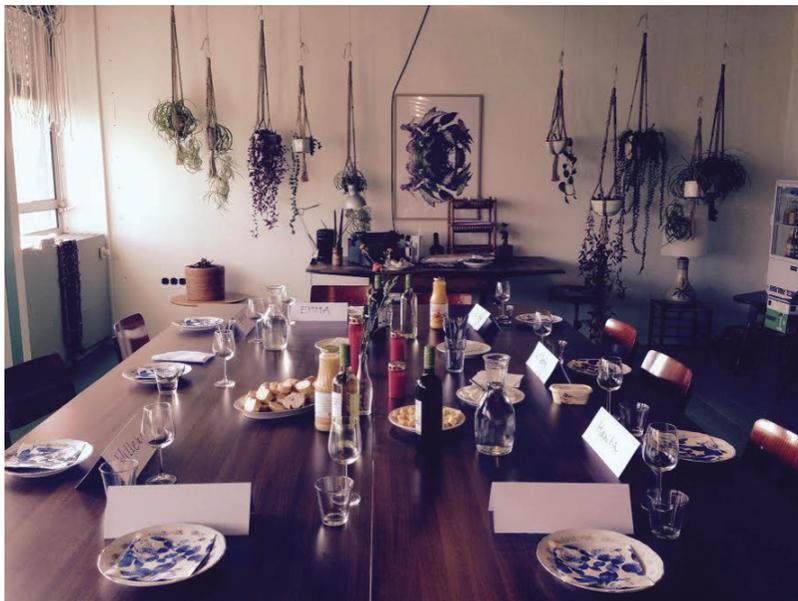


If this was your Last Supper, what would you serve?

By Emma Miriam Berentsen¹



London, United Kingdom (Autumn 2017)

Introduction

The text you are about to read is not a coherent or chronologically written academic text. It is to be read as a performance. A performance on paper or a journey of a performance on paper. In my phone I have a note written on 21 May 2015 at 21:22:

‘Emma, let’s develop a series of events around art/
death and food. LAST SUPPER NIGHT (S)
CONCEPT—(inspired by the last sleepover dinner

¹ I recently started building a *Last Supper* website where I want to archive *Last Supper* wishes, recipes and memories attached to the choices of food. If you like to contribute please contact me or keep an eye out on the website. The website www.lastsupperarchive.com will be launched in 2019 and people will be invited to upload stories, recipes, and pictures. For more info about me and my work please visit my personal website: www.emmaberentsen.nl

If this was your Last Supper, what would you serve?

we just had and because my mum will die tomorrow and also include the last meal idea of people on death row) Every night is set-up in the same way, however they are all different as the speaker of the night is someone else. It should be an interesting speaker, who deals with death in their work/life. [...] Work out the concept and organise some of these last suppers!!!!'

As I developed the concept for my *Last Supper* project further, I got in touch with *Denkstof*, an organisation based in my hometown who had previously shown interest in my ideas. *Denkstof* is a Dutch organisation that facilitates conversations on various topics for diverse audiences, and, following further discussion, we decided to make the *Last Supper* an inclusive event where everyone's last supper dishes were on the table, rather than that of just one person. The question: 'What would you want to serve if it was your *Last Supper*?' became a prominent question in the dinners that I have organised so far. The text you are about to read is a journey through my research. It is an archive of the last 2 years working on my *Last Supper* project, set up as a menu. A menu you can read from A to Z, or from Z to A or any way you like to eat your way through the text.

Arnhem, the Netherlands (Spring 2016)

Wine

The table was decorated with a white table cloth, porcelain plates, wine glasses, graveyard candles and filled with French bread, grapes and wine. It was during one of the *Last Supper* events I held in Arnhem, the Netherlands, that one participant arrived accompanied by her husband and three-year-old son. Whilst the participants were instructed to take a moment to look out of the window and let their thoughts wander in silence, her husband asked me if it was okay if he and his son prepared something for his wife. I said yes. On a large wooden plate they

The screenshot shows a Facebook event page. On the left is a navigation menu with options: Events, Calendar, Birthdays, Discover, Past, and a 'Last Supper by Emma Berentsen' highlight. Below the menu is a '+ Create Event' button. The main content area features a photo of a woman sitting at an outdoor table with a red water bottle. Below the photo, the event title 'Last Supper by Emma Berentsen' is displayed with the date 'JAN 11' and the location 'Public · Hosted by PopUpkerk Arnhem'. A 'Going' button is visible, along with the event date and time: 'Wednesday, January 11 at 7 PM - 10 PM UTC+01 about 10 months ago'. The location is 'Coehoornpark' in Arnhem, Netherlands. At the bottom, it says 'Invited by Matthias Voor de Poorte'.

