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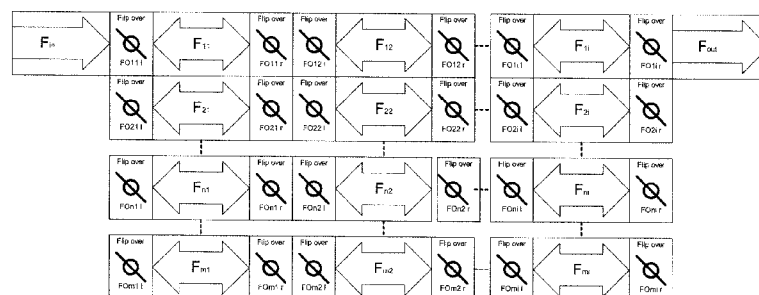


FIG. 7

(57) **Abstract:** An object processing machine for processing a plurality of objects, the machine comprising: a plurality of processing modules, each processing module having a modular structure co-operable with the modular structure of another processing module to form a modular assembly constituting the object processing machine; each processing module being operable to perform a corresponding processing operation on an object and being provided with at least one transfer unit located at a respective port of the processing module; each transfer unit being arranged to transfer an object to or from the corresponding processing module and/or to or from a transfer unit of another processing module of the modular assembly; the transfer units being arranged to co-operate with one another and/or with another processing unit such that objects can be guided from an input of the machine to an output of the machine via a plurality of different transport pathways through the machine, wherein the transport pathway taken by a said object being processed corresponds to the pre-determined processing operations to be performed on the said object. A method of processing a plurality of objects using such a machine is also described.

METHOD OF AND APPARATUS FOR PROCESSING AN OBJECT

Field of the Invention

The present invention relates in general to a method and apparatus for
5 processing an object such as a card, work-piece or the like. A potential application
of an embodiment of the invention is in the treatment of a card like object, for
example a smart card equipped with a chip.

Background of the Invention

Object processing systems for carrying out a number of various processing
10 procedures on objects or work-pieces, such as cards or the like are known. For
example processing systems for personalising portable objects such as smart
cards including SIM cards, credit cards or telephone cards, as well as electronic
purses and the like are known. In a card personalisation system several
personalisation operations can be carried out to customise the card to the user.
15 The personalisation operations may include processes for graphical
personalisation of the card by relief marking by embossing or stamping, or printing
on one or both surfaces of the card as well as processes for electronic
personalisation of the card by transferring data to and from the memory of the
card. A personalisation operation for graphically marking cards typically uses a
20 marking device such as a laser marking machine to mark graphical data on the
card. The graphical data may for example include text such as the name of the
bearer of the card, a serial number or code, a bar code, a photograph or drawings
or other patterns or codes on the cards. A laser marking machine, for example,
generally includes a marking element such as a laser engraver, a marking location
25 for placing a card to be marked opposite to the marking element, a transfer path to
supply the card to be marked to the marking location and to remove the cards
already marked from the marking location. A personalisation operation for
electronic customisation of a card provided with a programmable smart object
such as a chip typically involves transferring electronic data from a database to a
30 smart object which is accessible via one or both sides of the card.

Some personalisation processes may include a step for verifying the cards
at the end of the personalisation process. Typically the personalisation processes

are carried out sequentially on a series of cards which are fed to a personalisation machine.

Such machines typically include a number of processing units arranged one after the other in a line so that an object can be processed in one unit and then conveyed to the next unit in line for another processing procedure. For example a card personalisation machine may include a unit for graphical marking the card, followed by a unit for electronically processing the card followed by a unit for verifying the graphical and electronic personalisation processes, the said units being arranged sequentially one after the other.

Desktop systems for processing cards are typically small machines dedicated to perform only a few processes. While such desktop systems have advantages in terms of footprint, power consumption and price, they are limited in terms of the rate of processing throughput and versatility. One desktop system is dedicated to one main application.

In addition to desktop systems there are the so called Central Issuance machines which are able to carry out several processing procedures on an object within a short time so that a high throughput can be achieved. These machines are however limited in terms of expansion in response to new applications or requirements.

The present invention has been devised with the foregoing drawbacks in mind.

Summary of the Invention

To better address one or more of the foregoing concerns, a first aspect of the invention provides an object processing machine for processing a plurality of objects in series, the machine comprising: a plurality of processing modules, each processing module having a modular structure co-operable with the modular structure of another processing module of the plurality of processing modules to form a modular assembly constituting the object processing machine; each processing module being operable to perform a corresponding processing operation on an object and being provided with at least one transfer unit located at a respective port of the processing module; each transfer unit being arranged to transfer an object to or from the corresponding processing module and/or to or from a transfer unit of another processing module of the modular assembly; the

transfer units being arranged to co-operate with one another and/or with another processing unit such that objects can be guided from an input of the machine to an output of the machine via a plurality of different transport pathways through the machine, wherein the transport pathway taken by a said object being processed
5 corresponds to the pre-determined processing operations to be performed on the said object.

In some embodiments of the invention the transport pathway taken by an object through the machine may depend on the actual operational status of the machine; for example the number of objects being currently processed by the
10 machine or the current processing operations being carried out by the machine on other objects. The transport pathway may be selected to optimise the performance of the whole system. The performance can be distinguished by the maximum throughput, a reduced power consumption or a minimum consumption of supplies such as ink, ribbon or the like when using processing modules carrying out the
15 same operation with different qualities by using different amount of supplies.

A transport path of the object between two object processing modules is not necessarily congruent with the path used during processing of the objects, wherein the transfer units are capable of guiding the objects via an optimised transport pathway out of several possible ways through the object processing
20 machine according to a predefined set of rules corresponding to the object being processed and the actual status of the machine.

It will be appreciated that the input and the output may be the same unit performing both functions or separate units, one acting as input, the other acting as an output.

25 A second aspect of the invention provides a method of processing a plurality of objects in an object processing machine, the object processing machine comprising: a plurality of processing modules, each processing module having a modular structure co-operable with the modular structure of another processing module to form a modular assembly constituting the object processing
30 machine and being provided with at least one transfer unit located at a respective port of the processing module; the method comprising: receiving a first object to be processed; transferring the first object to be processed to a first processing module via a first transfer unit of the first processing module; processing the first object according to a processing operation for the first object; transferring the first

object from the first processing module to a transfer unit of a second adjacent processing module so that the object can be processed by the second adjacent processing module or, alternatively, transferred directly to the transfer unit of a third processing module adjacent to the second processing module; wherein the
5 object is transferred between transfer units of the processing modules via one of a plurality of transport pathways between an input and output of the machine according to a predefined set of rules corresponding to the object being processed such that the object may be processed by all or alternatively by a subset of the processing modules constituting the said object processing machine
10 Following objects will be processed in a similar way taken into account the set of processes assigned to the objects and the actual status of the machine given by the functionality of the processing modules and the foregoing objects.

In embodiments of the invention:

- the plurality of transport pathways through the machine includes a transport
15 pathway by which a said object to be processed passes through all of the processing modules constituting the said object processing machine, and another transport pathway by which the said object to be processed passes through a subset of the processing modules constituting the said object processing machine.
- 20 • the transport pathway for a said object may depend on the actual operational status of the object processing machine.
- the transfer units may be arranged to co-operate with one another such that an object can by pass a said processing module via the corresponding transfer unit of the said processing module without being transferred into the said
25 processing module, the object being processed being transferred from one processing module to another processing module of the modular assembly by means of the transfer units according to a predefined set of rules corresponding to the object being processed.
- at least one port of each processing module can act interchangeably as an
30 input port or an output port, such that an object can be moved bi-directionally through the object processing machine .
- each processing module is interchangeable within the modular structure with another processing module.

- each processing module can be removed and replaced independently of the other processing modules.
- the processing modules may be arranged side by side and on top of each other in a two dimensional modular array.
- each processing module may be provided with a corresponding control unit to control the processing and transfer of a said object in the corresponding module according to the said object.
- each processing module is further operable as a stand-alone machine tool.
- the machine tool is provided with a power base for supplying power to each of the processing modules, each processing module being provided with an inter-cooperative power interface for co-operating with the power base or another inter-cooperative power interface for transferring the power supply from the power base to another processing module.
- an object being processed can by pass a said processing module via the corresponding transfer unit of the said processing module without being transferred to the said processing module.
- the transport pathway for a said object may depend on the actual operational status of the object processing machine.
- the object to be processed can be moved in a first direction and in a second opposite direction through a processing module.
- the processing and transfer of a said object is controlled by a respective control unit of the corresponding processing module according to the said object.
- the object may be transferred through the object processing machine via one transport pathway selected from a plurality of different possible transport pathways through the plurality of processing modules.
- the processing operation performed by a respective processing module can comprise one of graphically marking the object, transferring data to the object, embossing the card or verifying the object, other processing operations and combinations are feasible depending on the requirements of the application.

At least parts of the methods according to the invention may be computer implemented. The methods may be implemented in software on a programmable

apparatus. They may also be implemented solely in hardware or in software, or in a combination thereof.

Since at least parts of the present invention can be implemented in software, the present invention can be embodied as computer readable code for provision to a programmable apparatus on any suitable carrier medium. A tangible carrier medium may comprise a storage medium such as a floppy disk, a CD-ROM, a hard disk drive, a magnetic tape device or a solid state memory device and the like. A transient carrier medium may include a signal such as an electrical signal, an electronic signal, an optical signal, an acoustic signal, a magnetic signal or an electromagnetic signal, e.g. a microwave or RF signal.

Brief Description of the Drawings

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Embodiments of the invention will now be described, by way of example only, and with reference to the following drawings in which:-

Figures 1A to 1C are schematic diagrams of a SIM card which may be processed
10 by an object processing machine according to an embodiment of the invention;

Figure 2A is a schematic view of a basic processing module according to a first embodiment of the invention;

15 Figure 2B is a perspective view of the basic processing module of Figure 2A;

Figure 2C is a schematic view of the basic processing module of Figure 2A equipped with an input and output unit;

20 Figure 3 is a schematic view of the basic processing module of Figure 2A equipped with a plurality of input and output units;

Figure 4A is a general schematic diagram of an object processing machine according to at least one embodiment of the invention;

5 Figure 4B is a general schematic diagram of an object processing machine according to at least one embodiment of the invention;

Figures 5A to 5R schematically illustrate the operation of an object processing machine according to an embodiment of the invention;

10 Figure 6 is a perspective view of an object processing machine according to an embodiment of the invention;

Figure 7 is a general schematic diagram of an object processing machine according to a further embodiment of the invention;

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Figures 8A to 8J schematically illustrate the operation of an object processing machine according to the further embodiment of the invention;

20 Figure 9 is a perspective view of an object processing machine according to a further embodiment of the invention;

Figure 10 is a schematic view of a basic processing module according to a second embodiment of the invention; and

25 Figure 11 is a schematic view of a object processing machine including basic processing modules according to the second embodiment of the invention.

Detailed description

A method of and apparatus for processing an object according to different embodiments of the invention will be described with reference to Figures 2 to 11. In the described embodiments of the invention, by way of example, the method is implemented to personalise a SIM (subscriber identity module) card, illustrated in
5 Figure 1. It will be appreciated however that methods of the invention may be applied to perform processing operations on other types of portable objects such as credit cards or telephone cards, as well as electronic purses and passport booklets or ID cards and the like. Although the treated objects mentioned above are in the area of identification documents, embodiments of the invention can be
10 applied to other work-pieces requiring various treatments to be performed on it.

Several potential applications of some of the embodiments of the invention involve personalized cards primarily ID1 formatted and containing an electronic storage device. For example, a SIM card is representatively explained as a potential object of application. With reference to Figures 1A to 1C a SIM card
15 comprises a SIM chip 81 on a SIM card body 82. The SIM chip 81 includes a memory and communication elements for transferring data between the memory and a mobile terminal or an electronic personalisation device in which the SIM card 80 is inserted. A SIM card is used to identify a subscriber on mobile telephony devices (such as computers and mobile phones) and is generally
20 available in two standard sizes. The first standard size corresponds to the typical size of a credit card. The newer, more popular miniature version such as illustrated in FIG. 1A has a smaller size. Some smaller SIM cards are supplied as a full-sized card 83 with the smaller SIM card 80 being held in place by a few plastic links 84 that can be easily broken off to provide the smaller SIM card 80. A
25 SIM card typically stores a unique International Mobile Subscriber Identity (IMSI) to identify the subscriber to which the card is attributed to. The initial 3 digits of an IMSI represent the Mobile Country Code (MCC), the next 2 digits represent the Mobile Network Code (MNC) and the next 10 digits represent the mobile station identification number. A SIM card as a smart card also has a unique serial number
30 or integrated circuit card ID (ICC-ID) which is generally printed on the SIM card body during the personalisation process of the card. One of the main aims of at least one embodiment of the present invention involves the marking of data on the SIM card body by a graphical marking device. The SIM card has a front surface

801 on which the electrical contacts of the SIM chip 81 are visible and a back surface 802, on the opposite face of the SIM card. Graphical marking where appropriate can be performed on both surfaces 801 and 802 of the SIM card 80.

Nevertheless it will be appreciated that the invention is not restricted to this application, which has been presented as a typical example for the area of operation of the invention.

With reference to FIG. 2A and FIG. 2B, a basic processing module 100 for a personalisation machine for performing a personalisation operation on card shaped objects like SIM cards for example according to a first embodiment of the invention includes a processing unit F_1 disposed between a first or left flip over unit FO_{1L} and a second or right flip over unit FO_{2R} . Each flip over unit FO_{1L} and FO_{1R} is capable of supporting and transporting an object to be processed or which already have been processed in several different directions, preferably at least four directions D1, D2, D3 and D4 perpendicular to each other. For this purpose each flip over unit FO_{1L} and FO_{1R} includes a support S for supporting the object to be processed, the support being rotatable in an anti-clockwise or a clock-wise direction by a rotating mechanism R to a various number of different directions, preferably at least four positions perpendicular to one another.

For example the first or left flip over element FO_{1L} can be arranged to transport an object to be processed by the processing unit F_1 in a horizontal direction D3 from left to right to the processing unit F_1 from an input, while second or right flip over element FO_{1R} can be arranged to transport the object already processed by the processing unit F_1 in a horizontal direction D3 left to right from the processing unit F_1 towards an output. Alternatively the second or right flip over unit FO_{1R} can act as an input to the processing unit F_1 transporting an object to be processed in a horizontal direction D1 from right to left to the processing unit and the first or left flip over unit FO_{1L} can act as an output from the processing unit F_1 transporting the object in a horizontal direction D1 from right to left away from the processing unit F_1 . Consequently an object can be transported through the processing unit F_1 in two opposing directions.

In addition the flip over units FO_{1L} or FO_{1R} can change the transport direction of the objects by rotating the support S by an angle of not necessarily but

preferably 90° degrees in order to provide different ways of transportation to the object, for example, in a direction D2 or D4 not necessarily but preferably perpendicular to the direction D1, so that the object may be transferred from the processing unit F_1 to different object stacks or other processing units. Similarly the object may be transferred into the processing unit F_1 from different object stacks or other processing units, the flip over unit FO_{1L} or FO_{1R} rotates the support in order to receive the object from one out of various directions like D2 or D4 and successively rotate the support not necessarily but preferably 90° to transport the object into the processing unit F_1 .

With reference to FIG. 2C the basic module of FIG. 2A can be equipped with two ports depicted in the first embodiment as an input unit F_{in} and an output unit F_{out} . However it will be not excluded that port F_{in} may act as an output while port F_{out} may act as an input.

With reference to FIG. 3, in a second embodiment of the invention the basic module of FIG. 2A may be equipped with a plurality of input ports F_{in1} , F_{in2} and F_{in3} and a plurality of output ports F_{out1} , F_{out2} , and F_{out3} . Each input port corresponds to a different position of the first or left flip unit FO_{1L} . The flip over units thus offer the possibility of transferring objects to or from different object stacks. For example if the flip over unit FO_{1L} is positioned in a vertical configuration between F_{in1} and F_{in3} it may be used to receive an object via input port F_{in1} or input port F_{in3} . If then flip over unit FO_{1L} is then rotated by not necessarily but preferably a right angle in a clockwise or anti-clockwise direction so that support S is orientated parallel to processing unit F_1 , then the object may be transferred to the processing unit F_1 for a processing operation. Alternatively the flip over unit FO_{1L} may initially be in a horizontal configuration enabling an object to be passed from an input unit F_{in2} to the processing unit without any rotation. Similarly each output port F_{out1} , F_{out2} or F_{out3} corresponds to a different position of the second or right flip unit FO_{1R} . For example if the flip over unit FO_{1R} is rotated by not necessarily but preferably a right angle from a horizontal configuration to a configuration that renders F_{out1} and/or F_{out3} accessible it may be used to transfer a processed object from processing unit F_1 to output port F_{out1} or output port F_{out3} . Alternatively the flip over unit FO_{1R} may remain in a horizontal configuration enabling an object to be

passed from the processing unit F_1 directly to an output unit F_{out2} without any rotation.

In addition to providing an opportunity to select different cards from different input units and distributing into different output units, the Flip over units can be used to distribute the cards into additional processing units as illustrated in FIG. 4A and FIG. 4B. The object processing machine generally illustrated in FIG. 4A includes a plurality of m processing units F_1 to F_m arranged in a linear configuration one adjacent to the other, one on top of the other or side by side. A side by side or horizontal configuration can be achieved by rotating the basic unit illustrated in FIG. 2A and FIG. 2B not necessarily but preferably at 90° degrees so that the Flip over units FO_{1L} and FO_{1R} are on top and on the bottom of the functional unit F_1 . Stacking the so turned basic units, the side by side arrangement will create a horizontal layout of the processing machine. Such configurations enable different processing operations to be performed on the cards using different processing units and give the possibility to enhance the overall processing throughput by doubling processing modules of time consuming processes. Each processing unit F_n is equipped on each of its sides with a first or left flip over unit FO_{nL} and a second or right flip over unit FO_{nR} similar to the module of FIG. 2A. Each row of first or left Flip over units FO_{1L} to FO_{mL} and second or right flip over units FO_{1R} to FO_{mR} can be used to distribute the cards into the appropriate processing unit F_1 to F_m , and after the processing operation the card may transported to the next free and appropriate processing unit or output stacker F_{out} . As illustrated in FIG. 4B the object processing machine may be provided with a plurality of input units and a plurality of output units, so that different cards from different input units can be transferred through the various processing units of the machine to be machined according to the process and to be emitted out via the respective output unit.

The operation of an object processing machine equipped with four processing modules will be explained with reference to Figures 5A to 5R. Each processing module includes a first or left flip over unit FO_{nL} , a processing unit F_n and a second or right flip over unit FO_{nR} similar to the embodiment of FIG. 2A and the embodiments of FIG. 4A and 4B. In this particular embodiment the object processing machine is equipped with an input unit F_{in} and two output units: F_{out}

and reject output. Each processing module is further equipped with a control unit (not shown) controlling the processing performed by the processing unit of that module and the flip over units of that module. A set of rules implemented on the various modules guide the card to be processed through the processing machine.

