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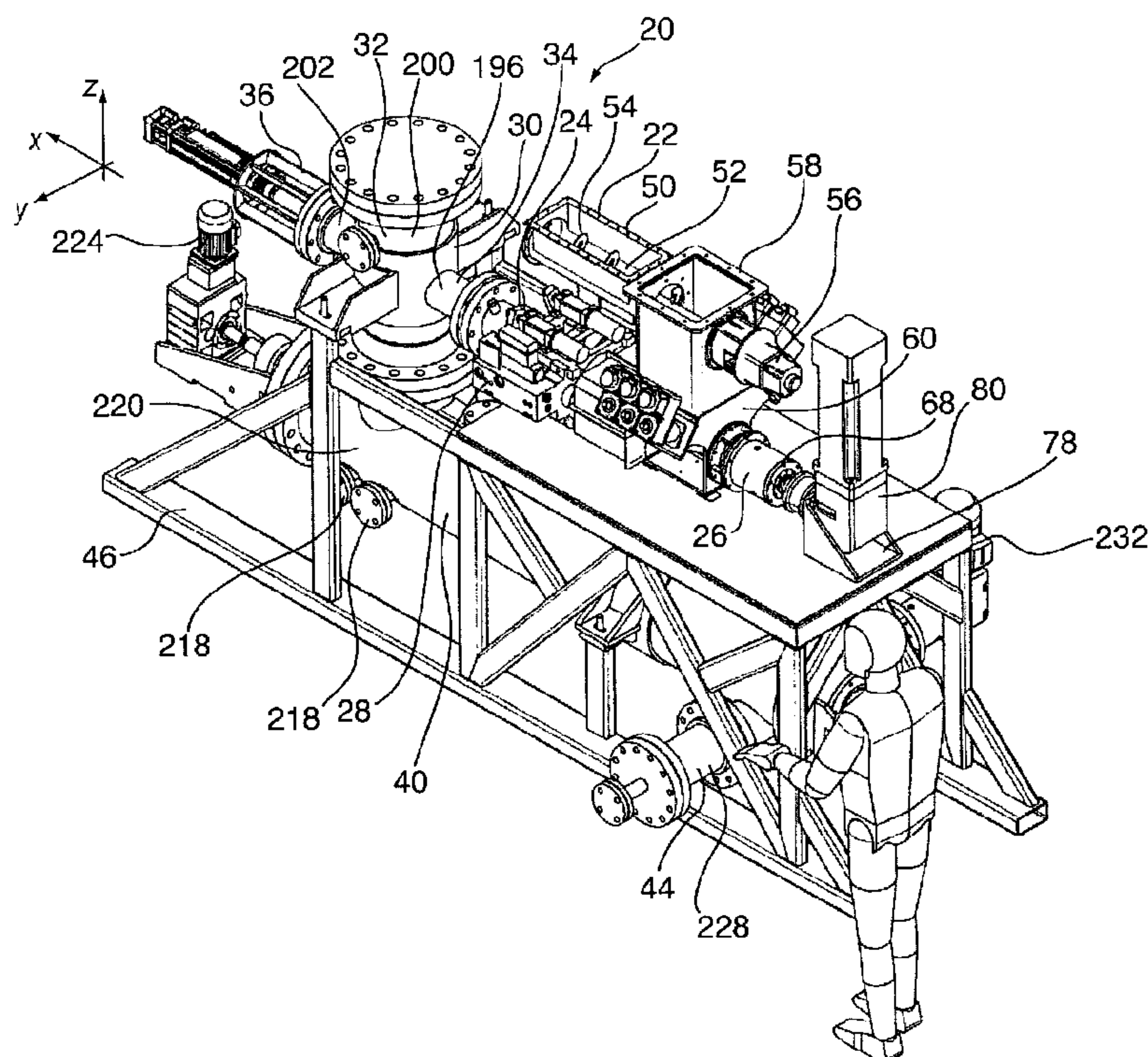
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(54) Title: COMPRESSION APPARATUS AND METHOD



(57) **Abrégé/Abstract:**

An apparatus is provided for compressing a loose solid feedstock. The apparatus includes a two stager compressor. The first compression stage is a screw compressor. The second compressor stage is a reciprocating compressor. The reciprocating compressor operates co-axially with, and receives its feed from, the screw compressor. A choke cone maintains pressure in the outfeed from the compressor stages. The reciprocating compressor includes a piston that is driven by a pair of hydraulic rams. The position and operation of the hydraulic rams, the screw conveyor, and the choke cone is monitored by sensors. The reciprocating compressor, the screw conveyor, and the choke cone are all adjustable in real time to control the compression of the feedstock according to a pre-programmed schedule that need not have equal compression and retraction strokes. The operation of the screw conveyor may be advanced or eased off depending on the motion of the reciprocating compressor. The operation of the choke cone may be actively controlled to obtain a coordination with the compressor stages.



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COMPRESSION APPARATUS AND METHOD

Field of the Invention

This invention relates to the field of apparatus for compressing loose materials, which may be loose fibrous materials, for introduction as a feedstock in a process occurring at elevated pressures.

Background of the Invention

A number of industrial processes involve the introduction of a loose solid feedstock into a pressurized reaction chamber or vessel. Unless the process is limited to batch operation this may require that the feedstock be pressurized and forced into the reaction vessel while the reaction vessel is maintained at elevated pressure, and possibly also at elevated temperature. In a continuous process with a pure liquid or a compact solid this may be relatively straightforward. Even for a slurry, or for two phased flow where solids are suspended in a carrier fluid this may be possible without undue difficulty.

However, the compaction and pressurization of a rather porous substantially dry solid, which may have the form of chips or flakes, or strands, may present a challenge. For example, these flakes or chips may be ligneous by-products of a forestry or agricultural activity. Earlier attempts to address this challenge are shown and described, for example, in US Patent 4,119,025 of Brown, issued October 10, 1978; US Patent 4,947,743 of Brown et al., issued August 14, 1990; and PCT Application PCT/CA99/00679 of Burke et al., published as WO 00/07806 published February 17, 2000, the subject matter of all of these documents being incorporated herein by reference. At the end of the process, the loose fibrous typically organic material leaves the reaction chamber through a discharge assembly of some kind, whence it is collected for further use or processing. To the extent that the process feedstock is then to be used as an input to a subsequent process, such as a biological digestion process, it may be desirable that the fibrous material be finely expanded.

Summary of the Invention

In an aspect of the invention there is a power transmission apparatus for a compression stage in a two stage compressor for loose-packed solids. The power transmission includes a

compressor piston, a head, and a plurality of power transmission members. The compressor piston is shaped to extend about members of another compression stage and to be reciprocally movable with respect thereto in a longitudinal direction. The piston has a first end and a second end. The second end of the piston is rigidly mounted to the head in a fixed orientation. The first end of the piston is longitudinally distant from the head and is shaped to co-operate with a mating cylinder. The power transmission members is mounted to the head and restricting the head to motion along a fixed reciprocation path in a fixed orientation relative to that reciprocation path. The power transmission members each is mounted to a stationary power input apparatus; and the power transmission members each is restricted to a single degree of freedom of motion from the stationary power input apparatus to the head.

In another feature of that aspect of the invention, the compressor piston is annular and has an axially extending passage formed therethrough to accommodate the other compression stage. In another feature, the power transmission has no slack between input of power to the power transmission at the stationary input apparatus and the head. In still another feature the power transmission members are connected to the head at moment connections. In a further feature the apparatus includes a controller operable to monitor motion of each of the transmission members and operable to co-ordinate motion of the transmission members relative to each other. In still a further feature each of the power transmission members is a shaft. The apparatus includes the stationary power input apparatus. The stationary power input apparatus includes drive cylinders and input power pistons. Each shaft of the power transmission members extends into a respective one of the drive cylinders and has a respective one of the input power pistons mounted thereto by which to drive reciprocation thereof. In yet still another feature, each of the power transmission members is a shaft held in a pair of first and second, axially spaced slide bearings that allow only longitudinal translation of the respective transmission members.

In another feature, each of the power transmission members is a shaft held in a pair of first and second, axially spaced apart slide bearings that allow only longitudinal translation of the respective transmission members. Each of the power transmission members is a shaft. The apparatus includes the stationary power input apparatus. The stationary power input apparatus includes drive cylinders and input power pistons. Each shaft of the power transmission members extends through a respective one of the drive cylinders and has a respective one of the input power pistons mounted thereto by which to drive reciprocation thereof between the pair of first and second axially spaced apart slide bearings. In a yet further feature, in cross-section transverse to the longitudinal direction the transmission members define vertices of a polygon. The piston has a centerline axis of reciprocation; and the centerline axis of reciprocation lies

within the polygon. In yet a further feature the power transmission members include a first power transmission member and a second power transmission member, each of the first and second power transmission members has an axis of reciprocation, the piston has a centerline axis of reciprocation; and the axes of reciprocation of the first and second power transmission members are substantially diametrically opposed relative to the piston centerline axis of reciprocation. In still another further feature, both the power transmission members and the compressor piston are located longitudinally to one side of the head, the apparatus includes a spider, the spider defines mountings for the stationary power input apparatus and the spider has a central passageway defined therethrough in which to mount the mating cylinder.

In another aspect of the invention there is a two stage compressor feed apparatus operable to compress loose feedstock material, the feed apparatus comprising. There is a first compressor stage and a second compressor stage. The first compressor stage has a screw. The screw has a volute operable to drive the feedstock forward in an axial direction while compressing the feedstock. The second compressor stage has a compressor piston mounted to reciprocate in the axial direction, the second stage compressor piston has an axial accommodation permitting an end of the screw to extend therethrough. The second compressor stage has a stator and rams mounted to the stator in a rigidly fixed orientation parallel to the axial direction. The second compressor stage has a cylinder mounted to the stator. The cylinder is a mating cylinder for co-operation with the compressor piston. The second stage compressor piston has a first end and a second end. The second compressor stage includes a head. The second end of the compressor piston is mounted in a fixed orientation to the head. The first end of the compressor piston is distant from, and is oriented to face away from, the head. The rams include shafting extending to the head. The shafting constrains the head to a fixed orientation cross-wise to the axial direction. The rams are constrained to a single degree of freedom of motion in linear translation parallel to the axial direction between the stator and the head.

In another feature of that aspect of the invention the rams, the head and the piston are slacklessly connected. In still another feature, the rams include at least a first ram and a second ram, the first and second rams is mounted on substantially diametrically opposite sides of the second stage compressor piston. In yet another feature, the apparatus includes a controller and feedback sensors, the controller and feedback sensors being operable to co-ordinate motion of the first and second rams. In a still further feature the controller has a pre-set schedule of displacement as a function of time for the rams and is operable to cause motion of the rams to conform to the schedule. In yet another feature the first stage screw discharges to a chamber has a liquid extraction manifold and drain. In still another feature the first stage screw has a

discharge tip, the discharge tip is surrounded by a sleeve. The sleeve is an axially stationary sleeve. The second stage piston surrounding the sleeve, and is axially reciprocable relative thereto. The sleeve has an interior face oriented toward the screw. The interior face of the sleeve has axially extending reliefs defined therein. In again another feature the feed apparatus discharges to a downstream conduit, the downstream conduit includes a cooling jacket, and the cooling jacket includes at least one internal helical wall.

In still another feature the feed apparatus includes a drive mounted to turn the screw of the first stage compressor, the drive is a variable speed drive, and the controller is operable to adjust drive speed of the screw in co-ordination with motion of the second stage compression piston. In a further feature 15 the two stage compression chamber gives onto a discharge, and the apparatus includes a discharge cone for seating athwart the discharge in opposition to passage of feedstock, the cone is axially reciprocable to permit egress of feedstock from the discharge, the controller is operable to adjust position of the discharge cone in co-ordination with motion of the second stage compressor piston. In yet another feature 15 the first stage compressor screw includes a volute has a continuously reducing pitch between successive turns of the volute. In a still further feature the cooling jacket has an inwardly facing wall defining a discharge passageway of the second stage compressor, and the inwardly facing wall tapers outwardly in the direction of flow.

In another aspect of the invention there is a process of compressing loose fibrous feedstock using a fibrous feedstock compression apparatus. The process includes passing the feedstock through a first stage of compression; employing a reciprocating piston to submit the feedstock to a second stage of compression in which that reciprocating piston is mounted to a head, and the head is mounted on actuating rams. The second stage of compression includes continuously sensing position of the rams during operation thereof. The process includes continuously co-ordinating motion of the rams.

In a feature of that aspect, the continuous coordination is achieved using real-time digital control of the rams. In another feature that control includes monitoring position displacement and motor current, and adjusting operation of the rams according to feedback from those sensors. In another feature the process includes operating the rams to a set schedule of displacement as a function of time. In a further feature, the process includes co-ordinating operation of the first stage of compression with operation of the rams. In still another feature the first stage of compression includes a screw compressor mounted to a variable speed drive, and the process includes continuous variation of the speed of the variable speed drive in co-ordination with

operation of the rams. In yet another feature the apparatus includes an axially movable discharge cone, and the process includes actively adjusting one of (a) position; and (b) reactive force applied to the cone in co-ordination with motion of the second stage compressor piston.

These and other aspects and features of the invention may be understood with reference to the description and illustrations.

Brief Description of the Illustrations

The invention may be explained with the aid of the accompanying illustrations, in which:

- Figure **1a** is a general arrangement in perspective of an high pressure process apparatus having a feed compressor assembly according to an aspect of the present invention;
- Figure **1b** is a profile or side view of the process apparatus of Figure **1a**;
- Figure **1c** is a top view of the process apparatus of Figure **1a**;
- Figure **1d** is an end view of the process apparatus of Figure **1a**;
- Figure **1e** is a longitudinal cross-section along the central vertical plane of the process apparatus of Figure **1a**, indicated as section '1e – 1e' in Figure **1c**;
- Figure **2a** is an enlarged perspective view of the feed compressor assembly of Figure **1a**; taken from above, to one side and to one end;
- Figure **2b** is another view of the feed compressor assembly of Figure **2a** from a viewpoint below and to one side thereof;
- Figure **2c** shows a vertical longitudinal cross-section of the assembly of Figure **2a** taken on the longitudinal centerline thereof;
- Figure **2d** is a top view of the assembly of Figure **2a** with superstructure removed and an alternate motion transducer arrangement;
- Figure **2e** is an enlarged perspective detail of the screw drive of the first compressor stage of the compressor section assembly of Figure **2a**;
- Figure **3a** shows a perspective view of the second compression stage of the compressor section assembly of Figure **2a**;
- Figure **3b** shows a perspective sectional view of a portion of the compressor assembly of Figure **2a** from the first stage screw compressor sleeve to the end of a dewatering section;
- Figure **3c** shows a further partial perspective sectional view of the compressor assembly of Figure **2a** from the end of the dewatering section to the end of the compression section output feed duct;

Figure 3d is a perspective view of a feed piston drive transmission assembly of the second compressor stage of the compressor section assembly of Figure 2a;

Figure 3e shows a perspective view of the moving components of the second compression stage section of Figure 3a;

Figure 3f shows an opposite perspective view of the components of Figure 3e;

Figure 3g shows a perspective view of a frame member of the second compression stage of Figure 3a;

Figure 3h shows a sectioned perspective view of the compressor assembly of Figure 3a with the second stage compressor in a first or retracted or return, or start of stroke position;

Figure 3i shows a view similar to Figure 3f with the second stage compressor in a second or advanced or end of stroke position;

Figure 4a shows perspective view of a feed cone assembly of the apparatus of Figure 1a, half-sectioned vertically along the centerline; and

Figure 4b shows an enlarged side view of the section of Figure 4a; and

Figure 5 is a horizontal lateral cross-section of the apparatus of Figure 1a taken on section '5-5' of Figure 1c.

Detailed Description

The description that follows, and the embodiments described therein, are provided by way of illustration of an example, or examples, of particular embodiments of the principles of the present invention. These examples are provided for the purposes of explanation, and not of limitation, of those principles and of the invention. In the description, like parts are marked throughout the specification and the drawings with the same respective reference numerals. The drawings are not necessarily to scale and in some instances proportions may have been exaggerated, the more clearly to depict certain features of the invention.

The terminology used in this specification is thought to be consistent with the customary and ordinary meanings of those terms as they would be understood by a person of ordinary skill in the art in North America. Following from the decision of the Court of Appeal for the Federal Circuit in *Phillips v. AWH Corp.*, and while not excluding interpretations based on other sources that are generally consistent with the customary and ordinary meanings of terms or with this specification, or both, on the basis of other references, the Applicant expressly excludes all interpretations that are inconsistent with this specification, and, in particular, expressly excludes any interpretation of the claims or the language used in this specification such as may be made in the USPTO, or in any other Patent Office, unless supported by this specification or in objective

evidence of record in accordance with *In re Lee*, such as may demonstrate how the terms are used and understood by persons of ordinary skill in the art, or by way of expert evidence of a person or persons of experience in the art.

In terms of general orientation and directional nomenclature, two types of frames of reference may be employed. First, inasmuch as this description refers to screws, screw conveyors or a screw compressors, it may be helpful to define an axial or **x**-direction, that direction being the direction of advance of workpiece material along the screw when turning, there being also a radial direction and a circumferential direction. Second, in other circumstances it may be appropriate to consider a Cartesian frame of reference. In this document, unless stated otherwise, the **x**-direction is the direction of advance of the workpiece or feedstock through the machine, and may typically be taken as the longitudinal centerline of the various feedstock flow conduits. The **y**-direction is taken as an horizontal axis perpendicular to the **x**-axis. The **z**-direction is generally the vertical axis. In general, and unless noted otherwise, the drawings may be taken as being generally in proportion and to scale.

Apparatus 20 – General Overview

A process apparatus **20** is shown in general arrangement in Figures **1a**, **1b**, **1c**, **1d** and **1e**. In the direction of flow of the feedstock material, there is a first assembly **22** that may be an input feeder or infeed conveyor at which feedstock material is introduced. For the purposes of this discussion, the feedstock may be taken as being corn stalks, or sugar cane stalks, cane bagasse or bamboo, or wood chips, or bark, or sawdust, and so on. The feedstock may be fibrous, may be anisotropic, and may be hydrophilic to a greater or lesser extent such as in the example of wood chips or wood flakes derived from the processing of green wood. The feedstock may have an initial moisture content of between 10% and about 65 % to 70% by weight, and may typically be processed with an initial moisture content in the range of 35 to 55 % by weight.

