

OPHELIA DENG

FOOD FOR TALK

Integrative Project

2019-2020

INTRODUCTION

Every Chinese New Year I invite my friends over for a dinner to make dumplings. We wrap, boil, and eat the dumplings all in one sitting. Sharing food with people has always been a way for me to connect with others and share a part of who I am. Hosting dinners is not always a walk in the park though. It can also be a place where personal issues get mixed with social ones, or where compliments lead to arguments. They can be celebratory or obligatory. I have been to a fair share of awkward Christmas dinners, second cousin birthday lunches, and buffets of families fighting over the bill. However, meal sharing can also be places to meet new people over lunch, or gather loved ones for thanks. My most meaningful memories of meal sharing involve making dumplings, an act that made myself more vulnerable with the people I chose to invite. It created a space for me to reflect.

Meal sharing as a place for self-discovery and reflection, became the focus of my research over the course of this year. I aimed to explore how meal sharing can deepen our connections to other people and ourselves. To better understand the intricacies of sharing food, I created *Food for Talk*, an interactive performance where I invited four friends to make and eat a meal with me. During our rapidly changing circumstances due to Covid19, each dinner was held virtually. The dinners were limited to myself and my guest to encourage discussion around our relationship with food and how it influences how we understand ourselves. Through meal sharing, I hope to gain new insight into how I interact with food and whether other people share the same or different experiences as I do.

CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION

“Psychologists tell us that food and language are the cultural traits humans learn first, and the ones that they change with the greatest resistance.”¹ – Donna Gabaccia

Food as Communication

To better understand our culture around meal sharing, I needed to understand food as a means of communication. The theories of Roland Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Eivind Jacobson offer three frameworks to help us navigate how food communicates.

Roland Barthes, a French literary theorist and philosopher uses semiotics to argue that food functions as signs that communicate more than just the food itself.² Barthes states that advertisement has become a tool which has transformed food into a *situation*.³ For example, coffee is now more associated with taking a break, meeting up with people, or specific brands. Thus, food communicates as an object itself and as a network of associations.⁴ Claude Levi-Strauss, a Belgian-born French anthropologist takes it one step farther and argues that food follows the same methods of language as a code to express social patterns.⁵ This code follows how language expresses thoughts and ideas. Eivind Jacobsen, a Norwegian professor, on the other hand, delineates three different frames for looking at food; food as nature, food as commodity, and food as culture.⁶ Food as nature highlights food as the physical manifestation of where humans meet nature such as farming.⁷ Food as commodity is linked to the food industry and business. The consumption and production of food creates multi-million dollar businesses which in turn has made food into a vessel for capitalism.⁸ Think for example of coffee and Starbucks, the soy industry on the global market, or Instagramming food. Each one of these examples uses food as a vehicle to convey ideas of power, money, fame, and desire. Finally, food as culture relates to our memories, and traditions. It links our experiences with food to ourselves and the people around us.⁹ Thus, when we eat cake, it is linked to celebrations of birthdays, and loved ones.

Food Sharing as Place

When we sit down to eat with other people, we are in a specific time and place. Whether it is at home, at a restaurant, or in a park, social eating creates spaces of social relationships. These spaces can mirror the community it takes place in, as well as breed conflict between the priorities of individuals and society.

1 Donna Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat : Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 124.

2 Roland Barthes, “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption”, in *Food and Culture*, ed. Carole Counhan & Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 2008), 2224.

3 Barthes, “Toward a Psychosociology,” 2224.

4 Barthes, “Toward a Psychosociology,” 2224.

5 Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologiques* Volume One, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

6 Eivind Jacobsen, “The Rhetoric of Food,” in *The Politics of Food*, ed. Marianne E. Lien & Brigitte Nerlich (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 59-62.

7 Jacobsen, “Rhetoric of Food”, 60.

8 Jacobsen, “Rhetoric of Food”, 60.

9 Jacobsen, “Rhetoric of Food”, 61.

For example, Michael Pollan, an American author, and professor at Harvard and UC Berkeley states, “The shared meal elevates eating from a mechanical process of fueling the body to a ritual of family and community, from the mere animal biology to an act of culture.”¹⁰ Pollan emphasizes the importance food sharing plays in building communities and culture. Although, Pollan’s arguments can be unrealistic in terms of the accessibility and feasibility for people to live the lifestyle he promotes, Pollan’s ideas about how food creates communities captures the cultural spaces created through meal sharing.

