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### The making of Dutch flower culture: Auctions, networks, and aesthetics

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# The Dutch Horticultural Auction: Traders

Like beauty, freedom of the market is in the eye of the beholder.

Economist Ha-Joon Chang



### *Horticultural Trader's Dens*

Dutch growers founded the horticultural auctions, they vote on auction policies, and they closely follow auction prices and trends. But they have little involvement with the auction's day to day operations, not even with the order their flowers and plants are sold, which is decided by lottery. Yet to the horticultural industry and to FloraHolland Aalsmeer, what happens here is no less crucial than cultivation, the grower's side of the cooperative. Events in the auction impact the whole horticultural chain. This is where the flowers and plants are sold. The auctions determine prices, and those prices reverberate through exporters, wholesalers, and retailers, and Dutch auctions establish a global rubric for floral value. Among other things, this means that even transactions far from Aalsmeer (and the other Dutch auctions) are affected by Aalsmeer's sales, since the sales set the standard for price, quality, and aesthetics. Dutch auctions are where you begin to see styles and developments in the industry, to note what is currently popular or losing favor. Aalsmeer is an effective barometer of horticultural trade in the Netherlands and around the world.

But above all, the Aalsmeer auction is a place. The building has four cut flower auction theaters and one for potted plants. Each weekday, through this gigantic structure that houses horticultural commerce, forty to fifty million cut flowers and plants enter and leave. So do ten thousand people, including several thousand traders, four thousand five hundred FloraHolland employees in charge of logistics, movement, testing, bundling, and much else, plus hundreds more who work in restaurants, banks, insurance offices, and other businesses located in the complex. It's a massive operation. Coordinating the reliable and efficient transport and sale of these perishable commodities requires a carefully calibrated infrastructure—a heating system for plants, a cooling system for cut flowers, storage for both, and conveyors, trolleys, and machines to ensure smooth, rapid, precise movement. All of this is done to maintain the optimal freshness of the products for the traders sitting in the auction theaters. Working individually or for import and export companies, they come to Aalsmeer between Monday and Friday to buy flowers and plants. The growers own this place, but because this is where the flowers and plants are sold, it's much more of the trader's domain.

Traders have their own networks, which overlap with those of growers, and share a lot with other parts of the horticultural industry, in terms of broadly accepted values, a shared sense of mission, tacit codes of behavior, and assumptions about economic and aesthetic practices. Even more than growers, buyers tend to be men. In the auctions, they frequently describe the environment as 'a man's world,' something clear enough to anyone visiting FloraHolland Aalsmeer, where on any given day you find hundreds of men and no more than three or four women scattered among the seated

crowds. But the actual workings of the auction and what happens among the traders are more complicated than what meets the eye, and may also seem more mysterious than grower practices and strategies.

An auction is in essence a market organization, a way of organizing the market<sup>50</sup> (ter Woorst 1987: 136). But the way things are done in Aalsmeer may fly in the face of commonly accepted notions about auctions, free markets, and the behavior of male traders. Auctions are thought of as pure arenas of capitalism, places ruled by the laws of supply and demand, spaces where market distortions don't exist, or are minimal. Auctions are also seen as unique stages for the performance of 'economic man,' where our true economic nature comes out, and it is competitive, robust, masculine, and profit driven. As champions of this realm, traders enjoy a powerful mystique, and even a romantic allure. This is especially the case among stock market traders, but also true for participants in other forms of auction. Among one another, traders exhibit a certain solidarity, though in Aalsmeer's auctions it's seasoned with doses of razzing and competition, a set of routines that correlates with an emerging form of white collar masculinity (Connell 2005). More broadly, trader behavior and outlook fit with ideas about what R.W. Connell first conceptualized as 'hegemonic masculinity,' a theoretical approach to gender relations (not only between or among groups of men) that over the past several decades Connell and others have elaborated and refined (2000). This hegemonic masculinity spans different strata of society, from the business elite to flower brokers and laborers, and its power can be seen in its ability to define conflicts, set the terms in which events are evaluated, define morality, and impose a persuasive language in which all parties are understood (Tosh 2004: 41-59). The authority and persuasiveness of such an outlook ultimately rest on the horticultural auction's financial strength and cultural clout.

Taking this into account, along with what we commonly suppose about traders and auctions, it seems unlikely that auctions might work not on the basis of competition and 'market fundamentals,' but on tacit agreements and norms, ultimately on forms of cooperation and community. Yet in fact, this turns out to be the case. And while that conclusion is consistent with other aspects of Dutch horticulture, it's not unique to Dutch horticultural auctions. All auctions work like that, as sociologist Charles Smith demonstrated over twenty years ago in a book based on decades of research, the insights and conclusions of which apply directly to FloraHolland (1989). Today, there's a broad spectrum of auctions in the world, selling everything from agricultural products to e-band width, though the exchange of goods is only part of the picture. Smith came to some curious conclusions about the role of community and cooperation in auction practices. Auctions have many outcomes, he argued, but only one or two of those are

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<sup>50</sup> "Een veiling is en wezen een 'markt-organisatie'".

economic, and while determining price is certainly one function, it's not always even the main one (Smith 1989: 162). This unorthodox view may seem counterintuitive, and difficult to accept. It's reasonable to wonder, if it's true that sales are only a secondary or tertiary consequence of auctions, why *are* things sold at auction?

Before attempting an answer for cut flowers and plants, and exploring the specific practices of Dutch auctions in FloraHolland Aalsmeer, it's useful to examine why *anything* is sold at auction, because it turns out that different auctions share some general principles. An understanding of them will then clarify how Dutch horticultural auctions work, and increase an appreciation for Aalsmeer's look and feel, and for what participants say about it. And given the common fundamental aspects of auctions, as well as the central role of auctions to the world economic system, there might be some broad implications to be drawn from Dutch horticultural auctions about how economic decisions are made, and how values are determined for many things that are both vital and common in daily life (such as oil, the stock market, copyrights, the seafood industry, and much more). Though often misrepresented or else scarcely visible to the public, auctions are important arenas which reflect and produce economic and cultural values. This is another way in which the local practices and activities occurring in FloraHolland Aalsmeer may ripple out around the world, and could have significance well outside of horticulture and agriculture.

### ***Auctions Produce Value, Identity, and Community***

Consider the breadth and diversity of what's sold today at auction: a Dubai condominium, a herd of Texas longhorn cattle, a Van Gogh painting, a cosmonaut's space suit, a suit worn by Cary Grant, Chilean sea bass at Tokyo's Tsukiji market, a thousand barrels of Nigerian oil, e-band width, copyrights for a novel, a stolen car recovered by the police...and some items from the past: objects ransacked from a village by Roman soldiers, an Ibo man in chains on a nineteenth century Charleston slave block, the prized Golden Age Semper Augustus tulip. Stolen goods, people, property, art, commodities of various kinds, all plucked from different times and places: what do they have in common? Recall Kopytoff's comment that the same thing may be treated as a commodity at one time and not at another, and how that reveals a moral economy supporting the 'objective economy' (1986: 64). As Smith framed the issue, what is it about them, or the auction system, that makes people sell them in this format? Millions of things are sold every day at fixed prices, so what is it about these things that requires an entirely different pricing technique to determine their worth? (1989: 1-3, 21) Whether or not it's the overriding concern, one purpose is to find a price.

Auctions take place around objects of uncertain or undetermined value, which means that some things for various reasons are not well suited to be sold by other means

(Smith 1989: 3). Changing conditions of supply and demand, unclear origins, and other factors may secure or destabilize value. In practical terms, the result is that the amount and type of things offered at auction does not remain static. What is offered and what is available fluctuate. At one point or another, almost everything has been or could be sold via auction. There isn't an inherent relationship between certain specific goods and the auction system, rather between goods of uncertain value and the auction. Not all things of uncertain value are sold by auction, but all things sold by auction have an uncertain value.

To varying degrees outside of auctions, the pricing of many items involves assessing quality, supply and demand, craftsmanship, and current taste; the common expectation is that, above all, a fair price represents the cost of producing and marketing, plus a modest mark up for profit. But in many cases it may be difficult or impossible to determine production costs when those costs can not be deduced or the object was produced decades or centuries ago, as with antiques. Similarly, yesterday's supply and demand can not predict tomorrow's supply and demand if subject to unknown, uncontrollable, or natural forces, as is the case with flowers, fish, oil, and other commodities. A further ambiguity also arises in the case of many commodities, that of classifying the type of thing being sold. Not only is the price of oranges unclear and unpredictable, but the price of Florida oranges will likely stray from that of Brazilian and Spanish oranges because of differing weather conditions, labor supply, and wages, as well as other structural factors that are always in flux (Smith 1989: 25-28). In Aalsmeer's auction, it is not at all true that a rose is a rose is a rose, because the grower's reputation, the condition of the product, and the location of its growth all effect what buyers are willing to pay. In this way, auctions do more than match buyer and seller at optimum prices: they resolve the ambiguity of value. But where do they derive the authority and legitimacy to do so?

Granted that auctions sell things of uncertain value, that in itself doesn't explain why auctions take place in open forums, why such objects require a social, public environment (including the virtual space of internet auctions) to be sold and bought. Auctions are about more than finding a price. They stabilize value through a socially sanctioned institution. Like ancient auctions in Rome or the slave-holding United States, today's flower auctions in Aalsmeer are profoundly social organizations. In fact, one of the reasons for the creation of many auctions is precisely this social aspect. An auction gives authority to the community that hosts it, which partly explains why so many charitable organizations turn to auctions for fundraising—the format justifies their collective power while it raises money (Smith 1989: 51-79). And via the auction, the community also may assign ownership to certain things, and give them a new identity. It's a rite of passage: auctions baptize, or brand, what passes through them. This is true in the case of recovered stolen objects today, but has been true for far longer. After

sacking villages, Romans auctioned the booty; in the antebellum United States, auctioning Africans partly served as a public ceremony that redefined the people as property. The auctions left their mark: they transformed the relationship between the public and the people or objects on the block (Smith 1989: 48-50, 79). And in turn, the public legitimized not merely the sale, but the new identity of the person or thing auctioned; in doing so, the auctions lend an aura of objectivity, fairness, and even naturalness and inevitability, to wider values and practices, whether they relate to slavery, pillaging empire, or capitalist commodity culture. In this way, the auctions both manifest power and serve as a conduit for social and economic values.