Input feeder or input conveyor **22** is attached to, and conveys feedstock material to, a multi-stage feedstock compression apparatus **24**, which may be a co-axial feeder, that includes a first stage of compression indicated generally as **26**, which may be a compression zone, such as a first stage compression zone or compression screw zone, and a second stage of compression indicated generally as **28**, which may be a second compression stage zone or piston zone. Output from the piston zone, i.e., the second stage of compression **28** is fed through a discharge section to a reaction vessel in-feed assembly, indicated generally as **30**, which includes a substantially

vertically oriented digester drop chute or in-feed head chamber **32**, an in-feed conduit or duct or insert, or digester insert **34**, and a choke cone assembly **36**. In-feed head chamber **32** is in essence part of the larger reactor, or reaction chamber or vessel **40**, which may be referred to as a digester, and which includes not only head chamber or digester drop chute **32** but also a substantially horizontally, longitudinally oriented vessel, which may be termed the main reactor vessel or digester, **42**. The main reactor vessel may have an out feed or output assembly, which may also be called the discharge tube, **44**. The entire apparatus may be mounted on a base or frame, indicated generally as **46**. The reactor vessel may sometimes be termed a digester, and in other circumstances may be termed a hydrolyzer. In-feed assembly **30** is connected to main reactor vessel, or digester, **42** at a flanged coupling, indicated as **48**. While only a single main reactor vessel is shown, other intermediate processing steps and their associate reactor vessels could also exist, and could be placed between in-feed assembly **30** and reactor vessel **42**, with connections at suitable flanged couplings such as coupling **48**, as may be.

In one such process an organic feedstock in the nature of a loose lignosic or partially lignosic i.e., wood-based or wood-like feedstock is pressurized to perhaps 245 psig, and heated in the reaction chamber to saturated temperature of partially liquid water and partially water in vapour form. Moisture may be added or extracted, as may chemical solutions. The feedstock is held at this pressure and temperature for a period of time as it advances along the reaction chamber. At the discharge apparatus there is a more or less instantaneous, substantially adiabatic, and substantially isentropic expansion. The almost instant reduction in pressure may tend to result in the water trapped in the moisture absorbent wood chips or flakes tending to want to undergo a change of state from liquid to vapour almost instantaneously, with a resultant expansion within the feedstock that is perhaps not entirely unlike steam expansion in the making of popcorn. The result is that the fibres of the feedstock tend to be forced apart and in some sense beaten, making a finer, looser product. The product so obtained may have a relatively high ratio of surface area to volume, and may be “tenderized” in a sense, such that the fibres may more easily be broken down in digestive processes of micro-organisms, e.g., bacteria, fungi, viruses, and so on, by which those fibres may be more readily converted to other chemicals, such as ethanol.

Input Feeder or Infeed Conveyor **22**

Input feeder or infeed conveyor **22** may include a collector vessel, which may be termed a reservoir, a trough, or a hopper **50**. It includes a feed advancement apparatus, or feeder **52**, which may be a conveyor, whether a belt conveyor or screw conveyor or auger **54** as shown. A

drive **56** is provided to run auger **54**, drive **56** being mounted on the far side of a down feed housing or drop chute **58**, with the drive shaft extending in the horizontal longitudinal direction through the housing to auger **54**. Drop chute **58** is mounted atop, and in flow communication with, an input housing, or hopper, **60** of compressor apparatus, or co-axial feeder, **24**.

First Stage Compressor or Compression Screw **26**

Compression apparatus or co axial feeder **24** is mounted to a base plate **62**, which is mounted to frame **46**. First stage compressor or compression screw zone **26** includes a moving compression member, **64**, a stationary compressed feedstock retaining member **66**, input housing or hopper **60**, a bearing housing or bearing housing assembly **68** (and, inherently, the bearing contained therein), a drive **70**, and a drive coupling **72**, and an array of preliminary infeed feedstock conveyor members **74**.

Moving compression member **64** may be a compression screw **76**. Compression screw **76** may includes a volute having a variable pitch spacing between the individual flights or turns of the volute, either as a step function or, as in the embodiment illustrated, have a continuously decreasing pitch spacing as the tip of the screw is approached in the distal, forward longitudinal or x-direction. Compression screw **76** has a longitudinal centerline, and, in operation, rotation of screw **76** causes both forward advance of the feedstock material along the screw, and, in addition, causes compression of the feedstock in the longitudinal direction. The base or proximal end of screw **76** is mounted in a bearing, or bearing housing assembly **68** having a flange that is mounted to a rearwardly facing flange of input housing **60**. The keyed input shaft of screw **76** is driven by the similarly keyed output shaft of drive **70**, torque being passed between the shafts by coupling **72**.

Compression screw drive **70** includes a motor **80** mounted on its own motor base **78**, which is mounted to base plate **62**. Motor **80** may be a geared motor, and may include a reduction gearbox. Motor **80** may be a variable speed motor, and may include speed sensing, monitoring, and control apparatus operable continuously to vary output speed during operation.

Feedstock entering drop chute **58** is urged by gravity into input housing **60**, and generally toward screw **76**. To aid in this migration, feed-stock conveyor members **74** may be used to direct the feed-stock to screw **76**. Members **74** may have the form of two generally opposed, inclined banks of twin screws or triple screws or augers **82**, mounted generally cross-wise to

screw **76**. Screws **82** are driven by motors **84** mounted to input housing **60**. Screws **82**, of which there may be four, six or eight, for example, may be in a V-arrangement.

Stationary compressed feedstock retaining member **66** may have the form of a sleeve **90** that is positioned about screw **76**. In the embodiment illustrated compression screw sleeve **90** is both cylindrical and concentric with screw **76**. Sleeve **90** has a radially extending flange at its upstream end, by which it is bolted to the downstream side face of input housing **60**. Sleeve **90** may have an inner surface **92** that has a set of longitudinally extending groove or channels, such as may be termed flutes **94** defined therein. Flutes **94** may run parallel to the axial centerline of sleeve **90**. As screw **76** operates, sleeve **90** provides radial containment of the feedstock as it is progressively compressed in the first stage of compression and defines a portion of the flow passageway or conduit along which the feedstock is compelled to move. Sleeve **90** also has an outer surface, **96** which is cylindrical, and which interacts in a mating close sliding piston-and-cylinder-wall relationship with the second stage compressor. Outer surface **96** may be concentric with inner surface **92** and the axial centerline of sleeve **90** generally.

Second Stage Compressor or Piston Zone 28

The second stage of compression, or second stage compressor **28** includes a frame, or stator, or housing, or spider, indicated generally as **100**; a moving compression member **102**; a feedstock retainer **104** that co-operates with moving compression member **102**; and a motive drive and transmission assembly **110**, which may also be referred to as a ram drive assembly.

The frame, or housing or spider **100** is rigidly mounted to base plate **62**, and hence to frame **46**. It provides the datum or stationary point of reference for the second stage of compression, and links the major components of the second stage of compressions together. It has forward and rearward transverse frames, or wall members, or bulkheads, or plates indicated as **105**, **106**, and upper and lower longitudinally extending webs or walls, both left and right hand being indicated as members **107**, **108**. Walls **107**, **108** terminate at flanges **109**. Each of the transverse plates **105**, **106** has a central eyelet, or relief, or aperture **101** formed therethrough to accommodate the duct or conduit, or cylinder in which feedstock is compressed and urged toward the reactor chamber. These eyelets are axially spaced apart, and concentric. This establishes the spatial relationship of that stationary conduit. Flanges **109** provide mounting points for the hydraulic rams and servo motors that drive and control compression member **102**, thus establishing the fixed spatial relationship between the cylinder rods, the base, and the stationary conduit.

Moving compression member **102** may be a reciprocating piston **112** having a first end **114**, which may be a piston front face, and a second end **116**, which may be a piston flange face. First end **114** is the downstream end that faces in the direction of compression and in the direction of motion of the feedstock. First end **114** is an abutment end and is the head or face of the piston. First end **114** will be understood to include any wear plate or surface that may be formed thereon or attached thereto. A cylindrical piston wall or coating or skirt **118** extends rearwardly from first end **114** to second end **116**. Piston **112** has a passageway **120** formed therethrough to permit feedstock from the first compressor stage to pass into the second compressor stage. Piston **112** has an inner surface **122** that permits reciprocation of piston **112** relative to screw **76** and sleeve **90**. It is convenient that surface **122** be a round cylindrical surface that is concentric with outer surface **96** (the compression screw sleeve outside diameter), and the centerline axis of sleeve **90**. First and second axially spaced apart seals, or rings **124** are mounted in seal ring grooves formed in skirt **118** near to second end **116**. In operation rings **124**, which may be the compression screw sleeve seals, provide a sliding seal between sleeve **90** and piston **112**. Piston **112** also has an outer surface **126**. It is convenient that outer surface **126**, which may be the piston outside diameter, be a round cylindrical surface, and that this surface be concentric with the other surfaces **122**, **96** and **92**, although it need not necessarily be either round or concentric.

Feedstock retainer **104** defines the outer cylinder wall **128** with which annular piston **122** co-operates, and to the extent that piston **112** is a moving member, cylinder wall **128** may be considered to be a stator, or stationary member. Retainer **104** may define a de-watering section or dewatering zone **130**. De-watering section **130** performs both the function of retaining the feedstock as it is compressed and the function of a sieve or colander that allows liquids to be drained off. The term “de-watering” refers to squeezing liquid out of the feedstock during compression. While this liquid may be water, or predominantly water, it may be a juice or oil. The term “de-watering” is not intended to imply that the apparatus is limited only to use with water or water based liquids.

Dewatering section **130** may include a housing **132**, also known as a dewatering split sleeve assembly, a porous sleeve **134**, also known as a dewatering sleeve insert, a flange member or seal cover **136** and piston seals **138**. Housing **132** may have an upstream flange **140**, a downstream flange **142** for rigid e.g., bolted, connection to spider **100**, and a longitudinally extending wall **144** that runs between flanges **140** and **142**. Wall **144** may have an array of perforations, or slots or drains spaced circumferentially thereabout to admit the passage of liquid

squeezed out of the feedstock. Porous sleeve **134** slides axially into housing **132**, and is retained in place by flange member **136**. Flange member **136** is fixed to flange **140**, e.g., by bolts. Porous sleeve **134** conforms to outer surface **126** of piston **112**. Porous sleeve **134** may include an array of fine capillaries, or perforations or perforation channels that permit the generally radial egress of liquid liberated from the feedstock during compression. Flange **136** includes grooves for the axially spaced O-ring seals **138** that bear in sliding relationship against the outer surface **126** of piston **112**. Base plate **62** has a drain located beneath de-watering section **130**.

Motive drive and transmission assembly **110**, which may also be termed a ram drive assembly, includes those members that produce the motion of piston **112** relative to the stationary base or point of reference, such as spider **100**. They include a pair of first and second drive members, which may be identified as pistons **150**, **152** that are each mounted between a pair of first and second axially spaced apart slide bearings **154**, **156**. Assembly **110** includes a plurality of transmission members, which may be identified in the illustrations as hydraulic cylinder rods, or simply “rods”. Identified as shafts **160**, **162**. There may be any number of such pistons **150**, **152** and shafts **160**, **162**. However many pistons and shafts there may be, where there are more than two such pistons and shafts they may be arranged in such a way that if the assembly is sectioned transversely, and each shaft is taken as a vertex of a polygon, the centerline of the compression stages will fall within the polygon such that force transmission is not eccentric. It may, for example, be that the centerline axis of the first and second compressor stages lies at the centroid of any such polygon. Where there are three such pistons, for example, they may be arranged on 120 degree angular spacing about the centerline.

Shafts **160**, **162** may either be mounted to the rams of a respective piston, or, as illustrated, may pass directly through a piston, be it **150** or **152**, and may have the piston head members against which the pressurized working fluid acts mounted thereto within the piston cylinder, **164**, **166**. In the usual manner, admission of fluid into one side of cylinder **164** (or **166**) will drive shaft **160** (or **162**) piston to the retracted or return position shown in Figure **3g**, while admission of fluid to the other end of cylinder **164** (or **166**) will cause shaft **160** (or **162**) to move in the other direction to compress the feedstock. Drive assembly **110** may have servo valves **170**, **172** for this purpose. Pistons **150**, **152** may be either pneumatic or hydraulic. In the embodiment illustrated, pistons **150**, **152** may be understood to be hydraulic.

Assembly **110** may also include position or motion transducers, indicated as **174**, **176** mounted either directly to shafts **160**, **162** or to slave shaft members such as may permit the instantaneous position of shafts **160**, **162** to be known, and their change in position per unit time,

i.e., velocity, to be calculated. Shafts **160**, **162** terminate, and are attached to, a cross-member, or frame, or yoke, a ram or ram plate, a cross-head or simply a head **180**. The connections of shafts **160**, **162** may be slackless connections, and may be moment connections. That is the connections may be rigid such that there is no degree of freedom of motion between the end of shafts **160** and **162** with respect to either longitudinal displacement along the **x** axis or angular rotation about the **y** or **z** axes. The connections may be splined, may include a shoulder, and may be bolted. Head **180** may have the form of a yoke or plate having a central opening to accommodate reciprocation of objects relative thereto through the central opening, such as the elements of the first compressor stage, notably sleeve **90** and screw **76**. In this instance head **180** has an internal annular flange or shoulder to which second end **116** of piston **112** is bolted.

It may be that pistons **150**, **152** have their own integral rams or shafts, to which shafts such as shafts **160**, **162** may be mounted axially as extensions. Whether this is so, or whether shafts **160**, **162** are monolithic members or members that are assembled from two or more sub-components, the use of axially spaced apart slide bearings constrains shafts **160**, **162** to a single degree of freedom of motion, namely translation along the motion path defined by slide bearings **154**, **156**. That motion path may be straight line axial displacement.

In contrast to some earlier machines, apparatus **20** may be free of such things as a large flywheel, a rotating crankshaft, long and heavy connecting rod assemblies, and so on. Since it may be desirable to avoid unduly large live loads as piston **112** reciprocates, it may be that there are only two such shafts and pistons. In this example, the entire live load is made up of piston **112**, head **180**, in essence a flanged ring with lugs, and shafts **160**, **162**. Moreover, the placement of pistons **150**, **152** to the same side of head **180** as piston **112** may tend to make for a relatively compact assembly in the longitudinal direction, that length being less than the combined length of sleeve **90** and de-watering section **130**. The length of the transmission drive train so defined may be expressed as a ratio of the output inside diameter of de-watering section **130** or tailpipe **196**, that ratio lying in the range of less than 8:1, and in one embodiment is about 5:1. Another potential measure of live load is the lateral compactness of the unit., as measured by the center spacing of the rods. In one embodiment the stroke of piston **112**, signified as dx_{112} may be about 3 inches, the bore may be about 4 inches, and the lateral spacing of the rods may be about 11 inches. The cantilever distance or overhang of the transmission is defined as the maximum length (i.e., in the retracted position) of the rods, shafts **160**, **162** plus the ram plate, head **180**, that extend beyond the nearest bearing. In one embodiment this may be about 10". Taking these values in proportion, in one embodiment the ratio of stroke to bore may be less than square (i.e., stroke/bore < 1), and in some embodiments less than 4:5. The ratio of overhang to

piston stroke may be in the range of 2.5: 1 to 3.0:1. The ratio of overhang to lateral center to center distance of rods 160, 162 may be in the range of less than 1 and may be 15/16 or less. In one embodiment it may be about 5/8.

A ram driven by hydraulic cylinders was used in US Patent 4,119,025. However, as seen at Figure 2 of that patent, quite aside from lack of feedback and positive control, there are at least two other points at which additional degrees of freedom of motion are introduced between the rigid frame of reference defined by the main conduit, and the output at the piston, those degrees of freedom being introduced by the pivot connection of the rams to the frame, and by the pivot and clevis pin arrangement between the rams and the slides. At each of these points slack, or tolerance build-up, can be introduced into the system. In the embodiment of apparatus **20** illustrated herein, the drive transmission is slackless from the point of application of input force by the pressurized working fluid at pistons **150**, **152** to the interface between head **180** and second end **116** of piston **112**, and, indeed to first end **114** of piston **112** at which output force is applied to, and work is done on, the feedstock. There are no intermediate points at which extraneous degrees of freedom are introduced into the system.

Further, inasmuch as it may be desirable to maintain the angular orientation of piston **112** relative to the centerline, it may also be desirable not to give rise to unnecessary or unnecessarily large eccentric or unbalanced loads. To that end, it may be that the centerline of piston **112** is either substantially co-planar therewith or lies fairly close to a plane defined by the axes of shafts **160**, **162**. "Fairly close to" in this context may be understood as being less than 1/10 of the outside diameter of piston **112**, or less than one diameter of shaft **160**, **162** away from being co-planar. Expressed alternatively in terms of angular arc, those pistons may lie in the range of 150 degrees to 210 degrees angular spacing, and may be about 180 degrees apart.

Drive assembly **110**, or, more generally apparatus **20**, may include a controller, indicated generically as **182** operable continually to monitor output from transducers **174**, **176** and continually to adjust servo valves **170**, **172** to control the position and rate of motion, be it advance or return, of piston **112**. The clock rate of the controller microprocessor may be of the order of perhaps 1 GHz. The frequency of reciprocation of piston **112** may be of the order of 50 to perhaps as much as approaching 200 strokes per minute. A more normal cautious range might be from about 75 – 80 strokes per minute (1 ¼ to 1-1/3 Hz) to about 150 strokes/min (2 ½ Hz), with a typical desirable speed of perhaps 100 strokes per minute (1 ½ to 1 ¾ Hz). Thus, the motion of piston **112** is many orders of magnitude slower than the ability of the sensors and processor to monitor and modify or modulate that motion. Controller **182** may be pre-

programmed to include a reference or datum schedule of displacement as a function of time to which piston **112** is to conform. That schedule may establish a regime of relatively smooth acceleration and deceleration. The schedule may also be asynchronous, or temporally asymmetric. That is, the portion of the cycle occupied by driving piston **112** forward against the feedstock may differ from the unloaded return stroke. For example, the compression stroke may be longer, and the motion of piston **112** slower, than the unloaded return stroke. In one embodiment a ratio of this asymmetry of compression to retraction may be in the range of about 4/5:1/5 to 5/8:3/8, such that the majority of time is spent compressing and advancing the feedstock. This proportion may be deliberately selected, and may be subject to real-time electronic control, in contrast to previous apparatus.

The inventors have observed that power consumption (and, indeed, the tendency to gall or otherwise ruin the sliding surfaces) may be reduced if piston **112** can be discouraged from deviating from its orientation and from contacting the sidewall, and particularly so if a thin layer of liquid can be established between piston **112** and the adjacent cylinder wall; or if such deviation should occur, if it can be sensed before it grows unduly large and adjustments or corrections be made accordingly to tend to minimize and correct the deviation. The deviations in question may be of the order of a few thousandths of an inch, such that even small amounts of slack or tolerance build up may have a noticeable deleterious effect. To that end, controller **182** may also be programmed to monitor each shaft and actively to adjust servo valves **170**, **172** to cause the various shafts to move in a co-ordinated manner in which the orientation of piston **112** relative to the direction of advance along the centerline is maintained substantially constant. With a high digital clock rate in the controller's microprocessor, to which in contrast the speed of the cylinder rod motion is infinitesimally slow, the degree of accuracy that can be obtained may be quite high. Further, to the extent that the junction of shafts **160**, **162** (however many there may be) may define a moment connection permitting substantially no angular degree of freedom of head **180** or piston **112** about the y-axis (i.e., the horizontal cross-wise axis), and shafts **160**, **162** are held in spaced apart slide bearings **154**, **156**, that may bracket pistons **150**, **152**, a high level of control is established over the angular orientation of the drive transmission assembly about both the z and y-axes.

