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In Search of Lost Time
2013

Die Angewandte

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This project would not be possible without
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Stefan Farthofer
Willi Kopf
Renate Mihatsch
Maximilian Sekira
Anna Weißkircher
Michael Zeltner

Thanks to
Tina Frank
Brigitte Höfler
Martin Kainz
Tanja Malle
Katharina Mischer
Martin Ross
Christian Sekira
Pepca Sienčnik
Stefan Sienčnik sen.
Stefan Sienčnik
Veronika Sienčnik
Gerin Trautenberger
Thomas Traxler
Lukas Weiß

Workshops
Gerhard Brandstötter (wood)
Karim Jafarmadar (Happy Lab)
Eduard Julk (metal)
Larissa Leverenz (screenprint)
Hans Lindner (wood)
Katharina Reckendorfer (photography)
Anna Weißkircher (metal)
Josef Schauer-Schmidinger (photography)
Flora Zimmeter (screenprint)

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Figure 1 — Suhrkamp Books

Perfection is something which haunts me since I was a child. My toys had to be in the right order as are my books today. My library is sorted not by author, but by colour and shape and I am grateful for the continuous design of Suhrkamp books which are made easy to sort (Fig. 1). I still regret not having studied mathematics. The satisfaction of a perfect equation is absolute and I am fascinated by mathematical systems. In the past I was using the Markow Chain, a mathematical system based on a collection of random variables which can be rearranged, therefore predicting the number of possible states. Here the future of the system is only dependent on the present, not on its history. I used this method to constantly recompose the theme of Bach's *The Art of the Fugue*, thereby creating a diversified repetition of the original notation.

Back to the present. Whatever I do I try to forge a certain perfection, which — of course — is never fully obtainable. Even the idea of having an absolute number on how many minutes I have spend watching tv would be comforting. And what could be more accurate than a machine? My friends say, my handwriting looks like printed. So, from writing like a typewriter, I started to use a typewriter at the age of 10, later to become a graphic designer

and typographer — just to realize that putting a form over something doesn't solve anything and certainly doesn't change the world. However, the disappearance of the manual labour as I experienced it, has increasingly changed our lives. Machines are not just tools, or as Marshall McLuhan would argue, "protheses" or "extensions of man", but are interfaces between man and nature, man and machine, subject and object (Vogl, 1999, p. 375).

Perfection can be embedded in a machine which does exactly what you want it to do. And as Konrad Zuse puts it, a machine is not only in the world, but creates the world in terms of a normative structure (Zuse, 1967, p. 450). However, it is the command which is imperfect and can create confusion even for a machine. The machine does not think and cannot interpret, but executes. We are its creators and thus inscribe the possible outcome. So, to follow Lacan, it is "a structure which exists in its precision, independent of any subjectivity" [eine Ordnung, die in ihrer Strenge besteht, unabhängig von jeder Subjektivität] (Lacan, 1999, p. 415).

The technological discourse of the 20th century has always been a critical one. Ernst Cassirer would argue that technology is to *apprehend* [Begreifen] and *comprehend* [Erfassen] reality (Hartmann, 2003, p. 54). Technology is used not only as an augmentation of our organs and central nervous system, utilizing a media-technical protheses in order to increase power and speed (McLuhan, 1964, p. 109), but as Cassirer states, for the emancipation of human from nature and consequently a method for creating self-awareness (Hartmann, 2003, p. 54).

For my research I borrowed about a hundred books. And there it was, a borrowing note by Austrian film-maker Ulrich Seidl who as myself seemed to be interested in *KybernEthik* by Heinz von Foerster and Norbert Wiener's *Futurum exactum*. He borrowed the books in 2010 and they seem to have been untouched ever since. I am sure they didn't lose their significance since they where published in the late 1940s, yet their popularity at our academy seems doubtful. I miss seeing the stamps of the library on the fist page registering every loan — a little indicator of how popular literature was at certain times in history. This information is certainly still kept in the system but the operators deny me the right to know.

