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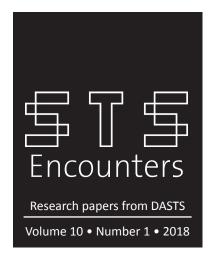
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Empirical Prints - Verfremdung & Fabrications
Kasper Ostrowski

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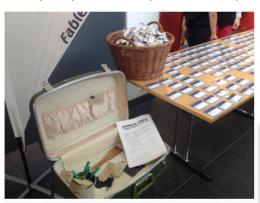
Introduction

'Empirical Prints' was initiated as an open-ended experimental project. The craft based research project served no clear-cut purpose and had no unequivocal resolutions in mind. However, it was devised with a multitude of sensitivities. As a non-conventional printmaker and STS scholar, I aspired to introduce and experiment with the practice of printmaking in an academic setting. Furthermore, I was intrigued by STS's long standings concern with materiality and especially the focus on the relational quality of materiality (E.g.: Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Weibel and Latour 2005). Lastly the project grew out of an interest for ways of re-enchanting otherwise forgotten and "invisible objects"; litter, garbage, mundane items etc. Inspired by both STS and the-atre theorist & play writer Bertolt Brecht, I aimed at making the natural look surprising.

The participatory experiment turned out to be a rich source of investigative potentials: The collecting of materials, the objects, the prints, the conversations between the "found objects turned printing plates" and the prints, the interaction with the participants and more. So simple, yet so rich. The unassuming set-up encompassed multiple affordances. While the concept also aimed at 'thinking slowly' (Bennett 2010) about and invigorating our attention towards humdrum objects, this article is less about an uncommon way of collecting empirical materials and more about their aesthetically unusual re-enactment. Or, in others words, more about the print-part of 'Empirical Prints' than the empirical part.

In this paper, I account for the process of making Empirical Prints and examine aspects of the concept, the print sessions and the range of prints. First, I introduce the concept and present my recurring motif 'Verfremdung'. Then, I link the printing concept to empirical work within design and STS. I claim that the invitation to collect a random object with the prospect of having it turned into a unique monotype triggers an empirical gaze. Next, I analyze the printing process and the re-enactment of objects utilizing the notions 'dramatic fabrications' and Verfremdung. I suggest that Empirical Prints could be contemplated as dramatic fabrications or well-meaning frauds producing or fabricating ontologies and affordances different from the represented objects. This is followed by a section in which I explore how the Empirical Prints seem to trigger a certain aesthetic view. Before the conclusion, I shortly reflect on the artistic perspectives of the Empirical Prints.

The concept

The first version was tested at the 2014 IDC conference, located in Aarhus, Denmark. As a special investigative endeavour, I invited around 250 international participants to bring a random object and drop it in a suitcase (See figure 1). During the conference I annotated, documented and turned the objects deposited into handmade relief prints. The printing process was carried out on a classic printing press (see figure 1) and took place at a centre for cultural production entitled Godsbanen located in the city centre. Subsequently, I mailed the prints to the respective 'object finders'.
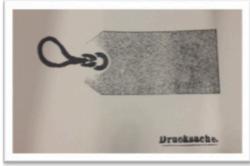

Figure 1

On the basis of the experiences gained from this test run, I have advanced the concept both theoretically and practically. A pivotal concern was the 'abruptness' of the set-up mainly due to the convoluted process and the distribution-latency. Motivating participants to drop an object in a suitcase and await some kind of print being mailed to them in an indeterminate future proved difficult. They were unable to engage in the printing process, experience the anticipation of the transformation or interact with the print-maker on duty. To create a shared process-space and eliminate the problematic distribution-latency I subsequently devised a rudimentary, but fully mobile and operational printing press system for making Empirical Prints on-location. Since the initial try-out,

the mobile version (see figure 2) has been put successfully into operation at number of different workshops, symposia and conferences. To ensure that the mobile version was indeed mobile it was kept light and small and was built with a LEGO plate. Later the plate was changed to a thin sheet of transparent polymethyl methacrylate (Plexiglas) in order to facilitate cleaning and avoid discrete, but unintended LEGO-marks in the prints. Different types of paper were tested for the mobile printing press. In the end, stone paper was chosen. This particular type of paper is rigid and preserves ink well. The downside being, that it dries out slowly. For this reason, a small hair-dryer was added