5 With reference to FIG. 5A in a first step of a processing operation, the left flip over unit FO_{1L} of the first processing module is orientated in a horizontal position to receive the card to be processed from the input unit F_{in} and to transfer the card 1 from left to right in a direction $D1$ to the first processing unit F_1 . The card is then processed by the processing module F_1 as illustrated in FIG. 5B. The
10 processing operation may be any suitable personalisation operation of the card 1 such as embossing for example. After the processing operation has been completed the card 1 is then moved back from the processing unit F_1 to the left flip over unit FO_{1L} of the first module as illustrated in FIG. 5C. The left flip over unit FO_{1L} is then rotated by an angle of 90° in this example to rotate the card 1 on
15 support S from a horizontal direction to a vertical direction as illustrated in FIG. 5D. The left flip over unit FO_{2L} of the second module, located adjacent to the first module, is also orientated in a vertical configuration in order to receive the card 1 from the left flip over unit FO_{1L} of the first module. In this way as illustrated in FIG. 5E the card 1 is transferred from the left flip over unit FO_{1L} of the first module to
20 the left flip over unit FO_{2L} of the second module. Flip over units FO_{1L} and FO_{2L} are then rotated through an angle of 90 degrees to a horizontal configuration as illustrated in FIG. 5F. Flip over unit FO_{1L} of the first module receives the next card 2 from input unit F_{in} . In this way the card 1 can be transferred from flip over unit FO_{2L} to the processing unit F_2 and card 2 can be transferred from flip over unit
25 FO_{1L} to the processing unit F_1 as illustrated in FIG. 5G. The second processing unit F_2 may perform an alternative processing function on card 1 such as laser marking of the card 1 while the first processing unit F_1 performs an embossing operation on card 2. It will be appreciated that the processes may be carried out simultaneously to speed up the rate of throughput of the cards, or at different
30 times according to the processing requirements. Such a marking operation may involve marking the support 82 of a SIM card for example. The associated information system transmits the marking data to the processing unit F_2 . The marking data transmitted will correspond to the card 1 being marked. After the

corresponding processing operations have been completed cards 1 and 2 are moved from processing unit F_2 and F_1 , respectively back to the corresponding flip over unit FO_{2L} and FO_{1L} which are both in a horizontal position for receiving the respective cards as illustrated in FIG. 5H. Both flip over units FO_{1L} and FO_{2L} are moved through an angle of 90° for instance to a vertical configuration, as illustrated in FIG. 5I so that the cards may be transferred to the subsequent processing unit. Thus as illustrated in FIG. 5J card 1 can be transferred from the left flip over unit FO_{2L} of the second module to the left flip over unit FO_{3L} of the third module and the card 2 can be transferred from the left flip over unit FO_{1L} of the first module to the left flip over unit FO_{2L} of the second module. In the following phase of the process the flip over units FO_{1L} , FO_{2L} and FO_{3L} are rotated from a vertical position to a horizontal position as illustrated in FIG. 5K, thereby enabling a third card to be received by flip over unit FO_{1L} from the input unit F_{in} for transfer to the first processing module F_1 for an embossing procedure, the second card 2 to be transferred to the second processing module F_2 for a laser marking procedure and the first card 1 to be transferred to the third processing module F_3 for a third card personalisation process for example electronic personalisation of the card 1 as illustrated in FIG. 5L.

During the electronic personalisation of a card, the electronic personalisation unit F_3 transfers the respective personalisation data to the memory of the chip 81 of card 1. Data can be transferred to the memory chip 81 via electrical contacts or strips or via so called contact-less devices such as a radio antenna or an induction system. It will be appreciated that embodiments of the invention may be applied to an electronic personalisation of a card provided with access to one or more memory chips or zones via interfaces provided on both opposing main surfaces of the card.

After the respective processing operations have been completed by processing units F_1 , F_2 and F_3 the cards 3, 2 and 1 can be transferred back to the respective flip over units FO_{1L} , FO_{2L} and FO_{3L} , each being initially orientated in a horizontal position for receiving the corresponding card. The flip over units FO_{1L} , FO_{2L} and FO_{3L} are then rotated to a vertical position as illustrated in FIG. 5M so that each card can be transferred to the adjacent subsequent flip over unit. In this way card 1 is transferred from the left flip over unit FO_{3L} of the third module to the

left flip over module of the fourth module FO_{4L} , card 2 is transferred from the left flip over unit FO_{2L} of the second module to the left flip over module of the third module FO_{3L} , card 3 is transferred from the left flip over unit FO_{1L} of the first module to the left flip over module of the second module FO_{2L} . Each of the left flip over units FO_{1L} , FO_{2L} , FO_{3L} and FO_{4L} are then moved to a horizontal position so that the cards can be transferred to the respective processing units F_1 , F_2 , F_3 and F_4 as illustrated in FIG. 5N. The left flip over unit FO_{1L} of the first module receives a fourth card 4 from the input unit F_{in} and transfers it to the first processing unit F_1 . The fourth processing unit F_4 may be a verification processing unit verifying that the correct procedures have carried out on the card.

As illustrated in FIG. 5O card 1 is transferred from the fourth processing unit F_4 to the right flip over unit FO_{4R} of the fourth module by moving the card 1 in a direction from left to right. The other cards 4, 3 and 2 are moved in opposite direction from the respective processing unit F_1 , F_2 and F_3 back to the corresponding left flip over units FO_{1L} , FO_{2L} and FO_{3L} so that they may be subsequently passed to the next processing unit.

As illustrated in FIG. 5P cards 4, 3 and 2 are rotated through an angle of substantially 90° by their respective flip over unit to a vertical position and transferred to the subsequent flip over unit. Card 1 is rotated to a vertical position and passed from the right flip over unit FO_{4R} of the fourth module to the right flip over unit FO_{3R} of the third module.

As illustrated in FIG. 5Q cards 2, 3 and 4 are transferred to the next processing unit F_4 , F_3 and F_2 of the processing machine via corresponding flip over units FO_{4L} , FO_{3L} and FO_{2L} respectively and a fifth card 5 is received by the first processing unit F_1 . Card 1 which has completed each of the processing operations is transferred via right flip over units FO_{3R} and FO_{2R} from right flip over unit FO_{4R} of the fourth verification module F_4 to the right flip over unit FO_{1R} located at the output unit F_{out} . As illustrated in FIG. 5R the right flip over unit FO_{1R} of the first module rotates from a vertical position to a horizontal position in order to transfer the card 1 to an output unit F_{out} . This happens, if the processed card 1 satisfies the verification carried out by processing unit F_4 . If the processed card 1 had not satisfied the verification conditions, the card 1 would have been

transferred to the reject output by rotation of the right flip over unit FO_{R2} of the second module F_2 from a vertical position to a horizontal position.

Figure 6 is a perspective view illustrating the embodiment of Figure 5A-5R in which the modules are stacked one on top of each other in order to form an assembled tower - like structure constituting the object processing machine. One side of the assembled tower is provided with a card input/output stack unit while the opposing side of the tower is provided with four input/output stack units, one on each module. Thus in this way, for example, a set of cards to be processed may be introduced via an input unit on one side of the unit. The cards can then be processed according to four different procedure sequences, with the cards being processed by different units or according to different processing techniques carried out by the same unit so that four kinds of cards are created, each output stack corresponding to a processing sequence or processed card type.

The base of the object processing machine is provided with a power supply for supplying power to each of the processing modules located above the power supply. The lower processing module can be inserted into the power base by means of a power interface connection in a plug and play like manner with power being transmitted to each of the modules via the power interfaces of the processing modules disposed between the respective processing module and the power module. The added weight of the modules piled one on top of the other helps to strengthen the power connection

The configuration of modules illustrated in FIG. 6 provides a simple linear modular structure. It is conceivable that while the embodiment of FIG. 6 is presented as a vertical structure the modules may be arranged side by side to form a horizontal structure.

The modular concept, in which a plurality of individual processing modules can be built together to form a card processing machine, enables further machine enlargement for higher throughput or additional processing functions. According to further embodiments of the invention, it is possible to stack several linear arrays of processing modules together to build up a two dimensional matrix of basic modules. FIG. 7 illustrates such a general modular structure constituting a processing machine structure made up of a plurality m of rows of modules

arranged in a plurality i of columns. A combination of various processing operations and/or a multiplication of a particular processing operation may be easily achievable. If such a structure is made up of a number of basic modules as illustrated in FIG. 2A a double row of transport (Flip over) elements will be formed
5 between the rows of processing units. The advantage of such a configuration is its high flexibility which enables each processing unit to be supported individually and the provision of additional areas for buffering cards, work-pieces or objects being processed. FIG. 9 is a perspective view of a 2D array of modular processing units according to an embodiment of the invention in which two columns of four rows of
10 modular units forms an object processing machine.

With reference to FIG. 8A to FIG. 8J the working sequence of this further embodiment of a processing machine will be described exemplarily. As illustrated in FIG. 8A the processing machine is made up of four rows of basic processing modules arranged in three columns. Each processing module is provided on each
15 of its side with a flip over unit. In this way a double channel of flip over units is provided between the first and second columns and the second and third columns. In this particular embodiment the processing machine is provided with a single input unit F_{in} and two output units: F_{out} and reject output. It is conceivable that in alternative embodiments of the invention the processing unit may be fitted with
20 any number of inputs and outputs up to a maximum number of 16 for the illustrated example, one for each externally located flip over unit.

In an initial phase of the processing procedure the flip over units FO_{11R} , FO_{11L} , FO_{12R} , FO_{12L} , FO_{13R} , FO_{13L} of the processing modules F_{11} , F_{12} and F_{13} of the upper row of the processing machine are orientated in a horizontal position.
25 Thus, as illustrated in FIG. 8B, three cards 1, 2 and 3 can be transferred to processing units F_{13} , F_{12} and F_{11} respectively. Card 1 may be processed by units F_{11} and F_{12} before being received by processing unit or F_{13} or the card 1 may be simply transferred through either or both of these units without any processing procedure taking place. With reference to FIG. 8C card 1 may then be transferred
30 to processing unit F_{23} by rotation of flip over units FO_{13L} and FO_{23L} from a horizontal position to a vertical position in order to hand over the card 1 to the next row and successively rotate of flip over unit FO_{23L} from a vertical position to a horizontal position in order to transfer the card 1 into the processing unit F_{23} .

Alternatively card 1 may be transferred from processing unit F_{13} to processing unit F_{23} by using the flip over units FO_{13R} and FO_{23R} in a similar way than FO_{13L} and FO_{23L} .

Card 2 may be transferred from processing unit F_{12} to processing unit F_{22} by rotation of flip over unit FO_{12L} and FO_{22L} from a horizontal position to a vertical position in order to hand over the card 2 to the next row and successively rotate of flip over unit FO_{22L} from a vertical position to a horizontal position in order to transfer the card 2 into the processing unit F_{22} . Alternatively card 2 may be transferred from processing unit F_{12} to processing unit F_{22} using the flip over units FO_{12R} and FO_{22R} in a similar way than FO_{12L} and FO_{22L} .

Card 3 is transferred towards processing unit F_{21} by means of flip over unit F_{11L} and F_{21L} while a fourth card 4 is received in processing unit F_{11} by means of flip over unit FO_{11L} . Transferring the card 3 from processing unit F_{11} to processing unit F_{21} by using the flip over units FO_{11R} and FO_{21R} similar to the way described above for card 1 and 2, will give the advantage that the card 4 can be received by the processing unit F_{11} without delay caused by the flip over unit FO_{11L} .

As can be seen in FIG. 8D while cards 1 to 3 are moved to the second row for processing by processing units F_{23} , F_{22} and F_{21} respectively, cards 4, 5 and 6 are received in the top row for processing by processing units F_{11} , F_{12} and F_{13} . In this way processing of various cards can be carried out simultaneously by several units thereby increasing the throughput rate of card processing.

With reference to FIG. 8E, cards 1 to 3 can be transferred to the third row of processing units F_{31} , F_{32} and F_{33} by appropriate rotation of the corresponding flip over units while cards 4 to 6 are transferred to the second row of processing units F_{21} , F_{22} and F_{23} . At the same time cards 7 to 9 can be received on the top row of processing units F_{11} to F_{13} as illustrated in FIG. 8F.

Continuing the procedure, cards 1 to 3 can be transferred to the fourth row of processing modules F_{41} to F_{43} , cards 4 to 6 may be transferred to the third row of processing modules F_{31} to F_{33} , cards 7 to 9 may be transferred to the second row of processing modules F_{21} to F_{23} while cards 10 to 12 are received on the first row of processing modules F_{11} to F_{13} as illustrated in FIG. 8H. In this way 12

processing procedures may be carried out simultaneously thereby increasing throughput.

As illustrated in FIG. 8I cards 1 to 3 can then be directed towards the output from the fourth row by means of flip over units FO_{43R} , FO_{33R} and FO_{23R} .

5 As illustrated in FIG. 8J cards 1 to 3 are output through output unit F_{out} while a further card 13 is received through input F_{in} to processing unit F_{11} . The procedure may continue until all cards have been processed and transferred to the output through output unit F_{out} .

10 It is conceivable that each card i or a group of cards may proceed via different pathways through the machine so that different processing procedures are implemented according to the type of card or group of cards. Each card may be processed by each processing unit through which it passes or it may be transferred through a unit without being processed by that unit because the processing unit is located on its programmed path.

15 In further embodiment of a basic processing module 200 as illustrated in FIG. 10, the basic processing module 200 is an independent module which may be removably connected by means of a corresponding interface to one or two separate flip over units FO_{1L} and/or FO_{1R} .

20 With such a basic processing module a matrix configuration may be formed in which a single row of Flip over units FO_n is disposed between the rows of processing modules F_n as illustrated in the embodiment of FIG. 11. This embodiment provides the advantage of placing a variable number of flip over units FO_{nL} and FO_{nR} between two processing modules without any change in the hardware design depending on the actual requirements to the object processing machine.

25 In embodiments of the invention each processing module may be equipped with a respective control unit for controlling the processing operation to be carried out on each object, according to the object and from controlling the transfer of an object from one processing module to the next resulting in a distributed intelligent system. A control system (not shown) such as a computer or processor or the like can be connected via the base of the object processing machine and can manage the overall sequential control of the object processing machine so that an object or

a group of objects can be processed according to a pre-defined set of rules dedicated to the said object or the said group. Different paths through the object processing machine can be programmed according to the object or group of objects being processed. Each object is not obliged to pass through each processing module in order to pass from one processing module to another. Each object may only be processed by a subset of the processing modules Bi-directional paths through the object processing machine enhance the flexibility and potential applications of the object processing machine

The low production costs of the modular units enables an object processing machine according to embodiments of the invention to be produced at reduced costs. In this way the overall object processing machine benefits from the reduced manufacture costs of single units which may be produced in large scale, manufactured by processes such as plastic moulding, while still allowing complex object processing machines to be built.

The methods according to the embodiments of the invention can enable increased production rates since an increased number of objects may be processed simultaneously even if the processing operation differs from object to object.

Although the present invention has been described hereinabove with reference to specific embodiments, the present invention is not limited to the specific embodiments, and modifications will be apparent to a skilled person in the art which lie within the scope of the present invention.

For instance, while the foregoing examples have been explained with respect to the processing including personalisation operations of SIM cards it will be appreciated that the methods can be applied to the processing of any type of portable object such as work-pieces or other entities where a plurality of processing operations is required.

Many further modifications and variations will suggest themselves to those versed in the art upon making reference to the foregoing illustrative embodiments, which are given by way of example only and which are not intended to limit the scope of the invention, that being determined solely by the appended claims. In

particular the different features from different embodiments may be interchanged, where appropriate.

In the claims, the word “comprising” does not exclude other elements or steps, and the indefinite article “a” or “an” does not exclude a plurality. The mere
5 fact that different features are recited in mutually different dependent claims does not indicate that a combination of these features cannot be advantageously used. Any reference signs in the claims should not be construed as limiting the scope of the invention.

CLAIMS

1. An object processing machine for processing a plurality of objects, the machine comprising:

5 a plurality of processing modules, each processing module having a modular structure co-operable with the modular structure of another processing module of the plurality of processing modules to form a modular assembly constituting the object processing machine;

each processing module being operable to perform a corresponding
10 processing operation on an object and being provided with at least one transfer unit located at a respective port of the processing module;

each transfer unit being arranged to transfer an object
to and/or from the corresponding processing module, and/or
to and/or from a transfer unit of another processing module of the
15 modular assembly;

the transfer units being arranged to co-operate with one another and/or with another processing unit such that objects can be guided from an input of the machine to an output of the machine via a plurality of different transport pathways through the machine, wherein the transport pathway selected from the plurality of
20 different transport pathways for a said object being processed corresponds to the processing operations to be performed on the said object.

2. An object processing machine according to claim 1, wherein the plurality of transport pathways through the machine includes

25 a transport pathway by which a said object to be processed passes through all of the processing modules constituting the said object processing machine, and another transport pathway by which the said object to be processed passes through a subset of the processing modules constituting the said object processing machine.

30

3. An object processing machine according to claim 1 or 2, wherein the transport pathway for a said object depends on the actual operational status of the object processing machine.

4. An object processing machine according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the transfer units are arranged to co-operate with one another such that an object can by pass a said processing module via the corresponding transfer unit of the said processing module without being transferred into the said processing module, the object being processed being transferred from one processing module to another processing module of the modular assembly by means of the transfer units according to a predefined set of rules corresponding to the object being processed.
5. An object processing machine according to any one of the preceding claims,, wherein at least one port of each processing module can act interchangeably as an input port or an output port, such that an object can be moved bi-directionally through the object processing machine .
6. An object processing machine according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein each processing module is interchangeable within the modular structure with another processing module.
7. An object processing machine according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein each processing module can be removed and replaced independently of the other processing modules.
8. An object processing machine according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the processing modules are arranged side by side and on top of each other in a two dimensional modular array.
9. An object processing machine according to any one of the preceding claims wherein each processing module is provided with a corresponding control unit to control the processing and transfer of a said object in the corresponding module according to the said object.

10. An object processing machine according to any one of the preceding claims wherein each processing module is further operable as a stand-alone machine tool.
- 5 11. An object processing machine according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the machine tool is provided with a power base for supplying power to each of the processing modules, each processing module being provided with an inter-cooperative power interface for co-operating with the power base or another inter-cooperative power interface for transferring the power supply from the power
10 base to another processing module.
12. A modular processing unit for use in the object processing machine according to any one of the preceding claims
- 15 13. A method of processing a plurality of objects in an object processing machine, the object processing machine comprising: a plurality of processing modules arranged to form an assembly constituting the object processing machine, each processing module being provided with at least one transfer unit located at a respective port of the processing module; the method comprising:
20 receiving an object to be processed;
transferring the object to be processed to a first processing module via a first transfer unit of the first processing module;
processing the object according to a processing operation for the object;
transferring the object from the first processing module to a transfer unit of
25 a second adjacent processing module so that the object can be either processed by the second adjacent processing module or transferred directly to the transfer unit of a third processing module adjacent to the second processing module;
wherein each object of a series of objects is transferred between transfer units of at least some of the processing modules via one of a plurality of transport
30 pathways between an input and output of the machine, wherein the transport pathway, from the plurality of transport pathways, for the respective object is determined according to the processing operations to be performed on the said object.

14. A method according to claim 13, wherein the plurality of transport pathways through the machine includes one transport pathway by which a said object to be processed passes through all of the processing modules constituting the said object processing machine and another transport pathway by which an object to be processed passes through a subset of the processing modules constituting the said object processing machine according to the processes dedicated to the object.
15. A method according to claim 13 or 14, wherein an object being processed can by pass a said processing module via the corresponding transfer unit of the said processing module without being transferred to the said processing module.
16. A method according to any one of claims 13 to 15, wherein the transport pathway for a said object depends on the actual operational status of the object processing machine.
17. A method according to any one of claims 13 to 16, wherein the object to be processed can be moved in a first direction and in a second opposite direction through a processing module.
18. A method according to any one of claims 13 to 17 wherein, the processing and transfer of a said object is controlled by a respective control unit of the corresponding processing module according to the said object.
19. A method according to any one of claims 13 to 18 wherein the object may be transferred through the object processing machine via one transport pathway selected from a plurality of different possible transport pathways through the plurality of processing modules.
20. A method according to any one of claims 13 to 19, wherein the processing operation performed by a respective processing module comprises one of graphically marking the object, transferring data to the object, embossing the card and verifying the object

21. A computer-readable medium having computer-executable instructions to enable a computer system to perform the method of any one of claims 13 to 20.