In 1949 Norbert Wiener published *Cybernetics or Control and Communication in The Animal and The Machine*. The term derives from the

Old Greek word *kybernein* meaning *regulate* [steuern]. In the center of his attention was early electronic digital computation which was developed by George Stiblitz, Alan Turing or Konrad Zuse, focusing on reducing the transmission of information and communication to its basic elements. One of the definitions comes from Jacques Lacan: "The cybernetic message is basically a string of zeroes and ones and the precise syntax of the machine enables logical operations. The machine only returns what we make it return. We are the ones who 'implement the meaning'." (Lacan, 1955, p. 417)

Wiener mentions that Cybernetic machines reproduce processes similar to the human memory (Wiener, 1948, p. 445). Furthermore Henri Bergson distinguishes in *Matière et Mémoire* (1896) two kinds of memory: firstly, the repetition of an automated function and secondly, the emergence of memory images. The first can be reproduced by a machine, not however the latter one. When Franz Kafka writes "Das Umdrehen des Schlüssels im Schloß erinnert K. daran, daß er bald hatte weggehen wollen", he speaks of the first kind of memory. Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* — which has inspired the title of my work — however, is about a *mémoire involontaire*. With the appearance of gramophone and film, new

ways of data storage have emerged, that seem to capture the soul of something that would be lost otherwise. So, the record label *His Master's Voice* is not just by chance using the image of a dog, quoting a painting of Francis Barraud, listening to his dead master's voice.

One of my teachers said that the back of my master project resembles a piece of Piet Mondrian and that the formal structure was actually beautiful. Still, it remains the back side of the alleged art piece and the viewer is not going to see it any time soon. I was also asked whether my installation has anything to do with minimal art, which because of its geometric abstraction is understandably close. But I never thought of it as a study of minimalism. However, the grammar of beauty is intriguing and yet I am not here to create a formal work, but to reconsider the process of making and producing itself.

There is a certain nostalgia, a longing for something past as the title of my work *In Search for Lost Time* indicates. I miss my grandmother, miss our old little flat in which my family was literally squeezed in and I am wondering why images of past times always seem nicer than the present. This longing for the past brought me to some found objects — clock radios from the 1960s and 1970s that were beautifully

Figure 2 — Alarm Clock

Figure 3 — Clock Radio #1

Figure 4 — Clock Radio #2

designed (Fig. 2–4). But to immerge into that era I had to take them apart and see what they are actually made of. I dissembled / deconstructed this complex system just to discover that the inside was everything but perfect. The electronics were squeezed together, sometimes glued or repaired and even attached with strings to make it work somehow. So, there it was, this machine which ought to be perfect, but wasn't (Fig. 5).

In our high perfection culture, where the handcrafted is not delivering what we expect, things need to be automated. Counting by hand would implement errors, but surely a machine cannot make the same mistakes. It has an unambiguous criteria for determining the right thing. Likewise Jewish culture insists on a written transduction of the Torah. However, it is believed that when a writer makes a mistake by copying, there is an error in the narrative, a mistake in the source code that would actually lead to a system break down or nemesis of the world.

Fordism was not only the notion of mass production, but is standardized, industrialized to avoid this human fallibility. Both Ernst Cassirer and Hannah Arendt refer to the close relationship of the implementation of machines and

capitalist economic system. When Francis Fukuyama proclaimed *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), he meant the victory of Western liberal democracy and free market economy. Only Slavoj Žižek identified what happened 2001 and 2008 with the financial crisis as a double defeat of capitalism (Žižek, 2009, p. 9). Yet it is an ongoing process of becoming faster, bigger, richer which seems to lead to a bubble of indifference and all revolutionary needs are satisfied by the market, therefore by the machine, leading us to Samuel Butler's *Erewhon: or, Over the Range* (1872), a dystopia of a land, where machines develop consciousness by Darwinian Selection and are able to reproduce themselves. Dismissed by many at his time, today we face a technology that is actually able to reproduce itself. Nowadays we have 3d printers which are able to print nearly all parts for their successors. An autopoetic circuit, where the system is bringing itself to perfection.

