

Read  
me

[read me]

*Manual*

This is a summary of the manual that we wrote for the original logbook

Dear reader,

*Read me (Lees me)* is about Elles Kiers, artist, cook and instigator of culinary heritage. When did certain things really start? What is a character trait and what is a symptom? When did things really go off track? Is it possible to forget one's own talent? From 2014 onwards Elles gradually made less and less work until it finally stopped in 2019. Handwritten recipes were lost; a fire destroyed an important part of her work and archive. Now it is Alzheimer's disease that blurs even the memories of those works. As friends we decided to make this book as a tribute to Elles Kiers. We ask ourselves questions and search for what we still know but have to confess that sometimes memory also fails us.

For the making of this book we have access to the archive of Elles. Although much is missing from that archive, it still provides an overview of almost 30 years of artwork. The log that Elles kept about the pigs and the related

events in and around two sea containers, which temporarily served as a pig farm on the border between Germany and the Netherlands in 2010, impressed us. The log is about the project *Pig Year (Varkensjaar)* that later culminated in the perennial project *Pig House (Varkenshuis)*.

In the logbook, Elles clearly shows her vision on the human and animal dimension of food and this way our desire to make a book became possible because the actual book was already written. We only had to provide context and clarify things to refresh the memory as some years passed. We have remained subservient to her log and let the soft voice of Elles resound. We have made her text as correct, clear and legible as possible. The temptation to ‘improve’ was there yet we have chosen to stay close to the words of Elles.

In this manual we provide information about the artistic development of Elles ahead of the *Pig Year* 2010, clarify certain concepts and events in the logbook and add to it where we find it helpful. In the epilogue we shortly mention the so-called Incomplete Cookbook that we are still working on.

“Eaters, that is, must understand that eating takes place inescapably in the world, that it is inescapably an agricultural act, and that how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, the way the world is used.”

Berry, 1990

In this statement we see the main theme from the work of Elles reflected. She often gave her edible art titles such as *Taste me (Proef me)* and *Sweet memory (Zoete herinnering)*. To us it sounded pleasant and involved to give this whole log and manual the simple title *Read me*. We hope that the manual answers questions you may have while reading the log and that it may also provide answers to questions that you have not yet asked yourself.

With kind regards,

Anna Dupon, Erin Stel, Henry Alles en Marike Splinter

## 2000-2009

From the start of the theatre group PeerGrouP (2000), known for its site-specific theatre projects, Elles has been involved in various productions. When in 2004 the group started working from a wooden barrack in the prison-village of Veenhuizen, Elles set up a large professional kitchen. From 2004 until 2010 the group worked intensively in and with the village of Veenhuizen and Elles, together with Sjoerd Wagenaar and Henry Alles, became the artistic core around which many projects evolve (Schuring, 2007). Sjef Meijman, who would be doing the project *Pig Year* (2010) together with Elles, was already living in Veenhuizen and befriended the theatre group in an organic way.

In the public debate the idea prevailed that no farmer or artist could exist without subsidies. Those farmers and artists, meanwhile, were among the first to speak out that there was a subject that needed serious attention: food production and animal welfare. How can we coexist with animals? How can we proceed in the production of milk and meat? In 2009 these questions came together in Sjef's proposal to create and share a meal with farm animals. On the menu that Elles serves in the different projects we see new dishes such as the *Amer-sausage (Amerworstje)*. And Sjef organizes *Tea with my pigs (Bij mijn varkens op de thee)* as he already has two pigs in his backyard in Veenhuizen. Soon Elles and Sjef set up the theatrical project *Butchery Donderen (Slagerij Donderen)* in which one of Sjef's pigs is processed and prepared. The design of the project turned out to be a clear preliminary study of working with pigs in art projects.

# 2010: Pig Year

After the successful collaboration in *Butchery Donderen*, Elles and Sjef declare 2010 to be the *Pig Year*. This was going to be a project in which visual and culinary arts come together with agriculture and livestock, and food production and animal welfare will receive attention: ‘What is our food anyway?’ ‘Where does it come from?’ The questions are studied by breeding, caring for and ultimately slaughtering and preparing four pigs. An important part of the *Pig Year* will be the stay in a mobile farm, the *P.A.I.R.* (Portable Artist In Residence). Elles and Sjef settled there in August, together with the pigs, on the border between the Netherlands and Germany. From there they conducted research into the origin of the specific Bunte Bentheimer breed and into the way pigs were and are kept in this border region called Bentheim. The intention was to set up the pasture in such a way that the pigs can root on the border in both countries.



# August 20

The *P.A.I.R* has been built up in a field, part of an industrial terrain that is shared by the neighbouring municipalities in Germany and the Netherlands. The *P.A.I.R* functions as a living and working accommodation for the artists, farm assistants and pigs. Earlier that year the *P.A.I.R* stood on the foundations of a former monastery in the province of Friesland, in the prison-village of Veenhuizen and is now located on the border between the Netherlands and Germany near the municipalities of Coevorden and Emlichheim.

# August 21

Today the first farm assistant arrives: Paul Bos from the Haarlemmermeer (a municipality in the west of the Netherlands in a polder, consisting of land reclaimed from water). In his capacity as a scientist, Paul was already involved in the subject of pig farming together with another farm assistant, Onno van Eijk. Coincidentally, around 2010 initiatives were developed by scientists as well as hobby farmers/artists to enable local small-scale production of pork that would also be sold on a small scale. With as little transport as possible, since transport is known to have a negative effect on animal welfare and energy consumption. It was becoming more and more difficult to find a local slaughterhouse with the required certificates, as there were not many butchers left with a slaughter practice of their own.