Downstream of de-watering section **130** there is a tail pipe or discharge section, which may also be identified as a compression tube **184** through which compressed feedstock is driven by the action of the compressor stage. Discharge section compression tube **184** may include a cooling manifold, or cooling jacket, **186** having an inner wall **187**, an outer wall **188** spaced radially away from inner wall **187**, and an internal radially outwardly standing wall or web **189**.

Web **189** may be in the form of an helix, and as such may tend to compel cooling fluid, which may be water or glycol based, to circulate about the jacket in a generally helical circumferential path from coolant inlet **190** to coolant outlet **191**. Inner wall **187** may have a divergent taper in the direction of flow. The angle of that divergent taper may be of the order of 30 minutes of arc. Discharge section tube **184** ends at a downstream flange **192**. Flange **192** mates with a corresponding flange **194** of the reactor vessel in-feed tail pipe, or digester inseret **196**, which may typically be of slightly larger inside diameter than the downstream end of discharge, but which may also have the slight outward flare or taper of section tube **184**. Both inside wall **187** and outside wall **188** may be circular in cross-section, outside wall **188** being cylindrical and inside wall **187** being frusto-conical. The combined length, from the dewatering section downstream flange to the choke cone seat, express in term of a length to diameter ratio, taking diameter at the outlet flange of the dewatering section, may be in the range of more than 5:1 and up to about 8:1 or about 10:1. In one embodiment this range may be about 6.4:1.

The compression process may tend to heat the feedstock. It may not be desirable to overheat the feedstock, and a location of maximum heating may be in the high friction shear zone immediately adjacent to inside wall and immediately in front of first end face **114** of piston **112**. To the extent that the feedstock is a biological material containing natural sugars, once the sugars of the feedstock start to brown, for example, the quality of the feedstock and the completeness of the subsequent activity in the reaction chamber may be impaired. The cooling of inside wall **187** may tend to discourage or deter this heating process. In addition, the retention of a modest moisture layer in liquid form about the outside of the feedstock slug may tend to provide lubrication between the discharge wall and the feedstock. The inventors have observed that this effect, and, conversely, the absence of this effect, may noticeably effect the power consumption of the apparatus. It appears to the inventors that this effect may be enhanced by one or another of close control of piston position, close control of, and enhancement of the evenness of, cooling, and close control of pressure variation during compression. In the inventors view, operational temperatures of the fibre at the wall may be kept below 65 C for wood based fibers, and preferably about 60 C. The wall surface of wall **187** may be maintained in the range of about 35 to 40 C, with a maximum of 65 C.

Choke Cone Assembly 36

Choke cone assembly **36** is mounted to vertical pipe **200** in axial alignment with, i.e., concentric with, the horizontal discharge pipe of the compression section, namely digester insert **196**. It includes a horizontal stub pipe **202** in which a longitudinally reciprocating shaft **204** is

mounted. The inner end of shaft **204** carries a pointed, generally conical cap or choke cone **206** that is mounted in concentric axial alignment with digester insert **196**. Choke cone **206** has a broadening skirt **208** such as may seat in the end of insert **196** at full extension. Assembly **36** also includes a reciprocating drive **210** mounted in axial alignment with shaft **204** on the centerline of the unit, and a sensing assembly **212**, which may be a load cell, by which to sense the position of shaft **204**, and hence choke cone **206**, and the force acting against choke cone **206**. Shaft **204** is mounted on a pair of axially spaced apart bearings **204**, and passes through a set of seals or glands, identified as packing rings **216**.

In operation, if there is no load on assembly **36**, such as may occur when there is no feedstock material in tail pipe **196**, shaft **204** moves forward to full travel to seat in the end of tail pipe **196**. As feed stock collects in tail pipe **196** it is initially not significantly compressed, and tail pipe **196** remains in place as the wad of feedstock builds against it. Eventually the wad becomes substantially continuous, and is quite tightly packed, sufficiently so to lift, i.e., displace the cone **206**, from its seat, and to permit egress of feedstock from tailpipe **196**. Cone **206** then serves two functions, namely to maintain pressure on the end of the wad or pad of feedstock, and to split up that wad or pad when it leaves insert **196** and enters the reactor chamber.

Both compression tube **184** and digester insert **196** may have the gentle longitudinal flare or taper noted above. In operation, when piston **112** retracts, pressure from choke cone **206** tends to push longitudinally rearward on the plug of feedstock in insert **196** and tube **184**. Since these members are tapered, this pressure tends to wedge the plug in place, the plug tending not to move rearwardly because of the taper. This situation remains until piston **112** again moves forward, overcoming the force applied by choke cone **206** and “lifting” the plug of feedstock off the tapered walls against which it is wedged, and urging the plug along in the forward direction. Through this process the sensors and control circuitry may be employed to determine the force to apply to shaft **204** to maintain stabilising pressure against the plug, and the timing to retract choke cone **206** as piston **112** advances, thereby tending to smooth the process.

Main Reactor Vessel or Digester Assembly 40

The main reactor chamber, or digester assembly may include a pressure vessel **220**, which may have the form of a substantially cylindrical tube, with suitable pressure retaining end fittings. The cylindrical tube may be inclined on a gentle downward angle from input to output. Pressure vessel **220** may have a feedstock conveyor, or which one type may be a central retention screw **222** driven by a main motor and reduction gearbox **224**. Retention screw **222**

may include a hollow central shaft that is connected to a source of heat, such as steam heat, and to the extent that it is heating the volute, or paddles, or screw flights **223**, those flights are also radially extending heat exchanger fins that establish a heat transfer interface. One advantage of such an arrangement is that it permits the introduction of heat into the reactor vessel, and hence into the feedstock, without changing the moisture content in the feedstock. Screw conveyor **222** may fit generally closely within the inner wall of the reactor vessel, such that as the screw turns, the feedstock may tend to be driven or advanced along the central axis. Pressure vessel **220** may be a double walled pressure vessel, and the space between the inner and outer walls may be connected to a source of heat, such as steam heat, it is heating the volume of the vessel as well, or may be insulated and may house heating elements, as may be appropriate for the particular industrial process for which apparatus **20** is employed. Pressure vessel **220** may be provided with a number of taps or nozzles or spray nozzles **214**, **218** at which liquids or chemicals in fluid or solid form may be introduced or extracted according to the nature of the process. Pressure vessel **220** may also include heating apparatus, again, according to the desired process. As noted, feedstock is directed into the main body of the pressure vessel by the vertical digester drop zone. Feedstock may leave pressure vessel **220** at the output assembly **44**. The pressure in the reactor vessel, or digester, may, in the broadest range, be in the range of 75 – 500 psig. A narrow range of 170 to 265 psig may be employed, and a still narrower range of 190 to 235 psig may be desired if the process is a steam only process. If acids are used to aid in breaking down the wood fibres, the pressures may tend to be toward the higher ends of these ranges. Temperatures in the reactor vessel may typically be in the range of 170 – 220 C, and, more narrowly, 200 – 210 C. The residence time of feedstock in the reactor chamber may be of the order of 4 to 5 ½ minutes.

Output or Discharge Screw and Discharge Tube Assembly 44

The discharge, de-compression, or output assembly, which may also be termed the discharge screw and discharge tube assembly, **44** may be mounted cross-wise to the main longitudinal axis of the reactor vessel, e.g., pressure vessel **220**. There may be two pipe stubs, those being a drive stub and an output stub or pipe flanges **226**, **228** respectively mounted to, and forming arms or extensions of, pressure vessel **220**. A screw or auger or discharge screw **230** may be mounted between pipes **226**, **228**, e.g., at a level rather lower than the centerline of pressure vessel **220**. Auger **230** may be driven by a motor **232**. Screw **230** passes beneath, and clear of, the main screw, namely pressure vessel retention screw **222**. The volute of retention screw **222** ends just before, i.e., longitudinally shy or short in the direction of advance of, cross-wise mounted discharge screw **230**, as shown in Figure **1e**. The transverse discharge screw **230**

feeds an output duct, or pipe identified as discharge tube **234**, which, in turn carries feedstock to an outflow governor, such as an outlet valve **240**, which may be termed a blow valve. The output duct or pipe or discharge tube **234** in effect defines a first-in-first-out output collector or accumulator or discharge antechamber. It is conceptually somewhat similar to an electrical capacitor in which a charge or plug of material for output can be accumulated in the collector awaiting discharge. The plug has in part a function somewhat akin to a wadding in a gun barrel where, in desired operation, there will always be a pad or plug or wadding of porous feedstock obstructing the outflow. The size of the pad or plug waxes and wanes as the outflow valve opens and closes extracting material from the downstream end of the pad or plug, with the pad being constantly replenished on its upstream end by the action of screw **230**. Transverse screw **230** then functions as a drive or packer. It forms and packs a wad or charge or pad of feedstock in the collector. If the pad is sufficiently large, the quantity of the charge will be less than the amount discharged in one cycle of the valve. The end of stub **228** extending longitudinally beyond the tip of auger **230** may have a flare, or outward taper in the downstream direction, comparable to the flare of the infeed pipe from the compressor discharge section, to discourage the feedstock from jamming in the pipe. The taper may be about 30 minutes of arc.

Outlet valve **240** may be a ball control valve **242**, of which one type is a Neles Series E ceramic ball valve such as may be used in abrasive applications where erosion resistance may be desirable and which may not necessarily be shown to scale in the illustrations. The flow path of this valve may be lined with a material that includes magnesia partially stabilized with zirconia. Valve **242** is a motorized valve, and may include a drive motor **244**, which may be a stepper motor with continuous speed variation. Valve **242** may include an internal ball with continuous 360 degree rotation. A may be appreciated, each time the ball turns 180 degrees, an incremental discharge or “blow” will occur in view of the pressure drop from P_{high} inside pressure vessel **220** to P_{ambient} outside pressure vessel **220**. Valve **242** may be a uni-directional valve, or may be used only to turn uni-directionally, be it always clockwise or always counter-clockwise, rather than reversing between the two. Valve **242** is an electronically controlled valve in which the operation of motor **244**, and the speed variation thereof, may be made in response to both pre-programmed values and parameter values sensed in apparatus **20** more generally. Those parameters may include pressure immediately upstream of valve **242**, drop in that value, rise in that value, differentials therefrom of rate of change thereof; may include temperature, moisture of other values in the process, and may include parameters related to motor load and performance from which the presence of feedstock in the accumulator may be inferred, or a fault inferred, an easily monitored value being electric motor current draw. As above, the clock speed

of the digital electronic monitoring and control equipment may be of the order of 1GHz, while the frequency of blows may be of the order of 30 – 60 Hz.

A typical internal pressure may be in the range of 245 psig at a saturated mixture of steam, for example. The rate of motion of ball valve **242** may be such that the period of opening is somewhat like the opening of a camera shutter or aperture, or nozzle, and in that short space of time the feedstock exits the reactor in what is more or less an explosion. To the extent that there is a level of moisture in the reactor and absorbed in the feedstock, it may tend to be a steam explosion. The length of the outlet duct past the end of the auger may be in the range of 4:1 to 10:1 times its diameter. All of the motors of apparatus **20** may be servo motors with continuously variable, digitally controlled speed. The pressure immediately upstream of ball valve **242** may be monitored, as may motor current. When there is a “no load” current in motor **244**, the controller may signal an increase in speed of motor **244** to attempt more quickly to re-establish an adequate plug of feedstock in the outflow collector. Conversely, where the load current is too high, as may indicate a blockage, the controller may signal a decrease in motor speed until current returns to an acceptable level with the discharge of material when valve **242** is opened, or, if this is not does not resolve the matter within a set period, t_{Long} , e.g., 1 sec or 2 sec., and the controller times out, the controller may then signal cessation of motor current to motor **244**.

As may be appreciated, rapidly depressurizing feedstock may be blown through the open aperture or nozzle defined by ball valve **242** at quite high velocity, particularly if, at the same time, there is an adiabatic, isentropic expansion as the moisture in the feedstock changes state from liquid to gas, e.g., water vapour. Processed feedstock leaving ball valve **242** may be discharged through outlet ducting, which may be in the form of a broadening passageway, which may be a diffuser, indicated conceptually as **246**. The output flow may then expand and decelerate in the diffuser. The outlet ducting may be connected to a settling chamber or cyclone, indicated conceptually as **248**, at which the processed feedstock may be separated from the liberated steam, and may further decelerate and settle out of the carrier gas (i.e., steam) flow, and may be collected, and whence it may be removed to storage or for further processing, such as use as feedstock in producing ethanol or other products. Motor **244**, diffuser **246**, and cyclone **248** may not be shown to scale in the illustrations.

The explosion of feedstock at the outlet may tend to be most effective when the pressure differential is greatest, the reduction in pressure most rapid. Valve **242** then acts like a relatively rapidly moving shutter. It may be advantageous for the shutter to be open only for a very brief

moment so that a reduction in driving pressure at the ball valve is negligible. To that end, variable control of the ball valve servo motor may permit both the time of exposure of the shutter, i.e., the time period at which the valve is open, and the interval between openings of the shutter to be controlled continuously as a function of time. It may be desirable for the opening time period, t_{Open} , to be as short as practicable, many short bursts being thought to be more effective in treating the feedstock than a smaller number of longer bursts or blows.

Typically, the ratio of valve closed time, t_{Closed} , to valve open time, t_{Open} , may be of the order of perhaps 3:1 to 10:1. The total time, t_{Total} , for 180 degrees of rotation of the valve may be as little as $\frac{1}{2}$ second, including both open and closed time, or 120 Hz, corresponding to a mean rotational speed of roughly 60 r.p.m. at two openings per revolution. A more typical total time for 180 degrees of rotation might be 1 s to 2 s, or 60 – 30 Hz. In normal operation the valve would be expected to move or cycle between open and obstructed or closed positions 40 times a minute or more. The valve may be open for 1 s, closed for 5 s or closed for 8 s. Alternatively, the valve may be closed for 1 s, and open for $\frac{1}{5}$ or $\frac{1}{8}$ second.

In operation, the auger motor may have a full load current draw, I_{fl} , somewhat in excess of 10 Amps, and a no load current draw of 3 Amps. When the current draw exceeds 80 % of full load it may be inferred that there is a plug of feedstock in the outlet pipe, and the control may signal for the valve to be opened. The valve may have a target open time period, t_{Ref} , perhaps of $\frac{1}{4}$ s. possibly somewhat less such as $\frac{1}{5}$ s to or $\frac{1}{8}$ s. If the pressure immediately upstream of the valve falls 2 psig prior to the expiry of that time period, e.g. $\frac{1}{4}$ s, the control may signal for the valve to close. Motor current may drop to a value close to “no load”, perhaps 40% or less of the full load value. If, abnormally, that pressure drop should exceed a reference value, P_{DropRef} , be it as much as 4 or 5 psig., the programmed logic of controller may infer that there is no plug left in the outlet pipe accumulator, which is undesirable. Valve **242** must then be closed immediately. When valve **242** is closed, discharge screw **230** replenishes the plug with feedstock until the threshold motor current draw is reached. Alternatively, if the valve is open for the target time period, t_{Ref} , $\frac{1}{4}$ s, perhaps, and the motor current does not fall below some threshold value, such as 50 % of full load, then the closed portion of the cycle needs to be shorter. If the closed portion becomes as short as possible, (though not necessarily so, assumed to be t_{Ref} .) due to the practical physical limitations of the valve, or a limit on the value imposed by the controller as a speed governor, then the length of opening time must be increased. If there is a high current draw at the same time as a low pressure signal, a fault signal will be generated and a warning or alarm signal sent to the operator and the process taken off-line.

Then, in summary, the foregoing describes an apparatus and method for processing fibrous organic feedstock. The apparatus includes a compressor operable to raise the fibrous organic feedstock to a processing pressure; a reactor vessel through which to process the fibrous organic feedstock under pressure; and a discharge assembly mounted to receive the fibrous organic feedstock of the reactor vessel. The discharge assembly includes a collector and a drive member operable to pack the fibrous organic feedstock into the collector. An outflow governor is mounted to the collector. The outflow governor is movable between a closed position for retaining feedstock in the collector and an open position for permitting egress of the feedstock from the collector. The outflow governor has an outflow governor drive. The outflow governor drive has a continuously variable speed control. The speed control is operable to alter both the duration of the outflow governor in the open position and the ratio of time spent in the open and closed positions.

The variable speed control is operable to cycle the outflow governor between open and closed conditions in excess of 40 times per minute. The apparatus includes sensors operable to monitor pressure upstream of the outflow governor and the digital electronic controller is connected to cause operation of the outflow governor in response to pressure signals and in response to load sensed in the collector, by the proxy of monitoring motor current. The apparatus includes at least one heat transfer interface at which heat may be added to said reactor vessel and any contents thereof, and at least one moisture modification input or interface by which to modulate moisture level within said reactor vessel, whether by extraction at dewatering section **130** or taps **218**, or by introduction at taps **214** (or **218**, as may be). The outflow governor is connected to open in response to presence out feedstock in the collector and sensing of a minimum outflow pressure threshold.

The apparatus may include control logic to (a) shorten outflow governor closed time when resistance to packing of the outfeed collector increases; (b) lengthen outflow governor open time when resistance to packing of the outfeed collector increases; (c) increase the ratio of outflow governor open time to outflow governor closed time as proportions of total outflow governor cycle time; (d) bias said outflow governor to reduce outflow open time to a minimum threshold value; or (e) immediately to move said outflow governor to the closed position when pressure upstream therefrom falls below a designated set point value, or all of them.

The process for treating a loose fibrous feedstock includes establishing the loose fibrous feedstock in a reactor vessel at an elevated pressure relative to ambient; passing charges of the

feedstock through a sudden expansion, which may be substantially adiabatic and isentropic; and controlling decompression cycle parameters in real time with a variable speed outflow valve.

The process may include using ball valve **242** as the variable speed outflow valve, and it may include driving ball valve **242** uni-directionally and varying speed in that one direction. The process includes employing sensors to observe pressure in the reactor vessel upstream of the outflow valve, and modulating operation of the outflow valve in response to pressure sensed upstream of the outflow valve. It may include at least one of: (a) maintaining the outflow valve in an open condition for less than one second; (b) maintaining the outflow valve in an open condition for t_{Open} , and maintaining the outflow valve in a closed condition for t_{Closed} where t_{Open} is less than $\frac{1}{4}$ of t_{Closed} ; (c) sensing pressure drop upstream of the outflow valve while the outflow valve is open, and driving the outflow valve closed immediately if pressure drop exceeds a set threshold value, $P_{Dropref}$; (d) sensing presence of feedstock in a collector mounted upstream of the outflow valve, and inhibiting opening of the outflow valve unless feedstock is inferred to be present; (e) setting a minimum open condition time reference value, t_{Ref} , for the outflow valve, and biasing the opening time of the outflow valve, t_{Open} , toward t_{Ref} ; (f) opening and closing the outflow valve in the range of 20 to 120 times per minute.