According to Luhmann, founder of modern system theory, a system is a closed network of relations, a self-referencing system that works in a closed loop, meaning a permanent relation of elements to each other within the system. These systems do not exist completely autarkic but are embedded in an environment. In case

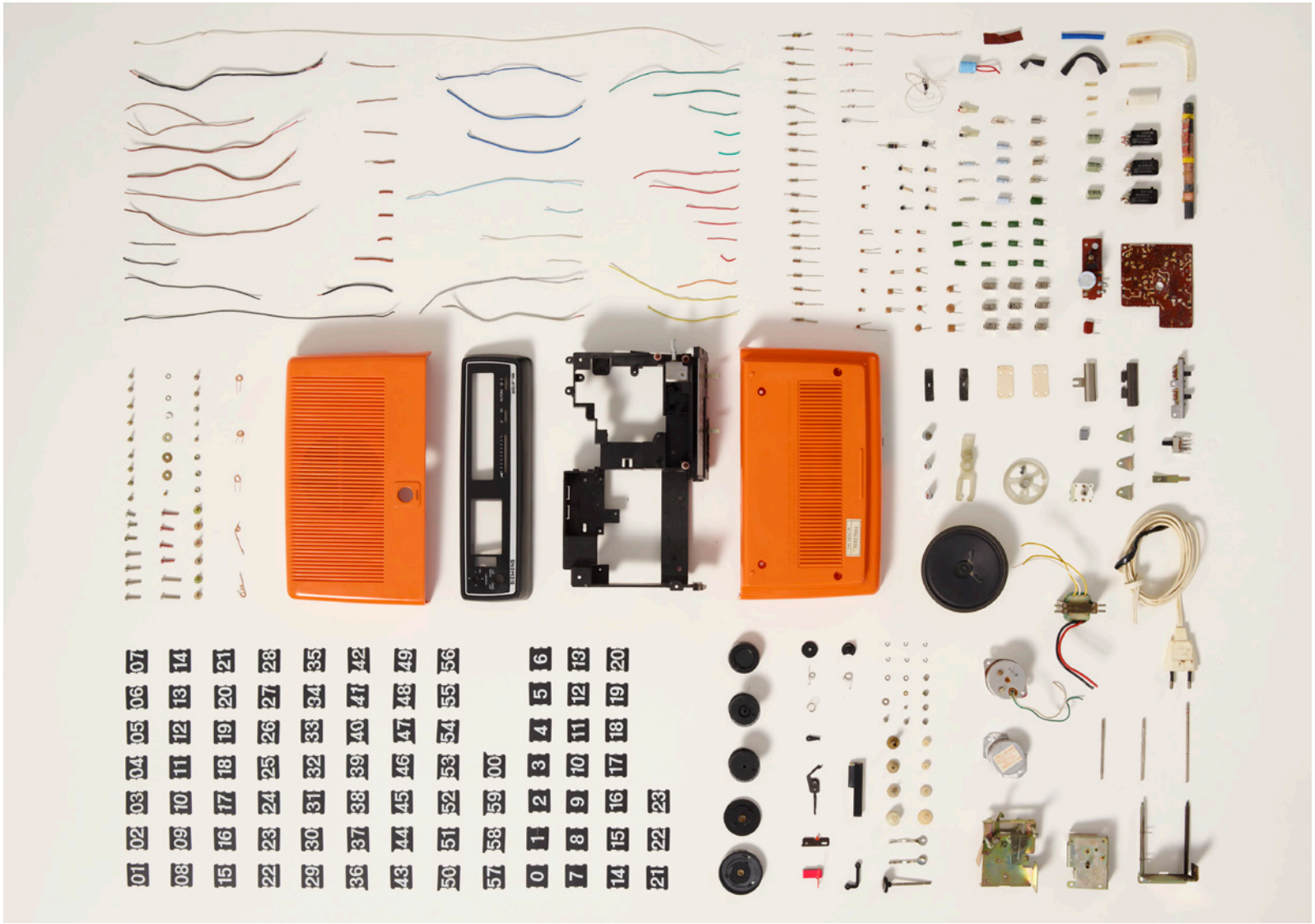


Figure 5 — Disassembled Clock Radio #1

there is a relation between the system and the environment, these are not called inputs, but consequently become part of the system itself. With the autopoietic turn in the 1980s there is a paradigm shift, stating that the systems — analog to a cell or a 3d printer — may be self-reproducing (Weber, 2003, p. 205f).