The community that hosts the auction sits in a unique position. In the Dutch horticultural industry, the auction community consists partly of the traders, the sellers (growers), the auctioneers, and others along the production chain. But the central dynamic feature of the auction community is the sodality of traders, as numerous ethnographic investigations have confirmed (Bestor 2004, Hertz 1998, Smith 1989, Zaloom 2007). The traders form a society of professionals, defined not only by common gender and nationality, but by shared interests and group identity, which is reinforced through trade publications and meetings, and expressed in styles of dress and codes of behavior. Some of their behavior seems memetic—that is, cultural information and practice is communicated via gestures, ways of speaking and moving, which other members of a group implicitly understand and imitate. The auction's dress code is informal—jeans, flannel shirts, worn pullovers, or the occasional bright, button down top. Many smoke, and the smoking rooms are also thick with talk. Conversations rarely exceed a few minutes because of the pace of trade, but there's enough time for small talk, jokes, and observations about business. What binds the traders are these sorts of habits and practices developed through repetition and through contact with one another, as well as the shared collective goals of buying the greatest variety of flowers and plants of the highest quality at the lowest price.

Their community is defined in terms of their connections to the place, traditions, and the institution, but above all by their relationships to each other and to the flowers and plants. As in other auctions, “the single most important factor that accounts for the sense of community is their shared value of the worth of the goods they pursue” (Smith 1989: 69). This shared value provides a real sense of distinction. Their judgement and expertise draw them together in a sort of congregation, and at the same time this disposition sets them apart as a group. But their sensibility is not merely or exclusively a ruling class taste, but rather, like Bourdieu's teachers and artists, often it is “a taste defined negatively, and combining features of middle-brow taste and popular taste” (1984: 267). Their outlook is upwardly mobile, good humored, and while not ostentatious, traders don't shun expressions of financial success by referring to the cars they drive, or vacations they've taken. These trappings of wealth can not be

disentangled from the auction's performance, the popularity of particular flowers, or the profits of one company or another. The status of flowers, companies, people, and the auctions are all aspects of what binds the community of traders.

These values influence buying and selling. Another way of putting this is that the real base of the auction's authority comes from the fact that the value of items sold is determined by the collective judgement of the auction community, though language may disguise what is actually going on. It is said that a particular item, or flower, *sold* at a particular price, using the passive tense, as though it happened of itself, a natural force. It would be more accurate to say that this specific group of people *collectively agreed* that a certain item was worth a particular price (Smith 1989: 167). But that would draw attention to the subjective and communal social nature of the process, and jeopardize the auction's status as an objective medium. The traders, working within the rules of the institution of FloraHolland, and within their own social norms, represent the decisive stage in the horticultural chain, ushering the product onto the market. And they imbue the process with a marked social character.

The traders are the heart of the auction community, and ultimately, communities determine social legitimacy, broad meanings, and local understanding. They generate definitions and ways of seeing while at the same time reinforcing those perspectives and values as natural or inevitable. When people participate in auctions, they do so not only as individuals pursuing their own interests, but also as members of a community, as part of the social fabric (Smith 1989: 93). In fact, typically, an auction emerges as an expression of an extant community, as was the case in Aalsmeer, where the auctions were founded by neighbors who knew each other from church and school, and were often linked by kinship as well. So the auction that grows out of a community in the first place becomes an institution that in turn sustains that community. But of course, in this sense of fostering social ties, auctions are not unique organizations. Nor are auctions distinguished from other kinds of markets, pricing, and exchange processes in possessing a social character. All sorts of market transactions, fixed price purchases, and treaty-negotiated sales are embedded in everyday life, though we rarely stop to notice the social norms that inform them.

Suppose you buy a microwave in a store, and a day later it breaks. Even if no warranty or guarantee came with the item, you would probably feel entitled to an exchange or refund, and the shopkeeper would most likely oblige. Or similarly, if after purchasing the microwave, you then came across other local stores selling them for half the cost, you might return to re-negotiate the price, on the tacit understanding that there exists a communal standard of fairness, a standard that suggests not a specific monetary figure, but a value falling within an accepted range. There are two relevant points here. First, price, even in a 'fixed-price' situation, may also in some circumstances be negotiated; second, and more generally, social values permeate different sorts of

financial transactions, and set limits on economic behavior. What distinguishes auctions from other kinds of buying situations is not merely that they are social institutions, but the extent to which they're actively devoted to and hinge on their social status (Smith 1989: 14).

### *Auctions and the Performance of 'Economic Man'*

Compared to other economic situations, the social aspect of an auction may well be more prominent, but that does not skirt or deny that they have a vital economic component. The auctions set the daily prices for the products, which is obviously important for everyone along the global horticultural chain. The method of selling is key for other reasons too, including that the auction community takes shape there in the auction hall.

As they determine prices, the auctions provide spaces for the performance of economic and social values; in this case, the values depicted and embodied come mostly from white Dutch men between the ages of thirty and fifty. The auction is the theater of trader comportment and the conduct of trade, which aren't the same thing. Since the trade involves auctioneers and other participants, it is more than just what traders do, say, or think. In a general sense, almost any human deed may be considered a performance in that it involves an individual or group carrying out behavior. But envisioning as performance what happens in the auctions also implies that actions convey meanings to both actors and observers, that conduct and specific activities—gestures, ways of speaking, how one carries oneself, eye contact, dress, and many other details—are coded, communicate messages, suggest interpretations, and express identity (Goffman 1959: 17-76). In turn, these expressions and displays are embedded in more general practices and traditions. A performative perspective invites attention to the deeply rooted cultural patterns which suggest forms that actions may assume—ranging from speech, tone of voice, and kinesics to the narrative frames and embedded codes which guide action and its interpretation in concrete situations (Turner 1982). The theatrical metaphor frames the situation through categories of actors, scripts, props, critics, the mis-en-scene, and the audience—each of which, in different ways, corresponds to auction activities. And as Goffman elaborated, there is more than one stage—there's the front, back, and outside, each of which constructs the drama. These three stages don't translate precisely to the horticultural auctions, nor even to the industry as a whole, but given the auctioneer booths, the trader smoking rooms, the hall itself, and countless other peripheral stages for meetings and negotiations, it's not a bad general analogy for the auction's economic drama. Aalsmeer's five auction halls occupy center stage each weekday from six a.m. when trading starts, and lasts for a few hours until there are no more lots for sale.

With its multiple tiers of trader seating, auctioneer balconies, and stage inset with a calligraphy of plant-display tracks, Aalsmeer's plant auction has an operatic feel that's curiously appropriate for the trade that goes on there. It is the seat of economic and social dramas that unfold around fragile, exotic commodities. Because this is the only space for potted plants (which constitute about twenty percent of FloraHolland's trade volume), it's much bigger than any of the four cut flower auction halls. One morning, amid the sounds of trade, I overheard a buyer speaking Spanish, which is unusual in this environment, and I wondered about his experience as a Spaniard among Dutch flower and plant brokers. We began a conversation about auctions, the role of traders, and the global potted plant business. He had just made his final purchase for the day, so it was a good time to meet.

"I deal mostly with clients in Spain," explained Gonzalo, a handsome thirty-ish trader for a large import-export company called Las Palmas. After studying international marketing in Maastricht, he landed a job in the flower industry, since he was well-suited to do business in the Spanish market. Fanning my arm across the seated rows of traders, I asked him what he made of all these men involved in buying plants. "Uy, it's too macho, this environment," he groaned, and smiled. Shuffling beside me toward the door, he continued: "All these guys, you know, and all this money, our job can seem quite glamorous...But you know what? You think the Dutch are so sophisticated and with all this money moving in the auctions, they're so rich, but us guys, the people you see working here, most of us, we're the *campesinos*. We're not earning the big money. These guys are basically farmers, not big shots. Actually, we're a bit like the slaves of the market."

Referring to enslavement in the marketplace was a rich and provocative way of describing his own place, and the position of traders, in the horticultural industry. On one hand, the notion of slaves of the market resonates strongly through the history of auctions, from Roman coliseums to the prominent auction blocks of the Atlantic slave trade, which ran simultaneously with the coffee-house art market auctions in European capitals (Smith and Findlen 2002). But of course Gonzalo did not literally mean that he and his fellow traders were chained to their desks and forced to perform for the market. He was indicating the hierarchy of power and profit, and at the same time, implied a kind of camaraderie with the other traders in this milieu. That was the other important content of our conversation, that between traders there's a special bond, a sort of brotherhood, or fellowship. The behavior of humans performing economic rituals is often described as that of 'economic man' or *homo economicus*, which indicates a kind of dog-eat-dog perspective. But given the amount of tacit cooperation occurring in the auction, and the affectionate relationships among the traders, *homo reciprocans* may be a better moniker. Yet whether the emphasis is on cooperation or competition, the almost exclusively male ambiance attests to the homosocial character of the auctions.

Traders associate in an idiom of homosocial humor and camaraderie that pivots on the assumption of masculine domination. Instances vary, but are pervasive and quotidian. As flowers pass through the auction pit, typically female FloraHolland assistants in light green jerseys pull out bouquets from the passing carts to display them for the buyers; if she is an attractive young woman, and/or buxom, she may receive hoots and cat calls. If a trader goofs and mistakenly bids too high, his colleagues may mock his error by linking it to effeminate characteristics. One may hear shouts to bring your mother in for help or a female teacher to properly educate you. Frequent responses to my question of why there aren't many women traders included: because it involves money, the auction is just too complex, or simply because the work is too demanding.

Auction participants may not consciously perform as men—they're there to buy or sell flowers and plants—but like Gonzalo, many do indicate an awareness of the fraternal environment, the *ouwe jongens krentenbrood*, influencing their behavior. Yet even in these cases, their acknowledgement seems to focus on things like shouting and other boisterous activities, and not on 'feminine' qualities like cooperation and trust, which are equally intrinsic to auction activities. Trust is a kind of expectation, based partly on experience, and although in this sense it is usually unstated, it is essential in forging personal bonds, institutional credibility, and communal cohesion. Trust brings a level of comfort and predictability to all social life, it helps to foster a sense of community, and it facilitates people working together. Large scale, diverse, and anonymous trade can and does take place in many economic environments without much critical evaluation or trust. But in economic scenarios dealing with credit, such as the financial sector or Aalsmeer's auction, you must be able to assess the trustworthiness of the individuals and institutions with whom you exchange commodities, money, or credit. Although trust takes the form of contracts and treaties governing transactions that involve such things as property, taxes, bankruptcy, and commerce, it is ultimately a psychological and social quality. When present, it's practically invisible, part of the normal civic landscape; when absent, it leaves a gaping hole, and may wreak havoc. Though it manifests itself in documents and rules, without these other, more basic but nebulous social and psychological aspects of trust, institutions, currencies, and systems collapse. And not only institutions and commodity markets hinge on it. In fact, as Mark Granovetter put it, social networks, too, depend upon "trust, by which I mean the confidence that others will do the 'right' thing despite a clear balance of incentives to the contrary..." (2004: 33)

The industriousness of Aalsmeer's flower auction system emerges not from cut throat competition but from cultural familiarity, from the handshake, the formal and informal agreements between buyer, between buyers and growers, and with distributors, importers and exporters, with the institution of FloraHolland sometimes acting as intermediary. This is not to claim that this realm of economic life is somehow

dominated by jovial goodwill toward one's fellow man. But the basic, common denominators are cooperation and trust. A trader will not last long who acts only and always as an individual, without give and take and compromise, without thinking in larger terms about the collective, the institution, the market, the industry. Even Wall Street traders exhibit a brotherhood, a social adhesive that supports the collective agenda in spite of fierce personal competition (Zaloom 2007: 111-125). Trust is a binding element, something fundamental for networks and the formation and reproduction of the auction community. Though personal qualities may reinforce cooperation, naturally, trust entails more than a wink, a nod, or a promise. FloraHolland has a lot of formal provisions to protect financial interests and ensure smooth business operations. In order to buy at the auction, traders must provide FloraHolland with their bank/giro number. The institution thus safeguards itself from buyers accruing exorbitant debt, but ultimately, the system does not hinge on such rules that prevent outright swindling or that discourage excess. Trust can not be dictated by the policies of a government or an institution.