FIG. 1B

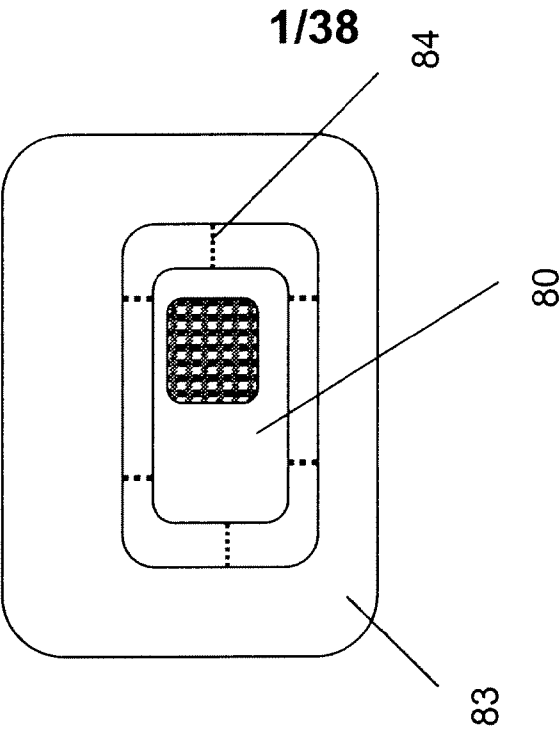


FIG. 1A

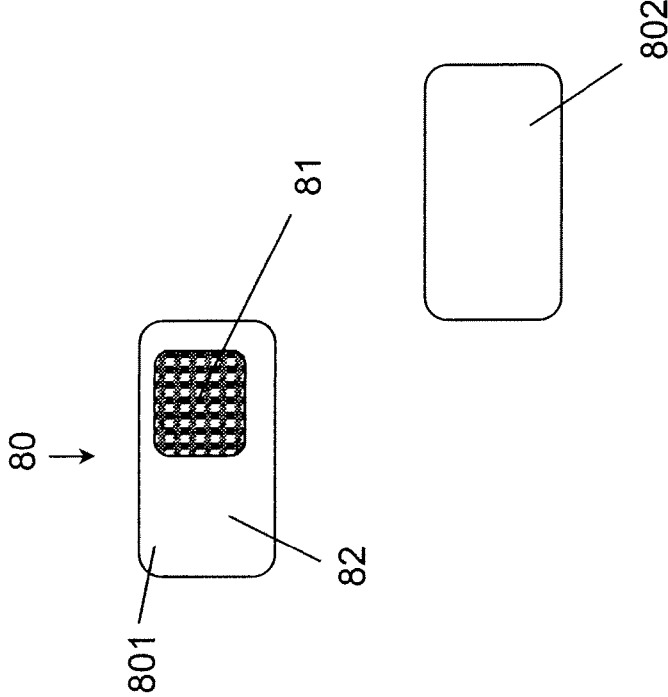
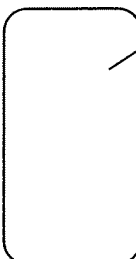
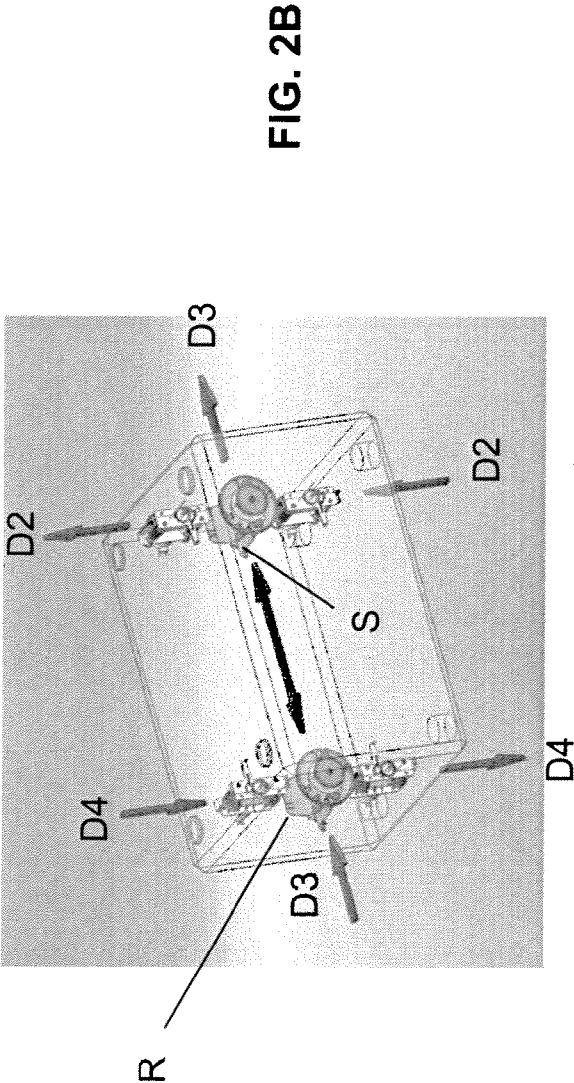
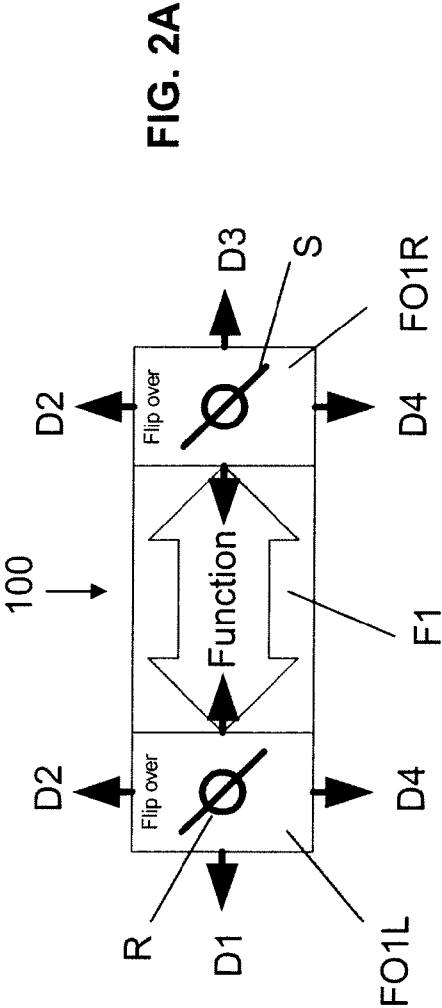
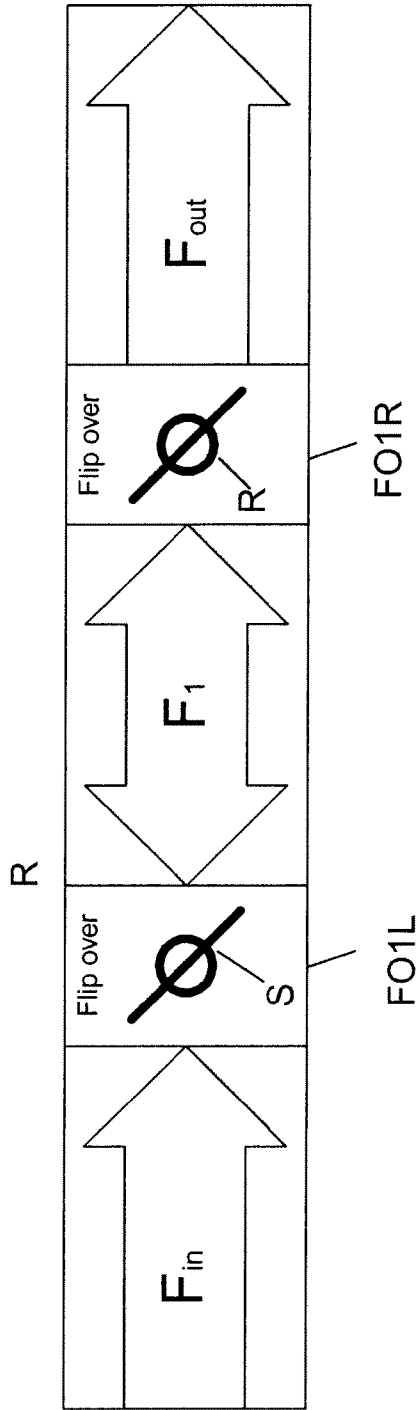