There are certain cesurae evoked by technical innovation that without doubt had an impact on our society. Machines are therefore encapsulated memories of certain times, archiving contemporary history of a society. Technologies such as the printing machine, daguerreotype, the Transatlantic communications cable, cinema, television, microprocessors and computers have changed our world in a drastic way. The industrial revolution has eventually implemented machines in its production process as a "technical simulation of muscles" (Hartmann, 2003, p. 50), perfectly executing their tasks. Yet what seems to be possible only with machines, proved us wrong at the Arirang mass games in Pyongyang, North Korea, where 15,000 youngsters were turned into human pixels reminding us of Siegfried Kracauer's *Ornament der Masse* (1963).

In the past I tried to engage socially and make political art. In 2011 I built a political world

clock called *Time for Revolution* which was inspired by the Arab spring, monitoring the political activity according to Twitter in a selection of countries. Conventional world clocks are typically found in loci such as hotel lobbies or stock market halls, representing stand-alone heterotopia, yet displaying their undeniable dependencies and power relations. But instead of progressing in time simultaneously, the incoming tweets about revolution were the engine for driving the clock hand. While time was running faster in some countries, others seemed to be in a static mode, providing both stability and stagnancy. Presented simultaneous and equal in their physical manifestation, some clocks indicated it is time for change in an infinite loop.

Similarly my current project is based on mechanisms used mostly in clocks. The series of two works is based on flip-flap displays which were commonly used in digital clocks or display panels at airports and railway stations since the 1950s. In both projects, the mechanics are deprived of their original function. The object *NOW* is based on a converted clockwork from the 1970s. Rather than displaying the time, the object shows the word *NOW* which continuously regenerates itself (Fig. 6).