In the case of the Netherlands horticultural industry, it emerges from and in turn helps to reinforce social networks, and this has numerous practical consequences for trade. In many ways, the auction community and the larger social world of the horticultural industry are precisely what constitute 'the market,' and in part this may explain participants' faith in it. Participants' financial success depends on an accurate understanding of Aalsmeer's auctions, its patterns, rhythms, as well as stated and unstated rules. In addition to specific horticultural knowledge, they know the autonomy, flexibility, self policing, and communal codes that govern market transactions. But because these factors involve norms (and our norms are invisible to most of us), many traders are unaware, or only vaguely conscious of how they inform their behavior. Their language to describe what they do and why tends to focus on more immediate, tangible concerns, or else on ideological generalities.

Asked why flowers are sold at auction, traders typically say that it's the fastest, fairest, and most effective method. They're not wrong: it is certainly more quick and efficient than other options. Garrulous ones may add other observations, but they mostly boil down to restating in one way or another that flowers *are* sold by auction, to description rather than analysis. In different ways, the idea of the essential fairness and impartiality of this form of selling has been emphasized in ethnographies of specific auctions, such as Tsukiji's fish auction in Japan, and from conclusions drawn from many different kinds of auctions (Bestor 2004; Smith 1989). In Aalsmeer, the sense seems to be: this is the way it's done because it's the shrewdest, best format; this is the way it has always been done; so why and how would you bother to change it? For many, auctions represent the crucible of natural laws of value, where pricing works out based on the most objective, transparent principals of the free market, and not according to

more worldly factors like the social norms and practices of actual communities, or the ambiguous value of certain goods. It is true that in the horticultural industry, commodity prices are vulnerable to unpredictable external forces such as drought and civil war in East Africa, the price of oil, currency fluctuations, and more. But the resulting rise and fall in price highlights the auction's main reason for existence. It provides a socially sanctioned, stabilizing force, a forum that may allow for a degree of accountability and regularity, and does so, moreover, through a local institution shaped by the values, practices, and traditions of participants.

### ***The Horticultural Auctions and Dutch Male Networks***

The blending of formal and informal economic relationships have been characterized as “business groups,” legally separate commercial interests that overlap, and have been applied more to East Asian than to European or American economic contexts (Granovetter 2005). But because “business groups” tend to be long term relationships based in commerce and cross into the social arena, they represent a useful way of describing the fluid structural continuity of Dutch horticultural networks. The auctions are one stage where the networks perform.

Horticultural networks in the Netherlands thrive not only in the flower business, of course— the're also the backbone of the corporate elite. Eelke Heemskerk has argued that the social network of these economic power brokers represents the institutional configuration of the corporate regime and is “part and parcel” of the Dutch form of capitalism. Social networks are important for business governance, says Heemskerk, because they supplement the competitive nature of the market with structured coordination, and that these social networks are the foundation of formal and informal institutions that coordinate the economy (Heemskerk, 2006: 30). But, he laments, in the 1980s and 90s these networks that have always championed the strength and competitiveness of the Dutch corporate world have begun to break down in part due to a fraying of the social fabric, as he sees it. In contrast, Dutch horticultural networks remain strong and active, and in fact, with the ongoing expansion of the industry into more and more distant regions, continue to grow. The increasing size and dominance of the industry would seem in some ways consistent with what has been written about the networks and the circulation of information in this stage of globalization. Namely, that information flows virtually, with increasing dominance and speed, and over greater distances in the contemporary period (Castells 1996). But in the Dutch horticultural industry, new technologies haven't transformed the way business is done. Although the internet and other technologies have helped to increase the industry's speed, efficiency, and range, what remains remarkably consistent is the character of the trade, where personal relationships define and seal commercial agreements. If the Dutch horticultural industry seems in this respect to be bucking trends, it is not due to a stubborn luddite

refusal to embrace technological innovation. It's more that increased technological efficiency has not really eroded the powerful social bonds that drive the industry.

Heemskerk calls some of the most important figures in Dutch power networks "big linkers" (Heemskerk, 2006: 95), who are corporate directors that hold three or more positions on corporate boards, and who often become spokesmen for the corporate elite. The networks of the horticultural industry have similar figures, such as the current president of Rabobank, who began his career as a trader in Aalsmeer, or Tjibbe Joustra, who left his position as Anti-Terrorism Coordinator of the Netherlands to head the Flower Council of Holland. These sorts of characters in the horticultural industry provide important links to the country's finance, infrastructure, and planning. In and out of the industry, these kinds of figures in the Netherlands are also commonly known as *bestuurders*, prominent people who seem to have a hand in guiding and organizing everything. The structure and composition of these network ties also affect social norms in the industry. In the flower auctions, masculinity is so basic a norm that it's almost like a gravitational force, lending substance, validity, and weight to the work of the trade, their common enterprise. Both the horticultural community and the business elite seem to fit with the conception of the familiar old boy's network. Many of these grand old men enjoy power and influence beyond their professional positions, by virtue of their eminence, reputation, prestige, and notoriety (Fennema 1982).

These poobahs (or *bobos*, as the Dutch also call them) fill the ranks of the business elite and the upper echelons horticultural networks alike. In contemporary gender studies, and generally, among observant lay people, it's recognized that major forms of social, political, and economic power are inseparable from dominant masculine practices and values. Recently, some have argued that the global corporate economy might be the setting for a new pattern of hegemonic masculinity, called "transnational business masculinity" (Connel and Wood, 2005). This management masculinity is shaped by two basic features. First, corporate managers of multinationals try to steer the flows not only of economic capital but also social capital. Further, they must increasingly work together cooperatively to coordinate and direct the complexities of fast paced and geographically diverse market dynamics. There's a much greater emphasis than ever before on teamwork, multiculturalism, empathy, and openness, which are not traditionally powerful masculine characteristics in these environments. Nevertheless, the ultimate business goals remain as competitive and back-stabbing as ever. And these values are consistent with ideas about achieving success in the market as an individual or as an institution. One possibility is that as globalization and multiculturalism continue to evolve, masculine and white elites must also adapt. Institutions may continue to perform the same—or very similar—functions, but the cultural logic within the institutions is shifting, perhaps paving the way for broader and enduring changes.

### ***What Traders Do at FloraHolland***

The abstract analysis of values and patterns, or of the market and masculinity may feel more tangible when matched up with the routine activities of traders in the horticultural auctions. What does the daily trade look like in FloraHolland Aalsmeer? How do thirty-five hundred or so people buy over twenty million cut flowers and plants each Monday through Friday?

Cut flowers generally arrive in the afternoon to be auctioned the following morning; usually, they have already been sorted, bunched, and placed in buckets, on trays and carts, and sit overnight in cold storage. Plants, which have a longer shelf life, also come in each day for sale, but there is more flexibility in timing and movement. Around five a.m., traders begin to show up to inspect the flowers, see what looks good, and note the condition of the types they're planning to buy. At six, the auctions open, generally to some fanfare: a bell goes off, lending a church like or religious feel to the ritual. The opening minutes showcase new varieties, and trade moves quickly. Traders sit in one of the five auction amphitheatres, each of which has enough room for five or six hundred people. They may sit anywhere, but tradition gives the front and center seats to the biggest buyers, generally those working for big import-export companies like Zurel.

Not just anyone can walk in off the street and buy at the auction. You have to register with the auction, which entails an annual fee, and entitles you to make purchases through the clock, as well as other formats mediated by the institution and located on-site. These other formats include 'cash and carry,' which offers a warehouse of garden supplies as well as flowers and plants, and the *bemiddelingsbureau*, a sort of intermediary that negotiates fixed price sales between growers and buyers. Buyers that use the *bemiddelingsbureau* tend to be large and buy in bulk. In spring, the supermarket chain Albert Heijn might buy millions of tulips through the *bemiddelingsbureau*, for instance, ordering them weeks before they're available. By not purchasing through the clock, they may manage to negotiate a cheaper price with growers; on the other hand, Albert Heijn might find that they paid more on the day of delivery than they would have through the clock. It's a risk, but it offers several advantages. The buyer is guaranteed the quantity desired at a negotiated price; growers are guaranteed to sell their flowers at a price they find acceptable; and the auction institution benefits by positioning itself as the intermediary in even fixed price negotiations, thus discouraging trade outside of FloraHolland. It works as a sort of futures trade, since it's done in advance and both buyer and seller are gambling that they'll do better this way than through the clock, but the negotiated prices may be higher or lower than what buyers pay through the clock on the day the flowers are delivered.

Before the clocks begin, traders come in to the auction hall and plug in: they take a seat at one of the desks and insert their yellow plastic card to a slot on the side, which registers their number with the auction, and other buyers and the auctioneers can see them and follow their purchasing activities. This allows them to see the order the flowers will be sold and thus estimate when they need to pay careful attention. They also put on a headset, which allows them to hear the auctioneers, and to speak to them. When they want to buy, they must be the first to push a button located on the desk, and then say how much of the lot they want—five or twelve or whatever they wish. They follow what's for sale via the clock, which they can see on wide screens positioned above the auction pit, or on their own laptops. Most traders have a laptop for convenience, to see clearly the clock above them, as well as to follow the clocks in other auction halls, and they carry a mobile phone for quick communication with whom they're buying for, and sometimes also to speak with traders sitting in other auctions.

The 'clock' that they keep such a careful eye on tells far more than time or price. It is a screen with a lot of information that their trained eyes can process in a glance. There is a number indicating the size of the lot to be sold, the price per stem, the name of the grower, the grower's location, a digital photo of the flower, and a quality rating assessed by a team at the auction. Taking up most of the screen, at the center of the clock is a circle marked with one hundred tics (each one eurocent) and a hand that spins past the tics, registering the price. This is a Dutch auction, which means descending bid sales. Prices start high and fall until someone buys the lot. Each purchase stops the clock momentarily, and then bidding continues until the entire lot is sold or until no one will buy. Descending bid sales move far more quickly than the British style ascending bid auctions, and with such a fragile, short-lived commodity, speed is essential. This is how, in a matter of four or five hours, over twenty million flowers and plants can be sold through about one hundred twenty thousand transactions.