The process may include (a) opening and closing the outflow valve at least 40 times per minute; (b) maintaining a total cycle time, t_{total} , of less than 2 seconds, where t_{total} is the sum of valve open time, t_{Open} , and valve closed time, t_{Closed} ; (c) maintaining a ratio of valve open time, t_{Open} , and valve closed time, t_{Closed} that is less than 1:5, or all of them. It may include providing a feedstock collector upstream of the outflow valve; providing a drive to pack feedstock into the collector; monitoring drive motor electrical current; monitoring pressure immediately upstream of the outflow valve; inhibiting opening of the outflow valve until drive motor electrical current exceeds a threshold current value, $I_{valveopen}$, and reactor pressure immediately upstream of the outflow valve is at least as great as a pressure minimum discharge triggering value, $P_{valve\ open}$; closing the valve at the earliest of: (a) timing out against a set reference value, t_{Long} ; (b) sensing a drop in electrical motor current to below a set reference value I_{Lowref} ; (c) sensing a drop in pressure greater than a set reference value $P_{Dropref}$. The process may include biasing the outflow valve open time period, t_{Open} to the shortest period of time consistent with the foregoing operating conditions, and biasing the ratio of outflow valve open time, t_{Open} , to outflow valve closed time, t_{Closed} , to the minimum value consistent with the other operating conditions.

The process may include heating the feedstock in the reaction chamber to a temperature corresponding to saturated water vapour temperature at the pressure of the reactor chamber, or

maintaining a moisture level within the reaction chamber in a preset range, or both. It may include a ratio of valve open time, t_{Open} , to valve closed time, t_{Closed} , falls in the range of 3:1 and 10:1, or more narrowly, a ratio of valve open time, t_{Open} , to valve closed time, t_{Closed} , falls in the range of 5:1 and 8:1. Outflow control valve **242** may be inhibited from opening when the current draw is less than 70% of I_{fl} , and may be inhibited from closing when I_{fl} is greater than 50 % of I_{fl} . The process may have a target control valve time open, t_{Open} , of less than $\frac{1}{2}$ second. The reactor vessel may be maintained at a pressure in excess of 190 psig, and temperature in the reactor vessel is maintained at the corresponding steam table saturated temperature. More narrowly the target reactor vessel pressure is 245 psig $\pm$ 5 psig. Control valve closing may be initiated on a fall in pressure of 2 psig, and is immediate on a fall in pressure of 5 psig.

Operation

Piston **112** is, or substantially approximates, a positive displacement device. It is also a device that may tend to impose the peak compression on the feedstock, and therefore the peak heat input. As such, the operation of piston **112** may serve as a reference, or datum, for the operation of other components of processing apparatus **20**.

In previous, passive, or passively controlled, apparatus, the rate of reciprocation of the second stage piston was not directly controlled. Rather, in one type of system, the pressure inlet valve for the advance stroke would open, and the piston would drive forward under the urging of the available hydraulic pressure at such rate as might be. This might continue until a forward travel limit switch was tripped, at which point the forward travel input valve would close, and the return travel valve would open to cause the piston to reciprocate rearwardly. Alternatively, in a system with a flywheel and a crank, the piston would advance and retract as dictated by the turning of the motor and flywheel against the resistive pressure in the load. In the hydraulic ram system, then, neither the time v. distance nor the force v. distance profile was controlled or constant. Among many possible outcomes of this kind of apparatus, there would be an instantaneous pressure surge in the workpiece, which might lead to overheating or rubbing of the piston against the cylinder wall; on retraction the piston might tend to work against the main screw, with a resultant surge in power consumption.

By contrast, the use of a controlled time v. displacement schedule permits control over the pressure pulse applied to the workpiece, and hence also to its heating. Further, since the apparatus may include feedback sensors for both piston **112** and screw **76**, the rate of advance of the screw, and hence its power consumption, can be modulated in real time in co-ordination with

the operation of piston **112**. The piston feedback sensors may include sensors for monitoring position displacement and speed, force, hydraulic supply and return pressure, and hydraulic motor current. The drive screw sensors may include sensors operable to monitor angular position, displacement, speed, output torque, longitudinal thrust loading on the screw shaft, motor current, and motor shaft rotational position and displacement.

For example, assuming that initial starting transients have been resolved, a steady pressurized wad of feedstock has been established in tail pipe **196**, that pad also bearing against the choke cone **206**, and that apparatus **20** is now running substantially at steady state. As piston **112** is retracted, or is in the retraction stage of its operating cycle, the power to screw **76** may be reduced or held steady by decreasing the rate of advance of the screw. Then, in the forward or advancing portion of its operating cycle when piston **112** and screw **76** are working in the same direction, and the action of piston **112** may tend to unload screw **76**, screw **76** may be advanced, i.e., turned, more rapidly. This control may be either an explicit control on the rotational speed of the motor, and hence of the screw, or it may be a control on motor current draw or a combination of the two. For example, there may be a scheduled speed of advance, provided that the motor current draw does not exceed a maximum value. In either case the system includes sensors operable to generate a warning signal and to move the system to a passive off-line, i.e., inoperative dormant status, in the event that either the force sensed at either piston is too high, or if the motor current exceeds a governed maximum. Inasmuch as the timing and displacement of the piston stroke are known, the operation of screw **76** may anticipate the motion of piston **112**, relative to and may itself be pre-programmed according to a pre-set schedule, with a suitable phase shift, as may be, or it may be adjustable in real time in response to observations of force and displacement of piston **112**.

Similarly, rather than being passive, choke cone assembly **36** may be active. That is, rather than merely being subject to a fixed input force, be it imposed pneumatically or hydraulically; or a spring loaded input force such as imposed by a spring, all of which must be overcome by the piston to cause advance of feedstock into the main reaction vessel, choke cone assembly may be positively driven. That is to say, choke cone assembly **36** may be advanced and retracted either on the basis of a pre-set schedule, or in response to real-time feedback from piston **112**., and may be responsive to instantaneous load and rate of change of load as sensed at sensing assembly **212**. Thus, as piston **112** advances, choke cone assembly **36** may be retracted somewhat to reduce the peak loading. When piston **112** ceases to advance, and returns backward, choke cone assembly can be advanced to maintain a desired pressure level in the feed-

stock pad. After processing through the reactor vessel, i.e, the digester, the feedstock is decompressed through the blow valve as described above.

By either or all of these features alone or in combination, active control of the displacement v. time and force v. time profiles may serve to reduce peak loading, to smooth the pressure profile over time in the feedstock, thereby reducing the tendency to local overheating, and tending to reduce the peak cyclic forces in the equipment, e.g., by reducing or avoiding spikes in the load history as a function of time. This may permit the use of a smaller motor, and may permit a lighter structure to be used. It may also reduce wear and damage to the equipment and may tend to reduce power consumption.

Various embodiments have been described in detail. Since changes in and or additions to the above-described examples may be made without departing from the nature, spirit or scope of the invention, the invention is not to be limited to those details.

Claims

I claim:

1. A power transmission apparatus for a compression stage in a two stage compressor for loose-packed solids, said power transmission comprising:
 - a compressor piston, a head, and a plurality of power transmission members;
 - said compressor piston being shaped to extend about members of another compression stage and to be reciprocally movable with respect thereto in a longitudinal direction;
 - said piston having a first end and a second end;
 - said second end of said piston being rigidly mounted to said head in a fixed orientation;
 - said first end of said piston being longitudinally distant from said head and being shaped to co-operate with a mating cylinder;
 - said power transmission members being mounted to said head and restricting said head to motion along a fixed reciprocation path in a fixed orientation relative to that reciprocation path
 - said power transmission members each being mounted to a stationary power input apparatus; and
 - said power transmission members each being restricted to a single degree of freedom of motion from said stationary power input apparatus to said head.
2. The power transmission apparatus of claim 1 wherein said compressor piston is annular and has an axially extending passage formed therethrough to accommodate the other compression stage.
3. The power transmission apparatus of any one of claims 1 and 2 wherein said power transmission has is free of slack between input of power to said power transmission at the stationary input apparatus and said head.
4. The power transmission apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 3 wherein said power transmission members are connected to said head at moment connections.
5. The power transmission apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 4 wherein said apparatus includes a controller operable to monitor motion of each of said transmission members and operable to co-ordinate motion of said transmission members relative to each other.

6. The power transmission apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 5 wherein:
each of said power transmission members is a shaft;
said apparatus includes said stationary power input apparatus;
said stationary power input apparatus includes drive cylinders and input power pistons;
and
each shaft of said power transmission members extends into a respective one of said drive cylinders and has a respective one of said input power pistons mounted thereto by which to drive reciprocation thereof.
7. The power transmission apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 6 wherein each of said power transmission members is a shaft held in a pair of first and second, axially spaced apart slide bearings that allow only longitudinal translation of said respective transmission members.
8. The power transmission apparatus of any one of claims 6 wherein:
each of said power transmission members is a shaft held in a pair of first and second, axially spaced apart slide bearings that allow only longitudinal translation of said respective transmission members;
each of said power transmission members is a shaft;
said apparatus includes said stationary power input apparatus;
said stationary power input apparatus includes drive cylinders and input power pistons;
and
each shaft of said power transmission members extends through a respective one of said drive cylinders and has a respective one of said input power pistons mounted thereto by which to drive reciprocation thereof between said pair of first and second axially spaced apart slide bearings.
9. The power transmission apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 9 wherein, in cross-section transverse to the longitudinal direction said transmission members define vertices of a polygon; said piston has a centerline axis of reciprocation; and said centerline axis of reciprocation lies within said polygon.
10. The power transmission apparatus of any one of claims 1 to 9 wherein said power transmission members include a first power transmission member and a second power transmission member, each of said first and second power transmission members having an axis of reciprocation, said piston has a centerline axis of reciprocation; and said axes of reciprocation

of said first and second power transmission members are substantially diametrically opposed relative to said piston centerline axis of reciprocation.

11. The power transmission apparatus of any of claims 1 to 10 wherein both said power transmission members and said compressor piston are located longitudinally to one side of said head, said apparatus includes a spider, said spider defines mountings for said stationary power input apparatus and said spider has a passageway defined therethrough in which to mount the mating cylinder.

12. A two stage compressor feed apparatus operable to compress loose feedstock material, said feed apparatus comprising:

- a first compressor stage and a second compressor stage;

- said first compressor stage having a screw, said screw having a volute operable to drive the feedstock forward in an axial direction while compressing the feedstock;

- said second compressor stage having a compressor piston mounted to reciprocate in the axial direction, said second stage compressor piston having an axial accommodation permitting an end of said screw to extend therethrough;

- said second compressor stage having a stator and rams mounted to said stator in a rigidly fixed orientation parallel to said axial direction;

- said second compressor stage having a cylinder mounted to said stator, said cylinder being a mating cylinder for co-operation with said compressor piston;

- said second stage compressor piston having a first end and a second end;

- said second compressor stage includes a head;

- said second end of said compressor piston being mounted in a fixed orientation to said head;

- said first end of said compressor piston being distant from, and being oriented to face away from, said head;

- said rams including shafting extending to said head, said shafting constraining said head to a fixed orientation cross-wise to said axial direction; and

- said rams being constrained to a single degree of freedom of motion in linear translation parallel to said axial direction between said stator and said head.

13. The two stage compressor feed apparatus of claim 12 wherein said rams, said head and said piston are slacklessly connected.

14. The two stage compressor feed apparatus of any one of claims 12 and 13 wherein said rams include at least a first ram and a second ram, said first and second rams being mounted on substantially diametrically opposite sides of said second stage compressor piston.
15. The two stage compressor feed apparatus of any one of claims 12 to 14 wherein said apparatus includes a controller and feedback sensors, said controller and feedback sensors being operable to co-ordinate motion of said first and second rams.
16. The two stage compressor feed apparatus of claim 15 wherein said controller has a pre-set schedule of displacement as a function of time for said rams and is operable to cause motion of said rams to conform to said schedule.
17. The two stage compressor feed apparatus of claim 15 wherein said first stage screw discharges to a chamber having a liquid extraction manifold and drain.
18. The two stage compressor feed apparatus of claim 15 wherein:
said first stage screw has a discharge tip, said discharge tip being surrounded by a sleeve;
said sleeve being an axially stationary sleeve;
said second stage piston surrounding said sleeve, and being axially reciprocable relative thereto;
said sleeve having an interior face oriented toward said screw; and
said interior face of said sleeve having axially extending reliefs defined therein.
19. The two stage compressor feed apparatus of claim 15 wherein said feed apparatus discharges to a downstream conduit, said downstream conduit includes a cooling jacket, and said cooling jacket includes at least one internal helical wall.
20. The two stage compressor feed apparatus of claim 15 wherein said feed apparatus includes a drive mounted to turn said screw of said first stage compressor, said drive being a variable speed drive, and said controller being operable to adjust drive speed of said screw in co-ordination with motion of said second stage compression piston.
21. The two stage compressor feed apparatus of claim 15 wherein said two stage compression chamber gives onto a discharge, and said apparatus includes a discharge cone for seating athwart said discharge in opposition to passage of feedstock, said cone being axially reciprocable to permit egress of feedstock from said discharge, said controller being operable to

adjust position of said discharge cone in co-ordination with motion of said second stage compressor piston.

22. The two stage compressor feed apparatus of claim 15 wherein said first stage compressor screw includes a volute having a reducing pitch between successive turns of said volute.

23. The two stage compressor feed apparatus of claim 19 wherein said cooling jacket has an inwardly facing wall defining a discharge passageway of said second stage compressor, and said inwardly facing wall tapers outwardly in the direction of flow.

24. A process of compressing loose fibrous feedstock using a fibrous feedstock compression apparatus, said process comprising the steps of:

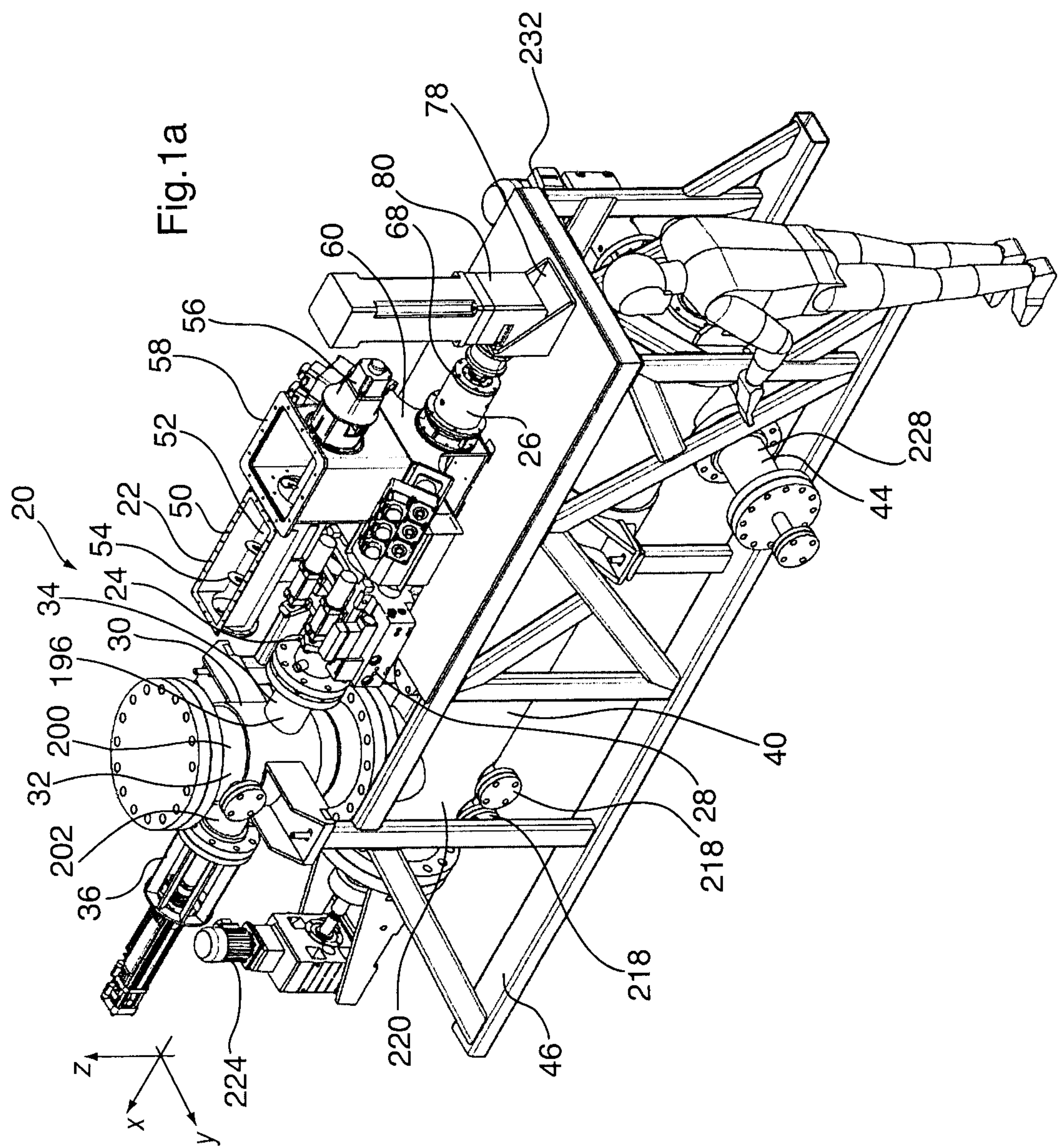
passing said feedstock through a first stage of compression;
employing a reciprocating piston to submit the feedstock to a second stage of compression, that reciprocating piston being mounted to a head, the head being mounted on actuating rams, that second stage of compression including continuously sensing position of said rams during operation thereof, and continuously co-ordinating motion of said rams.

