

Antonia Hirsch: Making Sense of the Invisible
A Surveillance Art Case Study

1.Introduction

In the era of social networks, platform capitalism, and extremely developed governmental secret services, the concept of surveillance and the meaning that people convey to it appears more ambiguous than ever. After the events of 9/11, the surveillance industry increased exponentially: nation-states, as revealed by Snowden's information leak in 2013, began operating mass surveillance on both national and foreign citizens (Galič et al., 2017, pp.26-27). In parallel, the global economy witnessed an epochal change in production, whose fundamental and most coveted means became personal data with the rise of matchmaking platforms such as Google and Facebook (Evans & Schmalensee, 2016, p.12). In particular, the latter and similar social media are emblematic of nowadays' ambiguous attitude towards surveillance: despite the alleged common will of privacy, the people, by continuously and voluntarily watching and being watched, *de facto* operate and subordinate themselves to a continuous form of horizontal surveillance in addition to the vertical one already operated by institutions and market forces (Galič et al., 2017, p.27). If in earlier times the questions relative to surveillance could have been phrased in terms of the right proportions within the security-surveillance trade-off, as Obama put it (The New York Times, 2013, 00:05:05), now it would rather make more sense asking whether the people are aware of the surveillance's dynamics or if they value their privacy at all.

However, surveillance is not only about privacy, but it can rather be conceived as an umbrella term under which different topics, such as urban planning and policing, are considered in the investigation relative to who, by whom, how, and why is surveilled (Galič, M et al., 2017, p.10). This broader conception of the term gave rise in the second half of the 19th century to the emergence of the multidisciplinary field of surveillance studies (Galič et al., 2017, p.10). Throughout the societal changes in the institutional, economic, and technological realms, surveillance scholars have gradually moved from the conceptualization of societies as disciplinary towards one of control societies (Galič et al., 2017, pp.10-11). Besides the academic one, the issues related to surveillance have raised an artistic response. 'Surveillance art', as defined by Brighenti (2010), engages the topic with different attitudes and approaches, in some cases only referring to surveillance, in others adopting surveillance techniques and technologies as a constituent part of the artwork (p.137).

This research focuses on *The Invisible Hand (after Adam Smith)*, an installation by Antonia Hirsch, a German Berlin-based contemporary artist and writer. Born in Frankfurt am Rhein, she did her art studies in London from 1991 to 1994, the year in which she went to live in Vancouver, where she stayed and worked until 2010 ("Info", n.d.). In the meantime, she exposed and lectured in many

European countries and North America (“Info”, n.d.). In her vast and polyhedric production Hirsch has approached the topic of surveillance on several occasions, an example of which can be seen in *Double Blind* (2008), in which she already adopted a critical stance towards power dynamics embedded in surveillance (Kwan, 2008). *The Invisible Hand (After Adam Smith)*, completed in 2009, was exhibited at the *Sorting Daemons: Art, Surveillance, and Social Control* exhibition in 2010 at the Agnes Etherington Art Center at Queen’s University in Canada, whose focus was on the artistic depiction of human’s relationship to surveillance and more specifically to information-gathering systems and how they affect human lives by tracking the people’s movement and consumer preferences (“Sorting Daemons: Art, Surveillance, and Social Control”, n.d). Through an iconographic and iconological analysis of the installation within the frameworks of surveillance studies and surveillance art, the paper wants to answer the following research question: how does Antonia Hirsch’s *The Invisible Hand (After Adam Smith)* portray and make visible overarching surveillance systems?

The paper is structured as follows: in the next section, there will be an overview of the previously published literature on the topics of surveillance and surveillance art; the following paragraph is devoted to a brief explanation of the methodologies of iconography and iconology; the fourth section is dedicated to the analysis; finally, a brief conclusion considers the results in relation to the research question and points out possible limitations of the analysis and ideas for further research.