On the other hand, Gill Valentine, a geographer and current Pro-Vice-Chancellor of social sciences at the University of Sheffield illustrates the complex ways consumption practices negotiate our identities within domestic environments.¹¹ Through a series of case studies in the United Kingdom, Valentine demonstrates how personal eating practices such as vegetarianism, can conflict with familial eating traditions or how demanding work schedules can influence eating environments at home.¹² As a place, meal sharing becomes a ground for building both comradery within groups as well as tensions within individuals.

In both situations, food sharing can also be viewed as a space for self-reflection. Sam Sifton, a former New York Times food editor states, “We’re gathering for the purpose of sustenance, for the purpose of almost literal communion. If you do that regularly enough, you’ll see a change in your relationship to both cooking and the people – and perhaps see a change in yourself and how you regard the world.”¹³ Meal sharing, thus, creates a place where individuals can confront perspectives different to those of their own and reflect on them.

Food Sharing During Covid19

As we are facing a pandemic at the moment, there has been an even greater resurgence for the importance of food, cooking, and meal sharing. Sam Sifton in a recent interview states, “There are precious few good things that are happening as a result of this coronavirus pandemic, but one of them, small as it may be, is that a lot of us are really experiencing the joys of eating together with family regularly. And even for those of us who believe we do that already, I think the experience of the last month or so has put the lie to that.”¹⁴ Although, the experience of sharing family meals cannot be shared by everyone especially those fighting on the front lines, there has been an increase in the percentage of people cooking at home since the quarantine.¹⁵

The increase in cooking has also led to a greater emphasis on meal sharing. During this time of uncertainty, meal sharing has shifted to virtual platforms through zoom, skype, or facetime. In order to frame meal sharing during Covid19, I use Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia.¹⁶

10 Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto*. (Detroit, Mi.: Large Print Press/Gale Cengage Learning, 2009), 20.

11 Gill Valentine, “Eating in: Home, Consumption and Identity,” *The Sociological Review* 47, no. 3 (August 1, 1999): 491–524.

12 Valentine, “Eating in”, 503.

13 Sam Sifton, “Cooking In The Time of Covid-19.” Interview by Dave Davies and Terry Gross. *Fresh Air*, NPR, April 7, 2020. Audio, 2:18, <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/07/828827151/cooking-in-the-time-of-covid-19>.

14 Sifton, interview.

15 Hans Taparia, “How Covid-19 is Making Millions of Americans Healthier,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/18/opinion/covid-cooking-health.html>.

16 Michel Foucault, “Heterotopias,” *AA Files*, no. 69 (2014): 18–22. doi:10.2307/43202545.

Michel Foucault describes heterotopia as:

something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.¹⁷

Heterotopia, in this sense, is a space that creates contradictory spaces but also relates to all the spaces surrounding it.¹⁸ Virtual meal sharing during Covid19, relates people to a specific time and place in their homes, but also connects them through the virtual space. Thus, we are at the same time having a meal together, and not together.

Creators of Food, Art, and Conversation

During the course of this year, I turned to performance as a medium for the project. As meal sharing is an act that cannot exist without participation, I looked at various food performance artists and their work.



Figure 1 Performance of Alison Knowles, *Make a Salad*, 1962, at the High Line, 2012. Photo by Liz Ligon. Courtesy of Friends of the High Line.

The first artist and art group I looked at was Alison Knowles and Fluxus. In 1962, Alison Knowles, a member of Fluxus, premiered *Make a Salad* in New York where she made a giant salad for the public.¹⁹ Knowles connected the mundane act of salad making to high art practices. She created a space where public participation was key which was a crucial part of my art making as well.

17 Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 24.

18 Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 24.

19 Julia Fiore, "When Making a Salad Became Groundbreaking Performance Art," Artsy, September 20, 2018. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-making-salad-groundbreaking-performance-art>.



Figure 2 [Right] Gordon Matta-Clark turned this photograph into a promotion for Food, 1971.
[Left] Gordon Matta-Clark inside FOOD, 1971.