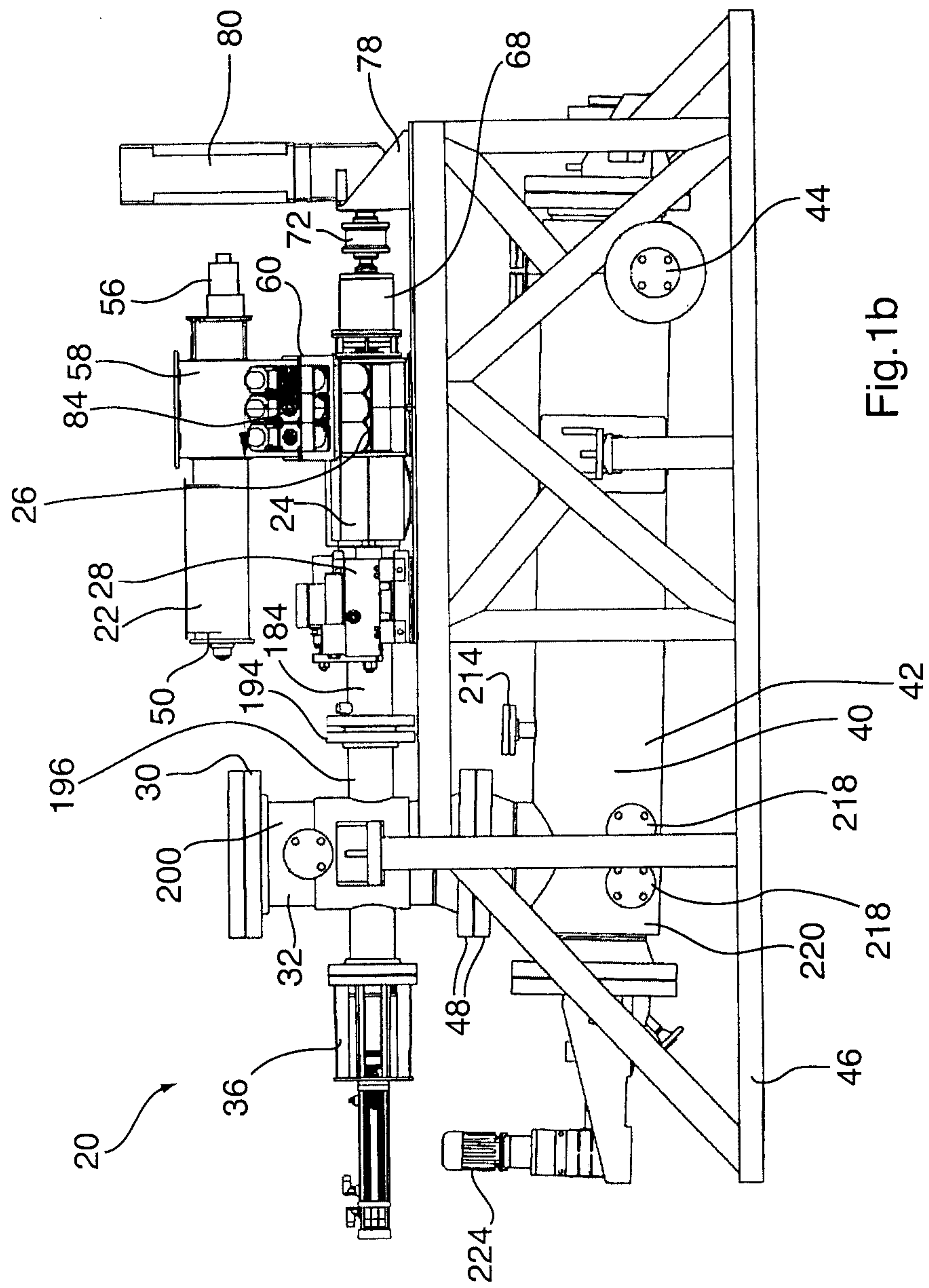
25. The process of claim 24 wherein said process includes operating said rams to a set schedule of displacement as a function of time.

26. The process of any one of claims 24 and 25 wherein said process includes co-ordinating operation of said first stage of compression with operation of said rams.

27. The process of claim 26 wherein said first stage of compression includes a screw compressor mounted to a variable speed drive, and said process includes continuous variation of the speed of said variable speed drive in co-ordination with operation of said rams.

28. The process of any one of claims 24 to 27 wherein said apparatus includes an axially movable discharge cone, and said process includes actively adjusting one of (a) position; and (b) reactive force applied to said cone in co-ordination with motion of said second stage compressor piston.





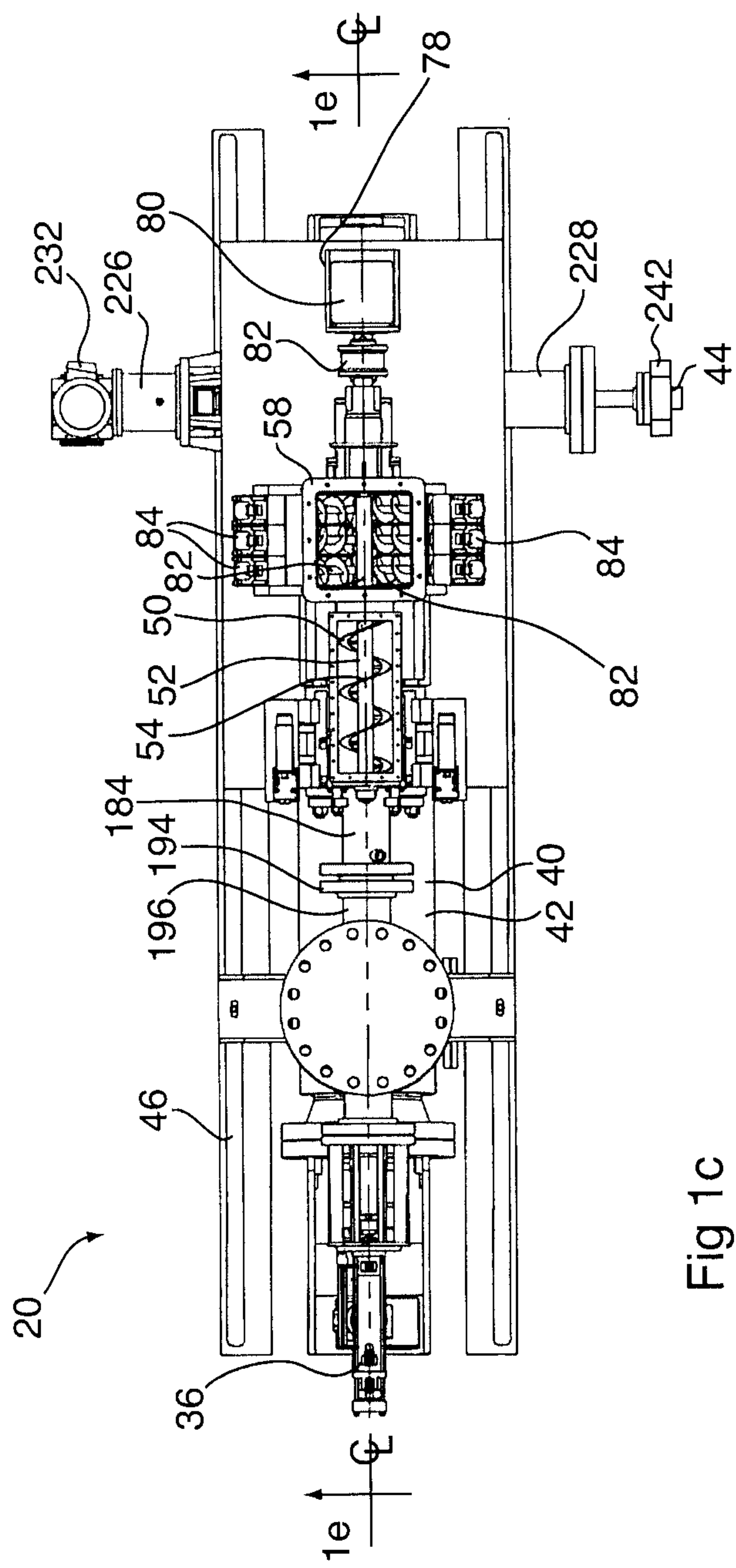


Fig 1c

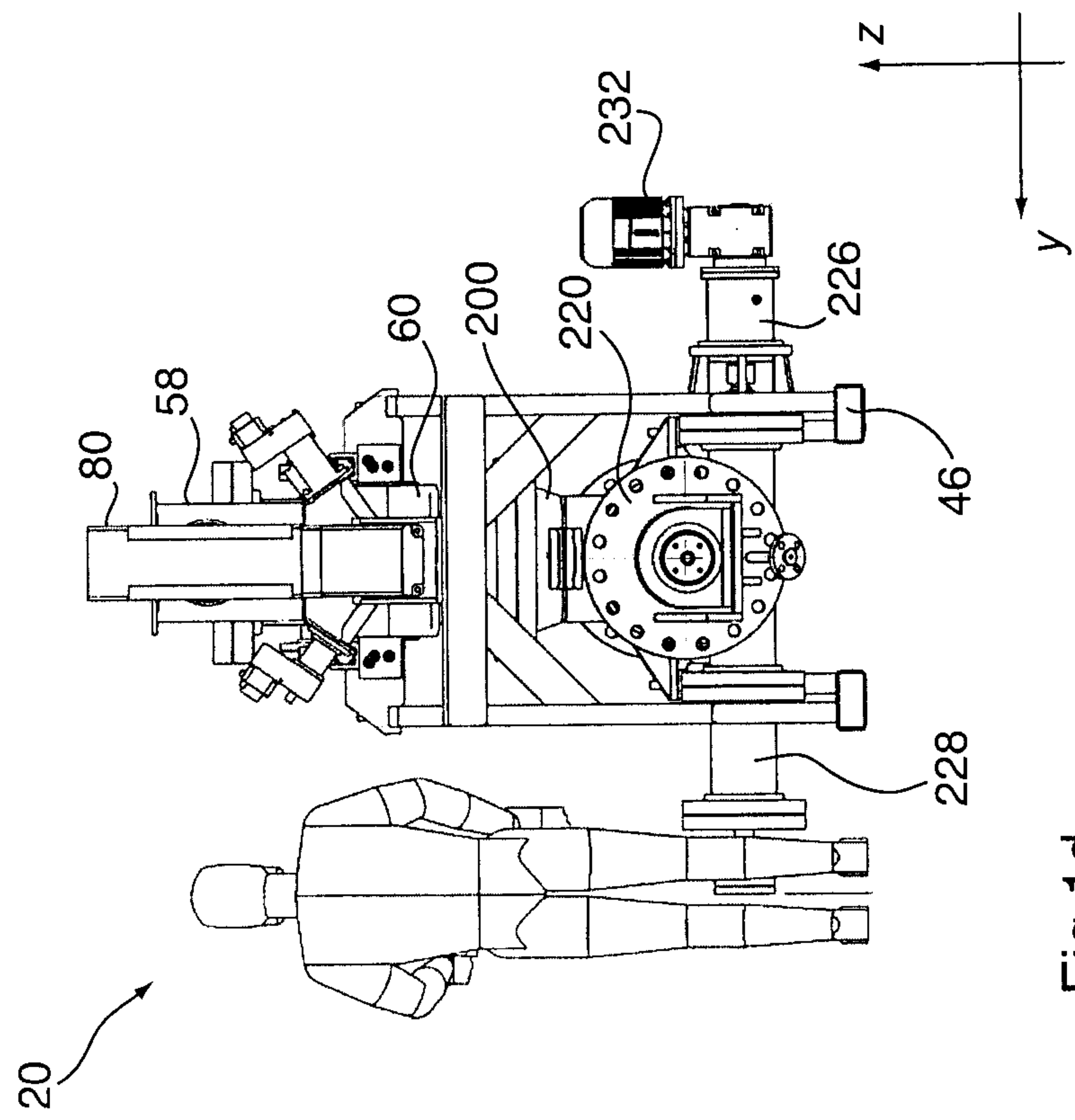
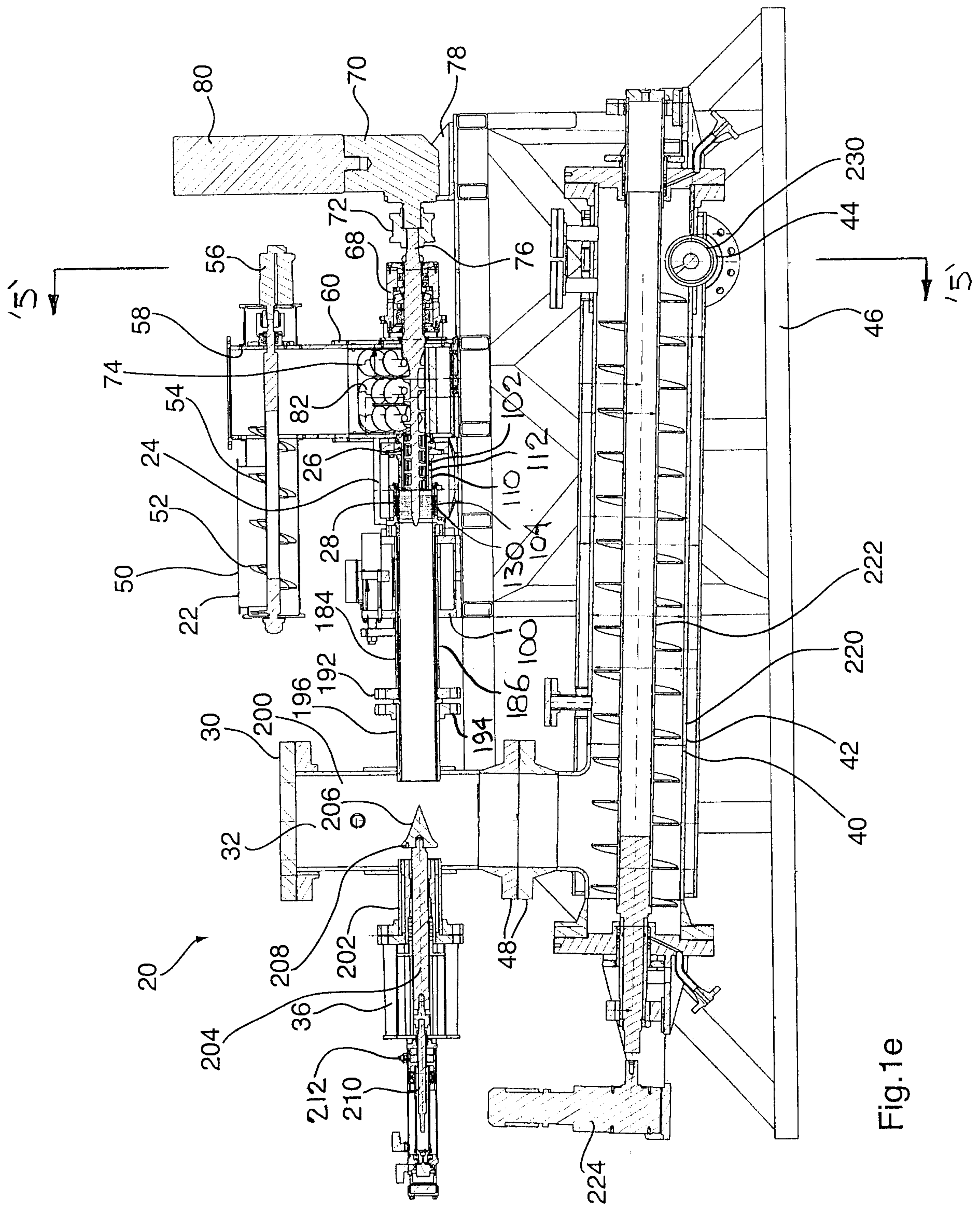