The screenshot shows the Glasshouse Art & Film Lab website. The header includes the logo and navigation links: ABOUT, VISIT, AGENDA, RENTALS, and JOIN. The main content area features a section titled 'Date: 2/18/2017' under the heading 'In Residency>>'. The text reads: 'Glasshouse's Winter Residency 2017 Welcomes Artist Emma Berentsen & Chef Marente van der Valk To Present'. Below this is the title 'Last Supper: Dinner Installation' and the date 'Saturday, February 18, 6-9p'. A paragraph describes the installation: 'Last Supper' is a dinner-installation in which the Dutch artist-chef duo collaborate to create an immersive dinner setting of a supper, a lament. Audience is invited to explore, taste, listen, and add to the installation. This culminates the two week residency of artist-chef duo Berentsen & Marente at Glasshouse as part of the art-house's 'Edible Bodies' season. (\$10/suggested). At the bottom, it notes: 'The following performance is part of 'Edible Bodies' program at Glasshouse. Curated by Lital Dotan'.

Last Supper Dates 2016 - 2017

- 27-28 May 2016 - Last Supper (in collaboration with *Denkstof*), Arnhem
- 16th of July 2016 - Last Supper, Chisenhale Art Place, London
- 24th of August 2016 - Last Supper, New Cross, London
- 11th of January 2017 - Last Supper, PopUpkerk Arnhem, Arnhem
- 12th of February 2017 - Last Supper workshop (in collaboration with Marente van der Valk), Glasshouse, New York
- 18th of February 2017 - Last Supper participatory installation (in collaboration with Marente van der Valk), Glasshouse project, Brooklyn, New York
- 29-30 September 2017 - Customized Last Supper, MAAS, Rotterdam

If this was your Last Supper, what would you serve?

carefully placed biscuits. They left the plate in the middle of the table. Next to the woman's plate they left a folded handwritten note. The husband whispered in my ear, explaining that this was a fantasy biscuit landscape in which he and his son had created a story for his wife. Then they left. Later that night, once it was the woman's turn to share her dish, she told us that she had asked her husband and son to prepare the *Last Supper's* task for her. She did not want to do it herself. She explained that if she ever was to have her *Last Supper*, she would want to be nourished by the people she loved. She told all of us how scared she was, and cried. She said that dying was her biggest fear. The story that was written on the note by her husband and son was a story about a girl getting lost in a fictional landscape. A land where girls get lost but are never scared. We all tried one of the biscuits. They tasted just like the dry, sugary biscuits we would bake at home as children. We all ate them in silence and afterwards we started to whisper about everyone's fear of dying. I imagine that everyone at that moment was too scared to make loud noises as it was almost as if the fragile childhood memories we had attached to these biscuits would break and crumble away if we were to talk too loudly.

Starter

Last Supper is a performative dinner that offers the opportunity to talk about the role of death and mortality in our lives. A maximum of 12 participants are invited each night to bring a dish they would want to share as their *Last Supper* and to join in a collective conversation. Much like the recent phenomena of the Death-Café movement founded in 2010 by late Jon Underwood, *Last Supper* intends to facilitate conversation around death and our own mortality. Each participant's contribution serves as a starting point for exchange. The *Last Supper* was conceptualised following the chosen death of my mother in 2015. My mother lived in the Netherlands at that time and in the Netherlands the

law states that: 'euthanasia and assisted suicide are legal only if the criteria laid down in the Dutch Termination of Life on Request and Assisted Suicide (Review Procedures) Act are fully observed. Only then is the physician concerned immune from criminal prosecution. Requests for euthanasia often come from patients experiencing unbearable suffering with no prospect of improvement. Their request must be made earnestly and with full conviction. They see euthanasia as the only escape from the situation. However, patients have no absolute right to euthanasia and doctors no absolute duty to perform it (Government of the Netherlands).

The night before my mother died, my sister and I prepared her final meal: homemade lasagne, a big green salad, and organic apple cider—just how she liked it. We had dinner in our living room, sitting all around my mum's bed, one of those hospital beds that the hospital had lent us. It was not important how the dish looked, or if it was the perfect taste, what was important were the memories we all had around eating lasagna as a family, and all being together for one last night.