FIG. 1C







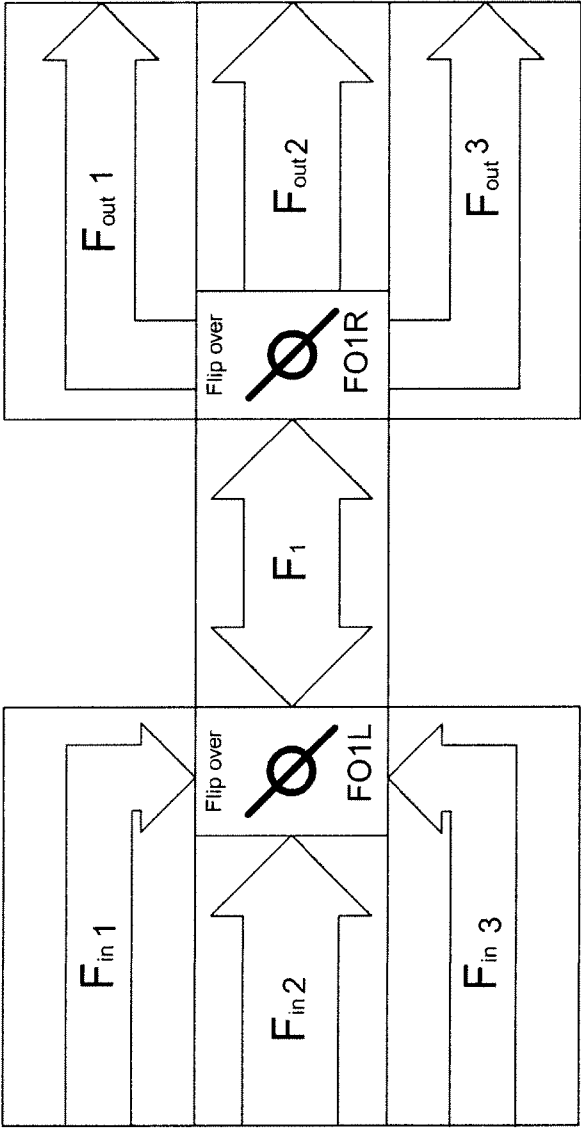


FIG. 3

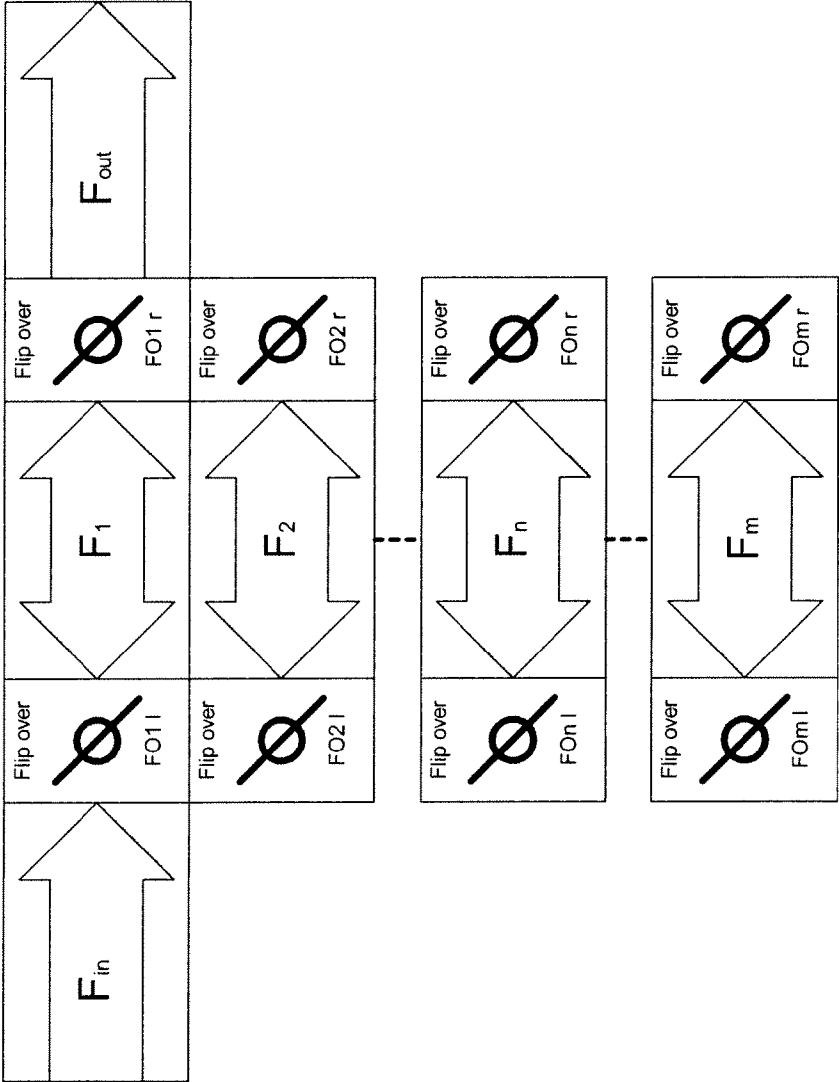


FIG. 4A

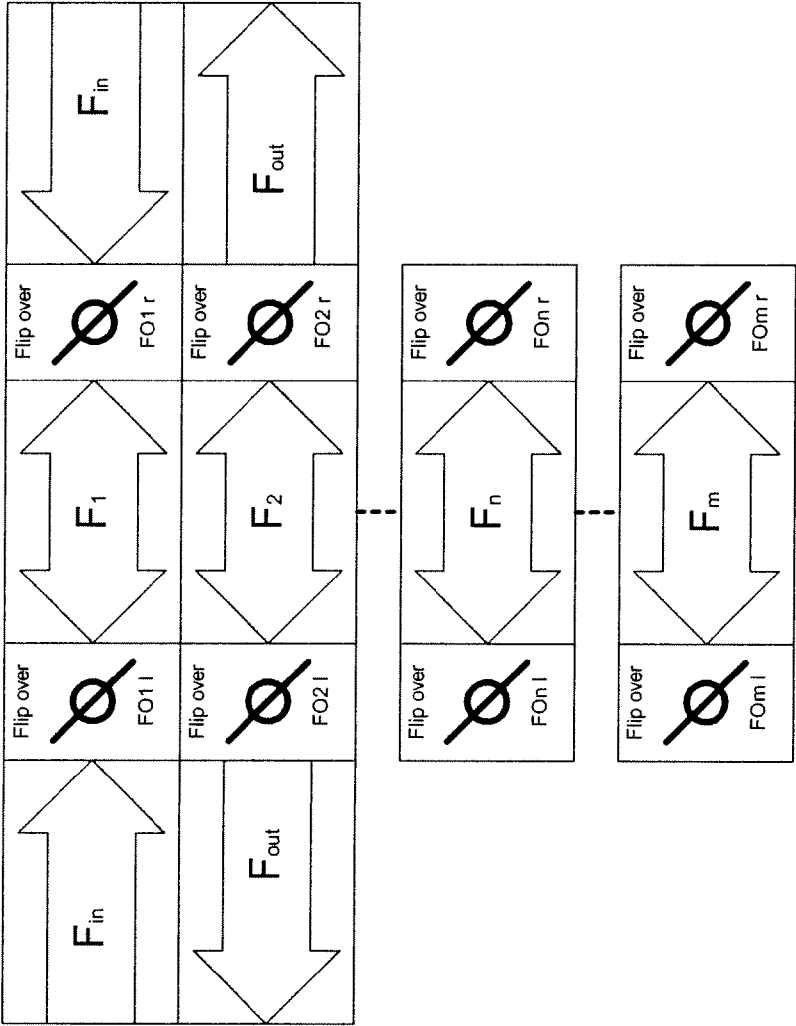


FIG. 4B

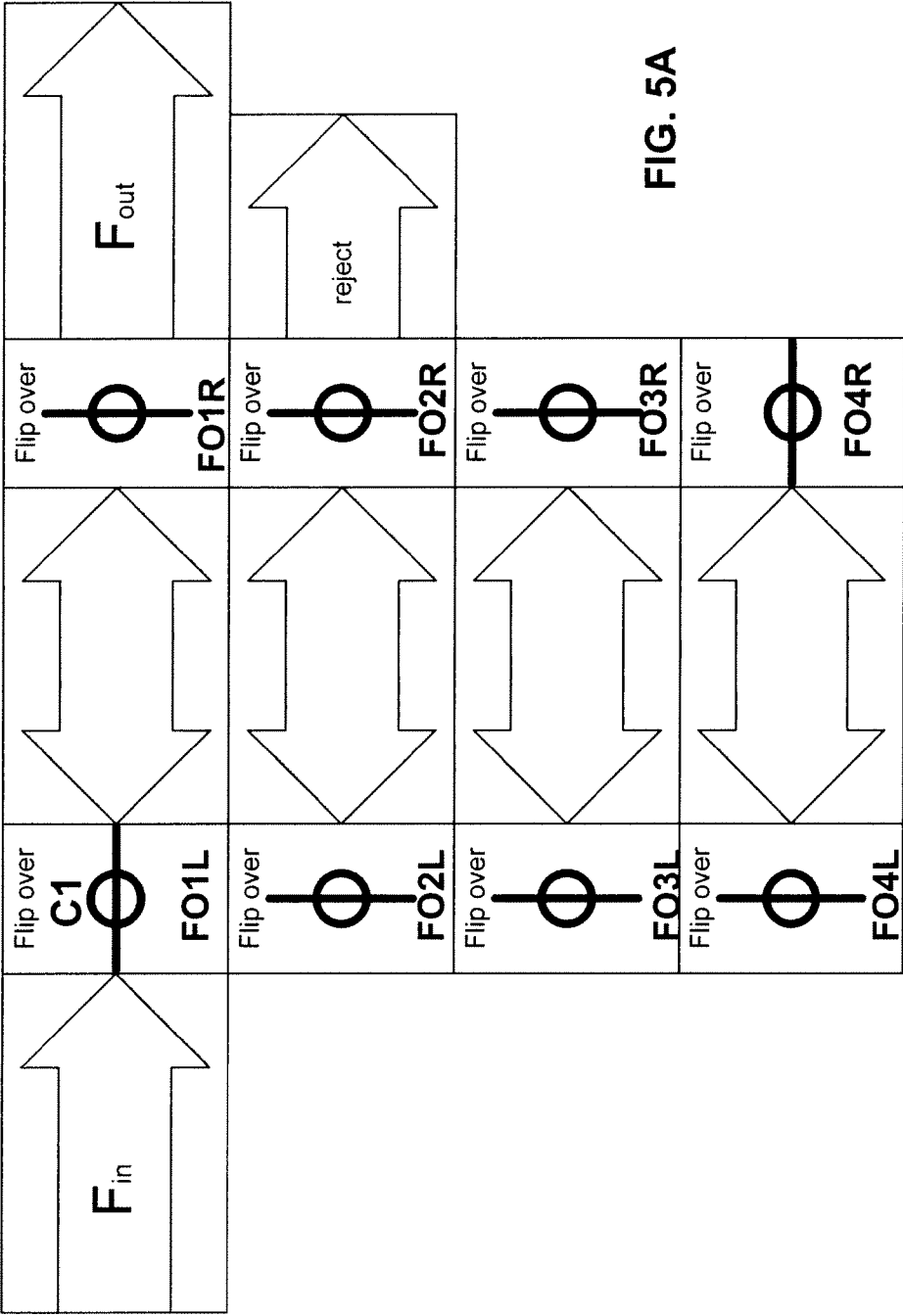


FIG. 5A

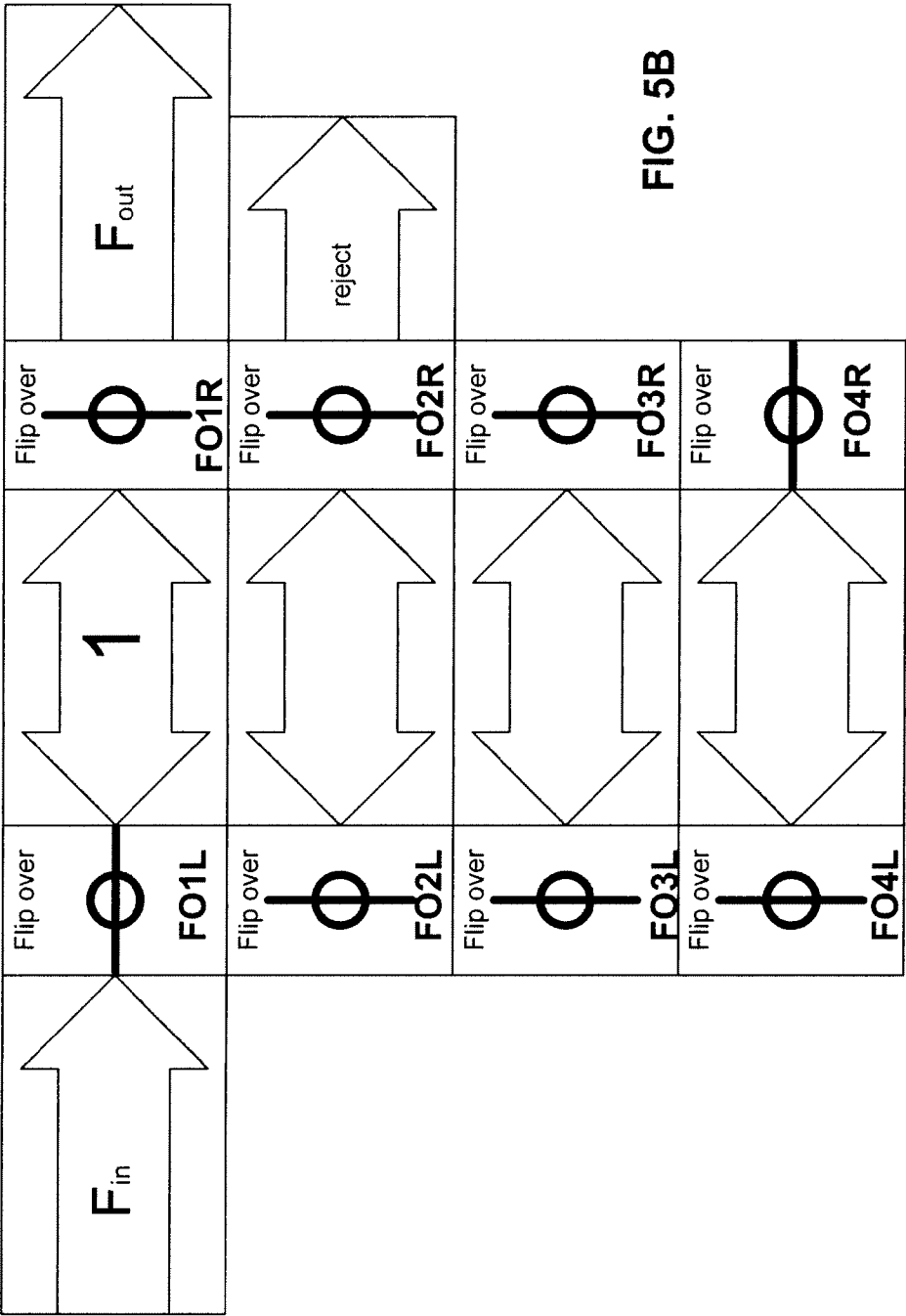
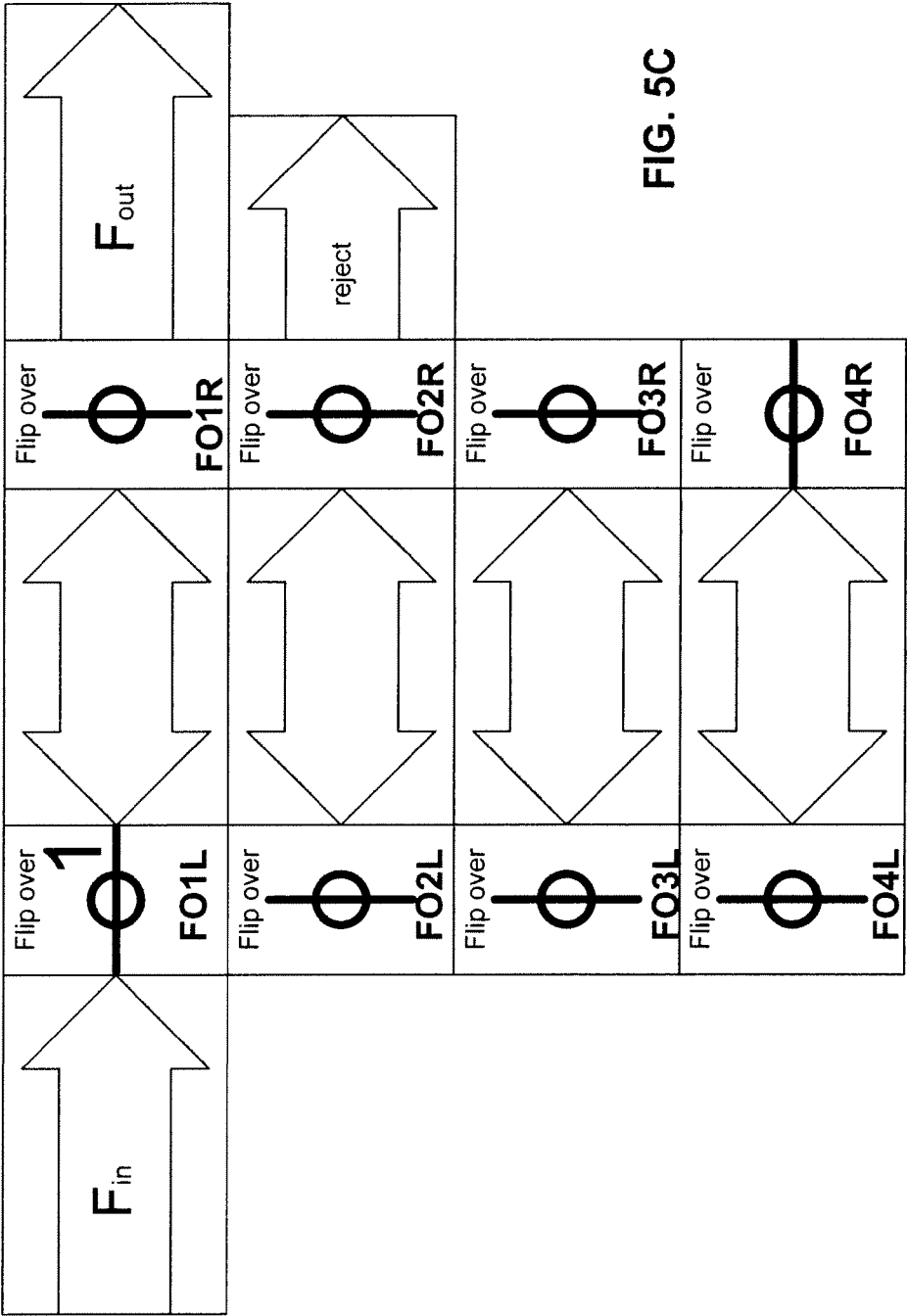
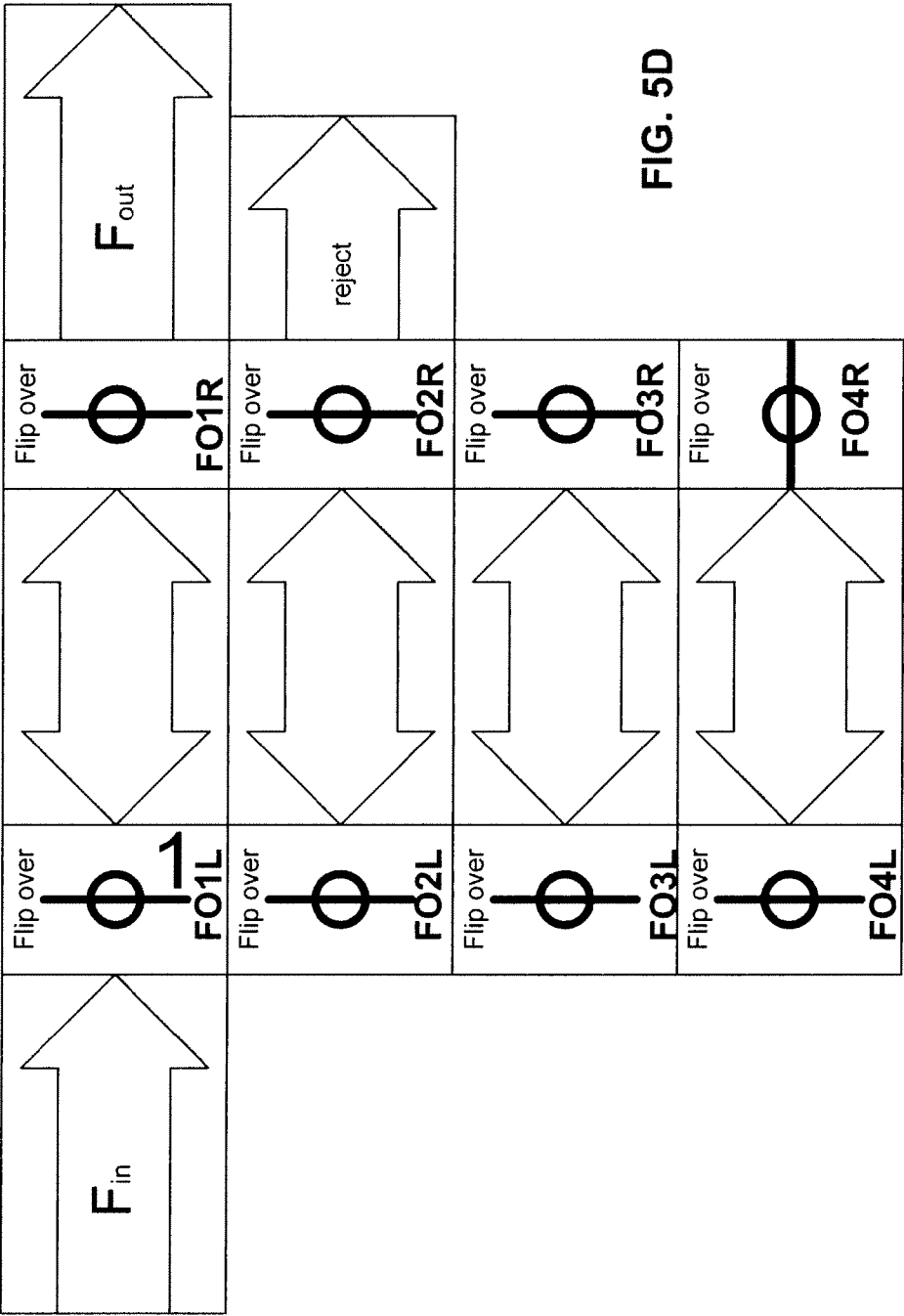


FIG. 5B





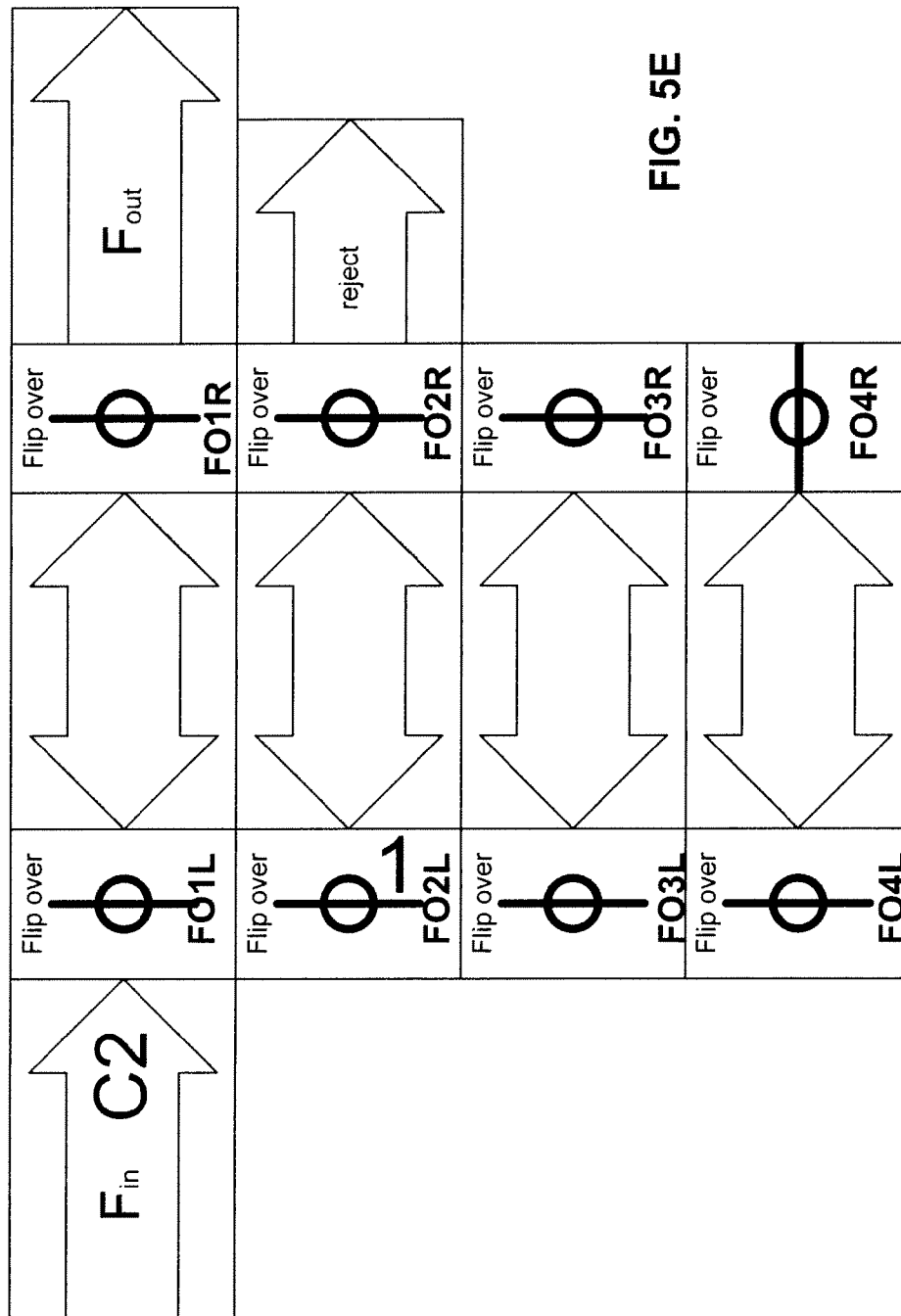


FIG. 5E

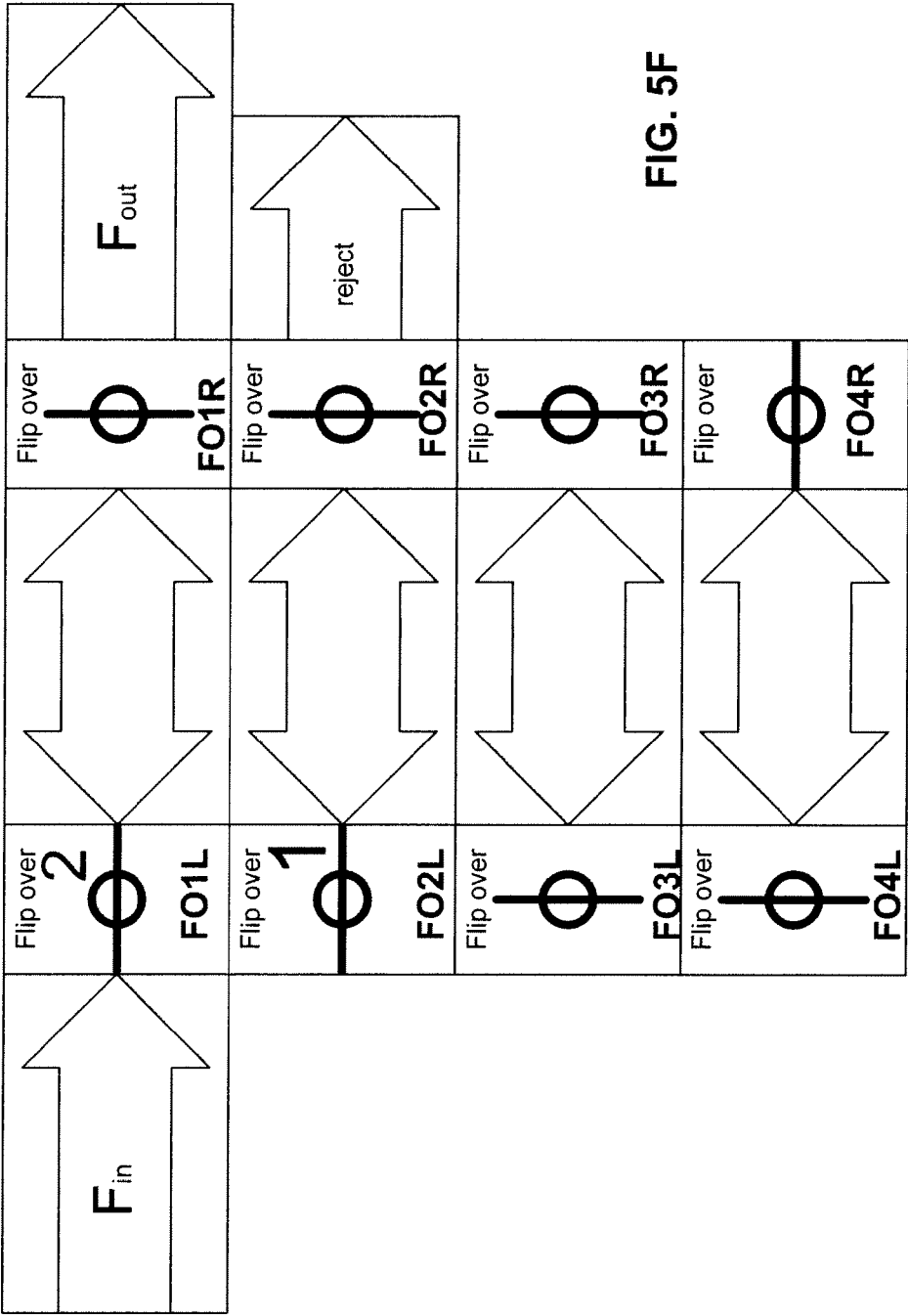
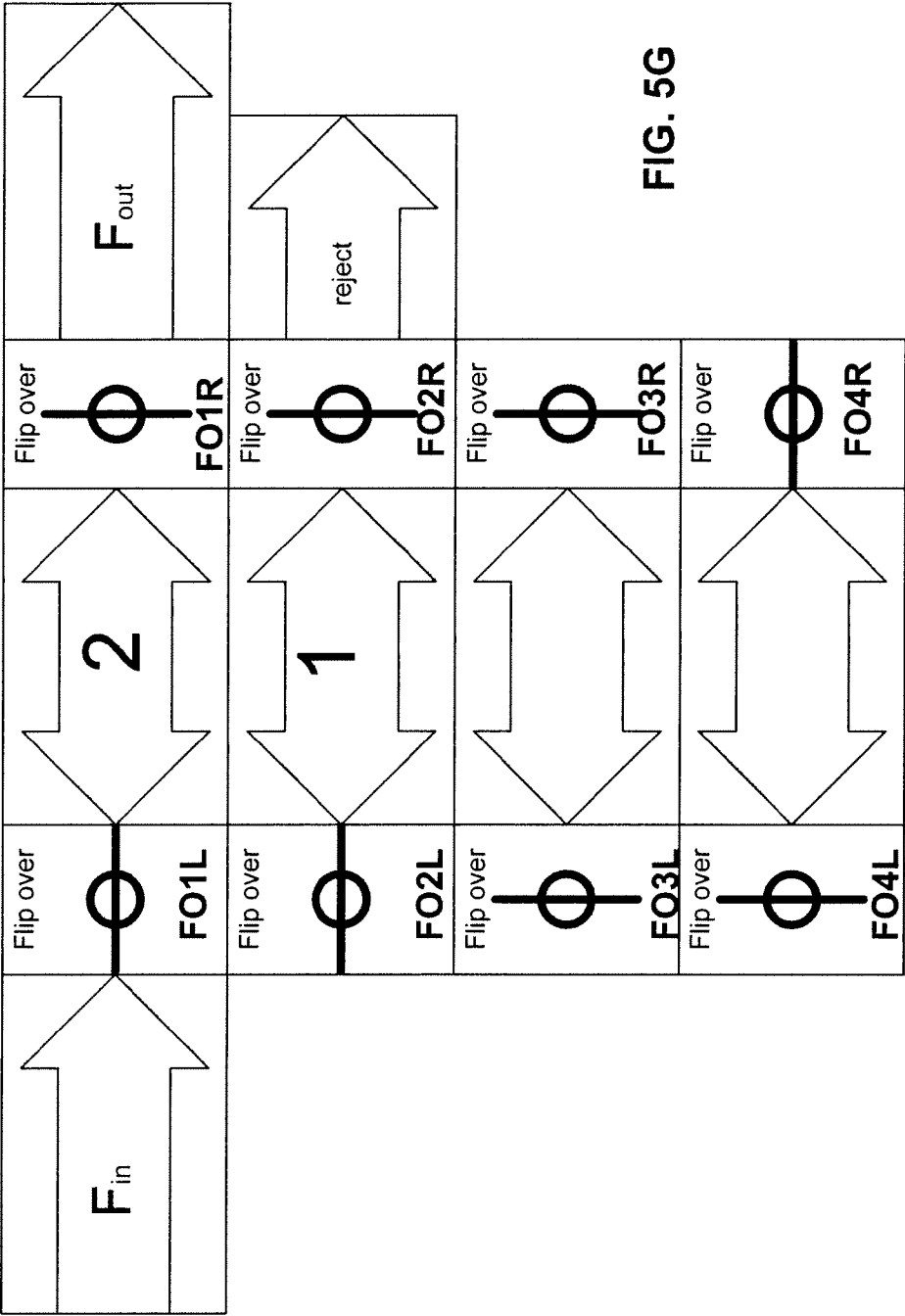