Along with Knowles and Fluxus, Gordon Matta Clark opened his Soho restaurant FOOD in 1971 which involved food as performance, food as art, and food as food for artists to eat.²⁰ Gordon Matta Clark's FOOD restaurant engaged on multiple levels with the idea of food as place making. The restaurant itself as one site for place making, the meals being served to feed the artists as another, and the artists who made the meals as yet another site. Thus, I became more invested in hosting my own dinners and creating multiple sites for place making. Finally, fast forward to 1990. Rirkrit Tiravanija turned gallery spaces into kitchens where Thai curry was served as the art and as the dinner.²¹ Tiravanija took the restaurant format and put it in a museum gallery which completely changed the context of meal sharing. Looking at Tiravanija's work showed me how important the setting of my dinners would be in creating the space for the types of conversation and reflection I was interested in.

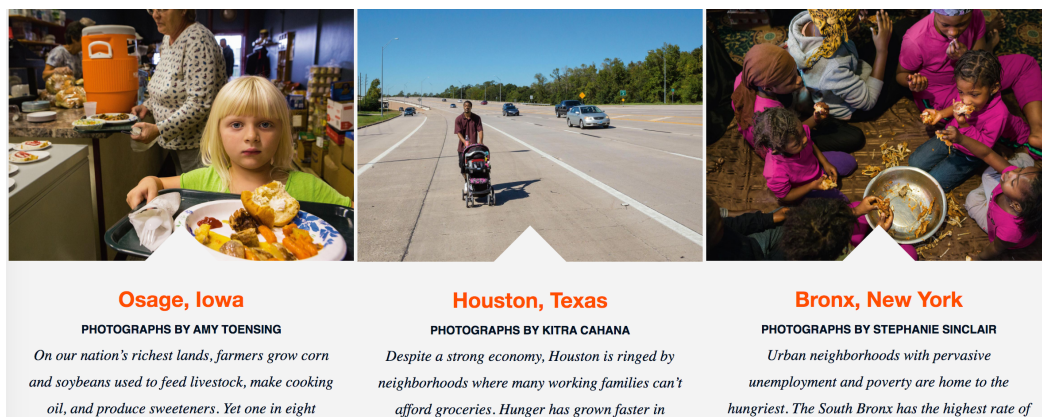


Figure 3 Screenshot from *The New Face of Hunger* web page.

In order to better inform the digital presentation of my project, I also looked at how food stories are used to communicate in other disciplines and digital media. In a recent National Geographic study: *The New Face of Hunger*, three photographers were sent to different parts of the US to

20 "Gordon Matta-Clark's Art Restaurant Resurrected," Phaidon, Accessed April 24, 2020. <https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2013/may/02/gordon-matta-clarks-art-restaurant-resurrected/>.

21 "Rirkrit Tiravanija: Cooking Up an Art Experience," MOMA, Accessed April 24, 2020. https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/02/03/rirkrit-tiravanija-cooking-up-an-art-experience/.

explore the effects of hunger.²² The project includes stories from multiple families. Each story lays out a different picture of how hunger affects different communities. Each image is followed by a paraphrased description that details the person's experiences. When I read the paraphrased statements, they felt less personal and more intrusive to each person's story. Thus, for my digital flipbook, I have used transcripts of my conversations with my guests instead of paraphrasing the discussion.



Figure 4 Fritz Haeg, *Forming Circles*. Photo by Gene Pittman.

Finally, I looked at artists working in areas of community engagement to better understand my role as a facilitator. Fritz Haeg, in his project *Foraging Circles*, used community involvement to create a rug and a space for conversation.²³ The rug was created through participant donated clothes that the community members would weave together as a collective.²⁴ Part of what made Haeg's project successful was the usage of community collected t-shirts to insight conversation around the rug. This created a built-in investment on behalf of the participants to the making of the rug. In order to facilitate the kinds of conversations I wanted for my project, I knew I would also need to find a way to create built-in investments on the side of my participants. Lastly, Candy Chang and her project *Before I die* became another inspiration for community engagement. In *Before I die*, Candy Chang used her environment and anonymity to create a space for thought and reflection for the local community.²⁵ This anonymity and phrase prompted the public to share what their desires are before they die. I took note particularly as to how the connection of a simple phrase to a place could insight reflection, which inspired me to use a similar format when designing my illustrated plates.

22 "The New Face of Hunger," National Geographic, accessed April 17, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/foodfeatures/hunger/>.

23 "Making Fritz Haeg's Rug," Walker, Accessed April 21, 2020. <https://walkerart.org/magazine/making-fritz-haegs-rug>

24 Walker, "Making Fritz."

25 "Before I Die," Candy Chang, Accessed April 24, 2020. <http://candychang.com/work/before-i-die-in-nola/>.