Figure 2

to the equipment list. This conglomerate made it possible to fabricate prints in a manner of minutes. A participant at a print-session in Denver noted that it was a: "Fantastic idea with instant gratification" (Denver 2015, EP participant). The simplicity of the set-up notwithstanding, it has proven less easy to communicate the participants assignment. Inspired by Gaver et al.'s cultural probes (Gaver, Dunne and Pacenti 1999), my newest set-up (Boston 2017) thus incorporated a pre-printing 'marketing' campaign, in which a tiny pamphlet including a humoristic invitation to join a "secret" printing society, a miniature motivational "bribe" (a dime), an invitation to the actual printing session and a challenge card to facilitate the collection of materials was distributed (See figure 3). This made it possible to answer questions and clarify misunderstandings

Figure 3

in advance while establishing interest for the print session. In spite of the information about the nature of the sessions, the general feel or atmosphere at the print sessions is occupied by 'curious surprise'. One participant stated: "My earphones came out like an erotic picture" (Denver 2015, EP participant). In Boston, another reflected: "I found a hair tie in about thirty seconds [...] Beautifully, it came out as a nautilus of sorts". This aspect has led me to evoke the concept Verfremdung.

Verfremdung

The playwright and theatre theoretician Bertolt Brecht coined 'Verfremdung' back in the 1930's. Despite many attempts through the years, the term seems notoriously difficult to translate; Estrangement, alienation or disillusion might be the closest English counterparts available, but they all somehow fall short of being accurate. Brecht's original notion has a fittingly intricate and academic German swung to it:

"Der V-Effekt besteht darin, dass das Ding, das zum Verständnis gebracht, auf welches das Augenmerk gelenkt werden soll, aus einem gewöhnlichen, bekannten, unmittelbar vorliegenden Ding zu einem besonderen, auffälligen, unerwarteten Ding gemacht wird. Das Selbstverständliche wird in gewisser Weise unverständlich gemacht" (Brecht 1967: p. 355).

As an artistic strategy, the agenda was not entirely unique. Back in 1817 Samuel Coleridge defined imagination as: "[...] the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: [...] the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar" (Coleridge 1907. Cited in Richards 2002, p. 191). And in 1821 the poet Percy Shelley formulated his romantic and now widespread statement: "Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar" (Shelley 2012, p.13). Furthermore, Brecht drew inspiration from Russian Formalism and in particular the work of Viktor Shklovskij who coined ostranenie 'making strange' or 'defamiliarization' in his 1917 essay 'Art as Device' in which he rationalized:

Figure 4

"The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (Schklovskij 1998: 16).

The pivotal aspect of Verfremdung in this setting is that - what was once considered obvious is turned incomprehensible in different ways. Or, as summed up by theatre theorist Martin Esslin: "The natural must be made to look surprising" (Esslin 1961).

While not being an entirely novel concept - historically speaking - Brecht´s collected agenda and his theory of 'epic-,' or 'dialectical theatre' were both unique in aim and approach. In general Brecht frowned upon unconcerned indulgence and entertainment. He aimed for education and emancipatory revolt: "The pleasure that his theatre was now permitted to give was the pleasure we feel when we discover new truths, the exhilaration we experience when we enlarge our understanding" (Esslin 1961, p. 127). Utilizing discordant and even jarring elements Brecht sought minor irritation to ruffle the spectators in unexpected ways (Best 2012: 231). Discordant elements were appropriated in different manners; Disruptive signs, placards or projections. He also used masks and puppetry, visible stage machinery and allowed smoking in the audience (Carlson 1996). Such elements were included to create 'critical distance' by forestalling emotional involvement and any ambitions for creating a trustworthy illusion. To keep audiences from losing their critical perspective and diminish the seductive power of theatrical suspense, Brecht wanted to keep both the actor and the act of fabrication foregrounded.

Unlike Brecht I do not cultivate any politically revolting ambitions. I do however share his didactical intentions. I believe that with the Empirical Prints I am fabricating friendly and aesthetically pleasing, but also somewhat discordant inscriptions that might disrupt the observers' utilisational gaze and force him or her to reconcile the different versions of the objects.