FIG. 5F



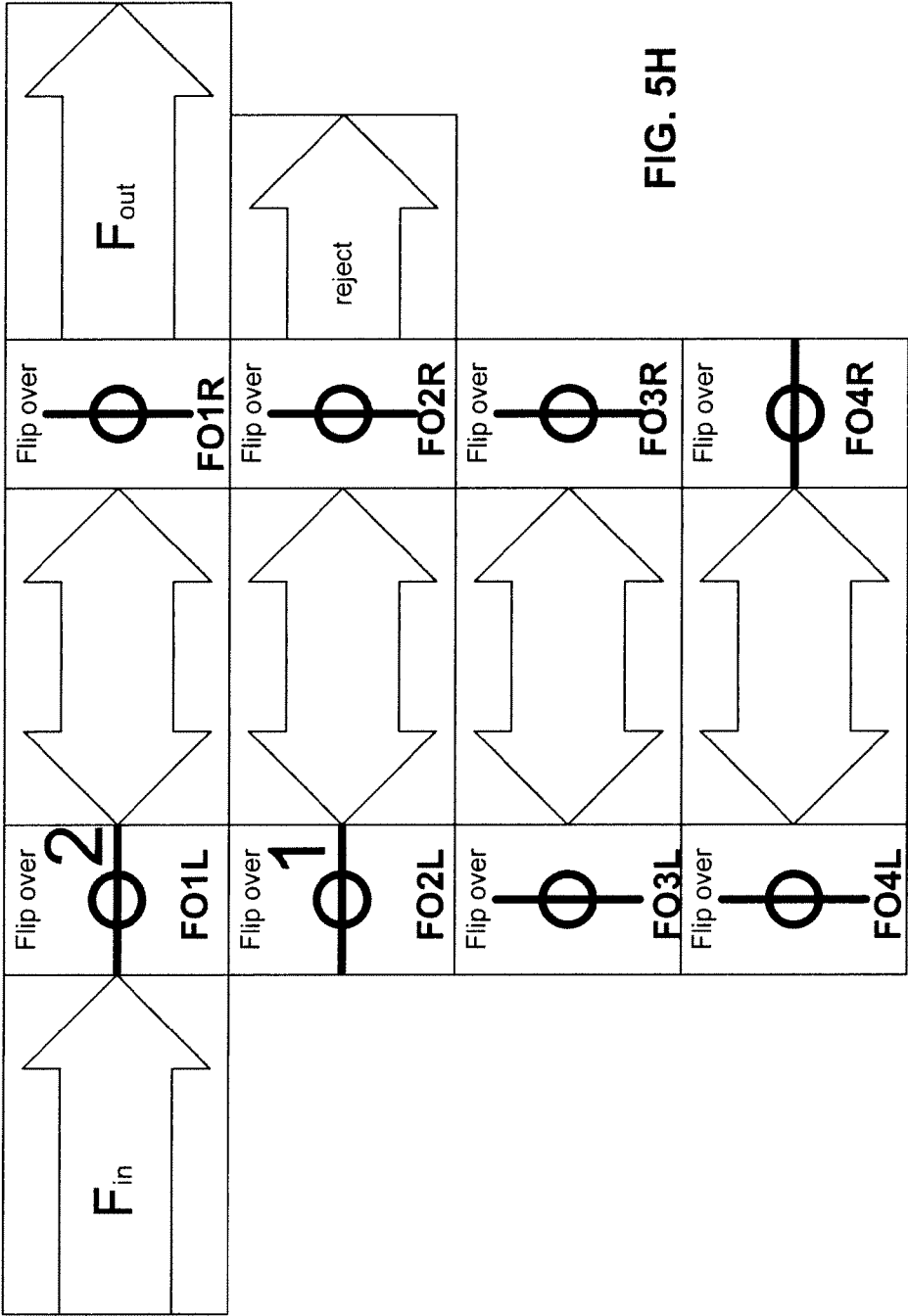


FIG. 5H

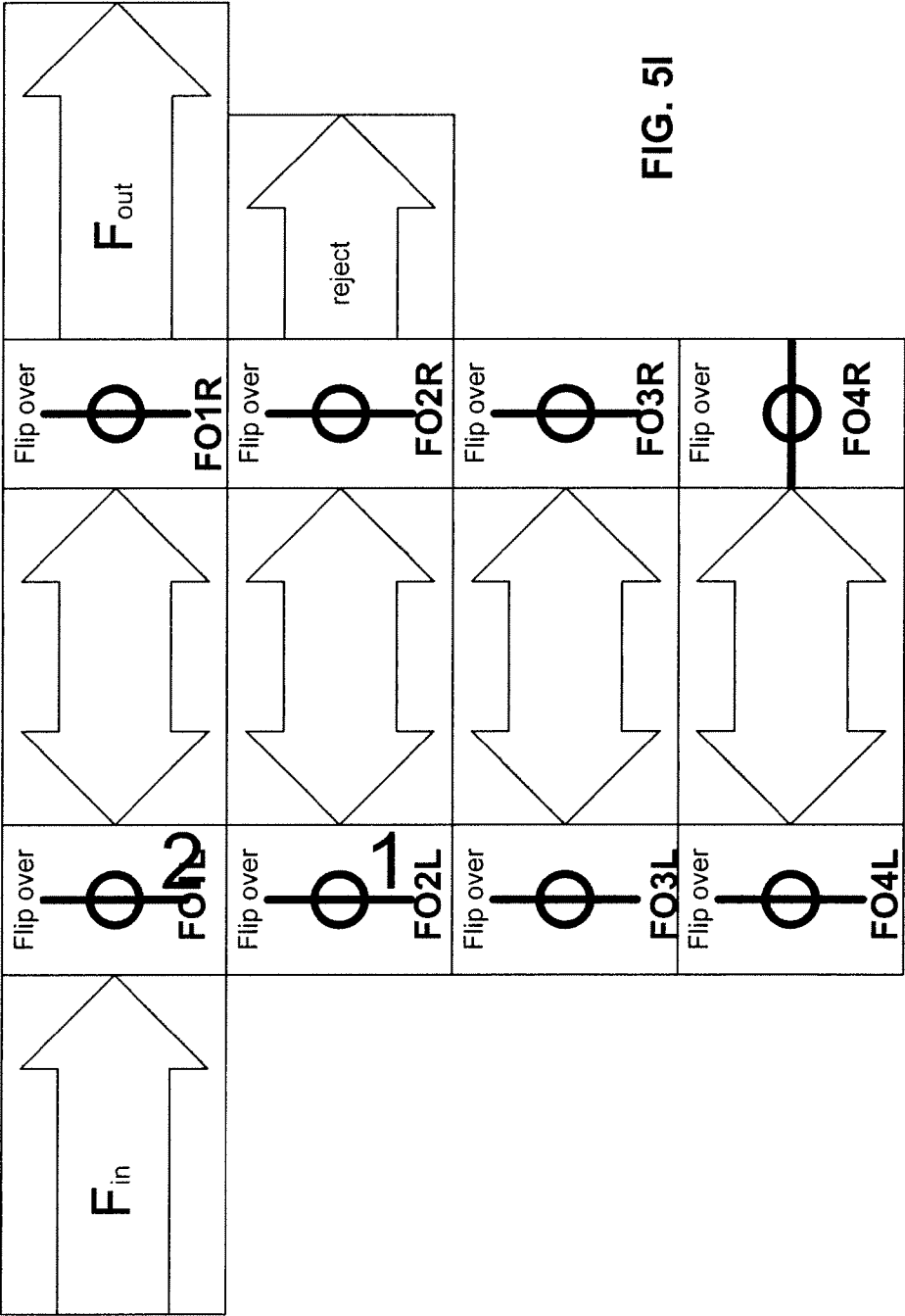
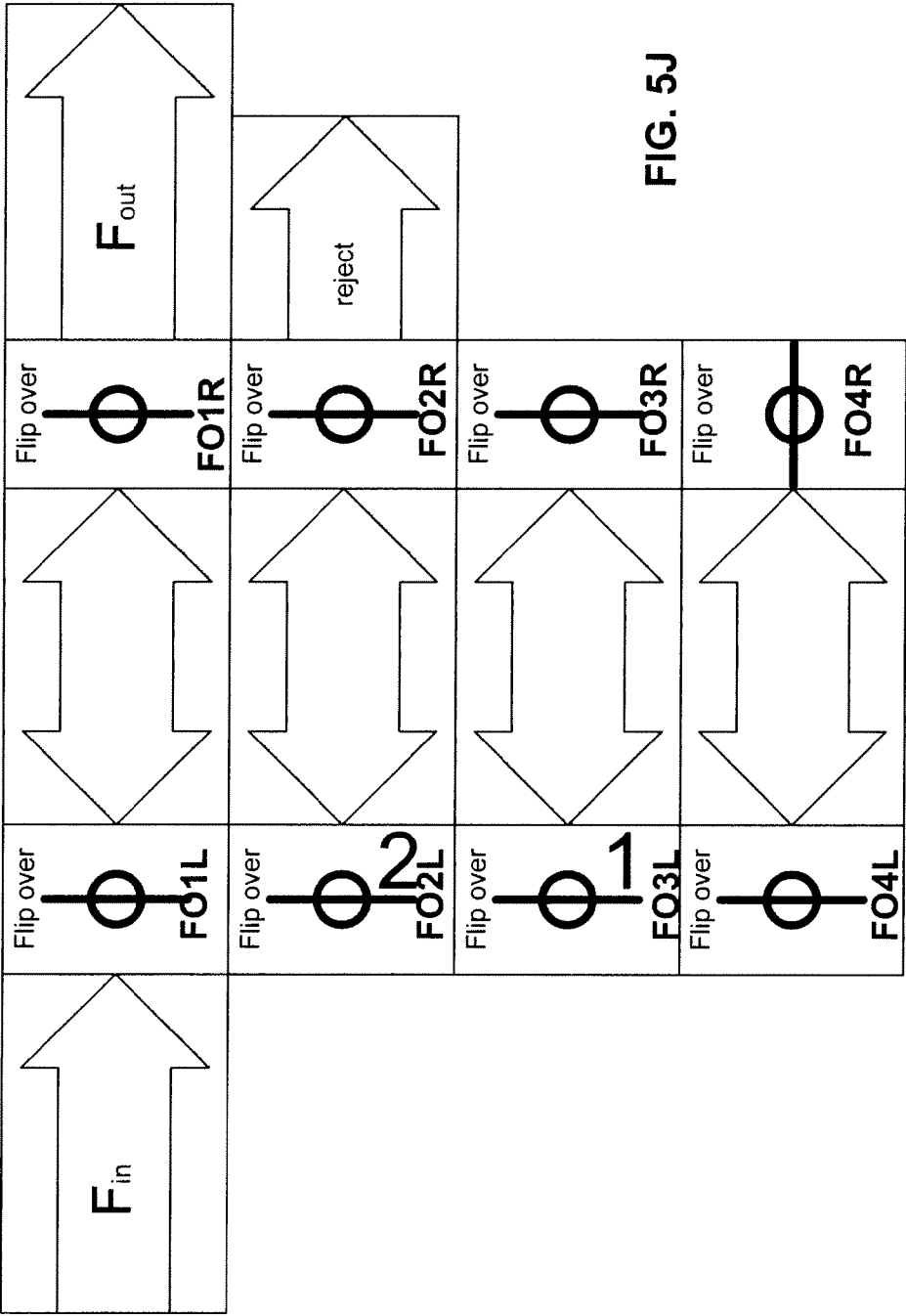


FIG. 5I



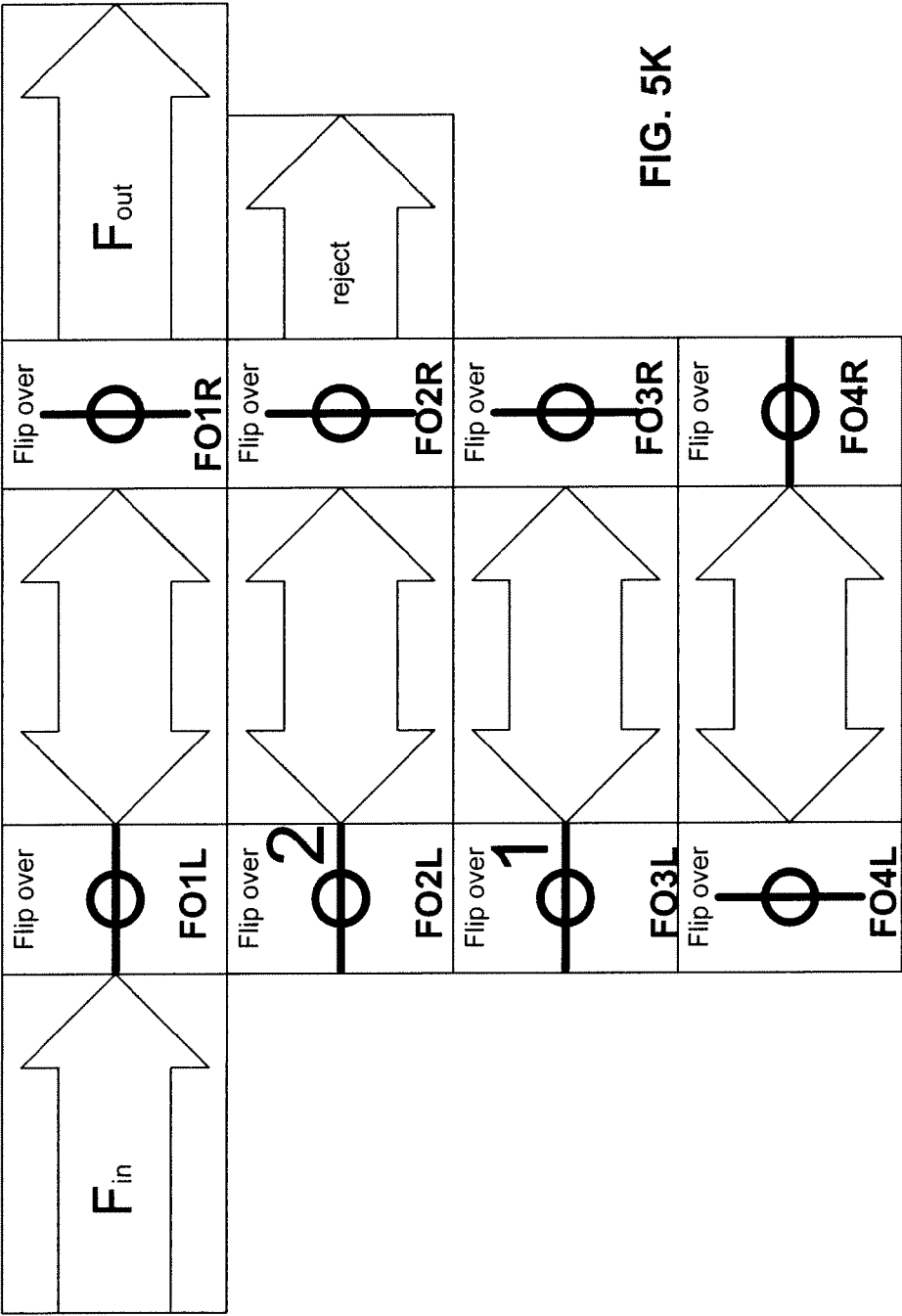
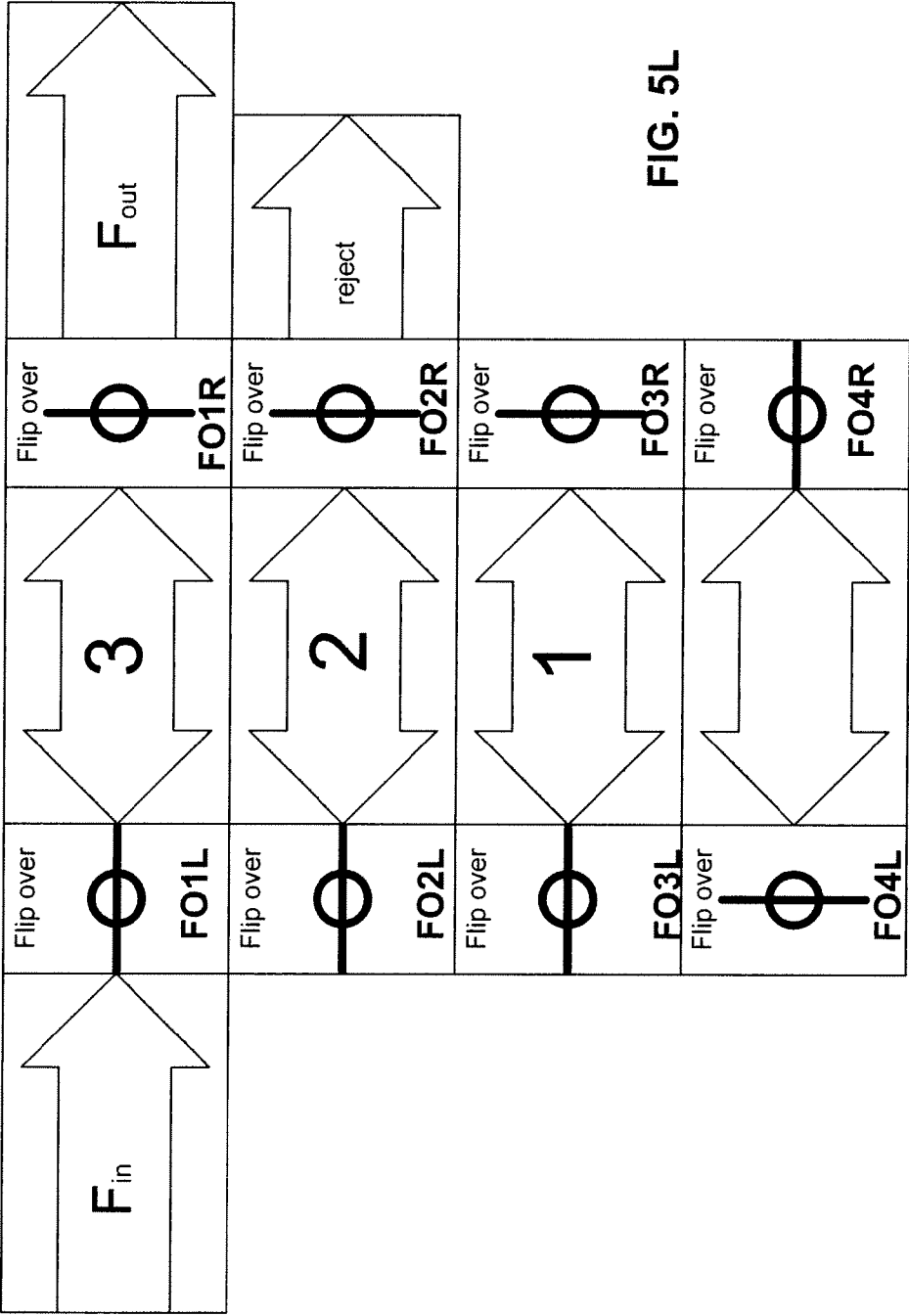