Mobile slaughter houses only became popular in later years and rightly received strong criticism; it turned out, among other things, that mainly wrecked (less mobile/ill) animals were slaughtered on site in order to make the meat available for the market. Economic growth in the agricultural sector once again comes at the expense of animal welfare.

The mentioned *Groeneveld Forum 2010* took place at Groeneveld Castle in Baarn discussing *Rooting in the relationship between animals and humans*. The program for this forum was developed in collaboration with the theatre group PeerGrouP. The invitation to guests stated:

“During the forum, Elles Kiers and Sjef Meijman herd pigs on the Groeneveld estate and take the animals for a walk through Baarn. When herding pigs, the relationship with the animal is much more

direct and visible than in the current mostly anonymous industrial systems of pig farming. The idea is that through ‘individual’ contact with the pig, the debate shifts from pigs in general to these specific animals.” Groeneveld Forum, 2010

The undoubtedly lively conversation between Elles and Paul Bos is reflected in the log, including a vague memory of the Maasai: The Maasai are a nomadic people living in Kenya and Tanzania. The memory could possibly concern the pastoral (shepherd-keeping) husbandry there, where man and animal live together under the same conditions and where slaughter takes place within the herd as a necessary act with respect for the animal’s being.

# August 22

The mentioned *Randstad* is a ring shaped megalopolis: a ring of cities close to each other (a.o. Amsterdam, Utrecht, Rotterdam and The Hague). It is situated in the western part of the Netherlands and covers a large part of what is called Holland.

Possibly first suggested by the stud farmer, the follow-up and perennial project *Pig House* did visit more urban territories in de Randstad and thereby drew a lot more attention from people that both cheered or criticized the project with pigs. The debate often shifted between pigs in general and the individual pigs in the different *Pig Houses*. In 2021 Ramsey Nasr, national poet, writer and actor, describes the debate in his book *De Fundamenten*, in which he uses the *Pig House* project in Rotterdam (2013-2014, the sequel to *Pig Year*) as an important artwork in this debate.

# August 24

“Whether we can still do that; slaughter the pigs?” At a later date Elles writes specifically about the slaughter of Bom:

“BOM. Monday morning half past six with a heavy heart we led Bom to the butcher. The butcher was very friendly and explained again what exactly was going to happen... It - was a short walk from the cattle trailer to the door of the butchery and I said: “Are you coming with me, Bom?” And he walked with us into the butchery. Behind a gate in the butchery were three other pigs, Berkshire males with pitch-black hair. They greeted and sniffed each other, an odd social image. We petted and cuddled some more, Bom just walked quietly with us. He had to stay put behind a fence and was sprayed wet around his neck (he clearly didn't like this) immediately after which the butcher put the electrocution pliers on his neck and I think it was no more than a second and then he was gone. Immediately after that the butcher put the

knife to his throat and the blood was collected in a container. From that moment on he was really dead. Those few seconds were all consuming, and it was significant to feel that Bom had not been afraid for a second, made no sound and was completely calm, no stress. He was a pig with a blind faith in humanity, unfounded as it turns out. Now it's my turn next weekend to make the very best memorable preparations I've ever made and it's going to be a tribute to Bom. Bye Bom."

Kiers, November 19, 2010

Farm assistant Petra Derkzen provides us with even more context in her 24-hour report:

“As pigs for meat production, Alie, Anna, Rinus and Bom paradoxically contribute to the development of a meat taboo. Their visibility and cuddliness disrupts the separation between animal meat that we can now make and like to make, since meat production takes place out of sight in battery farms. The confusion fuels an age-old ambivalence that continues to take on new forms but will always remain as a phenomenon.” Derkzen, 2011



# Epilogue

## An Incomplete Cookbook



At the end of the project, Elles and Sjef unpacked with ‘A full natural day with Bunte Bentheimers, good food, farm assistants and art’, as the press release states. ‘Twenty-four hours on the border; the border between man and animal and the border between two countries’. The diner served at this occasion is recalled in the log but does not contain any instruction in how to prepare it. Therefore we have translated it in the manual as an incomplete cookbook.

To our great regret we were unable to find the notebooks in which Elles wrote her notes and recipes. Her collection of cookbooks is still there, although damaged by the fire. We know in general terms from which cookbooks Elles got her inspiration, and there are a number of good starting points for certain recipes. While compiling this book, we went into the kitchen in search of her dishes as we remember them. Tasting, cutting, cooking, trying out and discussing it together produced knowledge.

Cooking forced us to look for exactly where an ingredient comes from and whether it is in season at all at the moment. This incomplete cookbook is an invitation to all to go into the kitchen thinking of Elles with the recipes of that vegetarian diner with the pigs. Elles' cooking cannot be reduced to a handful of herbs and a recipe for soup with salad. Her work was to create edible 'relationscapes' in which the dishes could travel with her and take on a local form over and over again. We strive to make this cookbook more complete together with others in the future.

mEATing Tilburg,  
the processing of  
Bom



**‘Preparing a dish is creating using all senses: I see, taste, smell, feel and hear. Preparing food is also about power, sex, sensuality, intimacy, vulnerability and femininity.**

Elles Kiers

Colophon summarized manual

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