2.Surveillance: the academic and artistic responses

Surveillance has been the object of multiple and various conceptualizations and theories. Galič, Timan, and Koops (2017) offer a comprehensive and schematic overview of them and distinguish three main phases in surveillance studies: 1) Foucault’s elaboration of Bentham’s Panopticon prison architectural design as a metaphor to describe the surveillance mechanisms adopted by the institutions to discipline their members – commonly regarded as the ground for the successive theories on surveillance; 2) the ‘Post-Panoptical’ theories of surveillance, characterized by the new conception of society as a control society rather than a disciplinary one and the consideration of its new networked and technological configuration and the role of market forces; 3) further elaborations of the previous two frameworks (Galič. et al., 2017, pp.10-11). Of particular

interest for this research are Foucault's Panopticism, Deleuze's concept of 'dividual', Clarke's 'dataveillance', and Lyon's 'panopticommodity'.

Foucault's Panopticism entails the idea that Western modern societies are grounded on a ubiquitous form of power that, by hiddenly exerting surveillance on its members – aware of the ongoing process of surveillance but unable to individuate its actors -, invisibly forces the individuals to internalize such surveillant gaze and behave according to the law and the mainstream moral and values (Galič et al., 2017, pp.15-16). Such disciplining process results in 'normation', by which term Foucault means the creation of norms of behavior (Galič et al.,2017, p.16). The 'norm' becomes key: it is the standard to strive for, all of those who do not manage to reach it are different, and thus inferior or deficient (Galič et al.,2017, p. 17). According to Foucault, CCTV cameras enforce these dynamics by rendering the surveillance not only omnipresent in space, but also in time through the storage of the recorded material (Galič et al.,2017, p.18).

Deleuze, observing the increasingly dominant role of corporations and the shift towards a corporate model of the institutions during the capitalist and globalized era, points out how surveillance's scope has changed from disciplining the individuals to control them (Galič et al.,2017, p.19). More precisely, considering the market-oriented essence of corporations, Deleuze argues that individuals as subjects are not relevant anymore for surveillance practices, but rather it is the "divided individual – consumers and their purchasing habits – who has become important to control" (Galič et al., 2017, p.20). To refer to such entity, Deleuze coins the term 'dividual', emblem of a fragmented society where the point of surveillance is not to create docile and disciplined bodies, but "to mould consumers, whose data-bodies have become more important than their real bodies" (Galič et al., 2017, p.20).

The idea of the gathering of data on different aspects of the individual was further developed in Clarke's concept of 'dataveillance', which indicates the increased capacity of surveillant actors to retrieve such data through computational means and digital information (Galič et al., 2017, p.28). The possibility to combine and share more easily the data granted by the new technological means and the digital nature of information determine a greater shaping power on the individuals, who, as a consequence of the new surveillance dynamics, face now a strong uncertainty regarding who gathers their data, where the latter reside, and the purposes behind the gathering processes (Galič, 2017, p.28). Said processes are also facilitated by the rise of new panoptic forms of entertainment and marketing, such as reality shows and social media, which made a social norm to watch and be watched voluntarily (Galič et al., 2017, p.27) and thus caused the spontaneous generation of massive amounts of digital information by the consumers themselves. In this new surveillance dynamic, which Lyon terms

‘panopticommodity’, individuals become both surveilled and surveillant, enforcing the disciplining and normalizing dynamics of the Foucauldian Panopticon horizontally (Galič et al., 2017, p.27).

These theories and concepts have partially inspired the artistic response to the topic of surveillance. Brighenti (2010), analyzing different artworks that he defines as ‘surveillance art’, argues that surveillance has a side effect in addition to social control, namely the production of collective imaginaries on what control and security are and different moods in relation to them (p.137). Within these moods and imaginaries, he (2010) claims that surveillance art tackles issues of social visibility and invisibility through various representations of contemporary visibility regimes (Brighenti, p.138). The asymmetry between being looked at and looking revealed by these regimes brings him to analyze the artworks also in terms of different forms of recognition, which covers a key role in the relationship between power and vision (Brighenti, 2010, p.138). Among the different types of recognition, Brighenti (2010) sees ‘individual’ recognition – recognition that conceives the individual as a Deleuzian dividual – as the one more often associated with surveillance and thus more prominent in the societal imaginary (pp.138-139). An example can be seen in his analysis of Sester’s installation *Threatbox.us* – an apparent screening of war videogames mixed with real wars in which, when the viewer enters a determinate zone, they are put into a spotlight by the projector while a very loud noise is reproduced - in which he (2010) argues that the spectator, who feels to be in the position of the observer, is abruptly confronted with the unexpected ongoing individual recognition, pointing out the invisibility of surveillance and how it operates across different visibility regimes (pp.146-147).