FIG. 5K



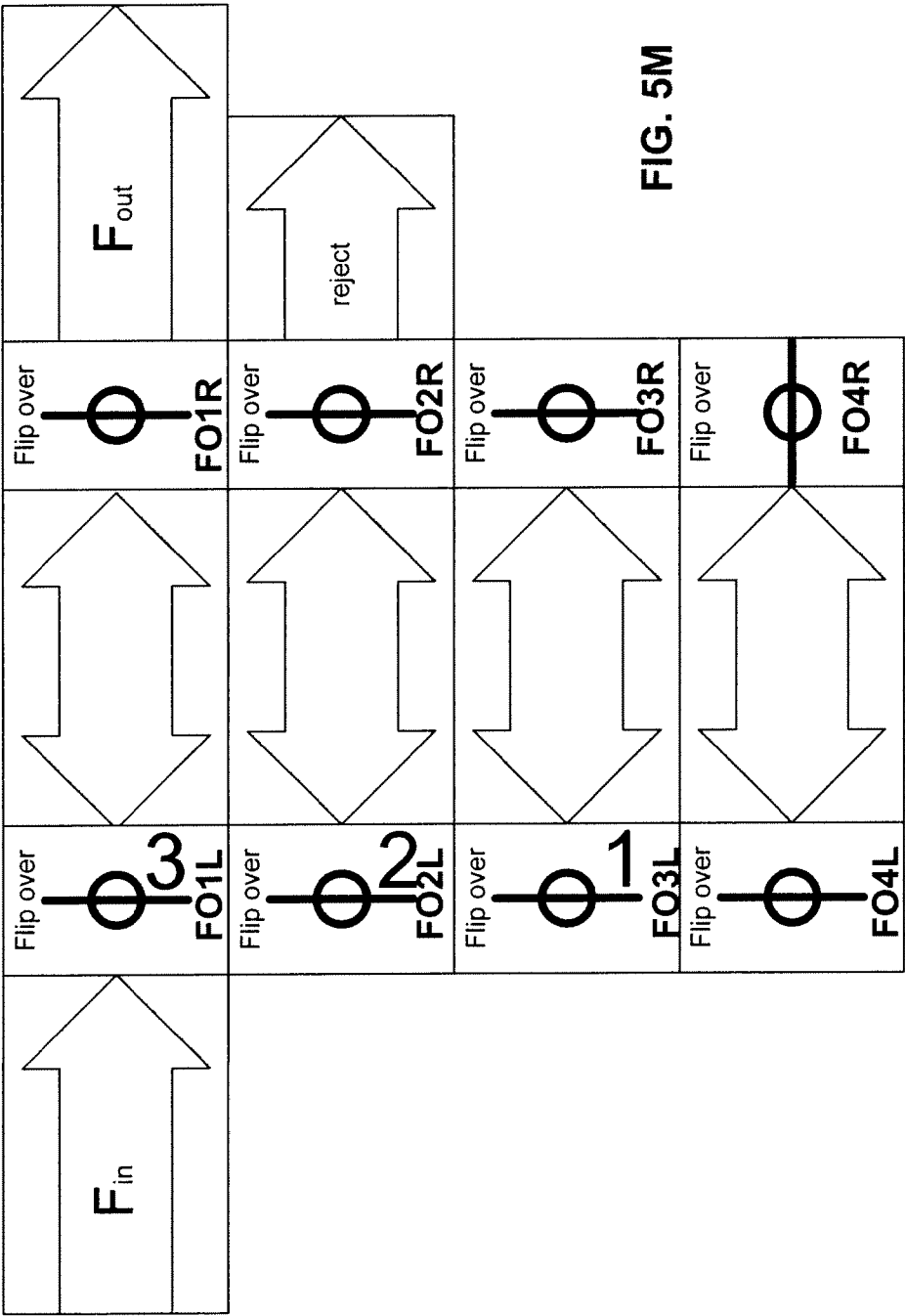


FIG. 5M

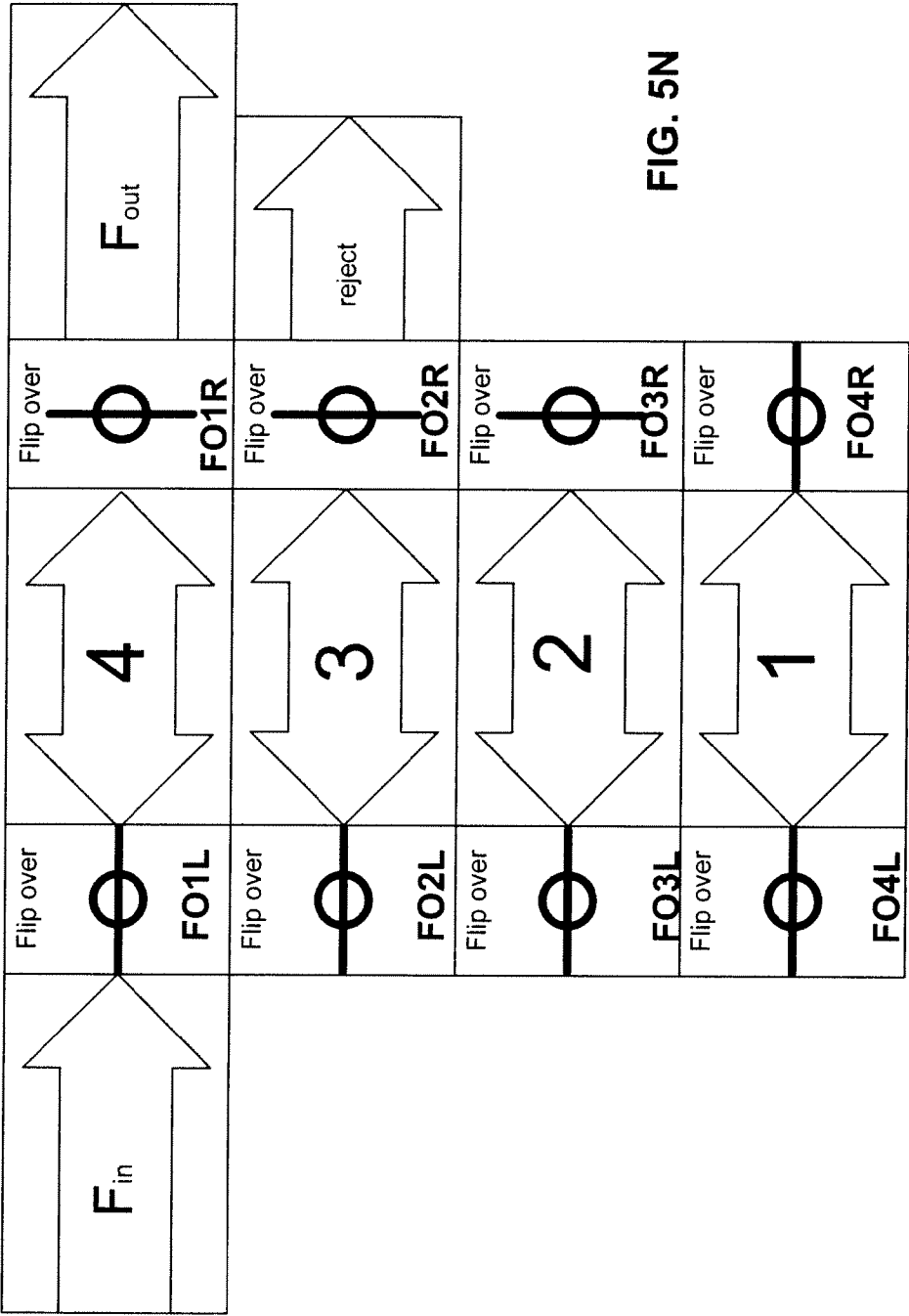


FIG. 5N

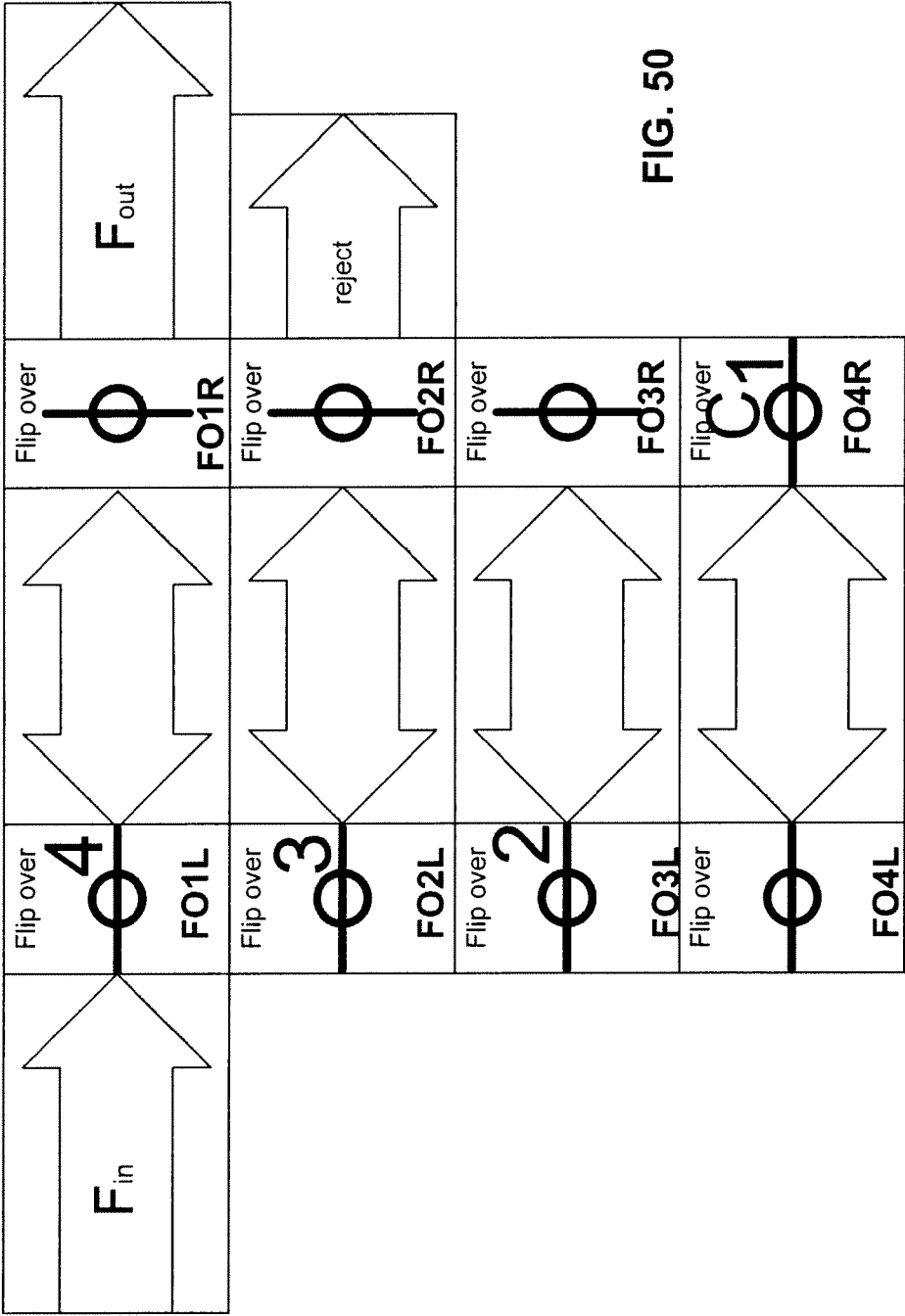
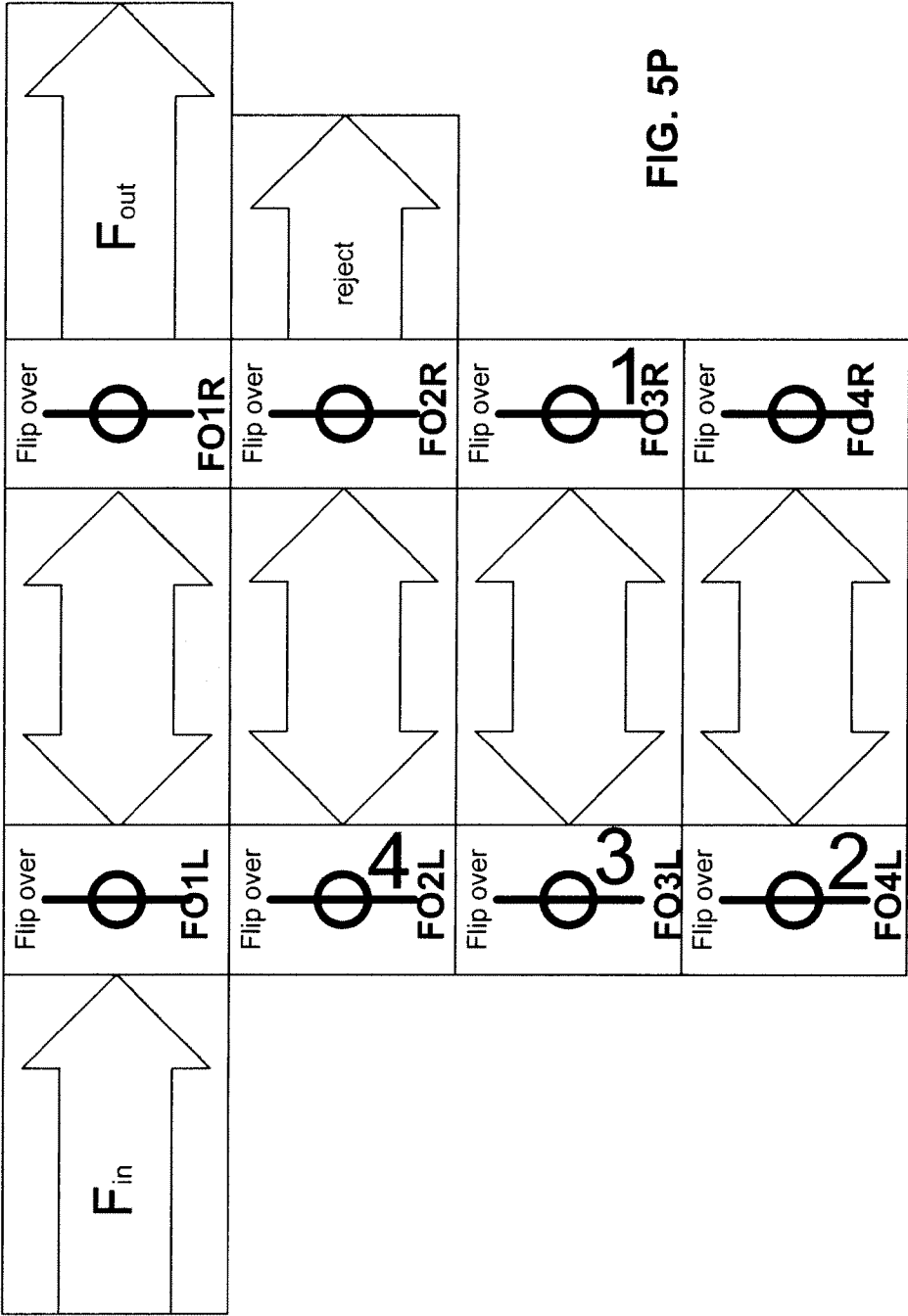


