking comments and reflections from auctioneers, saleroom assistants and buyers.

As analysis developed, it became increasingly clear that it was necessary to improve the quality of the recorded data and in particular to secure more reliable access to buyers and sale assistants as well as auctioneers. With the generous assistance of Robin Meisner, Anthony Morris and Menisha Patel, I was able to build a substantial corpus of video recordings using three or more cameras that enabled more detailed scrutiny of the interaction that arose between the auctioneer, prospective buyers and their

representatives as well as the telephone and Internet communications that play an increasingly important role in the auction. With the support of a number of auction houses, I was able to progressively broaden the range and types of auction we recorded. This substantial corpus of recordings includes sales undertaken in regional, national and international auctions houses in the United Kingdom and abroad, and auctions that range from sales of old masters to antiquities, early English furniture to modern and contemporary art, from high-end sales of fine art, through to rural auctions of general household effects. For convenience, throughout the book I use the term *art and antiques* to encompass a broad range of merchandise including paintings, prints, clocks, china, porcelain, jewellery, books, furniture, metalwork, toys, objets d'art, watches, boxes, maps, carpets, musical instruments, photographs, mirrors, statuary, costumes, cameras, trinkets, drawings, antiquities, weapons and much more besides.

Other material and data were also gathered as part of the project. Aside from field work, video recording, discussions and interviews, a number of auction houses generously provided access to a range of internal documents including the confidential sale sheets used by auctioneers during a sale. Also, in collaboration with Hideaki Kuzuoka and Jun Yamashita (University of Tsukuba), Paul Luff and Dirk vom Lehn (King's College London) and two willing and enthusiastic auctioneers, Robert Stones and Nick Allsopp (Peter Wilson Fine Art), we undertook an experimental auction involving students and staff at King's College London. The aim of the auction was to evaluate the use of a prototype system to enhance Internet participation in live auctions. One or two of the findings from the experiment are discussed in Chapter 6. Aside from these materials, it is worth mentioning that for anyone interested in auctions of art and antiques, there is a wealth of readily available material including histories of the auction and auction houses, light-hearted biographies of auctioneers, delightful descriptions found in novels and an interesting and insightful trade press. In Britain, for instance, we have the excellent trade weekly, the *Antiques Trade Gazette*, commonly known as the ATG, from which I liberally quote extracts throughout this book.

For all of us who engage in field work and ethnography, we are well used to relying on 'the kindness of strangers' to cite that wonderful phrase of Tennessee Williams in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but even for a well-seasoned academic, the kindness and generosity that I have received from auctioneers, specialists, saleroom managers and assistants and buyers have proved remarkable. Despite the cynicism that is sometimes levelled at auctioneers and the auction houses, I have found nothing but openness and encouragement for

Preface

xv

the research with few, if any, limits placed on access or the topics that people were willing to discuss. Members of the art and antiques trade as well as collectors and other members of the public who attend auctions have also shown extraordinary generosity – enabling us to record sales and discuss the practicalities of buying and selling at auction. It is not possible to thank all those who helped with the research, but without their kindness and support it would have been a great deal more difficult and less enjoyable to undertake this project. I would like to express my thanks in particular to Nick Allsopp, Paul Barthaud, James Bradburne, James Bruce-Gardyne, Richard Cratchley, Andrea Fiuczynski, David Gregory, Ian Guild, Jane Hay, Richard Heath, Carlo Karrenbauer, Chris Large, Cornelia Pallavicini, Marie Poole, Michael Pritchard, William Summer, George Wade, Tom Woolston and the late Brian Higgins. Robert Stones and Hugh Edmeads deserve very special mention in this regard. They provided wide-ranging access for field work and recording and demonstrated extraordinary willingness and patience to discuss at length the numerous questions and issues that arose as a naive ‘outsider’ attempted to come to grips with the intricacies of auctions and the demands of running an auction house.

For a number of years, the research discussed in this book has formed the basis of presentations, talks and papers given at conferences, colloquia and seminars in Britain and abroad. Audiences have shown much patience and I have greatly benefitted from their comments and in some cases liberally incorporated their ideas into the analysis. I am sure the following does little justice to their observations and insights and for any mistakes or misrepresentations I am very sorry indeed. A number of academic colleagues to whom I am very grateful indeed have provided particular support for and contribution to the study; they include Robert Dingwall, Charles Goodwin, Marjorie Goodwin, Howard Gospel, Adam Kendon, Hubert Knoblauch, Karin Knorr-Cetina, Hideaki Kuzuoka, Per Linell, Lorenza Mondada, Stephen Pratten, Alex Preda, Bernt Schnettler, David Silverman, Aksel Tjora and members of Work, Interaction and Technology Centre at King’s College London, Jon Hindmarsh, Dirk vom Lehn, Helena Webb, Menisha Patel, Lewis Hyland and Francesca Salvadori. Paul Luff deserves very special mention in this regard – he has helped at every stage of the project – in data collection, analysis and preparing the many presentations and papers. Last, but by no means least, I would like to thank Phineas Cleverly for his tremendous efforts in the production of the numerous images and drawings, Helena Webb and Ami Naramor for their careful scrutiny of the manuscript and Simina Calin, Joshua Penney and Adina Berk of Cambridge University Press, New York, for their editorial assistance.

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I would like to dedicate this book to my wife Gillian Heath, to my mother Joan Heath, and to the memory of my father, Claude Barnett Heath.

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