There is a long trajectory of tradition and ritual interrelating food and death, with last suppers being a common trope for those with a scheduled death as a way of saying goodbye to their next of kin. Despite that my mother was unable to enjoy the food in the way she once had, the occasion provided a space to celebrate her life in the knowledge that it would be over the following day. Consequently, the *Last Supper* dinners have proved to be engaging and open performative experiences in which a group of strangers come together and find common ground to discuss and reflect on life and death. Through this project, I hope to lighten this dark, unspeakable subject. I have found that *Last Supper* has not only contributed to the current discourse on death, but has provided a reflective space for people to talk about this inevitable, painful yet cathartic life phenomenon.

London, United Kingdom (Summer 2016)

Wine

Olivia Lamont, a producer and friend whom I met through a previous work, helped me produce *Last Supper* nights in London. She was intrigued by the project from the start, and helped me organise and develop a PR pack. When Olivia attended a performance she spoke of her own background and thoughts:

‘I don’t have much experience of people passing away very young. I see it as something very natural. In my mind it is very natural thing of people that they reach a certain age and then they die. [...] If I had to serve something as my last supper, what would I serve? - MEAT! Yes, definitely meat’.

Breaking the silence of the evening, the other participants burst into laughter as Olivia continued:

‘Yes, a big steak—I really would love to eat a steak before I die.’

(Transcribed from video footage from the Last Supper held the 24th of August 2016)

Appetizer

Food and Performance

During the *Last Supper* performative dinners the participants’ stories are the performance. All the participants are asked to listen carefully to the story of why a certain dish is being brought, what memories are attached to it, and how it is made. Through the unfolding of these personal (hi)stories the memories attached to a certain dish melt into the actual food we eat. While everyone is invited to taste the dish in silence, the senses of the participants are stimulated. We smell, taste and touch the memories of the strangers we share this night with.

The *Last Supper* dinners are set up in such a way that it does not become a big feast or dinner-party, but a space to listen, reflect, taste and sense both the stories and the flavours of the food.

'While food in everyday life is very much about doing and behaving, the reciprocity of table and stage has a long history. One of the ways that food is made to perform is through the dissociation of food from eating and eating from nutrition, and the disarticulation of the various sensory experiences associated with food' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 85).

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out that the dissociation of food from the sole purpose of nurturing our bodies is a common strategy to perform food. Reflecting upon the way food serves as a medium that transfers stories during my *Last Supper* performative dinners, I see a division between what happens 'above' and 'under' the table.

'Above' the table we share our stories, unfolding personal narratives, the connections between the foods we eat and the memories it provokes. Simultaneously, 'under' the table we digest and turn this material into the parts of our bodies. The unconscious corporeality of this process outlines the physicality of our bodies and their existence as disposable matter. To some extent, the performative nature of the *Last Supper* dinners might dissociate food from nutrition, however the action of eating inevitably reinforces the association of food to nutrition and nutrition to death.

This 'above' and 'under' the table dissociation also resonates with the setup process of the performances, on-stage and off-stage. The kitchen, where the food is being prepared, is not in the performance. All the mess of food-preparation has happened before, somewhere off-stage. On-stage we only encounter the final product. What would happen if the performance took place in a kitchen? If we all came together to not only share the

If this was your Last Supper, what would you serve?

final product but also the making of it? In its current format, the off-stage element is present in the participants' preparation of the food, making their *Last Supper* dishes in their own kitchens. The participants are like actors who are preparing at home, in solitary individuality, and then come to the theatre to perform on-stage, to play a role in a scene. Whilst I want to create a community through my *Last Supper* dinners, I am also aware that it preserves some deeply rooted emotions of loneliness and isolation attributed to the coping with death. However, I hope that through the sharing of these dishes during an event where you are surrounded with people who give attention and thought to both the food as the story behind it will enable the participants to embrace all these emotions in regards to death and our own mortality. For the development of the *Last Supper* project it would be interesting to see if the performance could possibly also take place in the kitchen of the participant. To bring the off-stage and on-stage element together. I am constantly experimenting with ways how to embed the idea of talking about death with performative concepts and experiences so it is definitely worth thinking about different approaches in regards to people's last supper wishes.

Arnhem, the Netherlands (Winter 2017)

Wine

My late boyfriend's step sister, Caro, had asked me some weeks before a *Last Supper* night in a pop-up-church if it was okay to film the evening for a video work she was creating. I confirmed this would be fine as long as she had permission from the attendees. On the night she came an hour early to set up her camera and to ask me some questions. When the participants started to arrive she asked everyone individually if they were happy to be filmed, and we began without any issues. I welcomed everyone and

explained the setup of the night. The moment I asked everyone to close their eyes and to imagine this really was their last night alive on earth, Caro tip-toed towards me and asked if, rather than filming, she might be able to participate in the evening. Of course I was happy for her involvement, however this meant the performance wasn't documented on film as had been planned.