Monahan (2017) approaches the topic of surveillance art by investigating its capacity to make systems of control visible and induce reflexivity in the viewer regarding its role in surveillance dynamics (p.560). Reflecting on the different ways of being seen that surveillance art considers, he (2017) suggests that, despite their undeniable disciplining and controlling features, they do not fit exactly the conceptual frameworks of discipline and control and also point at surveillance’s involvement in ethical responsibility among individuals (pp.561-562). Contextualizing surveillance art within the frameworks of Althusser’s concept of interpellation – the process by which an individual realizes its embeddedness within ideologies’ overarching power relations - and Rancière’s conceptualization of aesthetics as a normalizer of ideologies through its capacity to manipulate the sensible and intelligible, Monahan (2017) argues that surveillance artworks, invoking different forms of interpellations in the aesthetic realm, can produce forms of ‘countervisuality’, altering the margins of what is perceptible and bringing to light surveillance dynamics (pp.562-564). He (2017) ultimately concludes that surveillance art, through the fostering of ambiguity and the decentration of the viewing

subject, “can capitalize on anxiety of viewers to motivate questions that might lead to greater awareness of surveillance system, protocols and power dynamics” (p.576). In this sense, works that imply the participation of the viewer have particular efficacy by triggering self-reflectivity on the role that each of us plays towards the others in surveillance dynamics through feelings of uneasiness (Monahan, 2017, p.576).

The arguments brought forth by Brighenti and Monahan cast light on the role of technologies in art. Spronck and Petzold (2017) deepen the topic by focusing on installation artworks. They (2017) point out the embodied form of spectatorship that installation art creates by affecting the body of the viewer and underline how this translates into its active engagement with the artwork (p.100). Following, through the analysis of two installation artworks in Ihde’s and Verbeek’s postphenomenological perspective, which considers technology as mediating subject-object relationships and thus as a constituent of what the humans experience as reality, they (2017) argue that the technological structure of this peculiar form of artworks is capable to increase the spectators’ awareness of how technologies shape our existence in addition to how they facilitate it (pp.101-107).

This paper, by focusing on *The Invisible Hand (After Adam Smith)* as a case study, wants to concur to the deeper understanding of the artistic portrayal of surveillance started by the previously mentioned academics through an in-depth artistic analysis.

3.Methodology

The methodologies adopted in the analysis are those of iconography and iconology as described by Erwin Panofsky (1939). He (1939) defines the two respectively as the art history’s branch concerned with the matter of meaning or subject of artworks and a synthetical method of interpretation which, building on the iconographical analysis, contextualizes the artworks in terms of its epoch’s society and artist’s ideas and inclinations (pp.51-58). Panofsky (1939) elaborated a three-step approach to applying an iconographical and iconological analysis in which each step is devoted to uncovering a different layer of meaning of the artwork: the first, referring to the ‘primary’ or ‘natural’ subject matter, is what he calls pre-iconographical analysis and is finalized to identify the pure forms present in the artwork as objects or beings, how they mutually relate to each other, and their expressional qualities; the second, relative to the ‘secondary’ or ‘conventional’ subject matter, is the iconographical analysis, devoted to the connection of the artwork’s motifs and their

compositions to concepts and themes; the third, concerned with the 'intrinsic meaning', consists in the iconological analysis and is dedicated to understanding the ideas and attitude of the society – both in its entirety and smaller components – filtered through the artist's personality and concentrated in one artwork (pp.53-56). The correctness of each step's interpretative result relies on different forms of knowledge. While the pre-iconographical and iconographical analyses are respectively grounded on the more objective forms of knowledge of 'practical experience' and 'knowledge of literary sources', the iconological analysis relies on the more discretionary analyst's 'synthetic intuition' – the capacity to understand the human mind – and *Weltanschauung* (Panofsky, 1939, p.66).