Lost and found

A pivotal lesson from STS is that anything and everything, counts as legitimate empirical material. When investigating in a STS manner we try to include any element, which might productively 'thicken our descriptions' (Geertz 1973). Such a non-discriminative investigation modus is grounded in an intentional quest for limiting empirical and methodological hygiene allowing the inclusion of any materials – however mundane (Law 2004). As it has been thoroughly investigated by STS scholars; Pamphlets and flyers, trash and packaging, germs and bodily fluids, glossy reports or evidence-based lab tests are all equally valid as empirical points of departure (E.g. Coole and Frost 2010; Law 2007; Mol 2002; Mol and Berg 1994). They are all on the same level and equally valid as testimony of cultural processes and performative events. None of them are privileged a priori as accounts prone for theoretical inclusion: "There are no a priori limits in regards to the location of empirical matters or to the places insights might be produced" (Gad and Jensen 2007: 100. Italic in org. My translation). The question to ask, then, is how to render the commonplace strange when studying and performing empirical matters?

Amongst my sources of inspiration was Gaver et al.'s influential investigation of 'cultural probes' as an adaptation of 'Situationistic' practices into a design agenda (Gaver,

Dunne and Pacenti 1999). I shared the idea of accumulating "inspirational data […] to stimulate our imagination rather than define a set of problems" (Ibid.: 25). In my case this data was created on the basis of random objects that had somehow enthralled or sparked curiosity in the participants – and compelled them to reclaim and bring them to me for artistic translation. In Gaver and Dunne´s setting evocative maps somehow attuned the resident's attention towards selected aspects of their everyday-life. In a similar manner, the invitation 'join' a secret printing society and to bring an object with the prospect of having it turned into a monotype seemed to have potential for triggering an 'empirical gaze' – a novel attention towards lost objects and possible motifs in garbage, marooned or unsensational objects. I found that such an empirical gaze could be utilized as a way of re-enchanting hitherto lost, commonplace matters. I learned from participants, that in regards to the collection process, some had scattered through trash, some picked up items en route, at their hotel or at the conference site. Owning to this empirical gaze - previously abandoned and unsensational objects had turned into possible prints.

Figure 5 is a sample of the objects collected by IDC conference attendees. The participants used a brown manila mark to provide me with their delivery information, enabling me to reach them, once their prints were dry and ready for shipment.

Figure 5

The mobile set-up I developed and used later allowed me to frame the collection and the process differently. Working within academia, I coxed attendees towards objects loosely or metaphorically linked to their research. In the first sessions of this kind I processed everything from a tuning fork, an old cassette tape, phones, post-it notes and pills containers to a hand-rolled cigarette, a football jersey, a gene chip and more (see figure 6).

This way of collecting materials centrestage the randomness of empirical findings, underscoring the STS stance on a priorities: "empirical philosophy has no investment in pre-determining what an entity must be at the beginning of an inquiry" (Jensen 2004, p. 50). In my case, I initially established a very loose frame; I invited people to bring random, but relatively flat and preferably non-organic objects. What would they bring? Initially I thought that I might be able to track regional differences through the acquired objects. But from the participants I learned that some have had a different object in mind, but forgotten it and instead claimed a new one at the conference site or en route. This somehow hindered any tracking of regional characteristics. But it also indicated that - once triggered - an empirical gaze could be re-adjusted or re-engaged

Figure 6

on the fly with relative ease. To sharpen the concept and facilitate the enrolment of participants, suggestive challenge-cards were added to the set-up.

Non-digital prints

"What happens when we slow down the process of printmaking to a hairdryer?"
Denver 2015, EP participant

The simple, handheld process of turning reclaimed objects into prints, recast or reenact the empirical materials in such a way that the natural become de-naturalized - compelling both an empirical pre-printing gaze and a post-printing aesthetic view. The handheld prints work as strong, aesthetically surprising and at times humoristic reenactments of empirical materials - being both quite curious and ontologically complex. The mobile printing press functions as a contrapuntal devise which simultaneously blurs and displays the connection between input and output. With this instrument litter can be turned into objects of inquiry, making us re-consider the naturalness of the natural and exploring the potential otherness in and of the mundane.