In addition to the card and buying number, traders also rent a lot, or space on the floor of the auction warehouse where their purchases will be taken. Information on the product and the buyer are relayed directly to hand held devices of people working on the auction floor, who move the flowers and plants from the auction hall to the appropriate spot on the floor. Once traders finish buying, they go to their allotted space to inspect and collect their flowers or plants. If there's a problem, they may go to the complaints bureau, which maintains records of all the sales and will help to sort out the confusion. By around eleven o'clock trade is over, and the clocks stop, but activity continues with logistics and transportation to finish the day's business and prepare for the next one.

## *The Market and the Marketplace*

Traders' outlooks on all this activity are influenced by more than local practices and a Dutch masculine style. What traders do and how they talk about it are also partly shaped by their conceptions of markets, and where and how the Aalsmeer auction fits in to a larger economic scheme. Prevailing values and ideas as well as abstract notions about the economy are inseparable from practices in the market place, a relationship that has been described as "the cultural circuit of capitalism" (Thrift 2005). This circuit flows in both directions. Not only are local practices inflected by popular conceptions of the market, social identity, structural order, and historical memory, but FloraHolland Aalsmeer is also embedded in other institutions, infrastructures, and in the wide cultural diffusion of the horticultural industry. This dynamic helps give the Aalsmeer auctions a sense of place. Markets are, after all, both real places and abstract notions, traditionally distinguished with the terms 'marketplace' and 'the market.' One is somewhere you might go to buy sunglasses, a radio, or flowers; the other is sort of like dark matter in the universe, everywhere and nowhere at once, undetectable in itself, but causing observable effects all over. Both of these understandings inform what goes on in Aalsmeer: a specific place with its own idiosyncrasies, it also exemplifies general principals. The market is simultaneously hands-on and abstract, local and global, embodied and disembodied. One can talk about the market in a shorthand way, by asking how things went that day in the auctions, but the horticultural market is also world wide.

It influences and is impacted by numerous factors. Due to its interconnectedness and to butterfly effects, subtle, disparate, and seemingly unrelated events may dramatically affect 'the market.' In fact, the market itself is sometimes likened to an ecosystem or is described as having moods (Jacobs 2005). Conceived of as a force of nature, among the faithful the market inspires a kind of blind reverence. But far more than a metaphor for nature or a natural system itself, the market and its industries affect the natural world, and are also influenced by weather, resource availability, labor, and many other variables. Floods, droughts, interest rate hikes, wars, a rising Euro and political sex scandals may each cause price instability in agricultural and financial commodities. This price instability creates a situation that the auction, with its collective authority, is designed to resolve. Though participants may credit 'the market' with providing equilibrium, in an auction they themselves provide the resolution to certain kinds of instability.

The behavior of these men occurs in a place, of course, and that place, the Aalsmeer auctions, in turn molds the traders' practices, beliefs, and values. But as international competition and trade over the internet increase, one wonders where these trends may lead. What would happen if the geographical location of the market were uprooted? Is electronic space the new place for FloraHolland? If Aalsmeer as a specific

location has critically shaped the industry, as the industry evolves, will communities continue to be geographically defined, and what will this do to the locally defined characteristics of the market? As the horticultural auctions have begun to shift to the virtual market, we may already begin to answer these questions. As of 2009, forty-five percent of Aalsmeer's trade was already done via remote purchasing—traders bought their products through the auction, but were not necessarily physically on site when they did so. And auction planners project increasing volumes of e-trade. This may be another example of the kind of policy that benefits the institution of the auction (i.e. FloraHolland) at the cost of local growers and buyers.

The first step in imagining what a switch to electronic trade might mean is to set the transition in the context of other formerly geographically based markets that have atomized to the digital world. Given that electronic sales have often usurped the local retail of books, film, clothes and other items, one might predict that we are about to witness the disappearance or radical reorganization of the horticultural auction community. As the flower auctions take place more and more online, as trade moves away from Aalsmeer's auction halls on to the virtual space of the internet, it might seem like the Dutch horticultural networks will break down and perhaps disappear. In fact, FloraHolland planners anticipate that trade will soon become primarily electronic. Van Dijk (1991) and Manuel Castells (1996, 2005) both postulated at length about social networks taking shape more and more in virtual space, and coming to dominate not only trade but all aspects of community and daily life. Writing on the early cusp of the widespread commercial availability of the internet, many of their forecasts have proven accurate. Things like e-banking and social networking sites such as Facebook are frequently touted as examples. Furthermore, one need not speculate on the feasibility of hosting an auction in virtual space, given e-bay other successful on-line auctions. Over the past five years, the geographically based financial centers of Chicago Board of trade, Wall Street, and the London Stock Exchange have all gone on-line, and each of these institutions had bases in long standing local communities (Zaloom 2007). So why couldn't this happen to the Netherlands' flower auctions? Is it in fact occurring?

One must recognize that electronic commerce and information sharing has already influenced horticultural trade in many ways, from digitized images of the product just prior to shipping, to tracking transportation, and online marketing and information. Mostly, so far, the internet, like other advances in technology, has made business much faster and more efficient, but it hasn't fundamentally transformed the way the industry operates. And it seems highly unlikely that the internet will ever entirely replace the Aalsmeer flower auctions for several reasons. First, the horticultural industry needs a distribution center, a single location where buyers can come to assess and purchase the great variety of products available, because most buyers—be they importers, exporters, wholesalers or retailers—seek many kinds of plants and flowers. It

would be highly inefficient, and a major step backwards, for traders to suddenly have to coordinate with individual growers across the Netherlands, in Italy and Ethiopia, India and Ecuador. So it's essential to have a single location where buyers can view and buy, and that place should be actual, not virtual, because buyers like to see and touch their product before purchase. Both a trader's and a consumer's relationship to flowers, unlike some other commodities, tends to be personal and tactile. And if there is a problem with an order, it's convenient to have a central bureau to coordinate complaints and resolve problems. Finally, Aalsmeer has already established itself as a vital commercial and social center for the horticultural industry. Place matters. For another location to replace Aalsmeer, it would have to offer a competitive infrastructure as well as the interconnected social, political, and financial networks that in the Netherlands coordinate trade and direct innovation. There's a popular idea that global business tends to erase or eliminate any traces of local distinctiveness, but in the flower industry, at least, the local space continues to direct the flow of capital and to define horticultural styles. Many plants and flowers 'debut' in Aalsmeer. It's an important commercial testing ground, and, though it's not the only space networking occurs, it's an important venue for growers, buyers, and other industry people to rub elbows and bounce ideas off each other.

On the other hand, e-trade could have a noticeable impact on the daily practices of traders, and thus on the auction community. In an effort to facilitate the transition to more virtual trade, the Aalsmeer rose auction (one of the five auction halls) was the first to stop the practice of showcasing the flowers on carts across the buying theater, where traders can see the product not only in the digital image on the clock above them, but the actual blooms as well. Now that the blooms no longer make an appearance, fewer traders physically attend the rose auction. In contrast with the other four crowded theaters, there's typically only a scattering of traders in the rose auction. We don't like it very much, a lot of traders told me. "It's weird, there's kind of a cold feel in here without the flowers," said Salim, a rose buyer and one of the few remaining regulars. But this is the way FloraHolland planners have decided to modify sales, and traders don't vote on the institution's policy. Traders may not like it, but so far the rose auction's changes haven't led to a fundamental shift in how business is conducted. Aalsmeer remains the place to be. More buying takes place online, but FloraHolland remains the intermediary, and though the flowers don't move through the auction hall, they still pass through the same building that holds the auction. The traders still connect to the market via headset and computer screen, but now they can link to the market from outside the space of the auction hall. In theory, this opens the market to buyers far from Aalsmeer, even in other countries. But because the expertise is still local, and for the reasons already stated, electronic trade has not displaced local business. Not unlike the *bemiddelingsbureau*, e-trade will likely have the effect of strengthening the institution

of FloraHolland over time, ensuring its strong long term market position. Instead of displacing trade, virtual space just provides more room for it to expand.

On one level, traders have a private relationship with the market. They develop a feel for its rhythms, which is based partly on *savoir-faire* and knowledge of the business, but not entirely. There's always a mysterious element beyond knowledge and experience that traders talk about with reverence. Some have described the anticipation of precisely when to press the button as a sixth sense. This perspective on the individual's relationship with the market's grace has a religious feel that jibes with the views of traders in the Chicago Board of Trade and other cathedrals of capitalism. But if the market is a supernatural force, it is also in the trader's bodies, and its effect can seem magnetic (Zaloom: 25-50). They plug in to the market, and buy electronically, whether they're physically in the auction or elsewhere. In Aalsmeer's auction seating, sometimes they resemble pilots zooming in on their target, tensing shoulders, gritting teeth, and jutting forward in their seat to hit the button. But, while the market exists in the transistors and ether of technology as well as in people's minds and bodies, the auction continues to be a vital physical location.

One morning in late March I entered the auction as lot after lot of tulips flashed by for sale. Standing by one of the showcases in back, a group of men were talking passionately. They formed a crescent around the shortest of the group, who stood at maybe five foot three (about a hundred sixty-four centimeters) while the others towered above him. In his mid fifties, with a jovial air, in a white button down shirt, dark hair, and thick mustache, the man resembled Nintendo's Mario. He was speaking English with an accent I couldn't discern, and moved his hands in quick circles as he spoke. "You come to my house. You will see. We are going to make lots of money together!" Beside him a younger man who looked like a relative began to translate to Dutch for the two red haired guys he addressed, but one raised his hand, cracked a grin, and said, "I understand." They continued to talk as they walked out together into the lobby, and down the stairway onto the floor.

After they left, a trader seated nearby looked over his shoulder, gestured with his lips at where the group had stood and smirked at another trader who was idling in the back with a cup of coffee. Both seemed amused. The man had clearly stood out, and not only due to his appearance and because he was talking in English. His *élan* and his histrionic gestures were like a parody of trader talk, and seemed campy to the regulars, the insiders. The market place has real cultural codes, and in all sorts of ways including this instance, traders express a kind of class consciousness, humor, and irony. Both traders recognized me, though we had never spoken. I approached the guy with the coffee, smiled, and said "We're going to make a lot of money together." He chuckled and replied, "Not around here!"

### *The Trader as a Cultural Figure*

Perhaps above all in the Dutch horticultural business, manhood epitomizes the style of trade—of all the social dynamics going on in the auctions, the most dominant, obvious, and entrenched norms seem to come from gender dynamics. The livelihood, values, social outlook, cultural and business sensibility all seem to connect to, or to be expressions of, a basic personal sense that many traders have of themselves as men, as Dutch, as members of the community, as the household breadwinners and heads of family. Most communities of traders also seem heavily influenced by beliefs about the purpose and behavior of markets and the place of the trader in the scheme of things. In addition to recognizing their sense of self and their role in the auction community, it must be said that traders also occupy an enduring place in the cultural imagination. Especially in the contemporary world, ideas about market behavior are closely associated with these characters. And although Dutch horticultural traders have only appeared relatively recently, the cultural figure of the trader is much older and more profound, almost an archetype.