Fig 1d



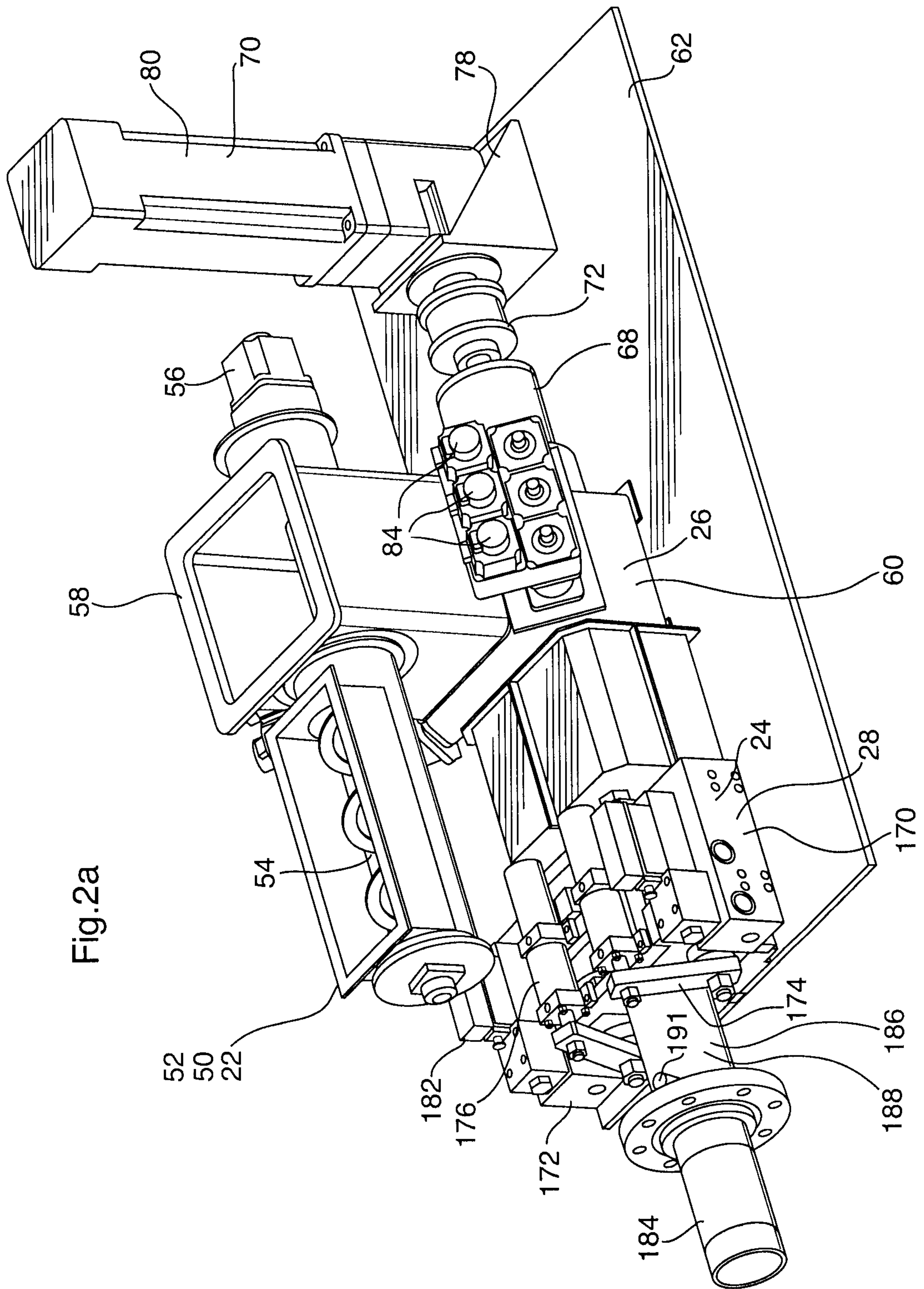


Fig. 2a

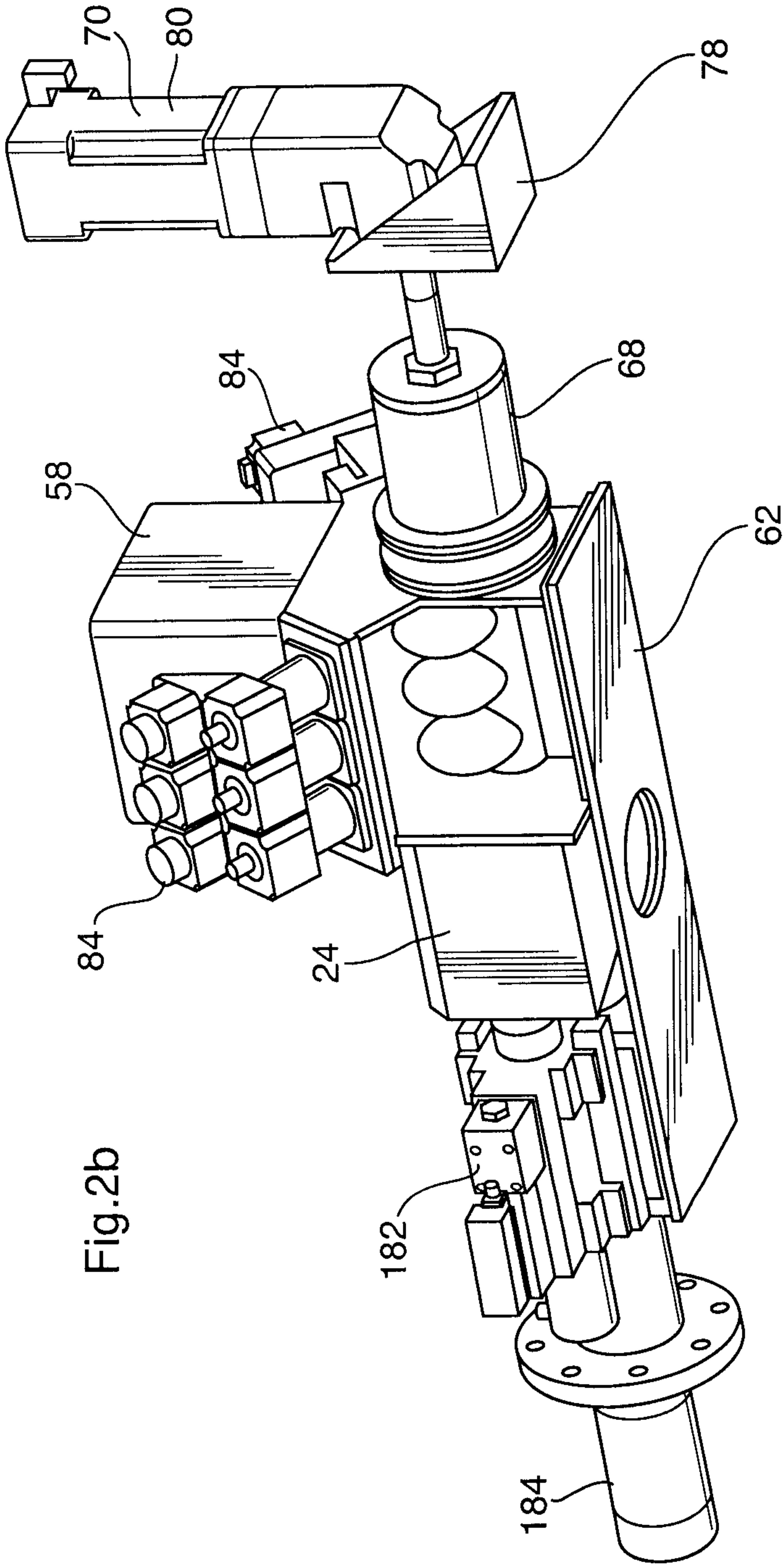
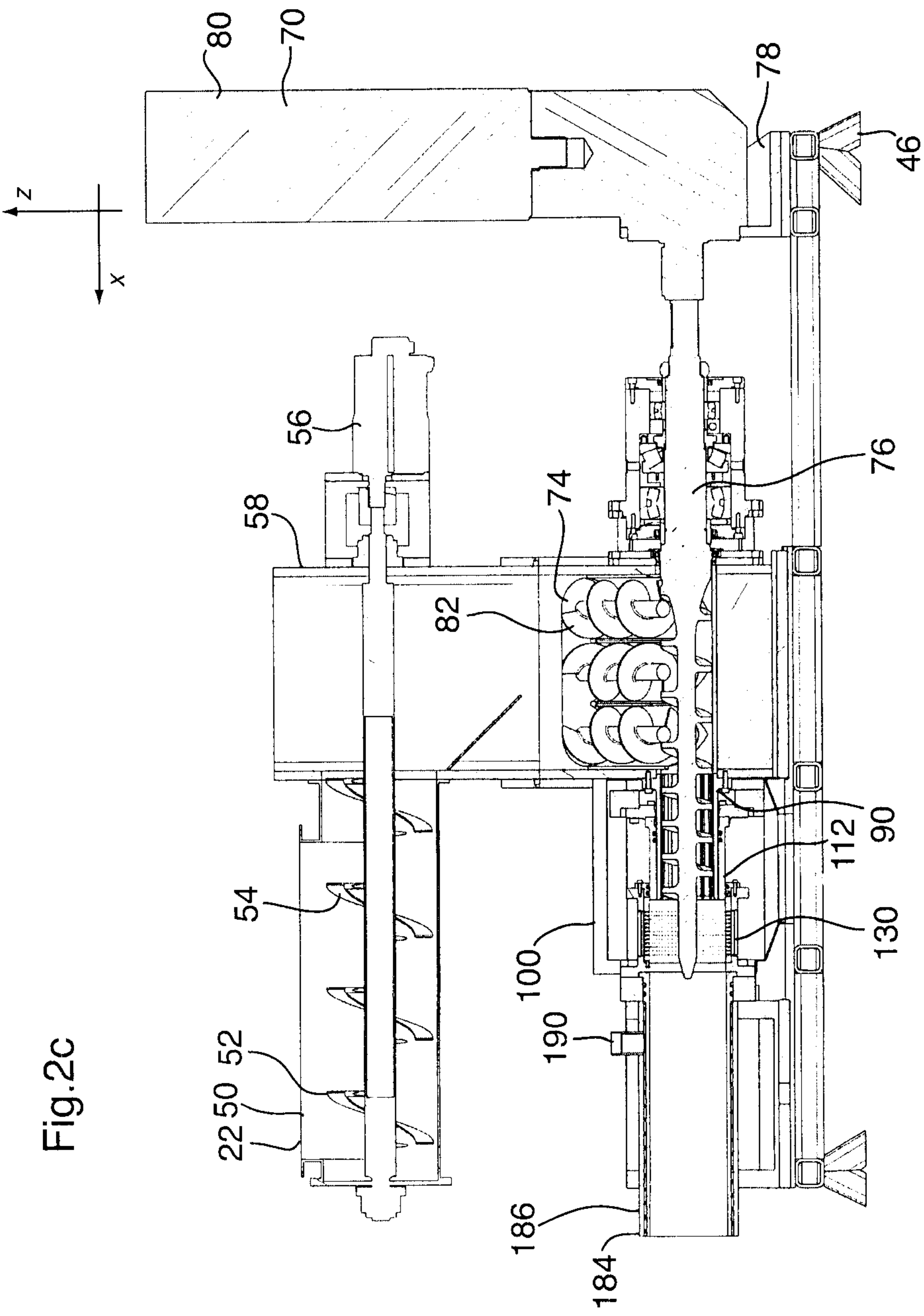
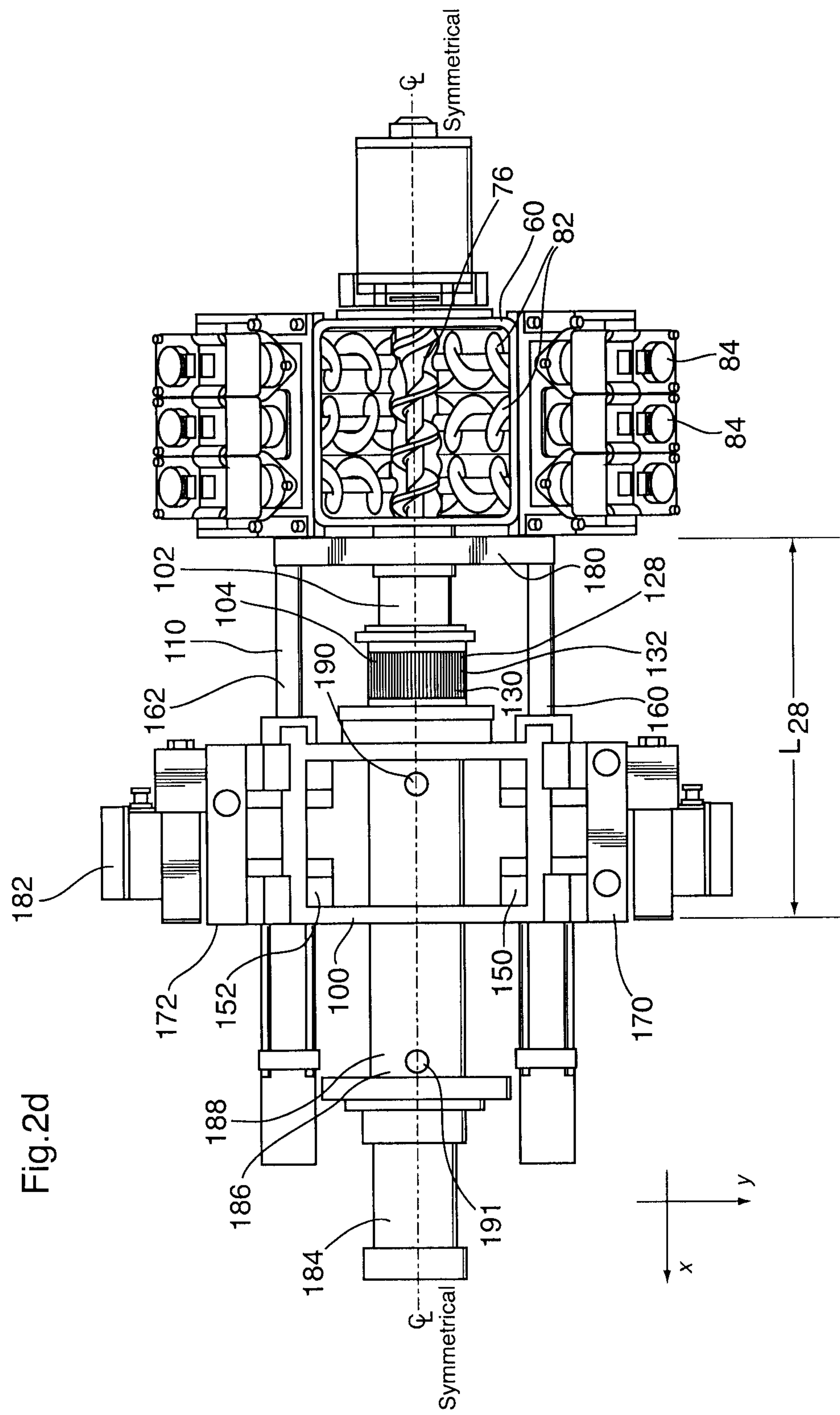