The choice to conduct the visual analysis with these methods rather than semiotics is grounded on the greater relevance that iconography and iconology give to the historical and social context of the artwork. In this case, considering Hirsch's origins, life, and work experience, the historical and social context considered are those of the contemporary Western globalized and computerized capitalist society.

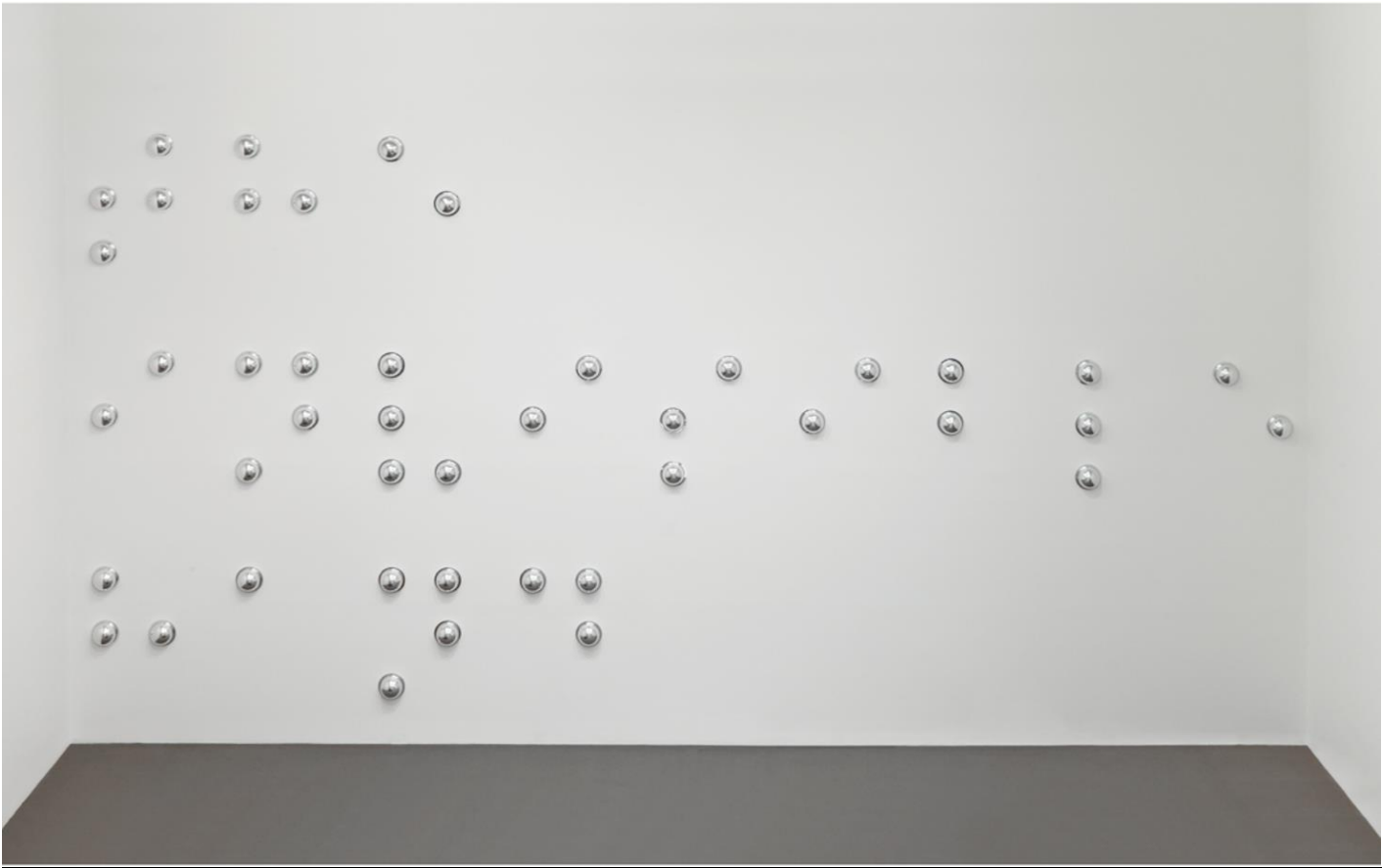


Image 1: Antonia Hirsch, The Invisible Hand (After Adam Smith) (2009)

4. Analysis

The analysis is structured in two sections. The first one contains the pre-iconographical and iconographical analyses propaedeutic to the iconological one. For the sake of the argumentation, part of the results of the iconographical analysis – the concepts relative to surveillance theories – will be exposed in the second section, devoted to the iconological analysis. In said section, the results will be presented in the second section according to the two analytical themes of surveillance dynamics and visibility issues.