At the turn of the twentieth century—just when men in Aalsmeer began to organize their cooperative flower auctions—Georg Simmel was theorizing the main ‘types’ of characters one finds in any society. The most mysterious and eloquently expressed type was ‘the stranger,’ a figure he abstracted from the role of traders in nineteenth century western Europe. Interestingly, the template of the stranger describes well both the role of the trader and the anthropologist. Simmel defined the stranger by his status as not having belonged to the community from the beginning. “He is, so to speak, the potential wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going” (Simmel 1950: 402). The stranger is “near and far at the same time” (Simmel 1950: 408). He is at once at home and foreign, both insider and outsider, a traveler and a local, trusted and suspect. The trader-model of the stranger was, of course, Jewish, which also helps to locate him in the nineteenth century social imagination as someone familiar but somewhat shifty, part of the social landscape but whose loyalty may not be taken for granted. As you say ‘trader,’ you might even hear the echo of its homonym, ‘traitor’. Traitorous may be a hyperbolic characterization of the Dutch horticultural traders, but it is true that, as people who don’t produce anything and who make money off of others’ work, they are sometimes regarded with suspicion and disdain. Making money off of money is not seen as honest work. For centuries the church outlawed usury, which is one reason money lenders in Europe were often Jewish, and one more thing that marked them as shady or deceitful. Traders exist in this realm of sneaky and nefarious financial activity, or at least are tainted by it.

Traders are, in other words, cultural communicators (Zaloom 2007: 111). They do more than fulfill an economic function in society and in the horticultural industry. Their practices are imbued with a sort of local and national logic. Even without

factoring in the advantages of social networks, kinship, or growing up in the industry, a potential trader possesses, merely by virtue of being Dutch and male, the important social framework to become a successful trader. Such a person has social and cultural fluency, an ability to negotiate local codes, to manage networks, to insinuate himself in structures of authority, and business, and is likely already linked to the industry through personal contacts. These qualities are part of these traders' social norms, and thus tend to be invisible to them, though of course, these norms enable their economic performance, and financial success. There's no clear way to distinguish between traders as actors in a market drama and performers of cultural identity. There's a conceptual difference, but in actual practice, these ostensibly separate realms blur together. One can not sift out cultural characteristics from the economy. These conclusions also rhyme with many of the theoretical insights and ethnographic observations of both auctions and other kinds of markets in different times and places (Bestor 2004; Hertz 1998; Zaloom 2007).

Due to their connection to wealth and power, financial traders hold a special allure. A number of films, articles, and books have explored the world's of these traders, often focussing on scandals such as that of Jérôme Kerviel, who on 2007 through deceptive trading nearly brought down one of France's oldest financial institutions, Société Générale, defrauding the bank of nearly five billion euros. Though fascinating and even seductive, financial traders have long been recognized as a destructive force, their greed and reckless behavior causing calamity. After losing a fortune in the financial catastrophe of the South Sea Bubble in 1720, Isaac Newton famously declared, "I can calculate the movements of the stars, but not the madness of men." While these financial traders differ from flower traders in the scale of wealth and power they wield, the two may well be more alike than not. Neither produces anything. Both make money off of someone else's work, and are often regarded as suspicious and dubious. When I asked growers and others not involved directly in sales how they viewed the auction and traders, many quoted their father, uncle, or grandfather saying things like "Never trust a Rijnsburger," or "They don't know what work is." These views tend to be generational, though. One reason for it might be that in today's horticultural business, people may not have career long jobs—in a decade they could go from trading to marketing to a government sponsored promotional board. Flower traders may still be seen somewhat as a clique, but less so than in the past.

A more lucrative, close-knit, and insular group are oil traders. Because their business is about getting information and knowing where the market is, "oil traders never stop talking to each other", as the BBC noted. Oil traders seem to operate via a global network, people who know each other and who communicate regularly on mobile phones. In 2008, *BusinessWeek* uncovered what it called "the ultra secretive informal network of traders who dominate global independent oil trading.[...] They are the Rich

Boys. All operate in the world of onetime fugitive billionaire Marc Rich, the most-wanted white-collar criminal in U.S. history until his controversial pardon on President Bill Clinton's last day in office in 2001." Rich, who in the nineteen seventies and eighties was the world's foremost commodities trader working at Phillips Brothers, has spawned the most powerful informal network of independent commodities traders on earth. Companies run by the Rich Boys span the globe, and include the Netherlands-based Trafigura Group, one of the world's top trading companies. Not all of these powerful, male, financial networks operate conspiratorially, surreptitiously, or on the edge of the law. But like the Dutch flower traders, they have in common this gender element. Lately, there has been an effort to blame 'irrational exuberance' and the formation of economic bubbles not on corruption, lax regulation, or systemic contradictions, but on the male traders themselves. Their hormones, it seems, poison their judgement. A spate of biological studies have purported to examine the role of hormones in financial practices.

In recent years, neuroscientists at Cambridge University and MIT have studied professional securities traders during their normal work day to learn how biochemistry affects financial decisions. They concluded that cortisol and testosterone may cause traders to make wild, outrageous gambles, because of the potential rewards, both financial and emotional. Dr. John Coates, one of the studies' authors, calls it the 'winner effect,' which is when successive victories boost levels of testosterone higher and higher, until the winner is drunk with success, so bullish that he can no longer think clearly, assess risk reliably, or make sound decisions. Dr. Coates, who was also a Wall Street trader during the dot com bubble, concludes that risk-taking becomes addictive, causing traders to swoon on an emotional high, and this contributes to the formation of market bubbles. He believes that excessive testosterone makes traders foolishly overconfident, exaggerating a market's rise. Too much cortisol, secreted in response to stress, might in turn make traders overly shy of risk, nudging a market's downward slide even more precipitously. The solution he offers is basically to break up the patriarchal, boys club atmosphere. He suggests that a better way to lower extreme levels of testosterone or increase estrogenic effects on a trading floor is to hire more older men and more women. Regardless of its consequences for risk-taking activities, this would be a welcome change, in the interest of promoting more diversity and democracy in elite environments. But it's hard to take such studies too seriously. (One can imagine a trader's defense in court to charges of violating regulations: a temporary insanity plea, my hormones made me do it.)

Dr. Coates' observations and recommendations do merit attention, but not for their dubious revelations of 'male trader behavior'— though human activities may have measurable biological expressions, behavior and cultural patterns can not be reduced to biology. But what's interesting is how scientific and economic discourses gravitate

toward the figure of the trader in order to explain how the economic system works, and to celebrate or censure the performance of ‘economic man.’ Anthropologists, too, betray a special fascination with traders. Other market participants have a complex subjectivity and a layered relationship with the market, and have been studied, but they don’t often warrant the same theoretical finesse or earn swanky labels as traders or those in the financial industry. Theodore Bestor honors the trader’s expertise in this system by dubbing Tsukiji’s fish traders ‘technicians of globalization,’ a rich phrase, since it likens globalization to sorcery or magic and traders to high priests or witch doctors (playing on ‘technicians of the sacred’). In a more ambiguous but equally complimentary expression, Caitlin Zaloom describes financial traders and financial professionals as “practitioners of reflexive modernity,” borrowing Anthony Giddens’ term to capture people’s disorientation in the face of a contemporary world that seems out of control and scarcely comprehensible (Zaloom 2009: 246). Dutch horticultural traders also exist in a dizzying, globalized world, negotiate complex economic problems, and balance imperfect knowledge of the market with cultural norms and expectations. Perhaps they’re both technicians of globalization and practitioners of reflexive modernity. Certainly, some exhibit high levels of testosterone.

### ***Kim: A Woman Trader’s Views on Gender and the Market Place***

“It’s a man’s world in here,” she told me the day I met her. Kim placed both palms on the desk, as though measuring vibrations on a car’s dashboard. “Can you feel it? The fuel is testosterone...Vrrruuum!!!” We laughed, glancing around at the traders; a balding guy within earshot wearing a red flannel shirt turned and playfully stuck out his tongue. Then Kim continued: “Sometimes these guys can get really aggressive, like animals, but you know, mostly they just act like guys buying flowers in the auction—maybe a bit rowdy sometimes, but just themselves, just normal.” Just normal meant that mixture of competition and solidarity, locker room rambunctiousness tempered by serious concentration and dedication, an *ouwe jongens krentenbrood*, a place where a woman’s presence is curious and provocative, but tolerated. Kim is a familiar figure, and said she feels the other traders respect her expertise, but that she’s not ‘one of the guys.’

While Kim’s experience as the only woman (or one of the only women) in the rose auction is atypical, that may slowly be changing. While the auctions remain overwhelmingly male, more and more women are scattered in among the crowds. But if their appearance is new and unusual, their method of entry to the industry is traditional. I once asked Frans Kuipers why men dominate the flower auctions. A veteran of the Aalmsmeer auction’s board of directors, an energetic retiree still active in the business, he looked at me, and raised his eyebrows. “Is that true?” he said. “I think there are a lot of women in the industry. In fact, my own daughter is an auctioneer of plants at

FloraHolland,” he said with evident pride, and picked up his mobile phone. “I’m calling her right now!” But she wasn’t interested in talking. Kim was somewhat unusual not only as a woman, but as a trader open and willing to talk, and possessing the confidence and reflective cast of mind that often offered some significant and penetrating view of the auctions, or the values and practices of traders.

“I have enough money. I don’t need to be like—what’s that Microsoft guy?—Bill Gates, or like Michael Jackson or Brittany Spears. I mean, what would you do with all that money?” Like most traders, Kim’s profits are not extravagant. Traders’ profits vary, but many of those three thousand people who buy at FloraHolland work for import and export companies, and they earn a modest salary. They’re not ‘slaves,’ but they’re also not earning the lion’s share of profits in the industry.

“Do you compete specifically with each other,” I asked Kim, “keeping an eye on particular buyers?”

“To some extent, yes. Like, people know if a large company is buying a particular flower today. But that kind of thing isn’t actually a big part of what goes on here. I mean, do other traders pay much attention to who’s buying what at any moment? Maybe, if they’re interested in that lot, but otherwise probably not. Sometimes, guys might look at ME, that little lady trader in the back, you know. But Marcel [her husband] also has the same number [the FloraHolland registered buyer’s number that shows on the public screen] and no one knows who he is...So it varies, I guess, when and why they pay attention.”