METHODOLOGY

My approach to creating my project was highly experimental and unplanned. I went into it with one idea and came out with a totally different one. Most importantly though, I kept an open mind, and I was willing to go down any road the process took me to.

The Beginning



Figure 5 [Left] Dinner party with my housemates in Perugia, Italy
Figure 6 [Right] Dumplings I made for a reference photo.



Figure 7 What I Eat, Oil on Canvas. Painting series I made abroad in Italy.

The start of my project actually begins almost a year ago from now. January 2019 to August 2019, I studied abroad in Perugia, Italy. During this time, I created a series of paintings which explored my Chinese American identity through the foods I eat (Fig. 7). This project sowed the seeds for my interest in food and identity. Coming in to IP I knew I was interested in exploring how food shapes who we are as individuals and as a society. As a painter, I initially imagined the final form to take shape as a collection of paintings. Before diving in though, I wanted to explore other avenues to gain more insight into other people's relationships to food and themselves. This led me to conduct my own research in the form of dinner events. The dinner events asked participants to share their relationship to food with myself over a meal I hosted at my house.

The Middle



Figure 8 [Left] One of the first iterations of the dinner invite/poster

Figure 9 [Center + Right] Food For Talk, Dinner invitations and forms. I hand wrote 106 in total to give out to all the IP and BA Seniors



Figure 10 Food preparation for my dinner events

As I was hosting dinners, and gathering information and personal stories, I was also researching and learning about case studies done around the topics of food, identity, home, habits, and family. At this point, I started to become more interested in the context and the social interactions that were happening as a result of my dinners. With feedback from my professors and peers I started exploring the social aspects of meal sharing and how silence or teamwork plays into the experience. Along the way I video/audio documented the process and free wrote after each dinner event.

Hosting dinners is hard work, and after hosting four different dinners, I needed time to reflect. My project was becoming more about me hosting the dinners than my original intentions of a painting/installation. I needed to re-assess what were my priorities, and what did I want to make as a senior project.



Figure 11 Dinner Event #2 - Eating together in silence. No one was allowed to talk while we ate.



Figure 12 Dinner Event #3 - Eating as teamwork. Each person was given a different handicap (blindfolded, hands tied, or vocal restrictions) and then invited to eat a meal.

The Lost and Found



Figure 13 [Left] Diary sketches of my thoughts and emotions about food.

Figure 14 [Right] One of the walls in my studio as I tried to sort through all the data I had gathered.

With the start of a new year, I was determined to find my way back on the right track. I began iterating all different forms my project could take from video, to classroom activities, to visual charts, and illustrations. I kept bouncing around from one idea to the next, but never really satisfied with any of them. I was lost. I continued to write and reflect about my project until I was writing in circles. I was struggling to grapple with my role in the dinner events and my original intentions for the project. I was very emotionally charged with frustration, and at the same time I also began making diary sketches based on my emotions (Fig, 13). There seemed no end to the madness though.



Figure 15 Illustrated plates based on my sketches from Fig.13.

Enter guest critic artists!

Through my conversations with the guest critic artists I was able to refocus my project in a direction that felt natural and logical for where it had taken me. I embraced the performance aspects of the project and began feeling excited about the work again. I was able to see how important my role was in hosting the dinners and to share my relationship with food to others. Thus, I decided to host one-on-one dinners for my exhibition, and create a space to share with others my relationship to food based on the food we would eat and the plates we would eat out of. Each plate was designed around one of my previous sketches. To prepare for this performance/installation I began sketching and visualizing what the space would feel and look like (Fig. 16).