Figure 7

Making prints on an old printing press or with the mobile version is an almost provoc-

atively analogue process. To make the prints, each of the provided objects must have ink applied on a surface. On several occasions, this turned out to be rather complicated as I received printwise "difficult" objects like a liquid filled container for contact lenses, a box of pins or a football jersey. When inked, a piece of stone paper is placed on top of the object. Finally, pressure is watchfully applied to the conglomerate using a rolling pin. It is very much a hands-on process. Pigment on paper is 'old school'. It might even be considered retro or a political statement pointing towards restorative nostalgia: "Nostalgia is never only nostalgia, but the raw, reflexive appetite for something we can no longer access. This is unpopular culture, and the choice to participate is almost a political statement in and of itself" (Alexander 2014: 2; Boym 2001). The Empirical Prints are analogue and monotypic in nature. The prints cannot be altered digitally and I only produce one unique print on location. The margins of error are relatively big and there are no means for eradicating possible flaws and mishaps. In this manner, the prints represent an intentional way of retaining a familiar technique and a somewhat familiar expression generating surprising results set against a modern backdrop. One participant noted that it was: "Interesting to see the [printing] process from a different angle" (Denver 2015, EP participant). The conversations between the objects and the prints seem to generate surprise, entailing aesthetics and often humour. At the printing sessions, there are lots of laughs and attendees partaking often ponder enthusiastically "Wow, it almost looks like...". Or - as with the participant quoted further above stated: "My earphones came out like an erotic picture" (Denver 2015, EP participant). One way of thinking conceptually about the empirical prints is as dramatic fabrications.

Dramatic fabrications

"The image is making it very clear that it is <u>not</u> the same thing but its own. One wonders what the two could talk to each (Sic.)"
(Denver 2015, EP – Participant. Underscored in original).

Disregarding the incompleteness of the sentence, the point this participant is making seems very interesting. Following this line of inquiry, I investigate the prints as dramatic fabrications.

It happens under pressure. It´s a dramatic exchange. I It´s hot and cold. Brutal yet delicate, fragile and soothing. The object is smeared with ink, battered by a roller applying ink, then by a rolling pin forcefully demanding an exchange between object, ink and paper. The blank sheet of crisp white paper is tarnished with black ink. Some areas are bypassed, others highlighted. The contrast is obvious. Neither the object, nor the paper will ever be the same. The conglomerate is forever joined by force and then suddenly and abruptly torn apart. The paper almost lets out a noticeable sigh as the relief print is lifted from the press. It is over in a matter of seconds. Brutal, beautiful and certainly

transformative. Forged under pressure, something is forever gone and something new has been fabricated.

Fabrication, in my understanding, is different from transformation or construction as it somehow entails a touch of foul play. Fabrication could be considered both a creative process of construction and a lie, misconduct or fraudulent endeavour. The coupled term has double entendre: On one hand, I wish to entail a dramaturgical aspect with the pairing of dramatic and fabrication. On the other hand, I believe that the material translation could be considered ontologically dramatic. From the surface of tactile objects - a new paper version, an Empirical Print, is fabricated. When fabricating prints, I am making inscriptions - continuously recasting or reenacting the objects as ontologically different beings. The prints do not just represent a different, aesthetic perspective of the empirical materials. The prints seem to reenact the materials in different ways rendering them something fundamentally different, with altered affordances and potentials. I found that the fabricated versions seem to pose questions or stimulate narratives different from the actual objects: "Love having such a fun and interesting way to explore materiality" (Denver 2015, EP – Participant).

Contemplating Empirical Prints as dramatic fabrications could also be associated to the very act of acting in a theatre. Without digressing to far from the subject at hand I will too briefly turn towards the 'contract of fiction' in a theatrical setting (Szatkowski 2004). Intentionally disregarding most of the complexity in theatrical representations I would like to tie the prints to a dramatic domain by promoting the image of an actor or actress on a stage as a well-meaning fraud. The performer acting as Hamlet in the classic play by Shakespeare is not Hamlet, but at the same time he or she is not, NOT Hamlet (R. Schechner in: Christoffersen, Kjeldsen, Risum and Thomsen 1987: 63).