Watching them, one might be curious as to how they develop these skills, and more broadly, wonder how they decide to become traders. Often, of course, it runs in the family (Strating 1997: 160-166). One day, I watched a man showing his son the ropes. Looking down at the red button on the side of the desk, the man puckered, winced, and in slow motion drew his finger toward it. He was mocking the physical aspect of the transaction, but at the same time, indicating that the choice of when to push the button involved effort and expertise. For the next purchase, the father-trader raised his hand, formed his index and thumb in the shape of a pistol, thrust his hand forward to the button in a Western ‘quick draw’ style, ‘fired,’ and then raised his make believe gun to blow the smoke from the barrel. The boy beamed at him. Though unusually theatrical, this kind of scene is actually fairly typical. Men often bring their sons to the auctions on a sort of field day. Visits like this, talk over the dinner table, and other practices help to convey cultural and business knowledge, to transmit a ‘feel’ for the market. Women traders seem to get involved in the same way, learning the ropes through male figures in their family, as was the case with Kim.

Kim’s father has for decades sold flowers from his shop across the border in Germany, and has always bought from the auctions in Aalsmeer, which is not far from

their home in the Netherlands. Kim grew up tagging along with him, then selling the blooms from their retail store. After buying for a couple of years at the auction, she thought it might be interesting to work as an auctioneer, and did that for a few years before returning to buying for her father once again. This thumbnail sketch of Kim's resumé and background captures the essence of the horticultural system in the Netherlands. Through her father, and growing up with flowers, knowledge and sensibility about the horticultural industry were just bred in the bone. Kim has worked in many places along the production chain—trading, auctioneering, and retailing—so her fluency in and command of the horticultural business is deep and true. Plus, having also worked outside the industry, she has forged professional links with other sectors of society. The only atypical aspect of Kim's experience in the Dutch flower trade is that she's a woman.

After she had finished her purchases one morning, I sat at an empty desk next to Kim, who has sharp blue eyes and short dark hair. I asked her views on the auction's day to day operation, and wondered about her experience that day as the only woman buying among the rose auction's occasionally rowdy men. "Well, what's the expression in English?" she began, and chuckled. "'Boys will be boys? That's what you get here. They call me 'that little lady in the back.'" On another occasion she commented that the attitude could be annoying, but "they're not really that aggressive, and I'm pretty tough." At any rate, they never ganged up to conspire against her buying. But did she ever feel gyped in the trade, and did she often lose money? How did she understand her role in the market?

Her concise, matter-of-fact response might have been lifted straight from an economics textbook. "It's a fair system," she told me. "It regulates itself."

The fair-system-regulating-itself is a familiar outlook that rhymes with popular economic discourse on the free market. On one hand, the market should remain open and allowed to perform without tampering, and will supposedly stabilize itself the way an ecosystem or a body achieves homeostasis. But unlike nature, in order for this system to work and maintain equilibrium, its ideology must be rigidly enforced, and transgressions against its policies are punished, often severely. (Recall Eduardo Galeano's famous quip about the Uruguayan military dictatorship enforcing a neoliberal economic order, that people were imprisoned so that the markets could be free.) A similar logic—supposedly natural behavior requiring social sanction—also comes up with practices of masculinity, particularly violent ones, whether in the pub, at the soccer game (Buford 1996), or at the flower auction.

### *Erik: An Auctioneer's Perspective*

Although the patterns and prices in an auction are determined largely by the communal behavior of the traders, there is one figure in an auction who has a uniquely guiding role. The auctioneer introduces the product for sale, sets the pace and rhythm of trade, and directs the bids. Probably we're all familiar with the incantatory qualities of certain auctioneers, who are like barkers. In most auction schools, an important part of the training is how to lead and direct what's known as 'the chant.' But in Aalsmeer, the auctioneer's voice is not important because of the descending bid format. The winner is the first to bid, so the auctioneer does not try to build suspense or drive up the price with his voice, as in other kinds of auctions. The auctioneer sits in a booth at the bottom or to the side of the theater, and business is conducted via headset, so his presence is really only sensed by the traders who are plugged in, and not by visitors or observers. Nevertheless, the auctioneer does play a key role in setting the pace of trade, and decides the starting price for each lot. The auctioneer works for the auction, which is to say, for the growers, and makes a special effort to fetch the highest price possible, sometimes even testing trader's mettle by opening the bid at an outlandishly high price. A trader unfamiliar with the market value of particular blooms at different times of the year, or someone merely not paying close attention, might slip up and buy at the inflated price. If and when this occurs, it's the source of great jocularity for the group, and singular shame for the trader who screwed up.

Not all auctioneers are men, as both Frans Kuipers' daughter and Kim attest. But perhaps even more than the trader, the auctioneer is a consummately male role, symbolically presiding over the daily sales. In fact, Kim wanted to try auctioneering in part because of the gender challenge. She explained that both the vetting and training of auctioneers for Aalsmeer is grueling and intense. One trial that initiates have to pass involves a mock auction, under live, simulated trade, where you're tested under the speed and pressure of a real day's trade. They do everything they can to cause an auctioneer to trip up or break down. "It was pretty tough," Kim commented. "They really f--- with you, you know. There was another woman in the room with me that day, and they made her break down into tears. I was not going to let that happen to me." She didn't crack under the pressure, and for several years she was an auctioneer in Aalsmeer.

Like virtually every other position in the flower trade, auctioneers tend to come from a horticultural background. This was true not only of Kim, but also of Erik, who worked for fifteen years at the Aalsmeer auctions, first as a trader and then, since 2005, as an auctioneer. Auctioneering requires intense concentration, and so the auctioneers split their shifts, working only an hour at a time. One morning settling in beside Erik in the auction booth, I asked why more women didn't hold his position. "Ik vindt het wel

lastig. Tschja, vervelent,” (It’s a shame, really too bad), he said. “But there are some, and the ones we have, like Kim, have been really good.” A woman was emptying the trash as Erik spoke, and we both looked over at her. She nodded and repeated the line so often spoken, “it’s a man’s world.” Trading isn’t a prerequisite for auctioneering, but it certainly helps, as both Kim and Erik said.

Seeing the auction from the booth offers a different angle on trade. I was surprised, for instance, to finally see the importance of the mental and digital aspects of buying, which is to say that the silence was even more apparent. You don’t hear much over the headsets. Erik may occasionally roll his R’s or exaggerate a vowel, but mostly his voice is even and measured; from the hundreds of the traders, you hear “four...seven....no sorry, six....two....” which is them indicating to the auctioneer how many they are purchasing, once they’ve pushed the button to freeze the clock, and have won the bid. So most of the trade is silent, happening on the screen and in the minds and bodies of the traders. “Some of those guys wiggle around a lot in their seats,” said Erik. “Just look at them moving around, it’s like they’re playing a video game, which in a way, I guess, they are.” Watching the action on screen, they push a button in competition to win. And, says Erik, “it’s fun. I like working here. The business is never boring.” Though Erik is now an auctioneer, he still also buys, though obviously not at the same time he’s auctioneering. The morning I met him, in fact, he had just returned from a trip to Moscow, where he met with some high-end rose buyers. In his dual roles as auctioneer and entrepreneur, Erik has a keen sense of what flowers, particularly roses, look like as a commodity.

### ***Salim: Trader Identity and Autochthony***

One morning after the auctions ended, I struck up a conversation with a trader I had seen, minutes earlier, smash his fist on his desk and mutter “shit” after missing the price he wanted for some Vermeer Orchids. As one of the few non-whites among the hundreds of traders, I wondered about his experience at FloraHolland. Wearing a red sleeved leather jacket I would come to recognize him in almost every day, Salim said he’d had an okay day trading, though yes, he missed his opportunity on the orchids.

“It can be stressful for all of us guys in there,” he explained, and laughed. “But I just got some other orchids. Not a big deal, really. My buyer won’t care,” he said in English. Since he described himself as part of a group, I asked him if he became a trader, as so many do, through family connections.

He explained he’d worked in the auction for sixteen years, but did not begin as a trader. He worked for a Greek trader for several years before the man wanted to go back to Athens, and when he did, he asked Salim to buy for him at the auction. Salim went on

to say, “my family never had anything to do with flowers, no way. They came here from Pakistan, but I am born here. I speak Dutch. On the phone, I am Dutch.”

“So, you’re Dutch? Or just while you’re on the phone?” I asked.

“Yeah...” He laughed. “I am Dutch, basically, but to them sometimes maybe not. I’m the only black one around, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. But I never have any problems. I grew up here. I went to school here. Yeah, ok, I’m Dutch.”

He went on to explain how, in the auctions, when you’ve got your mind focused and eyes on the clocks, “[who you are] doesn’t really matter, you’ve just got to know how to push the button,” which electronically signals the auctioneer that you’re buying. (Some of Salim’s clients are Swedes and Danes, others are German and French, and most are in Western Europe.) Similar to many other Aalsmeer traders, Salim is jovial and sometimes engages in pranks and antics. He’s also easy going, friendly, and occasionally cracks jokes about race and nationality. Once, while we were talking (in early 2008), my phone rang. “Quick call from Bush?” he asked wryly, knowing some of my disapproving opinions of the U.S. president. He went on to say that he had family in New York, Atlanta, and Houston, “which really is Bush country.” He groaned. I asked, “it seems like there’s a lot of Pakistanis in Houston—why is that?” “There are, right? I don’t know why. Maybe Cape Canaveral. Maybe because we love to take off in rocket ships...” He cupped his hand to his ear. “...‘Houston, Houston we have a problem!’ There are a bunch of Pakistanis on board. Repeat: Pakistanis on board. Our ship’s full of Pakistanis...Request advice on how to proceed.”

One morning toward the end of trading, Salim and his colleagues were tossing wads of paper and packets of sugar at the traders making the final bids. One guy in a jean jacket with a sprinkling of gray stubble across his cheeks swiped Salim’s pack of Marlboros off the desk, and raised an eyebrow. “Sure, go ahead,” said Salim. A moment later, the three of us were standing in the glassed in smoking area in the lobby. After some discussion of that day’s prices, I asked them if they felt that the Netherlands is changing as much as so many contemporary news reports suggest, or as Wilders’ supporters warn.

Salim’s colleague confessed that he didn’t pay much attention to the news, nor really, think very much about the country in general. His focus was more on business, he said, and then on his family and enjoying his free time. Those were his priorities. Salim said that he didn’t spend a lot of time thinking about issues of integration necessarily, but that in the flower business generally and in his experience particularly, some reflection was essential. He also said “I do think the Netherlands is changing a little. I can’t say if I’m an example of it. But for sure, you wouldn’t see a guy like me here in the flower auctions ten or twenty years ago.” Salim’s buddy had stubbed out his cigarette and left by then. The rose auction was closing down, and traders were filing

out toward their lots, to the complaints bureau, for a quick smoke, or to the bathroom. Did Salim think this scene would look the same in five or ten years? “Yes and no. I had a fortune cookie once. It said ‘Life is the Process of Many Changes.’” We both laughed. “Maybe there’ll be more *allochthonen* like me, who knows. Maybe less trading here. Already they don’t bring the flowers down there,” he said. “I think it will be different. But basically the same.”