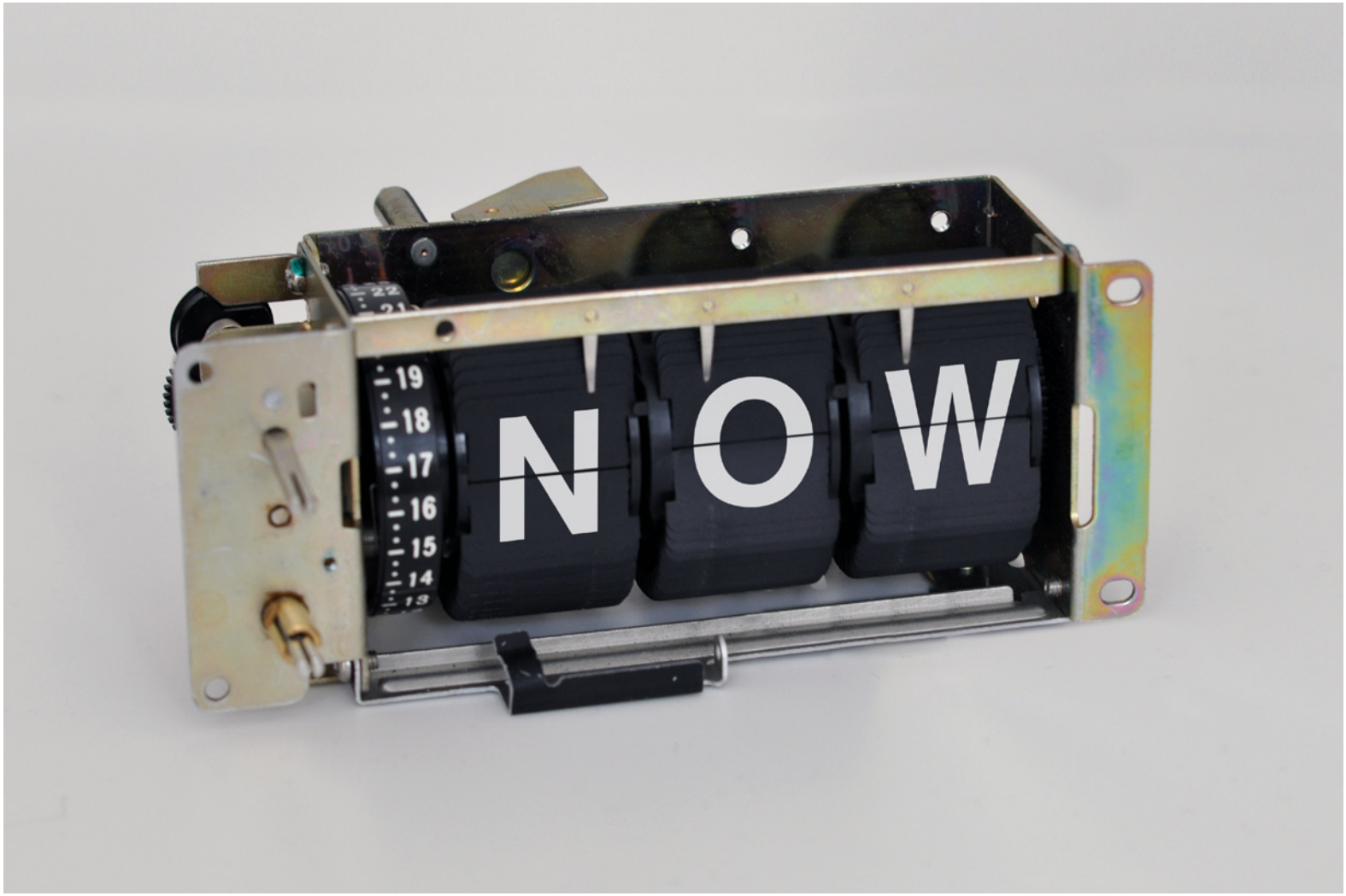


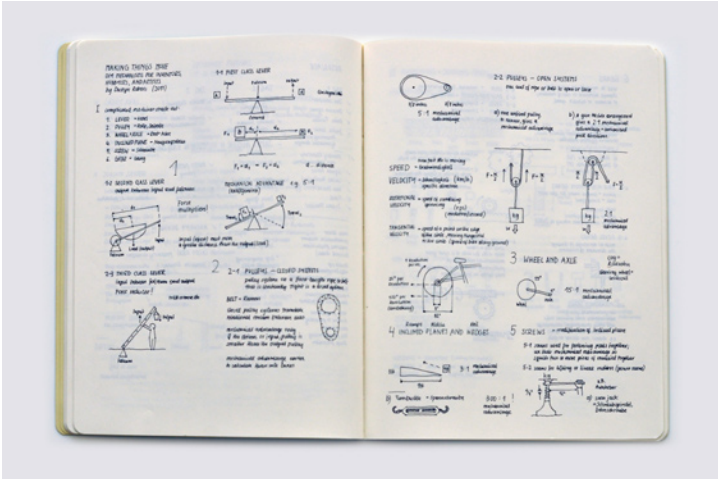
Figure 6 — Object NOW

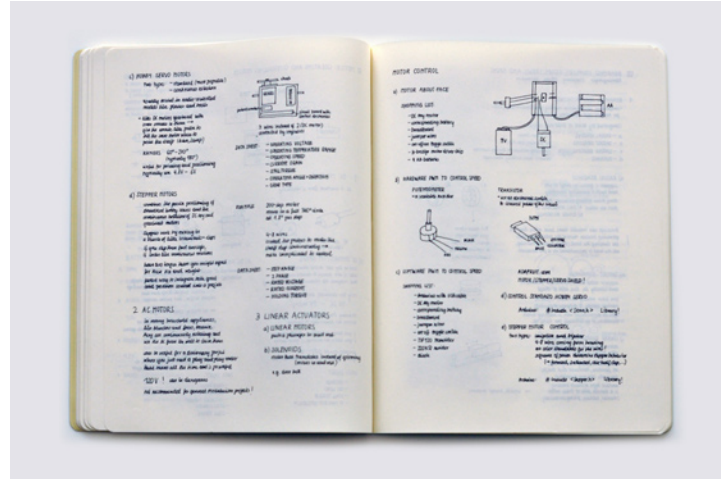
The wall installation *In Search of Lost Time* consists of 42 flip-flap displays arranged in a square grid. Instead of alphanumeric text, the modules are reduced to color and movement. By detecting activity in the room, the units randomly start to move until they reach a synchronized rhythm. When the visitor leaves the room, the motors decelerate and return to their initial position, except one additional module at a time that keeps a revised position thereby creating a dynamic image.