In very much the same manner, the Empirical Prints could be explained as well-meaning frauds. The fabricated versions of objects pose as recognizable objects, but are at the same time not the objects. The inscriptions are tangible in a different manner and foster affordances and experiences different from the objects themselves. As the participant noted, one really does wonder what the two could talk to each other about! Tactile objects tend to demand our attention in an 'utilisational manner' whereas the fabricated inscriptions invite us to momentarily disregard the objects usage and consider their aesthetic qualities and possible narratives. In much the same manner as the well-meaning fraud by a stage performer invites the audience to suspend their disbelief and momentarily let him or her pose as Hamlet in order to convey a certain drama or story (Coleridge 1907). While the actor is always part of the character - the Empirical Prints are self-evidently and undeniably always linked to the objects, but at the same time they are creating a point of departure, which is somehow partially separated from the objects. A print of pins is not pins, but it is also not, NOT pins. As such, it could be considered as a well-meaning fraudulent inscription of pins. As a peculiarity, one can consider the picture in figure 8, in which the printed version of pins features one of the actual pins, which somehow got stuck in the paper. As spectators in a theatre we are aware that the fraudulent actor on stage is not really about to kill another human so we let the drama unfold in order to gain insights. Similarly, the printed objects - in ontologically dramatic reenactments - seem to shed their utilisational matter in favour of aesthetics and narrative. Here a second dramatic impulse is collected from Bertolt Brecht's theory of 'epic-,' or 'dialectical theatre' and relates to the idea of making the natural look surprising and triggering an aesthetic view.

Figure 8

Brecht's use of Verfremdung techniques was a very strong, active and intentional way of advertising the very act of fabrication. In making handheld prints, the promotion is less forcefully intentional, but more discrete. When co-producing handheld prints the performers – the printmaker and the participant – are both physically present. Subsequently they are both 'made available' through the selected object and small mishaps like an unintended fingerprint, a ruggedly inked area or a slip of the rolling pin creating smears, smudges and double exposures. Thus, I believe, that the hands of the handmade are very present in this kind of work. It encompasses a "doer behind the deed" (Butler 1990 p. 25, building on Nietzche). Not as a particular, unison doer, but as a fabricator.

When studying this kind of prints, the actively participating spectator is not just contemplating the motif, but he or she is at the same time conscious that alongside him or her, someone turned a familiar looking object into something else; The object was reenacted as something surprisingly different – triggering what I previously referred slightly casually to as an aesthetic view which to some degree disregards the portrayed objects real life functionality. At this point I would like to unfold this angle.

Aesthetic view

Earlier I described how the invitation to have an object turned into a relief-print could trigger an empirical gaze and institute a pre-print attention towards possible motifs in lost, marooned or unsensational objects. In this section I will briefly examine the final prints and the establishment of an aesthetic view.

When objects are turned into relief prints something intriguing seems to happen. As considered above - they seem reenacted as ontological different matters. The utilities of objects give way to the aesthetics. The possibility of an aesthetic view is established. Partly because of the way we are accustomed to handle the medium - prints on paper

- and partly because of the surprisingly aesthetic gestalt the objects in concoction with the ink, the paper and the simple process seemed to have rendered possible.

Figure 9

Prints on paper are often relatively small, flat and easy to transport. They are most commonly intended for framing and exhibiting on a flat surface or wall. When engaging with such prints we are accustomed to refrain from any direct physical contact (the 'hands off credo' fiercely advocated in museums) and instead engage visually, emotionally and mentally. How we as recipients interact with works such as these could easily turn into an immensely complicated and forever ongoing discussion on art and perception. While it is a both intriguing and important complication, I will leave these aspects to scholars better attuned to investigate such concerns. However, I will shortly deduce one aspect I found in my material. In my setting affordances seem to generate a way of turning random objects into empirical inscriptions. The line-up of Empirical Prints detached from their possible use make the objects accountable as something, which can be contemplated, showcased, compared, handled, debated, visually scrutinized and later on analysed.