### ***‘Death or Gladiolas’? On the Floor with Karl at FloraHolland Aalsmeer***

After the Bloemenveiling Aalsmeer/FloraHolland merger, profits grew and the institution’s market position strengthened, but FloraHolland employees weren’t initially rewarded with those benefits. The people who trim flower stems on site, haul carts, work in offices, and perform dozens of other tasks that ensure smooth running logistics actually got what amounted to a cut in pay. And they were asked to contribute a higher percentage of their salary for retirement. They were told that this was because of the economic crisis, and some felt that in this new deal they were being told, in effect: take it or leave it, be thankful for whatever we offer. Meanwhile, the auction’s managers got “fat bonuses”, as it was often put. CNV Dienstenbond and FNV Bondgenoten represent FloraHolland workers (as well as others in the horticultural sector, and many white collar workers: they’re the Netherlands’ biggest unions). Most of my conversations with union representatives took place before this conflict, and no one indicated animosity toward FloraHolland management; in fact, among workers I spoke to, what most struck me was how dedicated to their jobs they seemed. The occasional frustration they expressed was that, if only this or that happened, they could *increase efficiency*. At least once I laughed in disbelief, not sure I was understanding what I was being told. My expectation, I explained, and I suspect that of many people, would be just the opposite: given that this is not full time work for many and that they’re not high wage jobs, most people would try to do the least possible, not strive to work harder or devise ways to better organize movement or improve practices. Don’t misunderstand, I was told: we’re not all happy worker-bees, plenty of people “don’t give a shit.” They show up for work with a hangover and just want to do the minimum requirements. Naturally, to the extent that it came up, people expressed a range of views on the subject. One guy who had worked on the floor for over a decade explained that in his opinion, most of his colleagues, particularly the younger ones, both worked hard and partied hard. It’s not a ‘career job’ for many of them. But regardless of motivation or morale, everyone seemed aware of the global dimensions of the business, had some local connection with the industry (family or friends working in the horticultural sector), and more or less enjoyed a certain prestige in being associated with the institution.

FloraHolland employees have a strong position in the sale of flowers and plants given that each day they help move about twenty million cut flowers through the

Aalsmeer auction alone. They do a lot to ensure the institution's reputation for reliability, and thus to keep steady the daily flow of millions of euros in profits. If the institution was still profitable and the higher-ups in FloraHolland were being rewarded, why should the workforce that is the least well compensated but that performs essential tasks be asked to sacrifice? The apparent double standard in responding to the economic crisis didn't sit well with employees. In April 2010, citing "kwaad bloed" (bad blood) between FloraHolland management and workers, they threatened a strike, something clearly worrisome for auction policy makers. The CNV representative made the announcement with brio. "In termen van de bloemen," he said "het is voor hen nu de dood of de gladiolen!"<sup>51</sup> ("In floral terms, for them, now it's do or die, death or gladiolas!"<sup>52</sup>) Faced with the stark choice, FloraHolland opted for the gladiolas: they agreed to a two percent raise for the workers (to be implemented over the following two years) as well as some other concessions regarding scheduling and workplace management.

I went to several (not well-attended) union meetings in 2008, and over the course of fieldwork spoke with about two dozen workers on the floor about their experience at FloraHolland Aalsmeer, about how, why, and when they got into the industry, and what they thought about the institution, flowers, and more. Most are under 40, and in contrast with the white male world of traders, there are many 'non-white' *allochtonen* on the floor, as well as many women. A number of people are religious and there have been discussions about making an area in the Aalsmeer auction available for prayer. The guy on the floor I got to know best had a long history in Aalsmeer and was well known among his colleagues. Tall, handsome, blond, and gay, Karl was also gregarious and eccentric. And, unusually for someone in his position, he is the son of a grower. According to Karl, his father made a lot of money growing gerberas (which were sold in Aalsmeer's auction) and retired early. On our first meeting, he explained, "my dad worked here his whole life, but whereas I work on the floor here with the *allochtonen*, he was a grower, which is more prestigious. I remember I used to come here as a kid, and now, look at me. I never ever ever, I mean never, thought I'd wind up here. It's ironic. I mean literally right here on this spot. But then I started working here, and then it just kind of gradually sunk in, and now I feel at home." With so much personal history there, Karl felt a strong sense of place.

"I like it here, I do," he added. "Never boring, not to me. Never a dull moment. Anything you want, any kind of person in the world, almost, you can find here. And it's not hard work, either, I think. I mean, I'm sorry, don't get me wrong, but some of these

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<sup>51</sup> "Bonden dreigen met acties bij FloraHolland" April 10, 2010, *Bloem en Blad*.

<sup>52</sup> Gladiolas imply victory; the winner of a bicycle races is traditionally awarded a bouquet of glads.

Moroccan boys, these young guys, they work here because it's an easy job. Easy money. For some people they do it so they can go to school, since it's part time work. But not everybody. I really like it. People might not be like the highest class or whatever, but I'm more comfortable with them. I mean, I'm not high class either."

"It's interesting to see how we all turned out," he continued. "I know one guy who's now a big-wig in everything." He pursed his lips and made a snooty face, referring to someone who became a successful trader for an export company. "He started out working for my father. We worked together, actually. But now I still work on the floor, I'm shit, and he moved up. We're still working in the same place, actually, but you know, in completely different worlds. Yes, it's like that here..." Karl went on to explain that the workforce is highly segregated, and that, even for him, with personal ties to other parts of the auction and the industry, his main contacts and his social world are on the floor where he works.

In such a masculine, and often macho environment, I wondered what it was like for Karl being gay, and out, at work. "It's not really a big deal," he said. "If someone doesn't like it, well, that's their problem. I'm not going to censor myself. But others might [censor themselves], you know, I think it's mostly to do with my personality. Everybody knows me, I'm quite popular. I mean, I'm also a slut, and I flirt with everybody. And you know, most of these tough young guys accept me, no problem. Some of the older guys, like especially ones who are religious or weren't born here, I know they don't like it, but so what."

One late morning at the end of his shift, as we walked around the auction-warehouse, Karl pointed out equipment and explained how it worked, often in nationalist terms that vaguely recalled FloraHolland's marketing language. "Have you seen this system, this conveyor lift?" he asked, pointing at one end of an enormous conveyor system running along the ceiling. Day and night, Coca-Cola-red pincers clamp onto and lift flower carts—specially designed with adjustable shelves to haul buckets of flowers and heavy plants, FloraHolland owns or rents over a million of them. The system carries these carts between one side of the highway, the part of the building that houses the auctions below which Karl and I were talking, and shuttles them over an enclosed bridge to the other side, where many import and export companies have their headquarters. The conveyor system is several kilometers long and, by avoiding constant back and forth truck traffic, saves considerable time and resources, and reduces diesel pollution. Waving an arm across the length of one section of the conveyor, Karl said, "I don't think Dutch people could ever even conceive of such a thing, you know. This contraption was built by the Germans. Germans are like you Americans, and maybe like the Chinese, too: they think BIG. You know, us little Dutch people, we're always thinking small and local, like we're all from these *klein dorpjes* [little towns]."

“Ah, okay,” I responded. “But look at this gigantic place, the biggest in the world. It’s Dutch, right? Isn’t that thinking big?”

“Yeah, I guess. But people’s mentality is what I mean. They think so small, so local, just about your neighbor or whatever. It’s pathetic really, I think.”

Karl’s mentality reflects considerable international experience. He’s lived in Australia, and traveled extensively in both North America and Asia. (One night I visited his apartment in Uithoorn, he showed his guests slides of his recent trip to India.) His ex-boyfriend of several years is African-American and works in a bank; Karl has also worked in the Cirque du Soleil (in the office, not as a performer). In addition to the flower business, which he knows a lot about, he spoke to me about science fiction and fantasy books and films, masculinity and flowers, hypnosis, and race.

One day, when I approached him on a work break, Karl stripped off his gloves, stuffed them in his back pocket, and sighed. He told me some days he really just hates his job, and would like to do something outside the flower business, something completely different. Like others in FloraHolland, Karl told me he would like to write a book about the place. “I think I could write maybe even a novel, something that takes place here but is a science fiction book.” Gesturing to the warehouse panorama, he continued. “Like: it’s after the Bomb, and now everybody’s living underground. And it looks just like this.” As we walked, he pointed to girders, machinery, the conveyor belt, and there were sounds of clanking metal, the hydraulic hiss of delivery truck shocks. He shouted so I could hear him over the din. “In the story, we all live now below the Earth! People have little windows way up to the surface and they manage to get things down! It looks like these!” he said, pointing to a ventilator shaft and two square windows along the ceiling bright with clouds. “Of course, everyone’s different, too,” continued Karl as we ambled to a quieter area. “All the white people, they get even whiter. And of course the black people get blacker. But eventually the black people get the idea to go out again on to the surface of the planet. After like 350 years. And they slowly realize that now they can survive there, but not anybody else. So they move up onto Earth, and the situation to our world now is sort of reversed. Now THEY’RE in charge...” His voice trailed off wistfully. “That would be something, now, wouldn’t it? But the world is a crazy place. You never know what might happen.” I commented to the effect that it didn’t sound like a hospitable environment for flowers, except maybe for some unusually hardy orchids that can live on live volcanoes. You’re right, said Karl thoughtfully. It would be a totally different place: “no more Aalsmeer, no more tradition.”

### *Aalsmeer's Auctions in the Historical Continuum of Auctions*

Given the density of activity occurring there, Aalsmeer's auctions are provocative places. They feature the ethnographic richness of daily life; the critical link in the horticultural production chain, where the commodity is baptized with a price; a socio-economic assessment of value; and historical continuities of social, economic, and aesthetic practices. Although the auctions are intimately bound together with the Dutch present and its past, they have a kind of timeless quality, since auctions have had similar social and economic roles in vastly different cultures, times, and places. Though they existed in pre-capitalist societies, they became more prominent in the modern capitalist period, and may in this respect resemble money, as many pre-capitalist societies also had coins and monetary systems, but as the capitalist system took root, money and the ideology of money penetrated social life more thoroughly (Graeber 2009). Perhaps auctions are linked to primordial community attitudes toward value, and stand outside the rise and fall of particular cultures or economic systems. In a different way, the function of time is also essential to understanding what some have called the "commodity situation" (Appadurai 1986: 13, Kopytoff, 1986: 64-95), which understands commodities not merely as particular kinds of objects, but as objects embedded in a matrix of values at the moment of exchange. (At other times and in other situations, the same objects may not be commodities.) Temporality, though, is more than an intriguing theoretical aspect of the auction; it's also an important practical element of any auction, especially the flower auctions. In Aalsmeer, not timelessness, but time is of the essence because the passage of time affects the freshness of cut flowers, and therefore their value. With split second sales and thousands of daily transactions, the clock is the pivotal instrument in the auctions. And the auctions, in turn, are the industry's command center, with FloraHolland Aalsmeer as the Netherlands' premier auction, with its multiple locations and massive capacity. These auctions constitute the heart of the global horticultural business.