Caro joined the conversation but did not have a specific wish for her last supper dish. Impressed by the evening, she later contacted me saying that she felt much more part of the conversation sitting with the rest of the participants and not behind her camera.

The first time I met Caro was at the funeral of my late boyfriend back in 2010. Where, if I remember correctly, we had drinks in a bar at the beach after the funeral service was over. I can't remember myself having food that day, nor did Caro.

Main Course

Death, Dying and Food

When I was a child my dad would often say to me: *'Als je niet eet, ga je dood'* (*If you don't eat, you will die*). He, obviously, had a point there. You can of course think: well, if you eat too much you will die, too. In my performances I often think about this paradox of food and nutrition. On one hand, food keeps us alive, gives us energy, it is the petrol we humans need to keep going. On the other hand, food can make us very ill and has the potential to kill us.

As babies we are nourished by our carers. We grow up and learn how to cook and feed ourselves, until the moment we are too old or ill and need someone or something else to nourish us. Either way, both our life and death revolves around food. We give meaning to food, we share food recipes, we attach memories to food and those meanings and stories are valuable in life, art and

the process of dying and coping with death.

In a lot of cultures there are existing traditions in regards to the mourning period where people celebrate the life of the deceased with a certain meal after the person has died. Often this is either related to the funeral itself or throughout the period of mourning where the mourners are given food by family, friends and neighbours. Although very interesting and fascinating in itself my fascination with food and death and the development of my *Last Supper* dinners is mainly dealing with the time before we die. It questions how we, the living, would imagine our last meal or last period alive to be.

Even though I borrow elements such as the number of guests and the sharing of bread and wine, from the most famous last supper depiction within Christian tradition, Jesus's last supper, in my personal research into this theme I have been very fascinated by the way American death-row inmates are given the opportunity to choose their last meal. Interestingly, Jesus and the death-row inmates both share/shared the knowledge of their upcoming and unchosen death, yet paradoxically Jesus ate his last meal with company, and could therefore share his experience, whereas death row inmates remain in solitude. As part of the research I did during a residency in February 2017 at the Glasshouse Project² in New York, I have been looking into the works of both Julie Green and Henry Hargreaves, both of whom have researched and re-constructed the last supper wishes of death row inmates. Julie green depicts these meals by painting them onto dinner plates in blue paint, publishing them on her website under states, dates and description.

In the *Last Supper* performative dinners I have been organising and creating I have been implementing elements from the two models of *Last Supper* I have discussed; the model of sharing and community (as Jesus's last supper is depicted), and the model of

² <http://www.glasshouseproject.org>

loneliness and solitude (as with death row inmates and the art of Julie Green).

Rotterdam, the Netherlands (Autumn 2017)

Dessert Wine

As part of a customized *Last Supper* installation for the premiere of a dance performance called *Happily Ever After* I interviewed the cast and crew about their last supper thoughts. One of the dancers told me that he would love the opportunity to go back to his mother's hometown in Thailand and have his last supper there, sitting with family on the floor in a circle around the food. The dancer started to smile as he added: 'and there are so many people that they don't fit all together around the food, so they have to sit shoulder to shoulder, almost like a bunch of ravioli together in a package'.

(Transcribed from audio recording for the customized Last Supper, recorded on the 25th of September 2017, Rotterdam)

Dessert

Last Supper Recipe

Create your own *Last Supper*

You will need

Limited time to live (preferably know the date you will die or at least close to the date)

People you would want to have next to you (or if you want to be alone you are allowed)

A kitchen to prepare the last supper (or if you don't need a kitchen think about where you will prepare the food)

If this was your Last Supper, what would you serve?

A dinner table (or car or garden or campsite or any other place you wish)

Plates (or how you wish to eat)

Glasses (or how you wish to drink)

Cutlery (or how you wish to put food in your mouth)

Candles (in any colour you like)

Napkins (in any colour you like)

Any other props you like (in any colour you like)

Method

Ask yourself the following questions:

What dish brings up a happy memory?

Do you remember the smell of this food?

Do you remember how the taste was the first time you tried this food?

If you were to have a Last Supper what would you want to eat or serve?

Does this food has a special memory attached to it?

Would you like to have people surrounding you at your Last Supper?

Who would be there?

Where would your Last Supper be?

How would it look like?

What season would it be?

What colours or accessories would you like to add?

And then – before you start preparing, being honest to yourself, would you really want to have a Last Supper?

Works Cited

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