Fig.2b





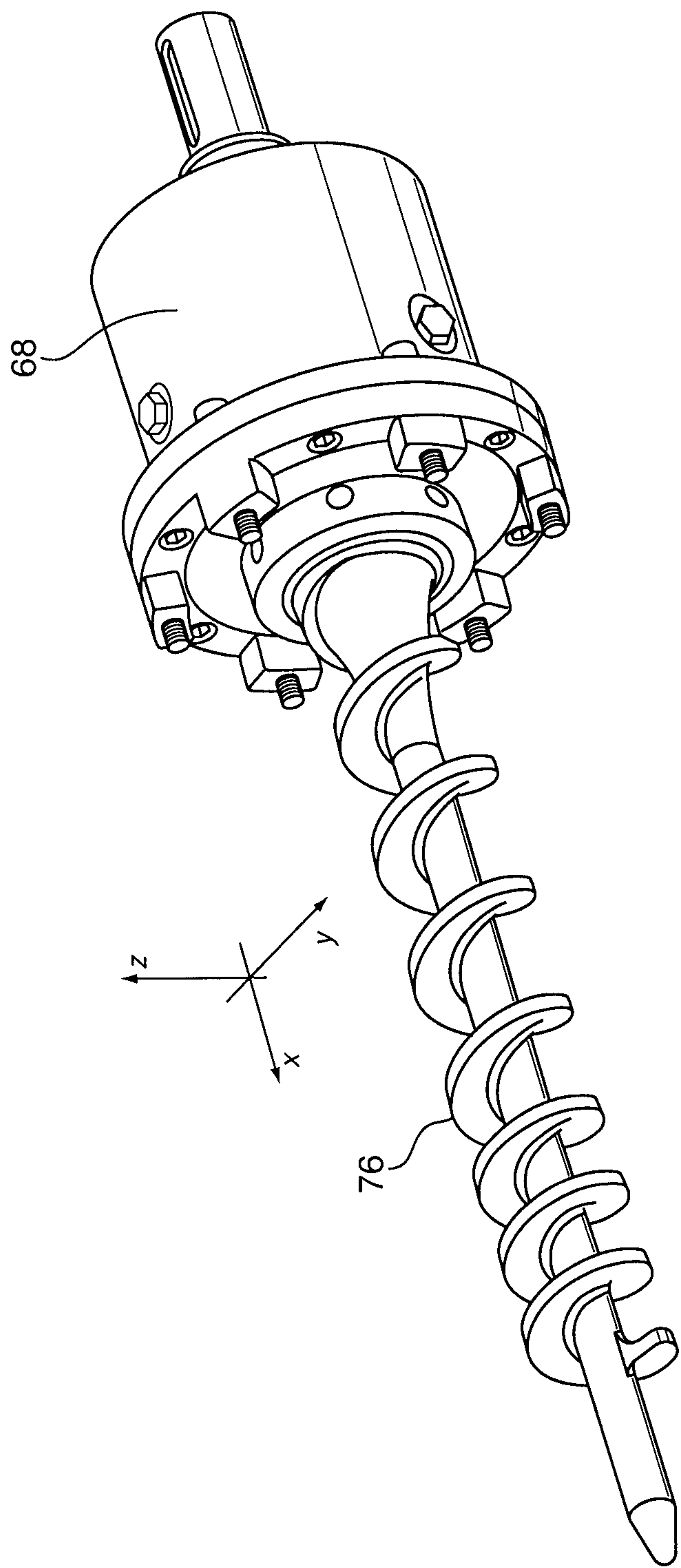


Fig.2e

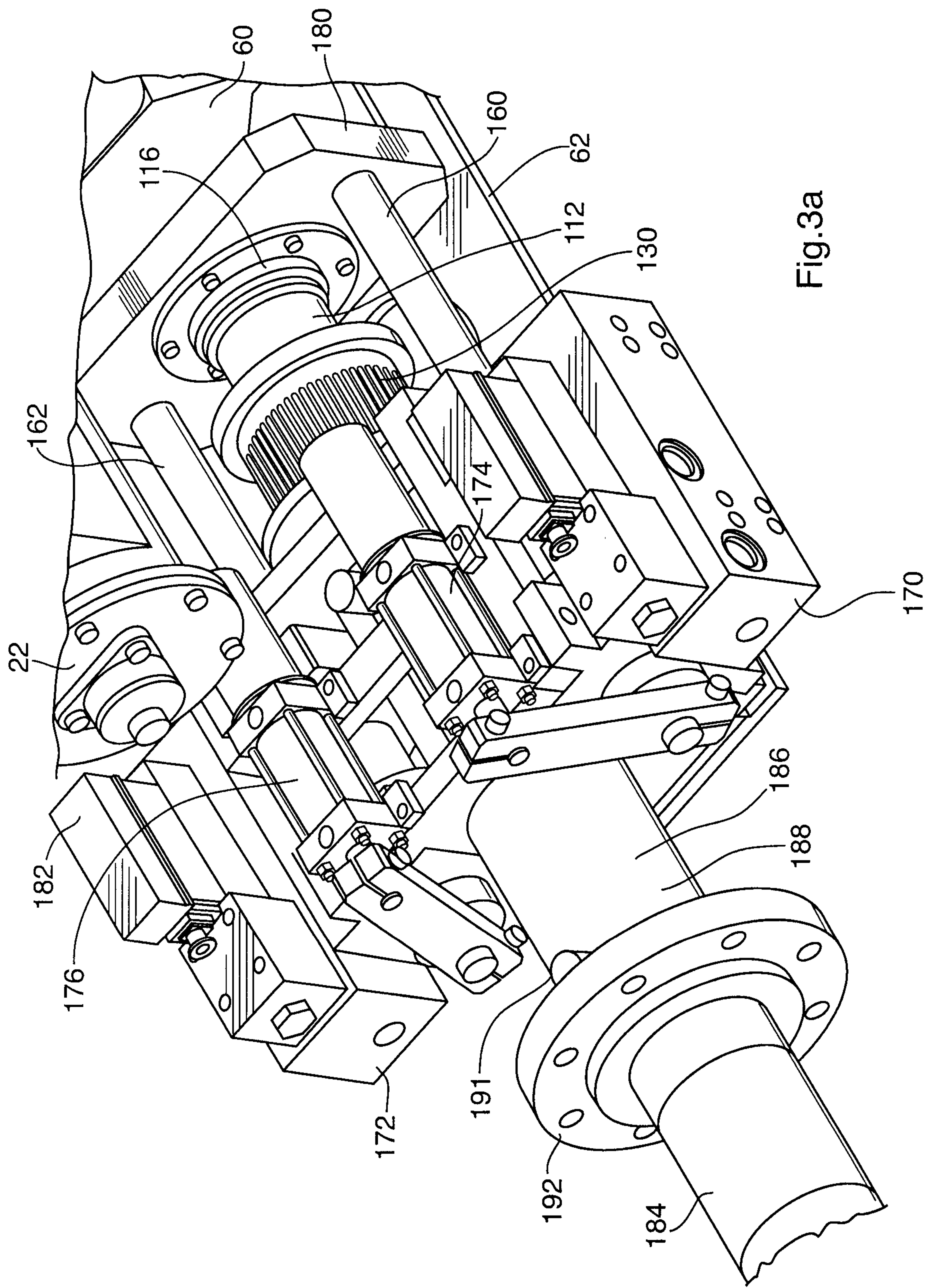


Fig.3a

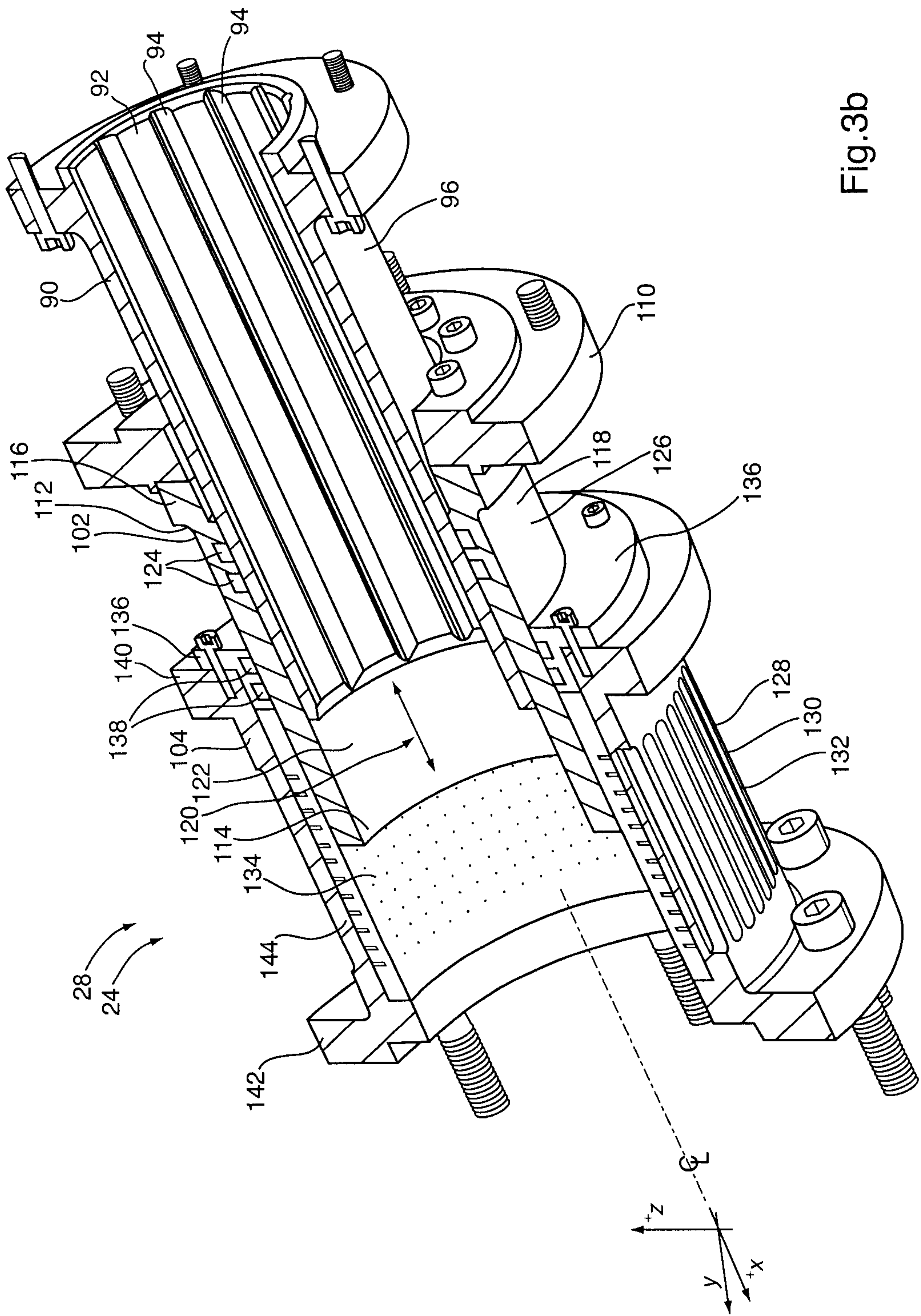


Fig.3b

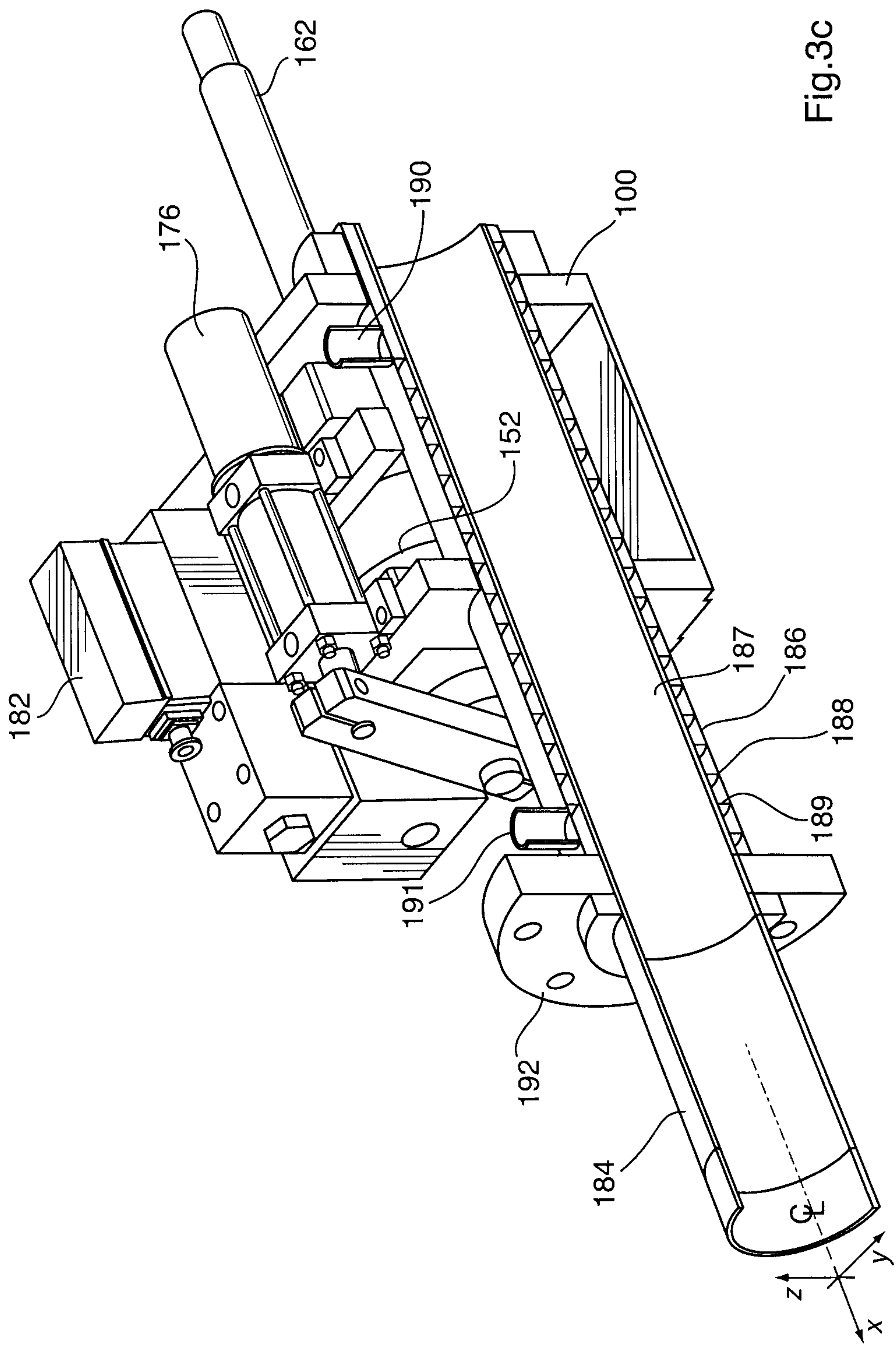


Fig.3c

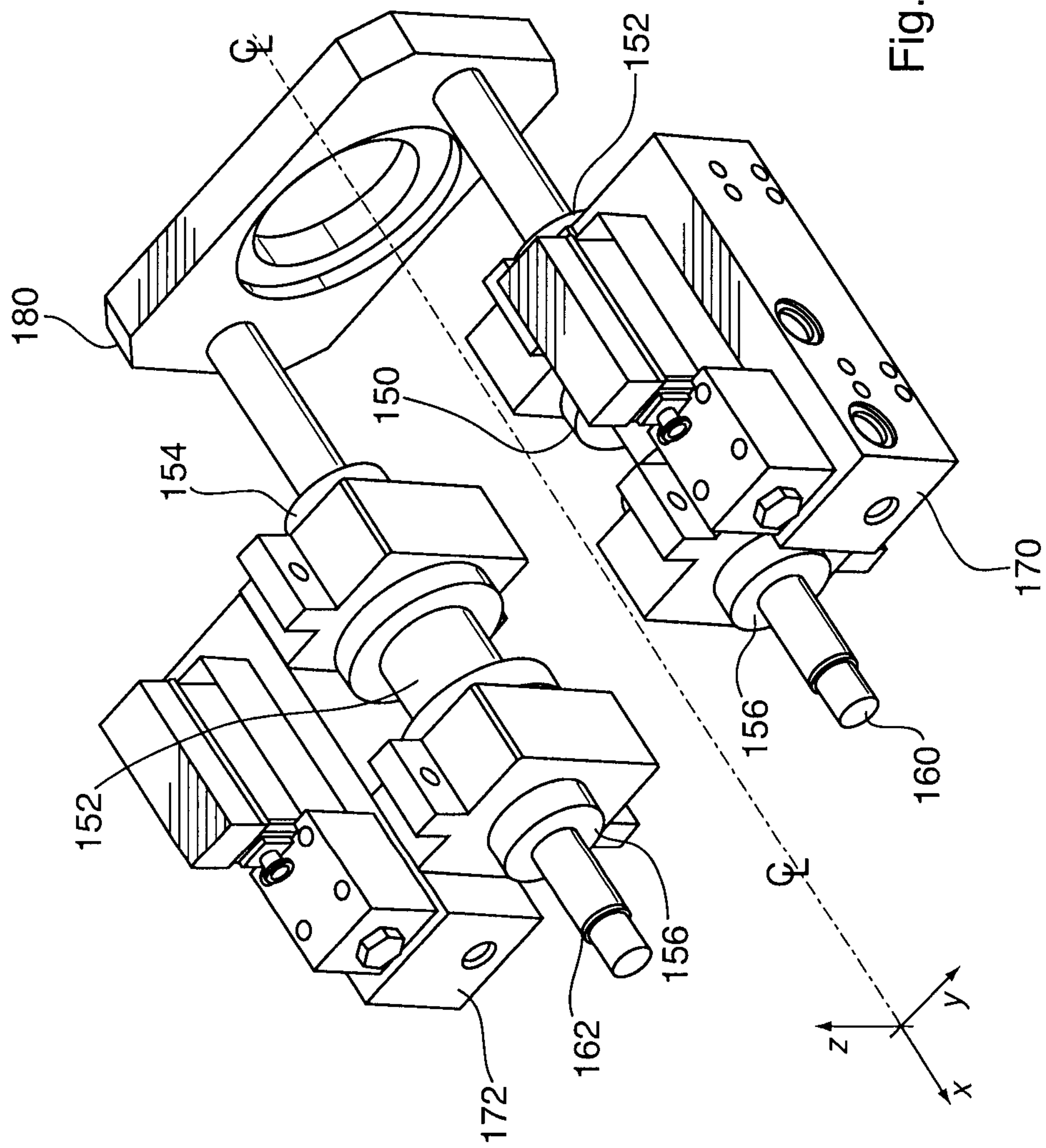


Fig.3d

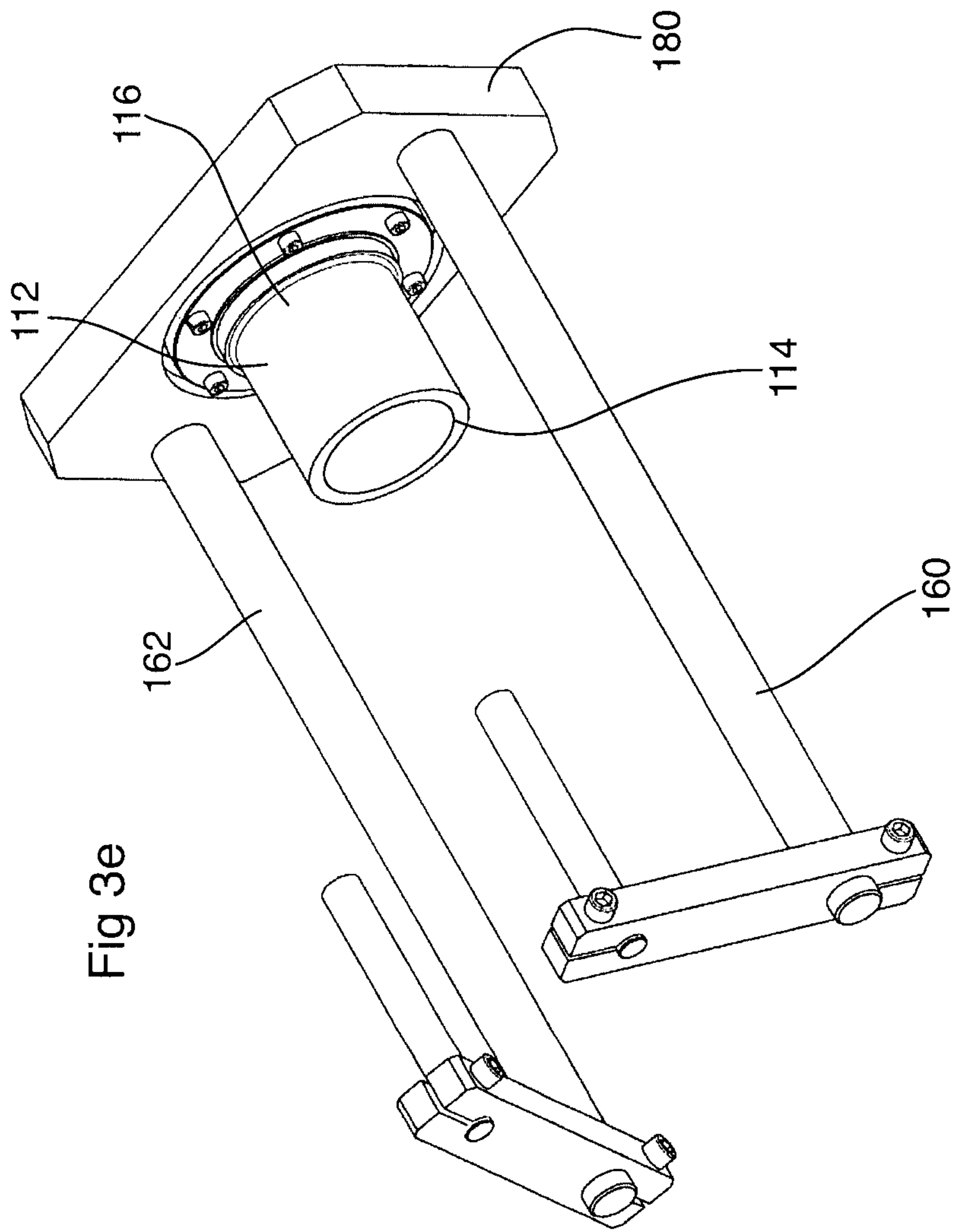
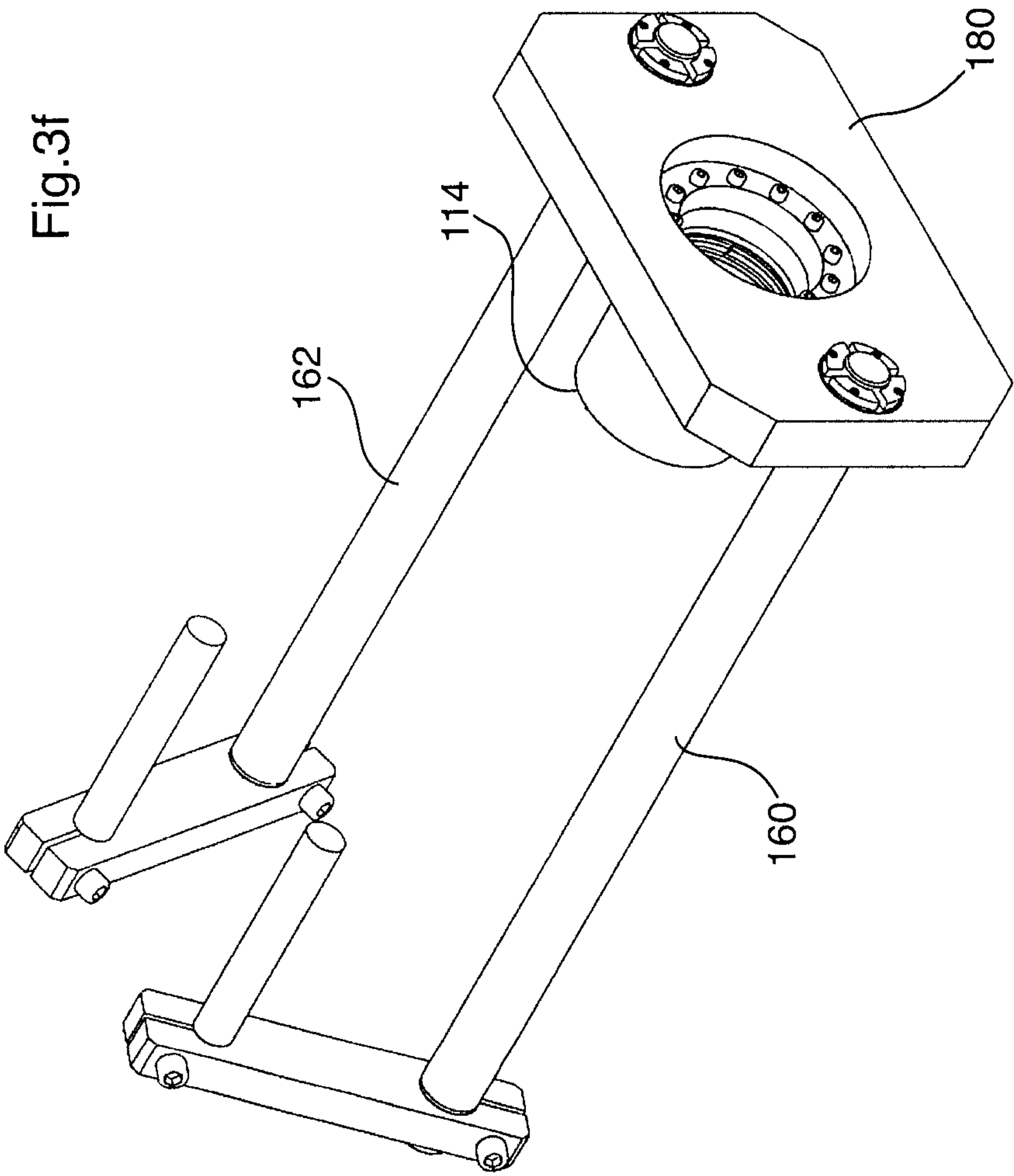