The common assumptions about how auctions work include the idea that this is the most disinterested and efficient method of determining value, and that in general they tend to represent the bare machinery of the free market. But economists still devise rules for particular auctions in order to perfect that machinery, and/or to benefit the sellers and organizers of the auction. In recent years, some economists (such as Paul Klemperer) pursuing this line of thinking have used game theory and advanced mathematics to devise complex models for different kinds of bidding strategies and, by tweaking the rules of operation, have investigated effects in real world auctions, such as those of U.S. government bonds and e-band width. Some of these insights have led to innovations in auction rules and design. But since the social world is inevitably more complex, dynamic, and unpredictable than models can account for, results of some of these studies have been mixed.

In 2007, research in this vein looked at Aalsmeer's cut flower and plant auctions, in a paper called *If Winning Doesn't Matter, Why Do They Keep Score? A Structural Empirical Analysis of Dutch Flower Auctions*. Calculating the micro-second reflexes of hand-eye coordination, the authors compared reaction times between winning and losing bids to measure the reserve price against the timing of the bids. They were interested in which factors led to faster bidding. But carefully entering the data of hundreds of thousands of transactions into elaborate formulae ultimately allowed them to make a rather modest and banal conclusion about the speed of the bidding. The authors note in their conclusion that “[t]he empirical results show that reputation is very important at the AFA [the plant auction],” something which is self evident to any trader, or any grower, since growers work hard to cultivate their reputation. Economic work on auctions is often like this—perhaps insightful and revealing about the logistics and technologies involved with buying and selling, but not very savvy about basic questions of value, since auctions are seen through a sort of tunnel vision, as highly complex mechanical contraptions that can be refined and manipulated through sophisticated machinery and ever more finely tuned mathematical modeling.

It's worth noting that auction designs that relied on this way of seeing have occasionally led to seller furor and frustration. In the 1990s, companies and governments turned to economists to design auctions for selling mobile phone companies, and they used game theory to predict how bidding would go. Auctions, it seems, were selected as the method of selling for noble and democratic reasons: to ensure fairness, to prevent the property and access from merely going to those companies with the most political muscle. But something curious happened when the auction designs were carried out in real life— a crucial factor had been overlooked. When British mobile phones were auctioned, an unforeseen dynamic developed: collusion between bidders. Bidders worked together to find the best price for themselves! No type of cooperation formed part of the designer's picture of the way auctions work, or might even potentially work. Participants working together surprised them because previously economists designing auctions assumed that buyers behaved strictly according to individualistic codes. The modeler's flaw was to assume that everyone would act independently; instead they cooperated. Auction designers understood this as an obstacle for more sophisticated architecture to subvert.

Although collusion involves scheming together, it is not the same as the basic cooperation one finds in any auction. When buyers collude, it is to subvert the system by bamboozling the seller. Collusion happens when two or more bidders make illegal arrangements not to bid up the auction price. But tacit collusion— where bidders signal their intentions or make 'offers' to other bidders through the bid itself which can also depress prices—is perfectly legal. Klemperer became famous for helping the British government to sell high bids on mobile phones, in the wake of the notoriously flawed

Swiss auction in which telecom companies vying for rights colluded to submit low bids, and the government was forced to sell off its rights at dirt cheap prices. In Aalsmeer, as in most auctions, buyers don't have to conspire to keep bidding low. Instead they share a tacit understanding that the system is sound and fair, and that the seller will receive the best price based on the buyer's (sincere) individual and communal assessment of value. At least two other basic features of Aalsmeer's auction make collusion irrelevant. One is that growers set a minimum price below which they will not sell. (It's the grower's institution, so they set the rules. But on the other hand, if their flowers or plants don't sell, they must pay a penalty to the institution, so it's in their interest to keep their minimum price reasonable.) The other factor making collusion improbable involves the obvious case that unlike the world of oil and telecommunications, horticulture is cheap and highly perishable.

The point here is that forms of cooperation stubbornly remain important factors in auctions and other market behavior, but designers and participants typically overlook this, since they seem to have a blind faith in a particular vision. Namely, that markets are free and fair, and the system's balance and integrity relies on the trader's inherent competitive and selfish nature. On the other hand, it's important to emphasize that pointing out principles of cooperation does not mean an absence of competition, nor imply the kind of democratic, communal values found in, say, an anarchist factory collective in Argentina. While there isn't as strict a pecking order in Aalsmeer as one might find in the stock market or a high price government auction, there are big players and small players. There are echelons of influence.

In the plant auction, when Gonzalo told me that the traders were really just slaves and *campesinos* of the system, he was only giving part of the picture. For most traders most of the time, that's probably a pretty fair assessment. Most are small time: between eighty and eighty-five percent of traders buy just fifteen to twenty percent of the products sold in Aalsmeer. But the big fish, the top five percent of traders, buy almost fifty percent. Of the thirty-five hundred registered buyers, several hundred work exclusively in the Dutch market, and are thus local figures that tend to earn a modest income. There is a hierarchy of traders, which is apparent in where they seat themselves in the auction theaters. By tradition, the bigger traders sit in the center and toward the front of the arena. This used to give the large traders some advantage in the time before the digital clocks (less than a decade ago), which show photos and display extensive market information about the product. These days, when trade is conducted via headset and laptop, it doesn't much matter where a trader sits, or even, increasingly, whether they're in the auction at all, since they may purchase online from any location. The grouping of traders in the auction doesn't really indicate a pecking order. In fact, big and small traders can switch positions—a big trader can lose and slip in his financial and market position just as a small trader can rise and gain wealth and position. Traders

understand that due to the market forces beyond their control, and/or because of good or bad judgement, they could wind up in another situation—it's part of the shared reality of traders, part of their habitus. So instead of a strict hierarchy, traders share a sense of solidarity and brotherhood, but one of competition as well.

While the Aalsmeer auctions are barely a century old, the institutional form of selling are at once ancient and contemporary, both pre-capitalist and stitched into the patchwork of the current world economic system. Though already an institutional element of the classical world, auctions seem somehow to embody the raw essence of capitalism, a kind of arena where the parabolas of supply and demand most clearly intersect, represents the most unbiased method of sales, and in this way constitute the core of the market—at least, according to some economic thought. But at the same time, there's something slightly sneaky about auctions, perhaps because of the unpredictability and occasional volatility of prices. Some Dutch argot reflects this almost seedy sensibility. “*In de veiling nemen*” or “*door de veiling sleuren*” (literally, to take someone in, or drag someone through, the auction) is to trick someone, to pull their leg. I never heard anyone use these expressions in Aalsmeer; they appear to be archaic slang from a generation or two ago. In the 1930s they first appeared in print when a popular Rotterdam writer named Willem van Lependaal used them in his stories (de Coster 1998). Nevertheless, the expressions suggest a distrust of auctions. In Dutch, *veilen*, the verb meaning to auction, dates back as far as the fourteenth century, and even then referred a primitive kind of public bidding (Verdam and Vermijs 1916).

In languages with stronger Romantic ties, many auction words derive from Latin, including, of course, ‘auction’ itself, which comes from *augeo*, which means to enrich, and increase or augment. Also closely related to the contemporary sense of auctioning is the Latin *augur*, as in to augur or foretell, as in an augury or omen. An *augur* was an official diviner in ancient Rome, someone who often used objects or signs to make predictions and whose authority was socially endowed though assumed to come not from the community but from a supernatural source. (In those days, it was a God; today's almighty is the market.) In other ways, too, this sense of divination or auguring carries over implicitly in the auction, since the auction is also an arena that inaugurates, or formally ushers into the world, a commodity by assigning it a price. This inauguration also has occurred with people, in the cases of slaves and of wives who were sold in the earliest auctions on record. And there are other lingering traces of ancient auctions in both contemporary sensibility and language. The Romans called the auction a ‘subasta,’ (still the Spanish term; Italians say ‘asta’) which is a contraction of two Latin words, sub hasta, literally “under spear.” Roman soldiers would auction off the spoils of war by driving a spear in the ground to demarcate the market, and sell the booty to the highest bidder, or ‘emptor.’ This led to Roman slave auctions in the forum being held under the sign of a spear, and kept the word in use. Typically, the auctioned

slaves were captives of some Roman military conquest, and the profits helped to subsidize the campaign (Shubik 2004).

In pre-modern times, auctions were not as widespread as they have become with the advent of capitalism, but even in the ancient world they had functions akin to those of the modern era. As long ago as Roman (and before that, Babylonian) times, auctions served to resolve problems of establishing the value and ownership of objects—those gathered primarily from looting and pillaging; and the value, ownership, and identity of people—those unfortunate men bonded into slavery, as well as young women sold, often along with other property, into marriage. In the contemporary period, auctions continue to establish the value and ownership of objects, an aspect especially pronounced in police auctions of recovered stolen goods, and in auctions of the estates of deceased people. Under such circumstances, the auction clarifies the value and the ownership of the property. But the really interesting aspect is not in the uncertain value of the things or in who they belong to, but in the communal character of the sale, for both the price and method for establishing value is legitimized by community approval and endorsement (Smith 1989: 80-108). Participants tend to understand it as a fair process, one that deflects responsibility from a particular person, organization or company, any of whom might not be trustworthy, and relinquish control to the unbiased and natural forces of the market. But that's not how it works in practice. Price is arrived at not by the guidance of some abstract, benevolent force but by the practices, behavior, and values of participants.

This basic observation has real implications for how we understand the value of objects as well as for the social organization of economic processes surrounding them. In an auction, things are not sold by private treaty or haggled over in some bazaar. Nor are prices arrived at merely by natural, pure economic principals such as the law of supply and demand (though supply and demand aren't irrelevant considerations). Instead, people decide collectively on the price and even the destiny of objects (and, in other historical periods, of people). With regard to slavery, auctions seemed to have had a similar function in both the ancient and the early modern era, because when people became slaves, they acquired a new identity as well as a new owner, and this transformation in status required both social sanction and a ceremony to structure, legitimize, and record the event.

Auctions have always been dramatic events, exciting to witness. Even contemporary auctions possess this ceremonial, performative character, apparent to any visitor to Aalsmeer's flower auctions. The fact that they're open to tourists reveals an awareness of the theatrical aspect of the auctions. This theatrical quality reveals another auction characteristic that links this form of selling over diverse historical periods, cultures, and geography. But the overall point here is that auctions are social institutions with an economic outcome, not merely economic institutions that come in different

cultural flavors. Though we don't have extensive information on ancient auctions, what we know of their similarities to auctions of the modern and contemporary periods demonstrates a remarkable continuity of this compelling social institution in radically different contexts (Bauer 2007).