

Footnotes by an invisible hand

By Émile Ouroumov

The philosopher Adam Smith occupies a privileged place in the hall of fame of economic liberalism, thanks mainly to his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776). One phrase Smith uses somewhat incidentally in this book has become the banner of ultra-liberal thinking, having been misinterpreted. By using the expression “an invisible hand”, the author refers to an unconscious mechanism which, despite diverging individual interests, contributes to the prosperity of a particular nation:

By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, [the individual] intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. [...] By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. Many have understood this metaphor to be a principle of quasi-spiritual order. It is held to allow self-regulation of trade, which coordinates and transcends private interest and leads to social harmony without requiring the interference of moral principles. Non-regulated capitalism is thus held to be a natural and infallible economic form, because even when it starts to get out of control, thanks to this “invisible hand” its fundamental principles are believed to spontaneously adjust the market for the common good. According to the disciples of this religion with no apocalypse, the innate intelligence of the markets makes it possible to overcome crises and to support limitless growth, since it follows a form of incorruptible logic whose sole parameter is to foster the development of those markets, irrespective of other considerations.

It is interesting to draw a comparison between global capitalism and the system within which recent art is evolving: the latter has its own economy of objects and people, of private and public investors, and of quantifiable growth parameters. The benefits it provides can be financial (by selling artworks) and political (by conveying a particular message). The world’s cultural capitals capitalise on this precious artistic added value, which confirms their importance in the context of symbolic and monetary exchanges; as in any sector with a high return on investment, there is a shift from amateurism and individual initiative towards professionalism and skilled management. Via a form of “affective capitalism”, which is intensely deregulated and encourages employment insecurity, the so-called “creative” sphere has even styled itself as an example of the negation of hard-won social gains, with a view to unrestrainedly multiplying the number of people involved and the number of

objects produced. And yet the field of ideas sits less than comfortably alongside valuation on the Stock Exchange, and even the "invisible hand" of the artist, who transubstantiates an object into a work, is at pains to adapt to industrial planning and production methods.

This state of conflict has given rise to critical approaches and strategic retreats designed to find a way out of a domain cluttered with *objects without ideas*, preferring instead *ideas without objects*. If the notion of the "invisible hand" applies to the present exhibition, it's in reverse: it involves a form of productive aberration. It is no longer a case of supernatural, omniscient intervention, but instead a question of deliberate, assertive economy of means. This "hand" makes gestures that are artistic and civic in equal measure, using a non-verbal idiom that expresses a desire for restraint, autonomy, disobedience, and refusal. One might even speak of a *grève des objets*, not only in the sense of "objects on strike", but also in the sense of a "beach" (also "grève") upon which the flotsam of indices, utterances and residues of acted-out artworks washes up, speculating on the requirements and conditions of their materiality.

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