4.1. Cameras, Braille Alphabet, Smith, and yourself

Hirsch's installation has a minimal appearance despite its relevant dimensions – it has a width of 1047 cm and a 511 cm height (“The Invisible Hand (After Adam Smith)”, nd.). The spectator is presented with the view of 44 mirrored halfspheres attached to the wall in an ordered disposition. The hemispheres, in terms of factual meaning, are identifiable as closed-circuit cameras. In the description of the artwork, Hirsch explains how they “are intended to function as a kind of all-seeing eye” and “can be often encountered in retail contexts where they serve the purpose of theft prevention” (“The Invisible Hand (After Adam Smith)”, n.d.). Regarding the disposition of the domes, it is identifiable as the Braille alphabet – the alphabet of the blind community. The domes spell out the expression “the invisible hand”. However, the viewers can see more in the installation. The mirrored feature of the domes causes the viewer to see themselves and those who are nearby the artwork at the same moment when looking at the installation. Furthermore, each of the domes reflects their and the others' figure from a different angle, thus capturing each a different image of the individuals. In this way, the installation engages with the spectators rendering them by all means part of the artwork and at the same time makes the spectators engage between themselves, by permitting them to see each other's reflection in it.



Image 2: Close-up on one of the installation's domes

The iconographical analysis reveals different themes and concepts. The convex mirrors identified as cameras can be seen as bearing a double meaning due to both their identification as surveillance domes and their mirrored appearance. Cameras, commonly understood as an icon of surveillance as demonstrated by the visual language adopted by anti-surveillance protesters (Daphi et al., 2013, pp. 16-20), immediately point at the theme of surveillance. Their mirrored appearance, on the other hand, recalls the spirituality and the idea of inner reflection that have been historically associated with mirrors in literature (McCarty, 1989, pp.171-173). The coexistence of the two meanings in the single object of the camera relates the two meanings and can be interpreted as hinting at the reflection on the topic of surveillance that the artwork wants to provoke in the viewer. The iconographical analysis confers conventional meaning to the expression spelled out by the cameras as well. “The invisible hand” is a metaphor created by Adam Smith, one of the most influential

economists of all times and arguably one of the founding fathers of modern academic economic discipline. He uses the term in the fourth book of his masterpiece, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of the Nations* (1776), to indicate the self-regulating dynamics of the market suggesting that an individual “by pursuing his own interest (...) frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it” (pp.349-350). In this sense, they operate as being led by the free market’s ‘invisible hand’ that brings him to unintentionally promoting ends that are beyond his comprehension (Smith, 1776, p.349).

4.2.Discipline and Control

The minimal look of the installation is in sharp contrast with its vast hermeneutic potential. By looking at it from an iconological perspective, it is possible to interpret the artwork as pointing out a dual essence of contemporary surveillance, which is represented as both a disciplinary method and a form of control. In relation to the former, the mirrored dome can be interpreted as a reference to Foucault’s Panopticism. As a matter of fact, its surveillance method is the very same as Bentham’s prison: it relies on the idea of seeing without being seen and the surveilled individual’s incapability to determine when they are being observed. The overwhelming dimensions of the installation can be interpreted as representing the big entities that exercise this disciplinary form of power vertically, such as state institutions. However, by considering the consistent number of the domes and how they interact with each other and with the spectators, the installation can be seen as showing horizontal dynamics of disciplinary surveillance as well. In this sense, each of the cameras, “spying” on other cameras by reflecting them, “consciously” surveil and are surveilled by their equals, recalling the dynamics described by Lyon’s concept of ‘pancommodity’. The domes in this way come to represent human beings and their disciplinary mediatic interactions. Such interpretation is also strengthened by the fact that the spectators while looking at the installation, experience visually this surveillance dynamics through the reflection of themselves and the bystanders in the domes. The installation thus does not only recall surveillance theories but makes them also visible by involving the spectators.