FIG. 50



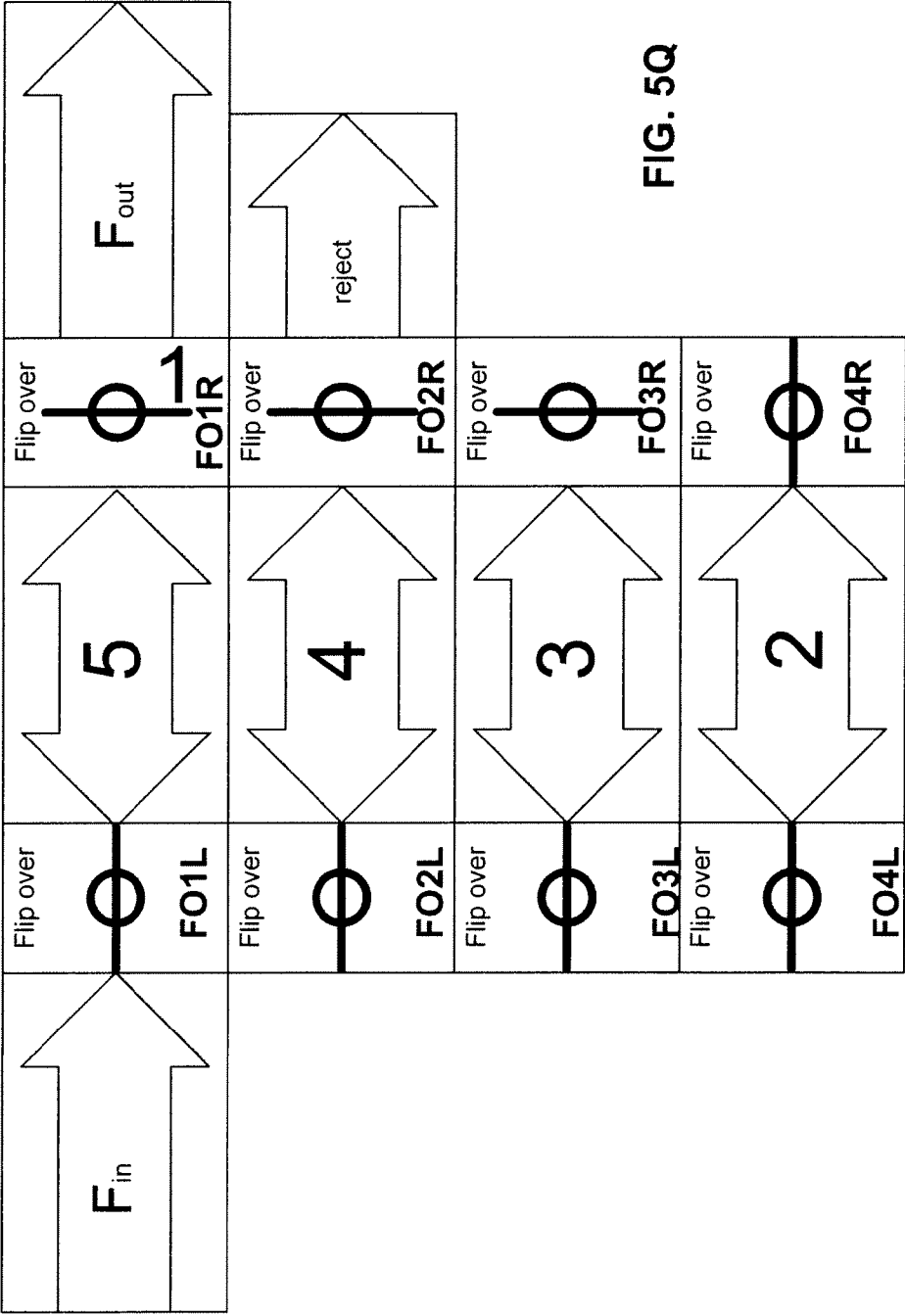


FIG. 5Q

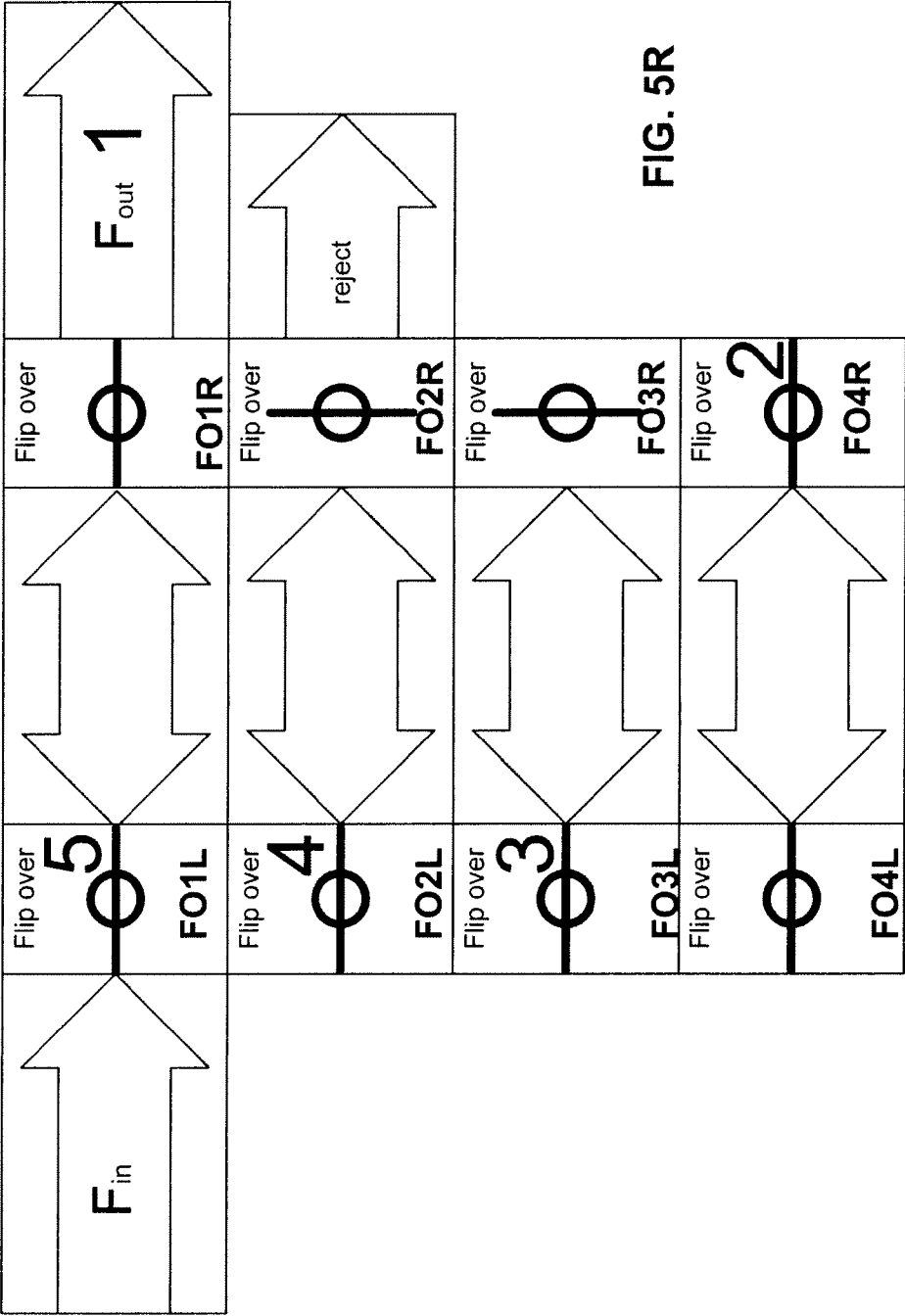
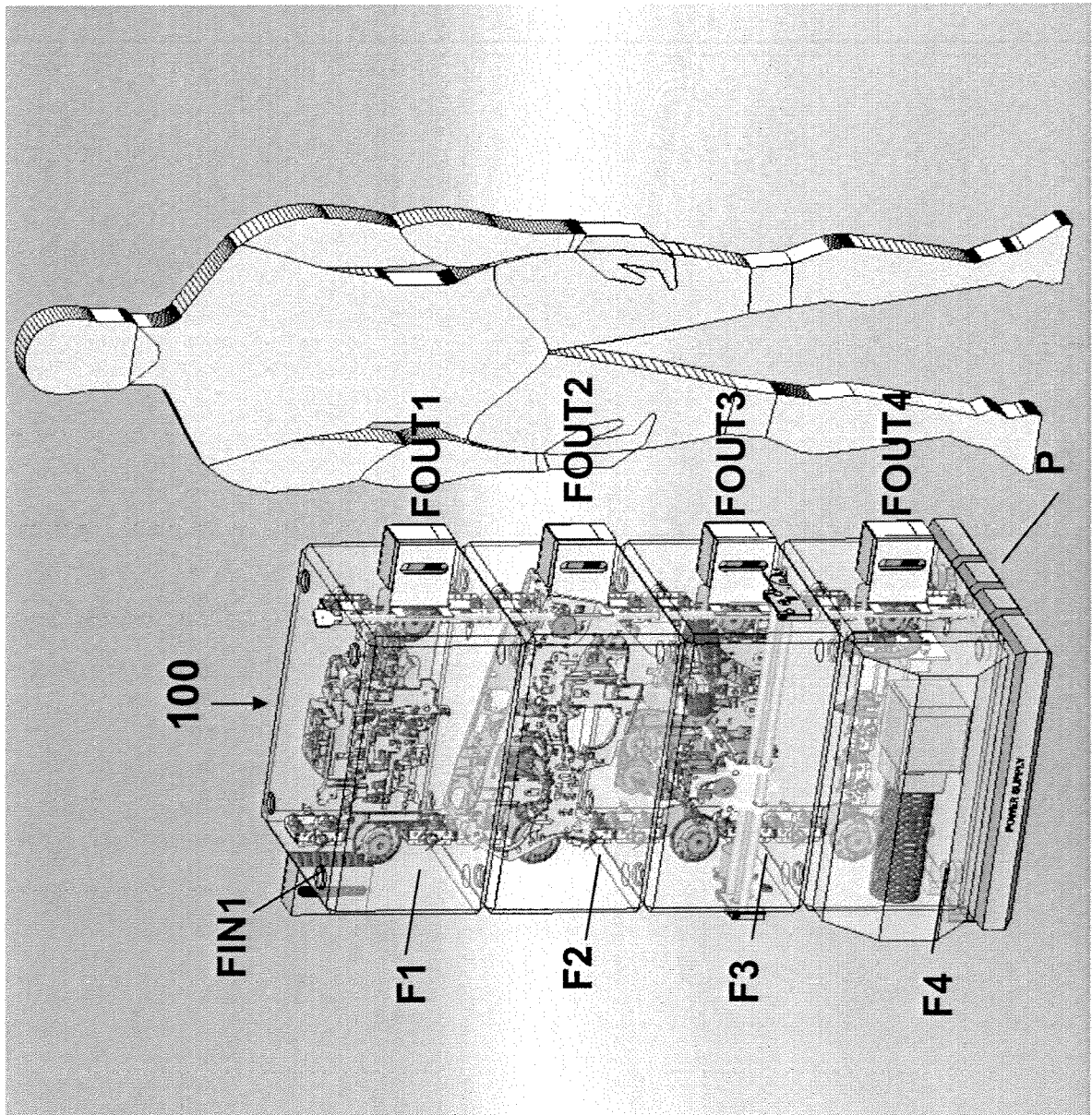


