

ANN HIRSCH

JASON'S ROOM

FINISH YOUR PLATE, BRO!

ON RESISTING POLITICS OF REDEMPTION AND SATISFACTION.

— Anna Maria Pinaka

Ann Hirsch's solo show at KRIEG is centred around Jason Biddies – a sensitive, simple yet humorous bro, who means well and just wants to have good, chill times, but it so happens he is full of white cis bro toxic masculinity that negatively affects those around him and can ultimately lead him to be alone, estranged from those whom, in his privilege, he takes for granted. *Jason's Room* presents us with his bedroom: there we find installed three videos that represent his past, present and future. These are also part of Hirsch's play *Jason's Crazy Night* to be performed at Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam, NL) in October 2019. During the play and through the three videos Jason gains insights into his own life. This is important because he doesn't quite know how his behaviour comes across, as the way he conceptualises himself and his relationships rarely takes into account other peoples' needs and feelings. This may seem like a depressing entry point, but if we accept Hirsch's invitation to endure the bleakness of *Jason's Room*, the discomfort of its familiarity and ordinariness, we might start considering anew how his subjectivity intertwines with myriad others, including our own.

Hirsch has been brewing Jason for years; performing him, and she says that the idea of Jason comes from men she loves in her life, and perhaps that's why she holds this remarkable commitment to him. She has spent a lot of time with this guy, taken him places, let him perform his own poetry out in the wild art-world. While carefully but bravely letting her audience inside Jason's world – and precisely in order to do so – the artist offers up her own exposure. This is a deep strength in her work and a rare attribute in contemporary art. To credit the way Hirsch uses exposure is not to deny how confession, dailiness and other representations that signal truthfulness have been in mass increase the past decades, partly due to social media. It is precisely the commonness of 'exhausting and selling the most intimate within us (for this is where our essence is supposed to lie)¹', as Bojana Kunst suggests, that requires the sort of critical take on deliberating artists' exposure as an art-strategy that the work of Ann Hirsch addresses.

To expose one's self without immediately grounding the value of this exposure on rhetorics of empowerment and positivity is

actually dangerous in a culture where a hint of womxn's bodies and sexuality (outside of mainstream porn and advertisement) is systematically feared and suppressed. By the way, Jason is really into porn and sort of prefers it to having sex with his girlfriend. Yet, one day he finds out that his girlfriend too enjoys pornography and in fact, she is into kink. That disturbs Jason who likes penis-vagina play, and he is not sure if he could cope with kinky stuff. To not like kink is fair enough, but his disturbance about his lover reveals how willful ignorance about another person's identity is itself created and sustained by the net of discourses and powers that shape subjectivity. But why might we care about what Jason is made out of? Is it enough that, as Hirsch puts it, we may have a Jason in our lives, perhaps a friend or relative, that we love and care for? Does Jason deserve our sympathy or empathy? And what does empathy mean in our current late-capitalist climate? As the previous artist to hold a solo show at KRIEG, Margaret Haines worded it 'Empathy, when co-opted, elicits cheap (passive) responses. When this happens, the problem is that we are no longer in a situation of collective struggle and active responsibility with one another, but

¹ Kunst, B 2015, *Artist at Work Proximity of Art and Capitalism*, p. 30, Zero Books, Alresford.

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instead in the space of cheap emotionality...'² Ann Hirsch's show suggests that cultures of finger-pointing may just not work and that we need to keep facing our own shortcomings. Perhaps we need to invent codes of communication that can replace the anonymous internet language, which frankly hasn't helped us much in learning to negotiate our complicities. Taking on the tasks of trying to understand one another, open up dialogue and resist perpetual shaming, currently pose ethical complexities, if not deadlocks. We care about who we are in relation to Jason, what makes us different to him, what binds us, how our subjectivities depend on each other, and how much agency we may have or not in this interplay of the discourses that make identities what they are. Therefore, we care about Jason also because we care about building a world where our critiques don't fail because of the *ways* we perform them.

The show also poses urgent questions about and through its mediums (video and performance): What does it entail to perform the other from within yourself in the post-truth era? What does it mean to work with identity at a time when the language of identity politics is heavily and dangerously appropriated by neo-liberal and even neo-fascist/alt-right agendas? The use of symbolism seems to be at the heart of what ties work made in the post-internet era with neo-fascist rhetorics. Not surprisingly, Hirsch's earlier body of work has already overviewed and foreseen some of these conflicts. For example, her performance video *Semiotics of The Camwhore* (2015), where she humorously goes over obvious symbols (ass, cleavage, keyboard, iPhone etc.) emphasising them, blending the female body with objects that make up our technologically mediated world.

Hirsch's ability to expose herself rawly is not a mere case of an artist working with vocabularies of honesty or autobiography as a means of quick-fix value making. Nor is it uncritical as to the proximity of contemporary art methodologies and neo-liberal engines of work, where subjectivity is at the core of production.³ Hirsch's particular use of herself in her work is rather a necessary means of reaching Jason. Her vulnerabilities make Jason and his *Room* relatable and expose how 'Jason is trapped in one version of masculinity so he thinks the only way out is to conform to this other version of masculinity, but in the end, they're both farces, and everyone loses!'⁴

Hirsch calls this 'grim' as she also finds the ending to her (Jason's) play. This play gives Jason

the opportunity to get to know himself, glancing into his background (which is remarkably unremarkable and undramatic), revealing where Jason comes from, whether and how his brand of masculinity is constructed and maintained by all sort of institutions, and whether he can choose differently who and how to be. Jason's possibilities for choosing lives and behaviours are indeed 'grim', banal and un-spectacular. Rather than a limitation of imagination or optimism on the artist's side, this can be seen as active resistance to politics of redemption and satisfaction – which is to say also a resistance to the very structures that produce and reproduce identity. Who profits from Jason's existence? What narratives afford him? *Jason's Room* suggests that a scenario of spectacular transformation or indeed ridicule will ultimately only reproduce Jason. And so the question remains, how do we stop reproducing that which we attempt to critique (here toxic masculinity for example)? Perhaps if we attend to the unspectacular aspects (or even aesthetics!) of active agency instead of falling for the spectacle – the drama of an identity which is presumed as natural and thus unchangeable, or on the other hand in need of grand reform – we may have a chance to resist the narratives of repair promised by neoliberalism, and instead create new languages of change.

Jason's Past, 13'58", 2019

Jason's Present, 10'45", 2019

Jason's Future, 11'05", 2019

Cinematography and Editing:
Zach Shipko and Tucker Bennett

Ann Hirsch is a video and performance artist who looks at the ways technology has influenced popular culture and gender. Her research has included becoming a YouTube camwhore, amassing over two million views on her videos, as well as making appearances on some popular reality television shows including as a romantic contestant on Vh1's *Frank the Entertainer...In a Basement Affair*. She was awarded a 2012–13 Rhizome commission for her two-person play *Playground*, which debuted at the New Museum and was awarded a 2014 WaveFarm Media Arts grant to continue producing this show. Her companion ebook, *Twelve* was censored from the iTunes store but is now available through Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery. She has been an artist in residence at Yaddo, Atlantic Center for the Arts and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. Ann is currently represented by [American Medium](#) in NYC and [Arcadia Missa](#) in London.

² Haines, M 2019, Henri Robert's 'Margaret Haines at Lily Robert | Yes, empathy is dangerous' <https://www.happening.media/category/magazine/en/article/5cb966ec1371a96bab0cb0d9/margaret-haines-at-lily-robert-yes-empathy-is-dangerous>. Accessed: 28 August 2019.

³ Kunst, B 2015.

⁴ Hirsch, A 2015, pers. comm.