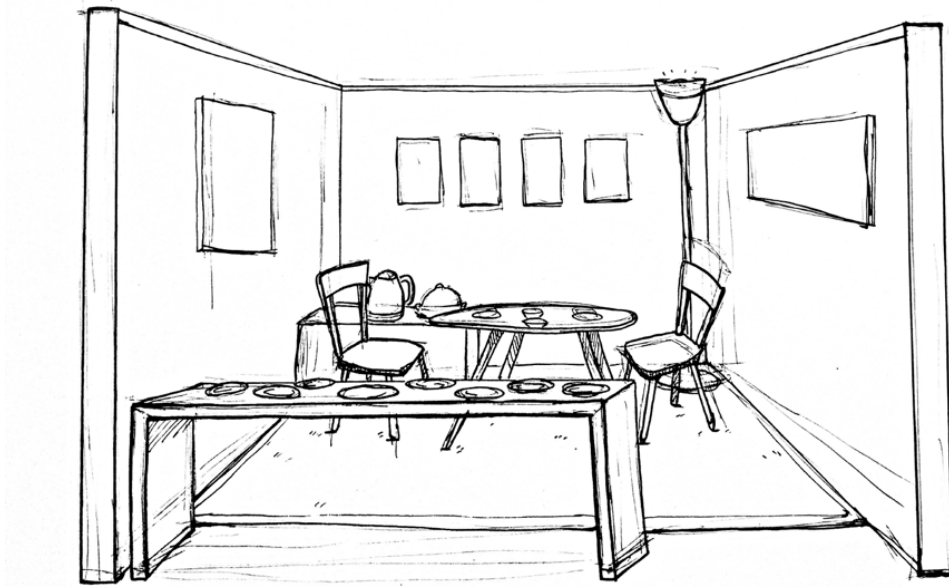


Figure 16 Sketch of my exhibition plans for hosting one-on-one dinners.

Covid-19



Figure 17 Eating dinner with my virtual guests during the quarantine.

Then the world ended. Not literally, but unfortunately Covid-19 spread prolifically and became a worldwide pandemic. As a result, my project also had to pivot. Brainstorming with my professors and peers, I was able to find a new life for the project in a virtual realm in which I hosted one-on-one dinners with my friends and family. As Covid-19 shifted our interactions with people, I became more concerned with my loved ones, and close friends. Thus, during this time, my project naturally shifted to focus on forging closer bonds with friends rather than strangers. It became an opportunity for me to form deeper connections with already close friends in a new frame of reference. Shifting to a virtual platform during the quarantine, also shifted the context of my dinners to document and reflect our current and unique situation.

The End (At last)



Figure 18 Eight illustrated ceramic plates which framed the dinner conversations.

The last stages of my work involved setting up dinner events once a week with friends and creating conversations through the plates I had already illustrated. Each dinner was centered around the plate my guest chose and the food we made based on their relationship and availability to foods. The final version of the dinner performances is documented in the form of an online flipbook which can be sent out for viewing. The digital format includes images from each virtual dinner and transcripts of the conversations that came about during the meals.

CREATIVE WORK

Food for Talk is a performance dinner event. The dinners are based on one of the eight illustrated plates that discuss my personal relationship to food. Over the course of four virtual dinners, my guests and I shared our stories and shared a meal together to create a place for deeper self-reflection and self-discovery. Each of the eight plates relate a specific phrase to a food that reflects my connection to meal sharing. In order to facilitate the conversation and intimacy needed for my project, each participant was asked to select one plate that resonates most with them. Additionally, each guest is asked to select the meal based on their connections to food sharing which creates an investment in the meal on the part of my guests. By creating the same meal together but separately, when the participant and I sit down to eat, we created a new space for meal sharing that is both real and virtual. The dinners are not recorded to enhance the sense of security and each participant is asked to eat with only myself in our new, real, and virtual room. With Covid19, sharing a meal has become one of the most intimate and reflective activities we do in our day to day lives which is documented through our conversations. The final form showcases the project in an online flipbook which allows the reader to view each dinner and read about the different conversations. Ultimately, the dinners created a space that documented the relationship between people and food during our uncertain times.