If the spectators, by reflecting on how the cameras interact between them and looking at themselves and the others in the domes, can visualize their surveillant and disciplinary role within society, by considering how the domes look at them, they are confronted with the controlling character of surveillance. Reflecting each a different image of the viewer, the cameras metaphorically operate what Brighenti (2010) terms ‘individual’ recognition, approaching the individual as a

Deleuzian individual (pp.138-139). In this sense, the different reflections of the individual are interpreted as the different consumer habits in which the surveilling corporations are interested in order to shape them. Furthermore, the viewer, confronted with their silent and different reflections in the surveilling devices, can grasp visually the 'dataveillant' society in which they know that they are the object of continuous surveillance but have no idea relatively to who and for what purposes is surveilling them.

The title of the installation playfully hints at these two aspects of surveillance. Its economic origins point provocatively at the commercial character of surveillance in control society. Said provocation resides in the demonstration of the distortion of the original concept of 'the invisible hand' caused by the rise of a control society: the individual, whose preferences as an economic agent are shaped by monopolizing corporations, is only wrongly convinced to follow his own interest and by doing so he does not the interest of the entire society but only of the very same corporations who guide him with their 'invisible hand'. At the same time, 'the invisible hand' could be interpreted as the normalizing features of the disciplinary society, which silently force the individuals to abide to the norm. The playful character of the title is also seeable in the wordplay hidden in it where the term 'after', which could be intended as 'according to', in reality indicates how things have changed from Smith's epoch.

Finally, considering the results of the analysis jointly, it is possible to argue that the installation suggests a coexistence and intertwinement of these two surveillance dynamics. A potential interpretation of how this happens lies in the view of the dynamics of vertical and horizontal normation as a means of enforcing the consumerist preferences created by corporations and the values and morality that come with them.

According to this reading of the artwork, *The Invisible Hand (after Adam Smith)* overcomes the academic separation between disciplinary and control society showing how these two surveillance dynamics coexist and intermingle in the contemporary computerized capitalist society. These dynamics are made visible by the installation's embodiment of the spectators which, being 'interpellated' as described by Monahan, become more aware of the surveillant dynamics and how they fit into them.

4.2.1. The blind and the invisible

As already suggested by the word ‘invisible’ in the artwork’s title, a second issue that the installation addresses can be seen in the visibility issues entailed in the previously described surveillance dynamics. More precisely, the installation can be interpreted as pointing out the visibility asymmetry inherent to these forms of surveillance. Key in this sense is the choice of the artist to write the expression “the invisible hand” in the Braille alphabet. In this way, as pointed out by the artist in the description of her *Double Blind* - installation which spells a Snellen chart in Braille with differently sized mirrored domes - the artwork assumes an oxymoronic character: those who see the installation are unlikely to read it while those who can understand it do not see it (“Double Blind”, 2008). Commenting on *Double Blind*, Kwan (2008) argues that such a conundrum allows the artist to make the situation of not seeing visible. Contextualizing this aspect of the artwork in the topic of surveillance, the installation, by addressing the spectators as blind even though they are presumably not, can be seen as hinting at the population’s helplessness towards and unawareness of the entity and functioning of the disciplinary and controlling surveillance dynamics. In the case of surveillance, those who cannot see the artwork and, therefore, understand it, do not see it not because they are blind, but because they metaphorically are on the other side of the camera invisibly surveilling those in front of it. The invisibility of surveillance processes, hinted at by the title of the installation and represented by the mirrored appearance of the dome that prevents seeing what hides behind it, causes the ‘blindness’ of the surveilled.

In relation to the condition of the surveilled, the artwork thus portrays a deeply asymmetrical situation in terms of visibility where the ‘blind’ and highly visible spectators live surrounded by all-seeing ‘invisible’ actors that direct them for their interests. This condition is made visible through the adoption of the Braille alphabet, which poses the viewers in the position of the non-seeing subject and instills in them question regarding their effective awareness of what surrounds them.