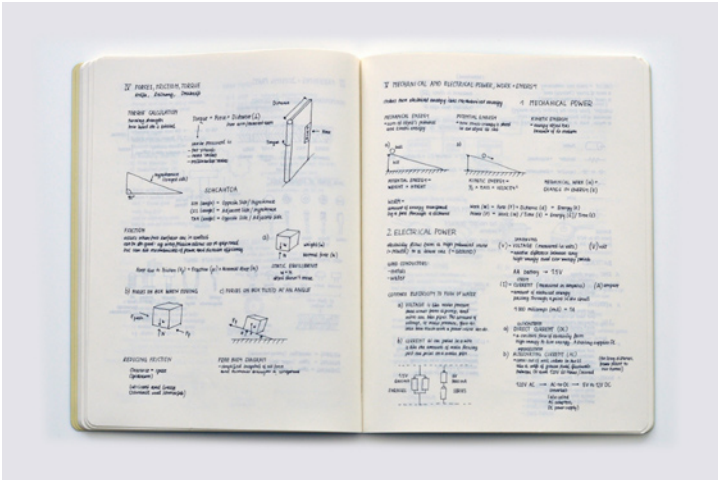
It is an autopoetic circuit that, according to Luhmann, is depending just on itself. By entering the room the visitor becomes part of the system rather than providing only a signal. The system runs as long as it is connected to power, by restarting it, the short-term memory of the microcontroller is cleared and the counting machine returns to its original position. To follow Henri Bergson it is the first kind of memory that this machine is able to mimic, however, by keeping track of its visitors a new, but random image is being created which is thereby influencing every future visitor and resembling what Marcel Proust in *The Search of Lost Time* would call *mémoire involontaire*.

By mimicking a mass production process of the 1970s I was trying to understand not only the technology but the mechanism of this era. It is a dialectic experience to be suddenly able to build something all by myself, but on the other hand barely being able to understand contemporary technology at all. Using the in-house workshops of the University and an independent FabLab I have passed every step of production, starting with foundations in mechanics using my father's old handbooks (Fig. 7–10), screen printing, joinery, metal work, laser cutting and 3d printing. Eventually I managed to build something resembling the Solari model of the 1950s making it move with stepper motors and a microcontroller.

I lost track of perfection on the way and every unit has signs of its manufacturing process. It keeps record of the partly painful process of the work including temporarily losing my sketchbook, 50 stepper motors being held by the Chinese customs authorities, reworking the same parts after the wrong metal was used, sitting over 100 hours staring at a 3d printer producing 84 pulleys, dealing with the inaccuracy of the screen printed work, nearly building a wall that wouldn't fit through the door, incessantly failing over an over again, and eventually blanking out my bank account. Yet, retrospectively everything is just fine and the memory of the past is always nicer than the present.







Figures 7–10 — Sketchbook

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Figures

Figure 1 — Suhrkamp Books
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Figure 3 — Clock Radio #1
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Figure 4 — Clock Radio #2
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Figure 5 — Disassembled Clock Radio #1
Photo: Nataša Sienčnik / Die Angewandte (2013)

Figure 6 — Object NOW
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Supported by
Arctic Paper
Verein Stadtimpuls
Wien Kultur

Copy editing
Maximilian Sekira
Ruby Sircar

Font
Arnhem by Fred Smeijers (2001)

Paper
Munken Pure 90g