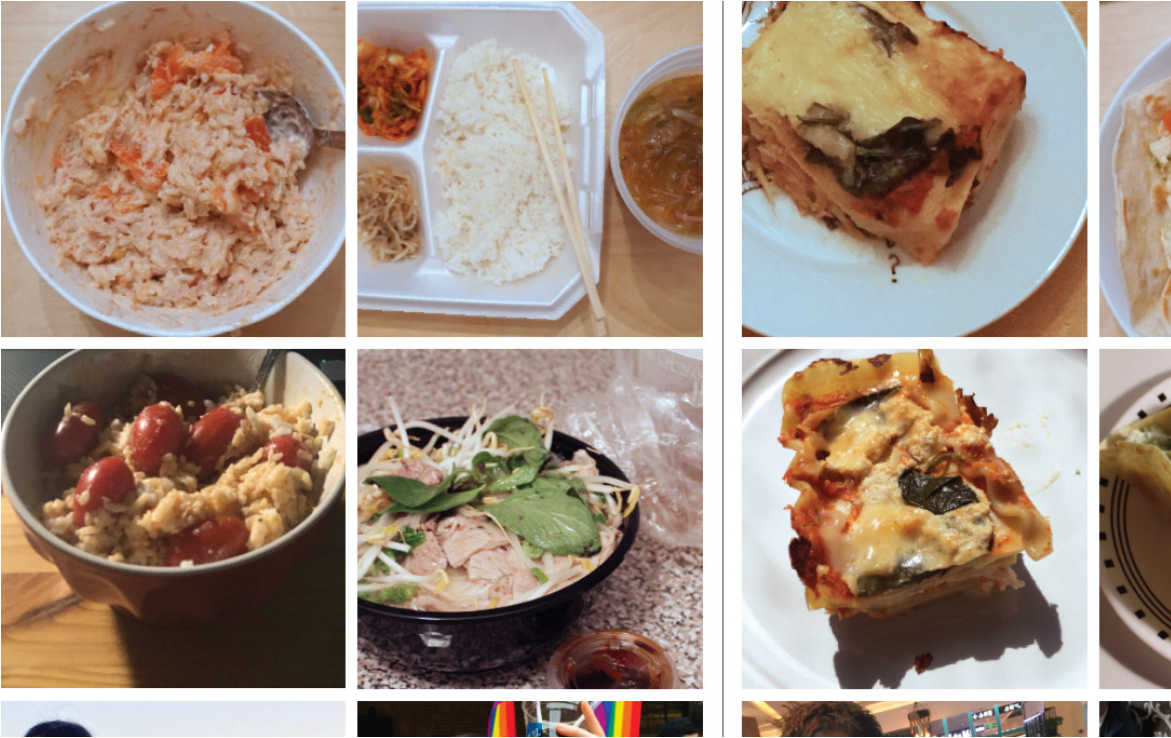


Figure 19 Foods we made and ate for each virtual dinner.

Caroline

I knew it was bad, I just couldn't stop

Yeah, I feel like we've had some very dark times. *But like, yeah, obviously my actions are much healthier now.*

It's so hard to get out of it. **And honestly, I feel like a lot of what makes my actions healthier is just like, fear of going back.**

I think that's the thing, is like, even though I'm not nearly as bad as I was before or in that kind of state, it never really leaves 100%. I'm always still very concerned about what I'm eating and stuff. *Yeah, I agree, I mean, I guess it's good because like then I'm not doing those actions per se but, I don't want to live just out of fear either?*



sent 8:37 PM




I definitely get like that cyclical thinking. Cause when you're in it, it's hard to get yourself out of it. I guess, like once you're in it, you're in it.

I know I feel like it's awful because like, I guess you know it's bad, but then it also shouldn't be something you're ashamed of talking about, but I totally was, and I didn't tell anyone.

Yeah with the KIND bars this is like the instance that I remember the most clearly, because I had ordered a box of 24 of them. And then I was just in my dorm room bingeing through all of them and throwing up afterwards because of it. Then only like five minutes afterwards Victoria and Scott walked into the room.

I also look at photos back then, and I'm like, I look normal. I just look like, you know, like a normal person. Happy and smiling, and like, nobody would know, which is the scary part. Like sometimes I look at photos and I'm like, Oh, wait, that's like during that time, and I'm like, you wouldn't even be able to tell what was going on behind the door.

Yeah it's scary.

Figure 20 A page from the online flipbook documenting one of the dinners.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this journey I cannot say it is truly the end. Over the course of our time in quarantine, the dinners I held became a documentation and reflection of our current situation. There was an even greater emphasis on self-reflection during our meals, but placed in a different light. I was no longer physically feeding my guests, but we were still sharing the same space in some sense. Virtual meal sharing, as I see it, is both the solution and the problem to our physical isolation. I have been reaching out to more people all of a sudden and found ways to make deeper connections to close friends through virtual dinners. Yet at the same time, I am still saddened by the inability to leave my house and share a meal with friends. As meal sharing is tied to how we interact with the world, the dinners both succeeded and failed at accomplishing its goal. Like Foucault's heterotopia, I was simultaneously sharing a meal with a friend and not. I was virtually interacting with the world around me by complying with quarantine rules, but at the same time not interacting with the world at all. Can virtual meal sharing be considered meal sharing at all? And what constitutes being together? Through my exploration, I am left with more questions than answers about our relationship to food sharing, technology, and spaces, but I will save those for another meal.

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