5. Conclusion

Returning to the research question, Antonia Hirsch's *The Invisible Hand (After Adam Smith)* depicts surveillance systems in contemporary society as a mixture of both disciplinary and controlling practices grounded on a deep visibility asymmetry between surveillants and surveilled. Such practices are depicted as intermingling between them and enforcing the norms and values of a consumerist society shaped by corporations. The installation makes these dynamics visible to the spectators by embodying them through their reflected images in the domes and approaching them as blind subjects, thus visually involving them in the surveillance systems and confronting them with their incapacity to see those. In this way, the installation fosters the spectators' awareness of said surveillance systems' functioning, their role in it, and how the technologies that permit them actively shape human existence.

Possible limitations of the research lie in the methodology and the literature relative to the artwork. Regarding the former, basing the iconological analysis on the author's synthetic intuition and Weltanschauung entails the risk of an excessively personal and conditioned interpretation of the artwork. For what concerns the literature, the scarcity of analyses and reviews on the analyzed artwork does not permit to sustain the claims made in the paper with academic writings, which would have been useful as a basis for comparison in the hermeneutic process.

In conclusion, *The Invisible Hand (After Adam Smith)* is only one of the many artworks that deal with the topic of surveillance – an artistic realm that is expanding rapidly, as the increasing academic interest demonstrates. Possible ideas for further research reside in the analysis of different artworks that engage this topic from a different cultural perspective or through different artistic means, such as photography or filmmaking.

References

Brighenti, A.M.B. (2010). Artveillance: At the Crossroad of Art and Surveillance. *Surveillance & Society*, 7(2), 137-148.

Daphi, P., Lê, A., & Ullrich, P. (2013). Images of surveillance : the contested and embedded visual language of anti-surveillance protests. In Doerr, N., Mattoni, A., & Teune, S. (Eds.), *Advances in the visual analysis of social movements* (pp.55-80). Emerald Publishing. 10.1108/S0163-786X(2013)0000035007.

Double Blind. (n.d.). AntoniaHirsch. Retrieved June 7, 2021 from <https://antoniahirsch.com/works/double-blind/>

Evans, D.S., & Schmalensee, R. (2016). *Matchmakers: The New Economics of Multisided Platforms*. Harvard Business Review Press.

Galič, M., Timan, T., & Koops, B.J. (2017). Bentham, Deleuze and Beyond: An Overview of Surveillance Theories from the Panopticon to Participation. *Philosophy & Technology*, 30(9), 9-37.

Hirsch, A. (2008). *Double Blind* [Installation]. <https://antoniahirsch.com/works/double-blind/>

Hirsch, A. (2009). *The Invisible Hand (After Adam Smith)* [Installation]. <https://antoniahirsch.com/works/the-invisible-hand-after-adam-smith/>

Info. (n.d.). AntoniaHirsch. Retrieved June 7, 2021 from <https://antoniahirsch.com/info/>

Kwan, V. (2008). *Double Blind*. Public Art Vancouver. <https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/public-art-brochure-double-blind.PDF>

McCarty, W. (1989). The Shape of the Mirror: Metaphorical Catoptrics in Classical Literature. *Arethusa*, 22(2), 161-195. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26308521>

Monahan, T. (2018). Ways of being seen: surveillance art and the interpellation of viewing subjects, *Cultural Studies*, 32(4), 560-581. 10.1080/09502386.2017.1374424

Panofsky, Erwin (1955 [1939]). *Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art*. in: *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Garden City, N.Y.: Double Day. Penguin Books Ltd.

Smith, A. [2007 (1776)]. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of the Nations*. Metalibri.

Sorting Daemons: Art, Surveillance Regimes and Social Control. (n.d.). ArtandSurveillance.

Retrieved 7 June, 2021 from <http://www.artandsurveillance.com>

Spronck, V., & Petzold, D. (2017). For the Sake of Experiencing: Technological Mediation between Installation Artworks and their Visitors. *Kunstlicht*, 38(4), 100- 107.

The Invisible Hand. (n.d.). AntoniaHirsch. Retrieved June 7, 2021 from <https://antoniahirsch.com/works/the-invisible-hand-after-adam-smith/>

The New York Times. (2013, June 7). *President Obama Defends N.S.A. Surveillance Programs* / *The New York Times* [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8F99BT8QAA&t=312s>