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Creating Competition: The Interactional Accomplishment of the Sale of Fine Art and Antiques at Auction

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There is a long-standing interest in discourse analysis with the ways in which particular forms of talk, in particular turn and sequential organisation, serve to accomplish highly specialised forms of social activity and institutional arrangement. In this paper, we consider auctions of fine art and antiques and examine the ways in which auctioneers deploy an organisation that creates competition and enables the price of goods to be rapidly escalated in a systematic and transparent manner. We explore the ways in which gesture and other forms of bodily comportment are used, with and within talk, to elicit, juxtapose and reveal the actions of potential buyers. We consider how gesture serves to establish the source and integrity of particular contributions and to establish trust in the outcome of the sale and the value that goods achieve. We also examine how the gesturing hands serve to engender specific actions and are transformed in the course of their articulation to respond to the contribution, or absence of contribution, of others; the gesture (re)shaped with regard to the emerging interaction between particular participants. In various ways therefore, the paper is concerned with addressing how gesture and other form of bodily conduct are interactionally articulated with talk so as to accomplish a highly specialised and contingent form of organisational activity; an activity that enables the value and exchange of goods, goods worth many billions of dollars each year, to be determined on the strike of a hammer.

The paper will include the presentation of extracts from video recordings of actual auctions recorded in the UK, North America and mainland Europe.

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