An aesthetic view seems to bring the objects back into our attention in an interesting way. Disregarding functionality, the aesthetic qualities of the objects take centre-stage. Some objects are surprisingly strong aesthetically, others less so. But in general, they are very much alike in their new enactment. The triggering of an aesthetic view makes the otherwise extremely different objects appear traceable, somehow similar, level and comparable across the board.

Artistic perspective
Are the Empirical Prints artistically intriguing? Maybe. More interestingly, they are the results of an ethnographic investigation; A conversion between object, ink, paper and people. The fact that the object "owners" now take part in the process somehow make them complicit. They and their choices are included and they become partially responsible for the objects and consequentially the prints produced. The inclusion is import-

ant – it engages the participants: "Cool and engaging project. Makes you think critically about the material of objects" (Denver 2015, EP participant).

Albeit free from 'classic artistic aspirations' Empirical Prints could still be loosely coupled to different sources of artistic inspirations. The collection of mundane objects could be associated with readymades or objet trouvés (found objects). In this school of artistic expression, art is mostly created from common every day and undisguised objects or products that have been selected, but not materially altered. The chosen objects are not normally considered art, because they already have a non-art function (Wikipedia 2015). Most iconic is Marcel Duchamp's 1917 display of a urinal entitled Fountain. While I share the aim of invigorating mundane objects that might otherwise have lost our attention, I am less focused on the unaltered objects themselves, but centre my attention on printed inscriptions made possible by the objects. Departing from the objects unique relief-prints are created. Due to the frailty of the objects and the handmade process it is impossible to fabricate multiple identical prints and I only produce one of each. As implied previously, the process of making Empirical Prints is not without encounters of resistance. Being an analogue and handheld process there is no way of 'digitally re-mastering' the results. Naturally the printmaker might make mistakes, but more interestingly the objects often impede repetitions as they break under pressure. In this way, the Empirical Prints entail both acts of fabrication and destruction. This aspect emphasizes the complicit here and now shared by the printmaker and the participant. It also adds a layer of 'brutal uniqueness' to the monotype. It is irreversible. The print will be forever irreplaceable, as the reference has been demolished.

Conclusion
What does a couple of coins, a football jersey, a box of pins, a set of earplugs, a gene chip and a plastic leave have in common? In an attempt to reenact trivial objects as startling - they were all turned into monotypic Empirical Prints using a handheld printing press.

In an attempt to introduce and experiment with the practise of printmaking in an academic setting I devised an experimental concept entitled Empirical Prints including a mobile printing press. Reflecting 'ethnographically' the mobile printing set-up seems to function as a prudent tool for investigating how fabrication of materialties can be incorporated into theoretical discussions of materialities. With the invitation to playfully investigate materialities through unsensational and marooned objects, the participants experience the effects of an empirical gaze and an aesthetic view. The concept slows down the process of printmaking to a hairdryer and renders instant gratification possible, while the participants partake in a shared process of 'brutal' and dramatic fabrication.

When making Empirical Prints, only a small number of pertinent features endures the fabrication process. Some structures will be included, others disregarded. It is the core practice of relief printing. Thus, the Empirical Prints seem to push the 'worldly' object away, while at the same time bringing it closer (Latour 1999: 30). The displacement of the found objects, the new fabrication, alters the participants interface with them.

While the Empirical Prints have aesthetic and surprising values, they also incite an intriguing discordant á la Verfremdung in the observer. The prints potentially make observers disregard functionality by 'taking from' the objects what made them obvious, familiar or readily understandable. The aesthetic reenactment seems to create surprise and curiosity by re-enchanting the unsensational and mundane objects. I believe that this way of fabricating somewhat discordant inscriptions disrupts the observers' utilisational gaze and force him or her to reconcile the different versions of the objects.

I believe that when something seems "the most obvious thing in the world it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up " (Brecht quoted in: Maggie B. Gale and Deeney 2010: 476). With the Empirical Prints, I aim to investigate different strategies for seeing the world afresh. I am trying to turn litter into objects of inquiry thus making us re-consider the naturality of the natural. Making the natural look surprising potentially develops our observational repertoire.

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Photos
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Kasper Ostrowski, PhD, AC researcher at Information Studies and orchestrator of the Centre for STS-studies at Aarhus University. His research focuses on STS, Empirical Printmaking and enactments of food quality.