Fig 3e



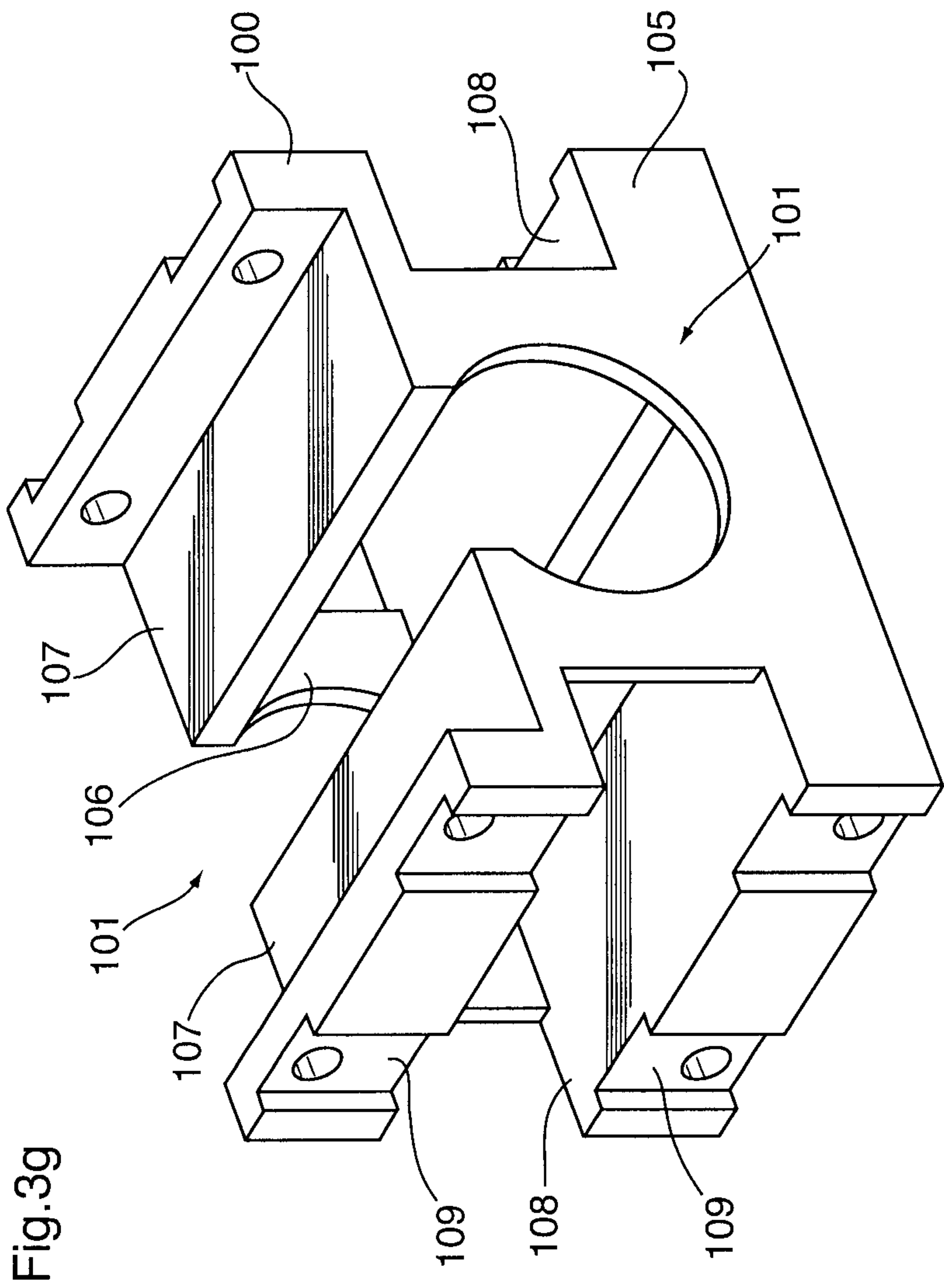
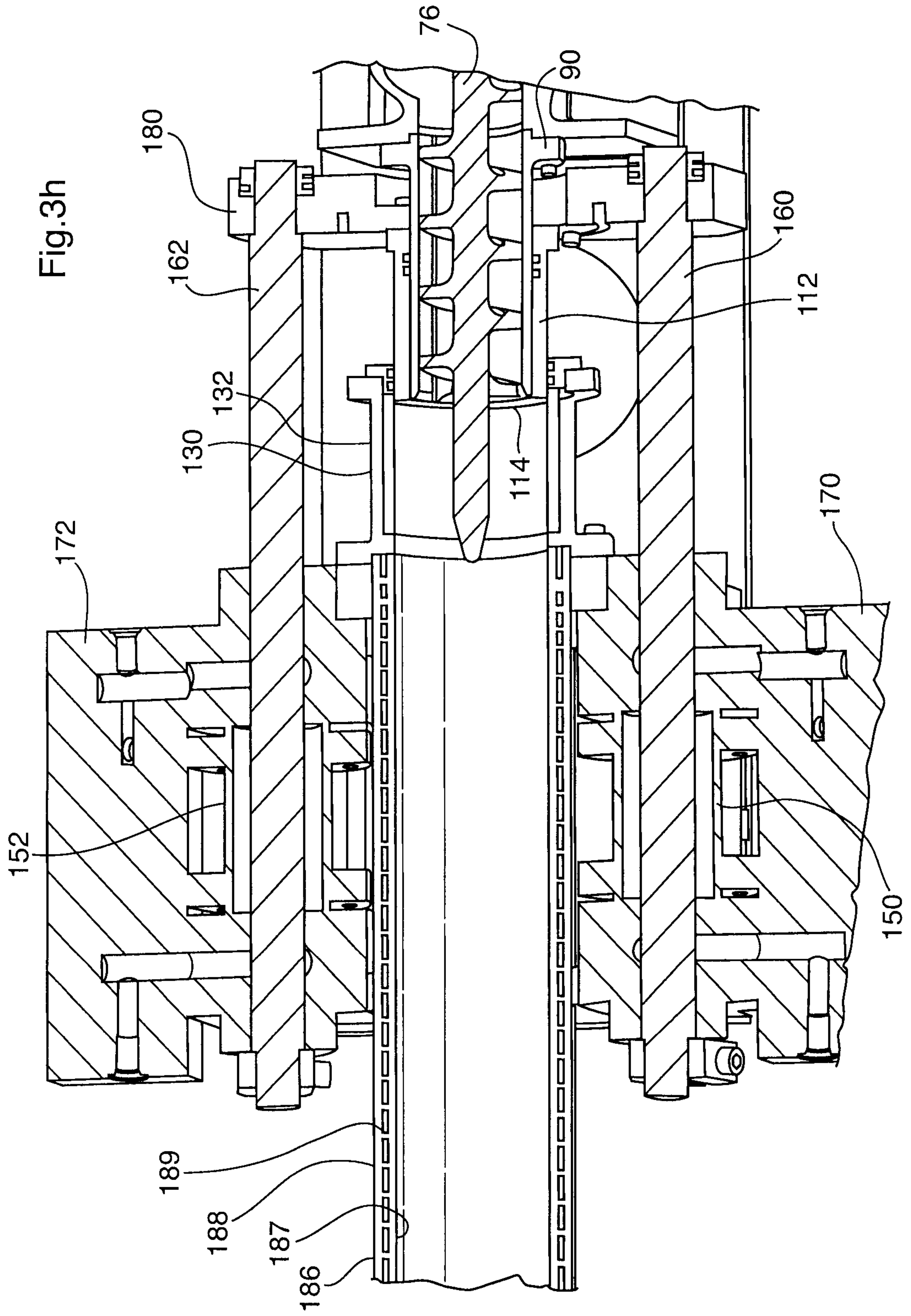
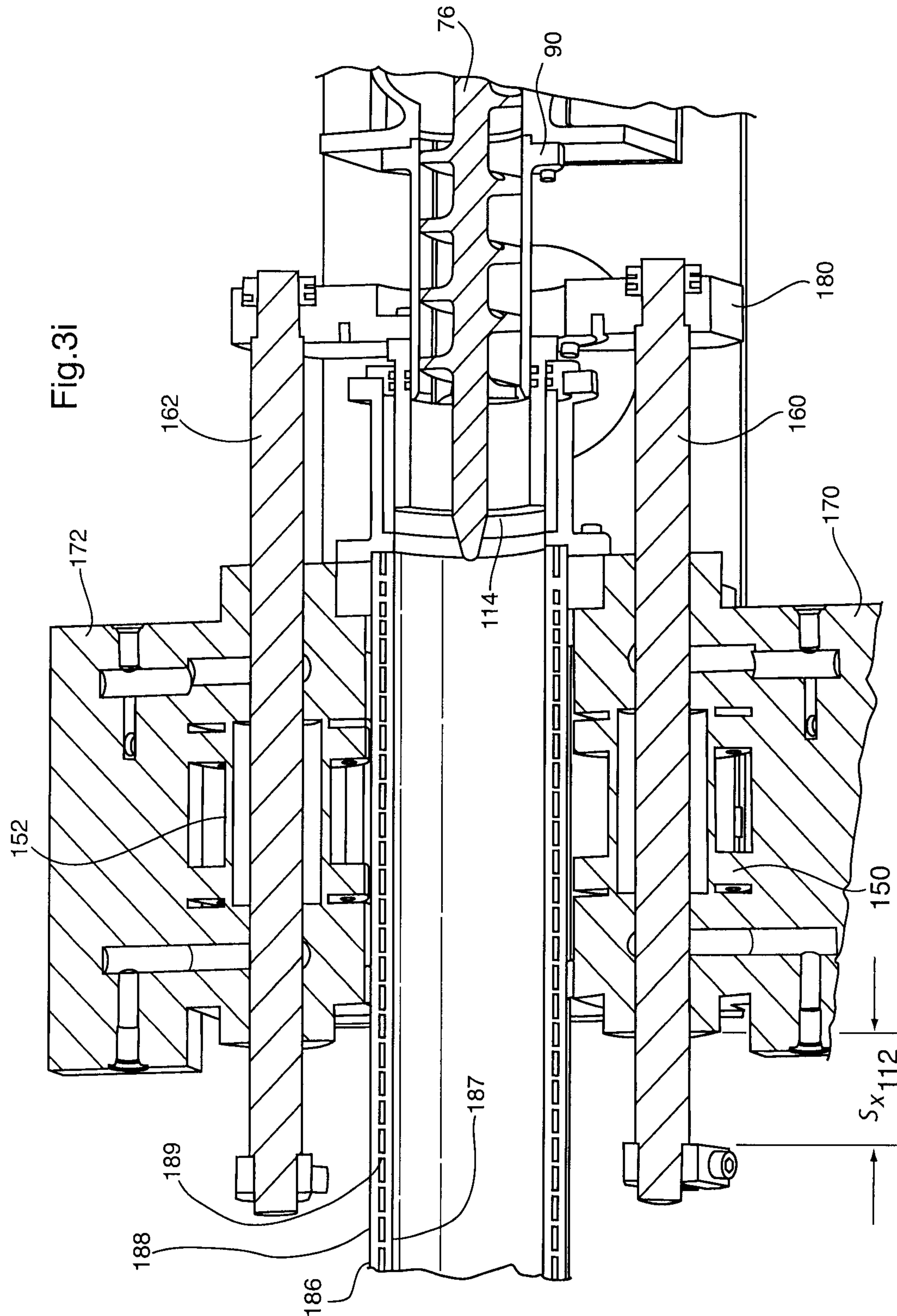


Fig.3g





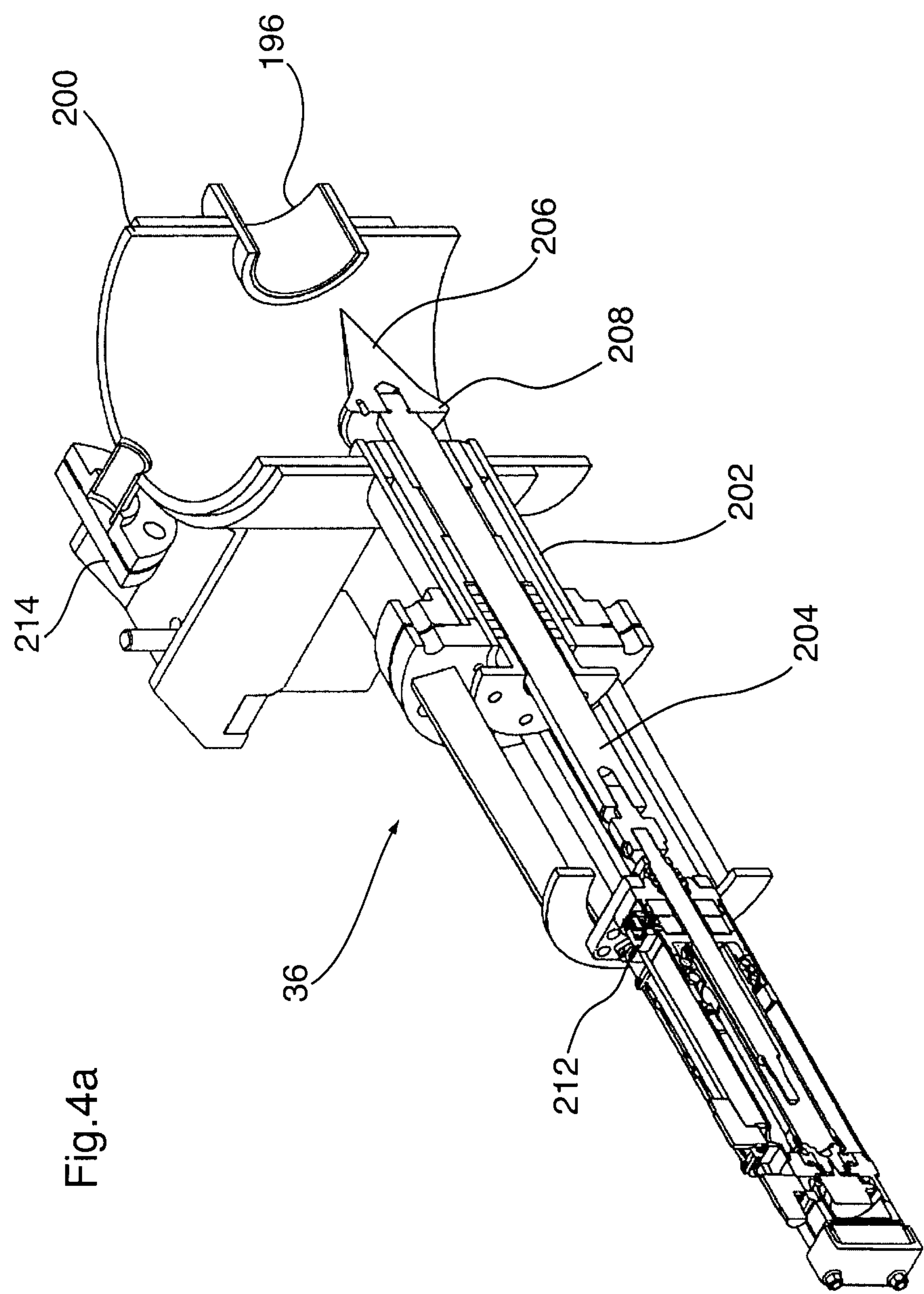


Fig.4a

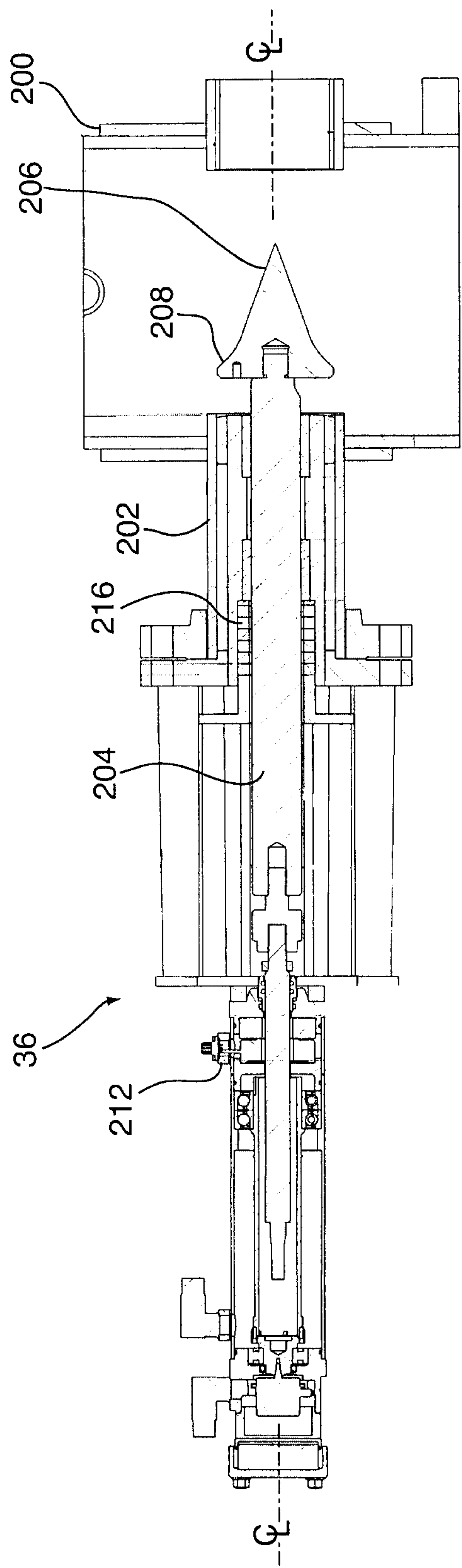


Fig.4b

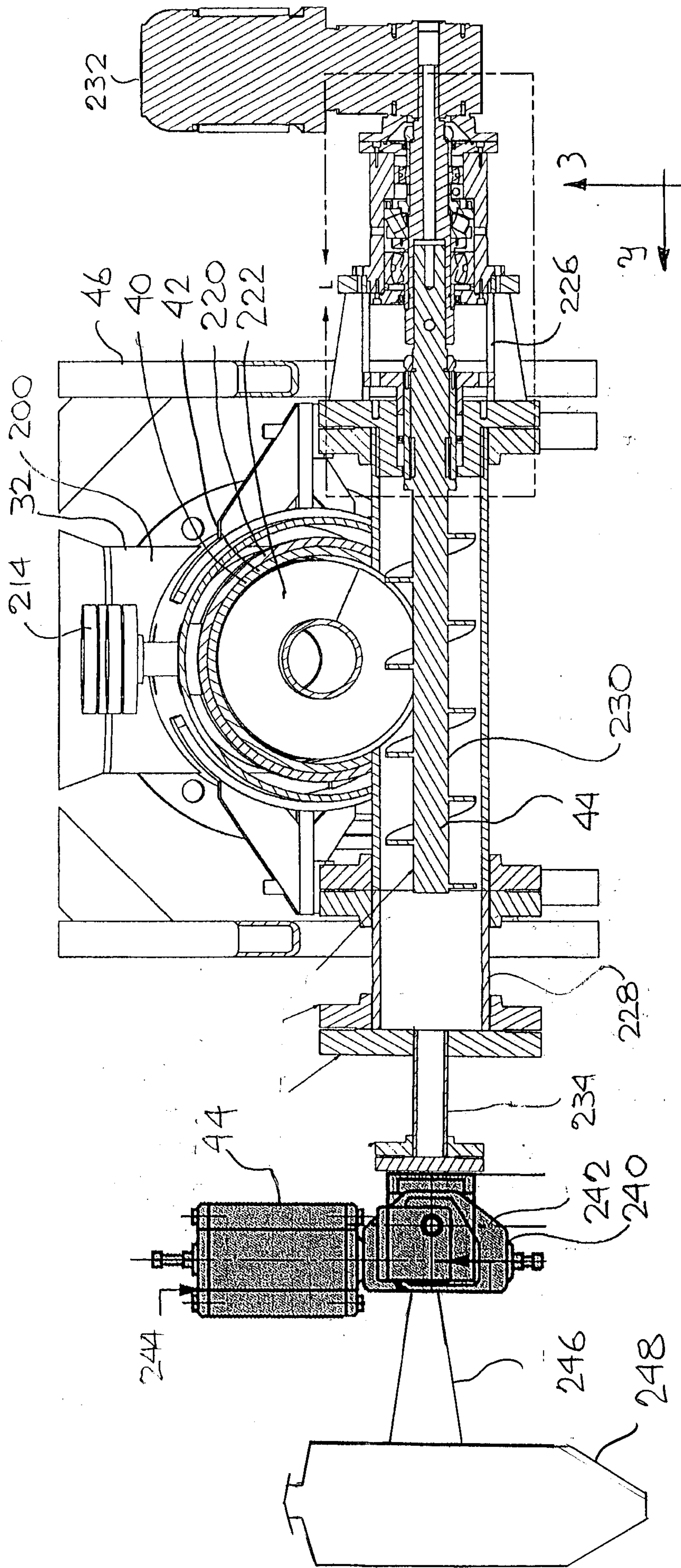


FIGURE 5