FIG. 5R

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FIG. 6



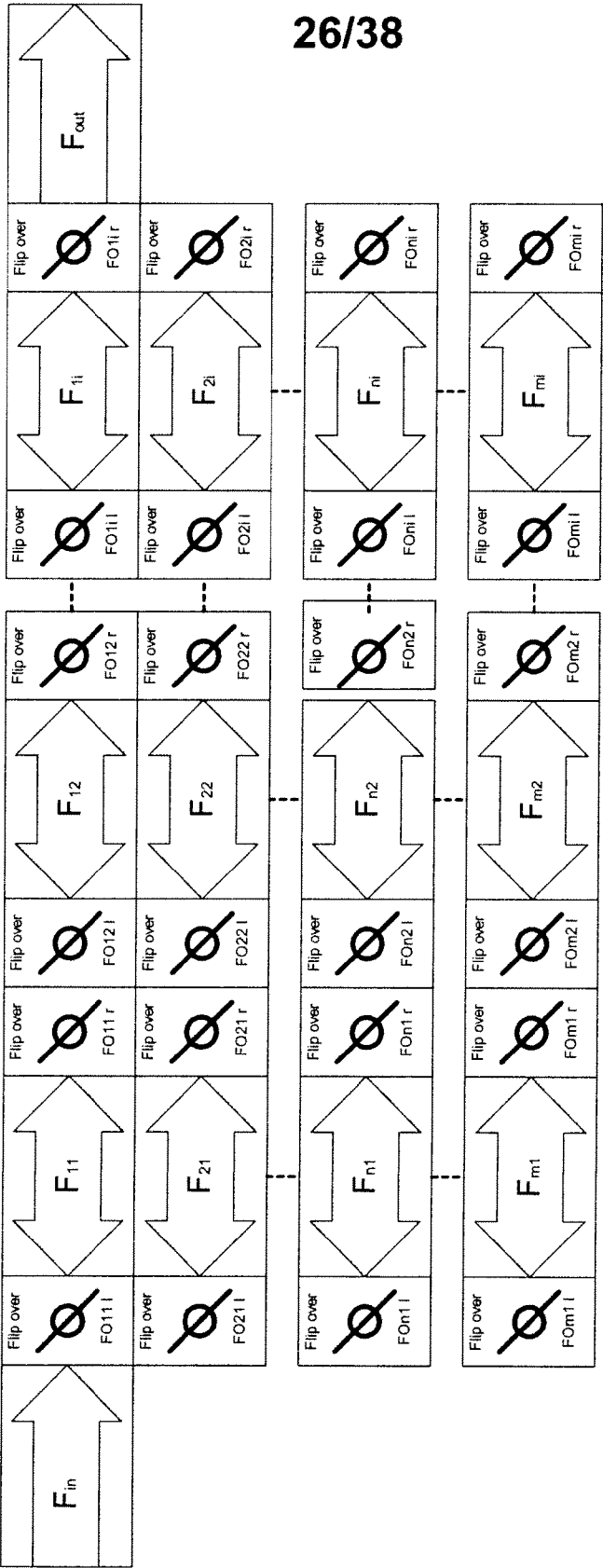


FIG. 7

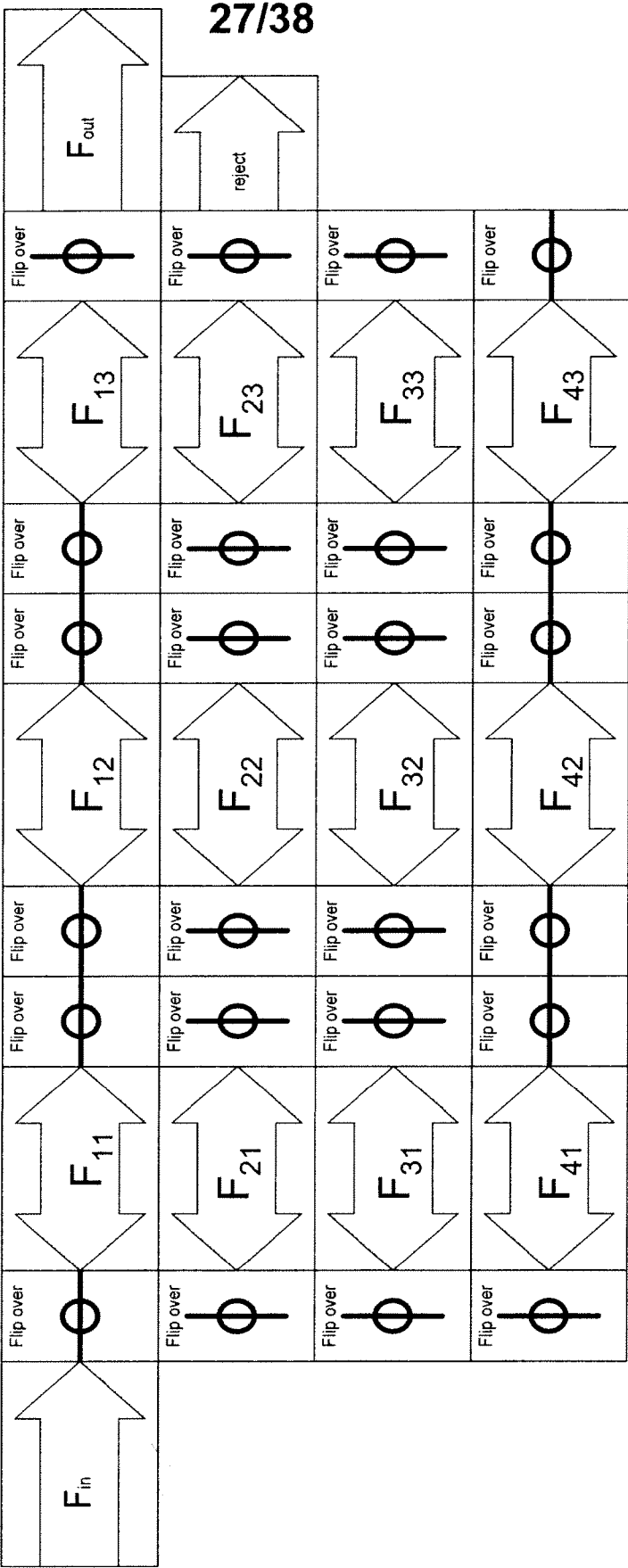


FIG. 8A

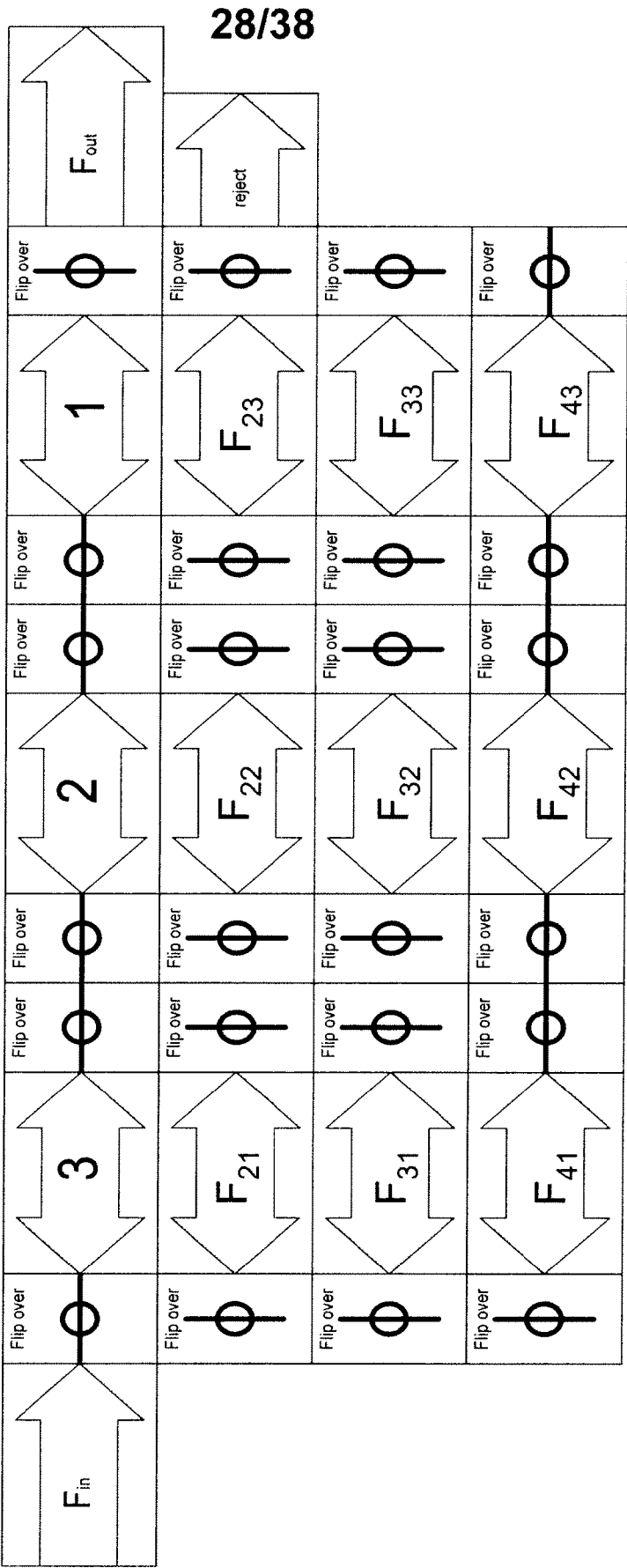


FIG. 8B

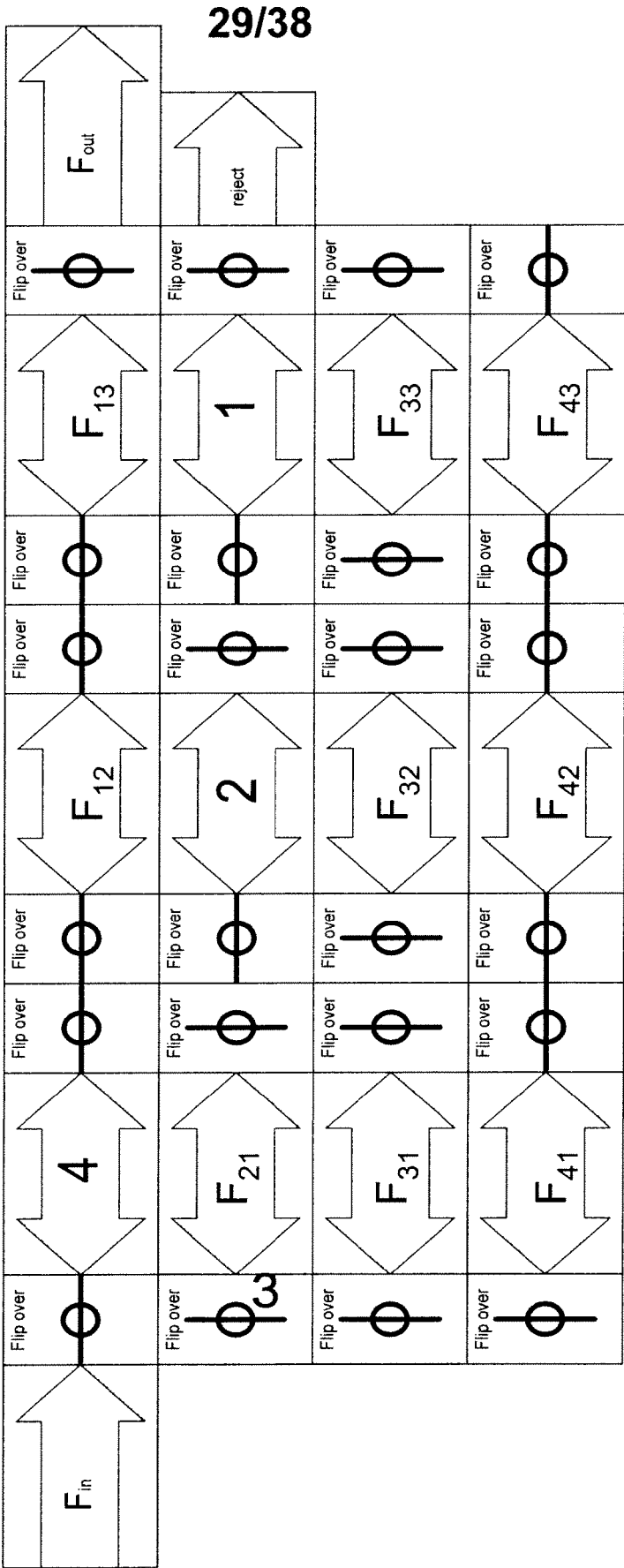


FIG. 8C

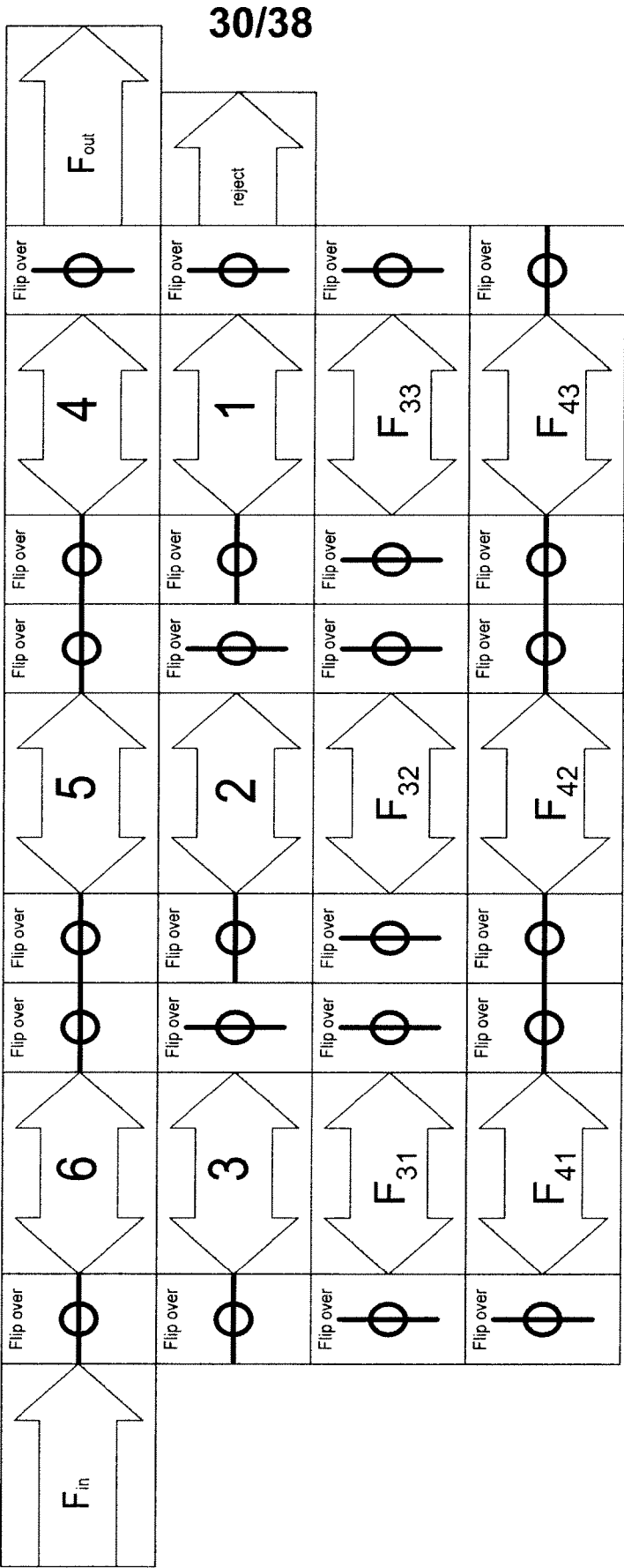


FIG. 8D

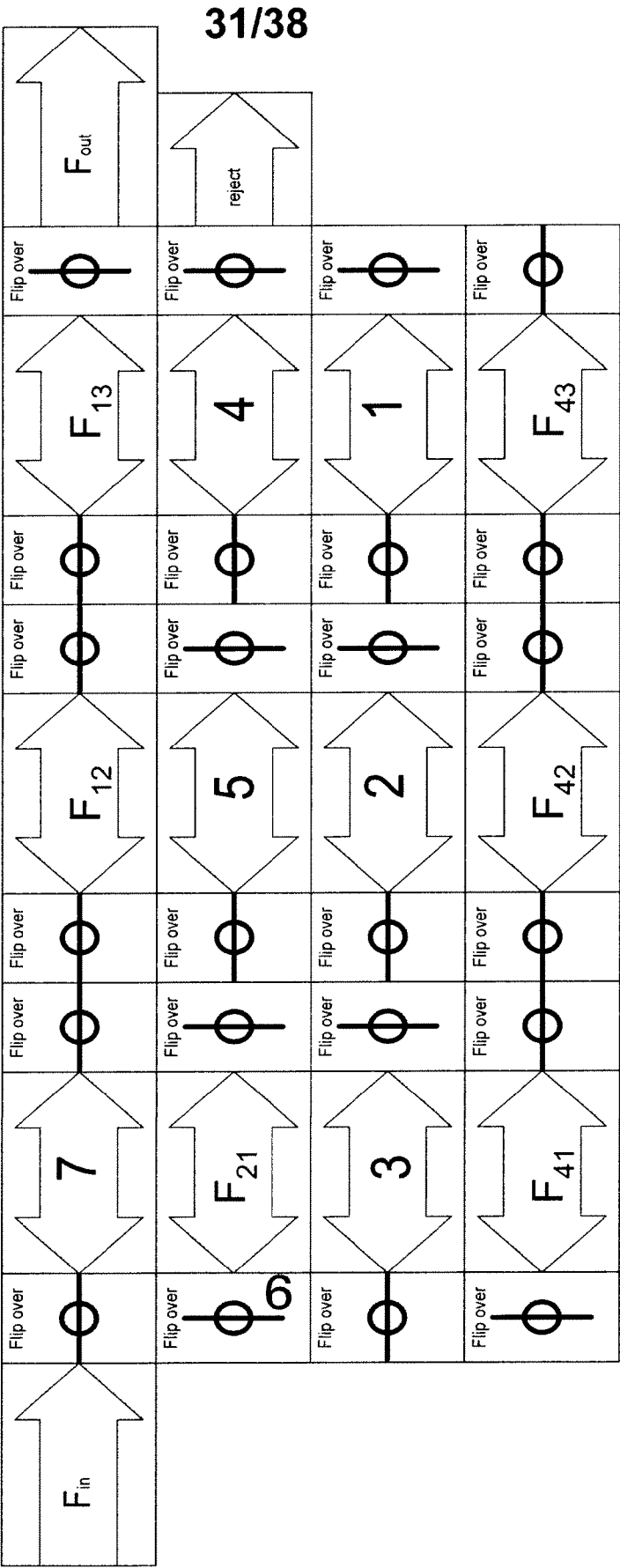


FIG. 8E

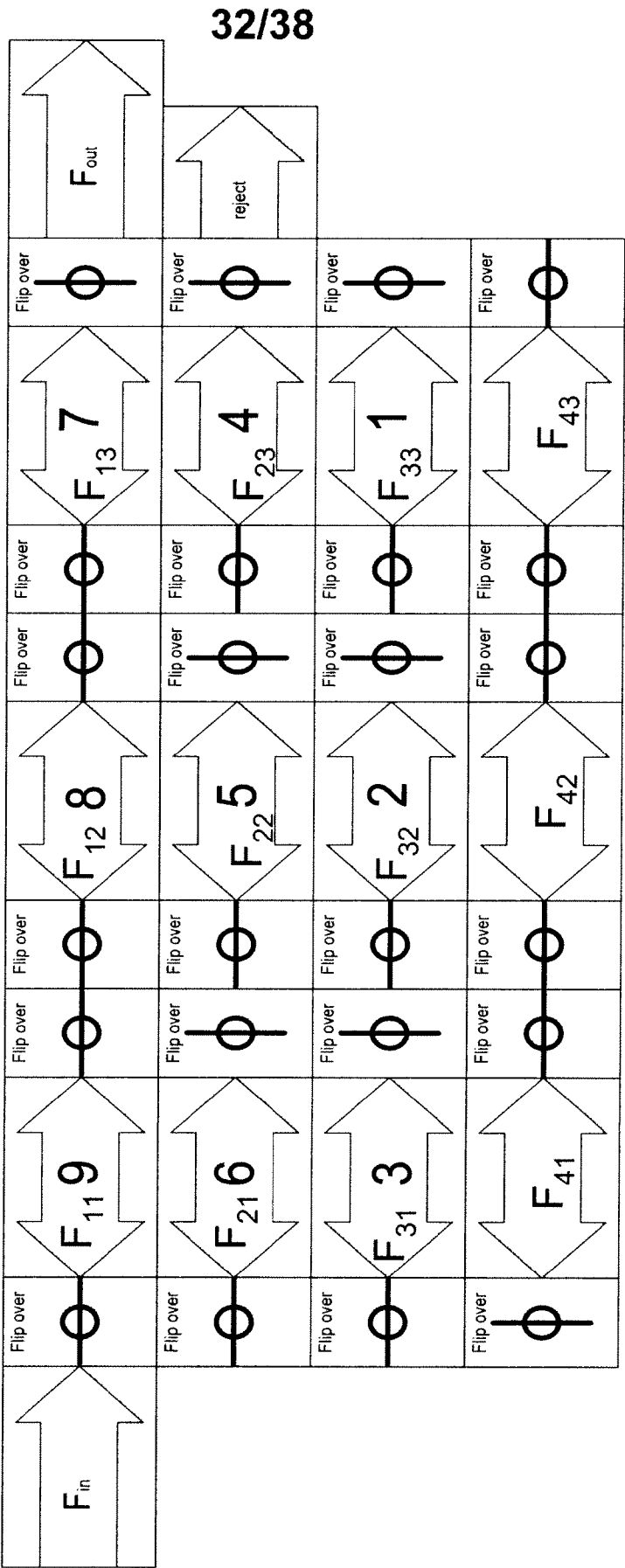


FIG. 8F

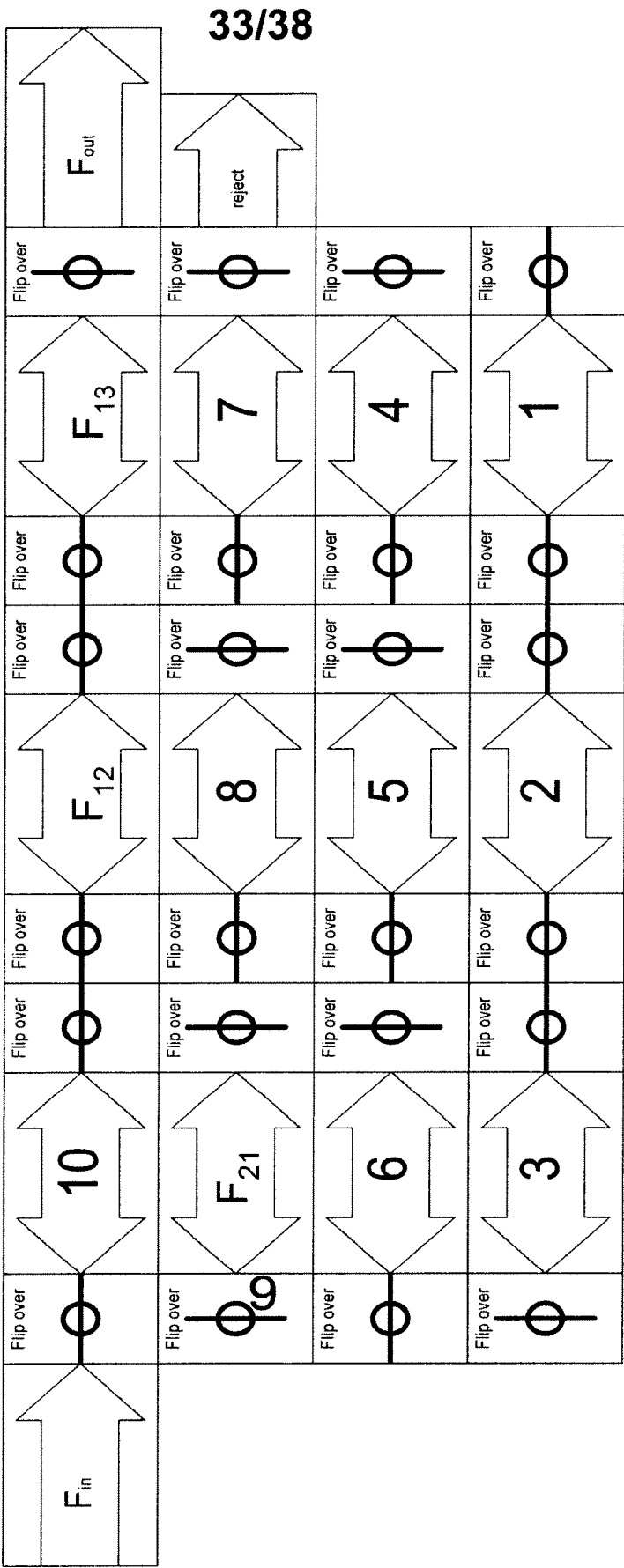


FIG. 8G

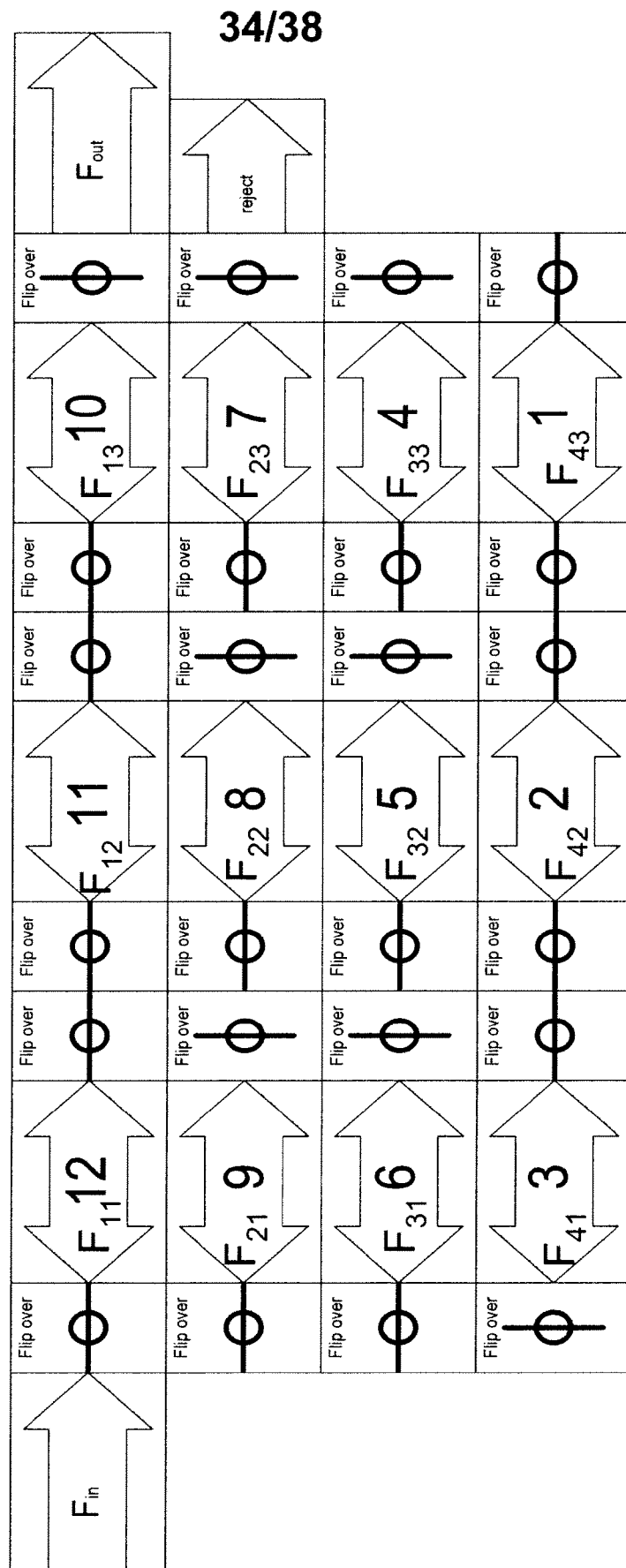


FIG. 8H

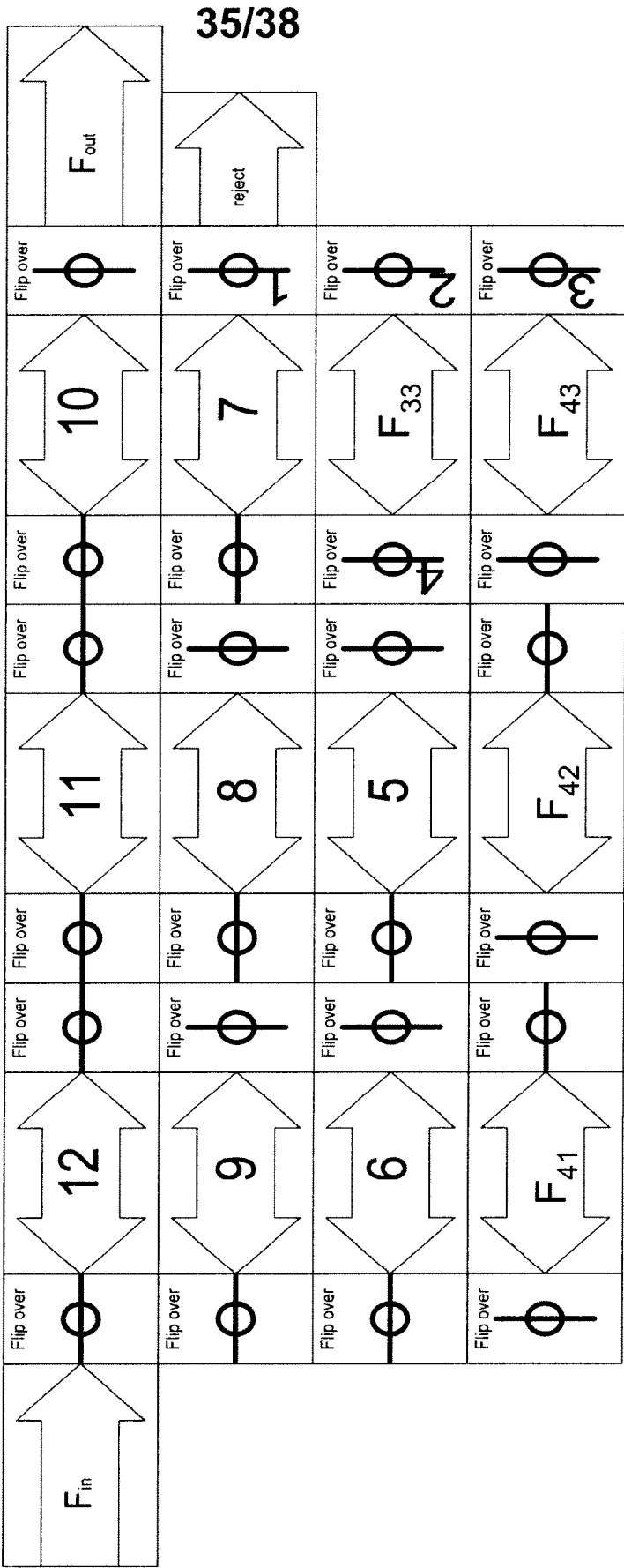


FIG. 8I

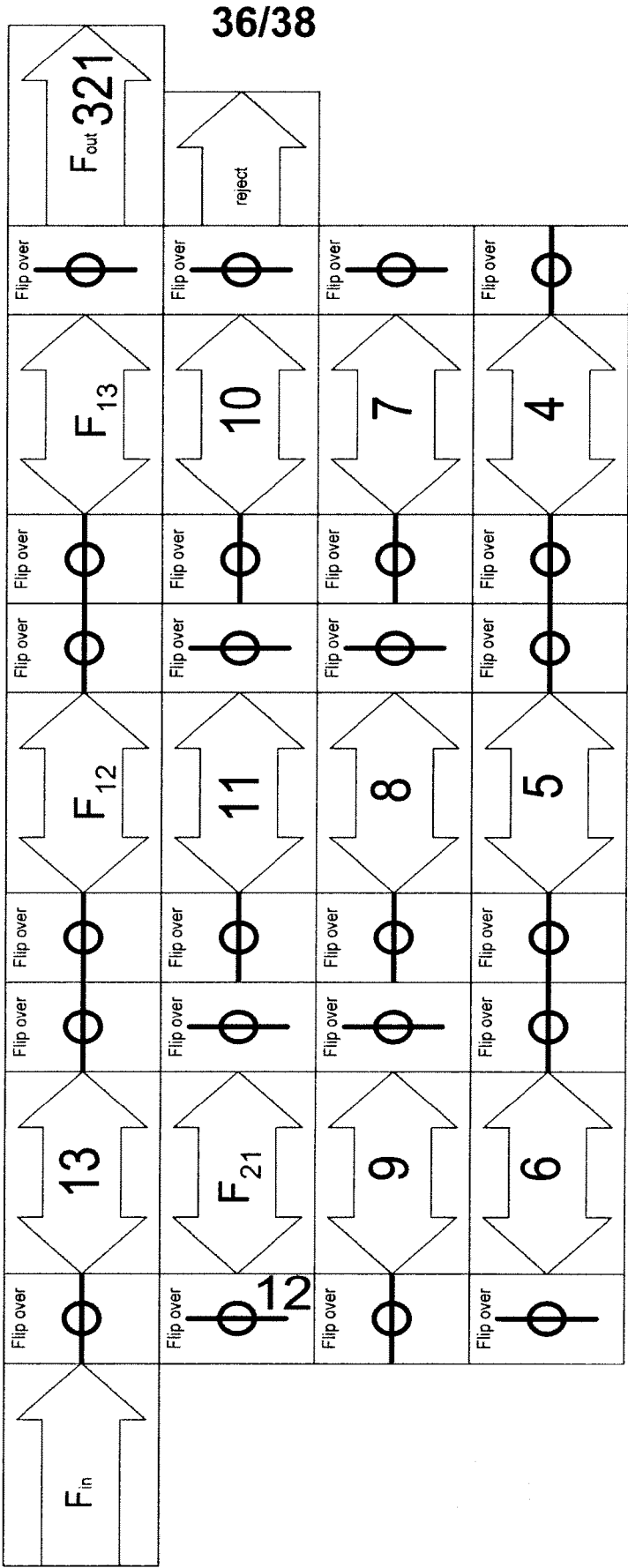
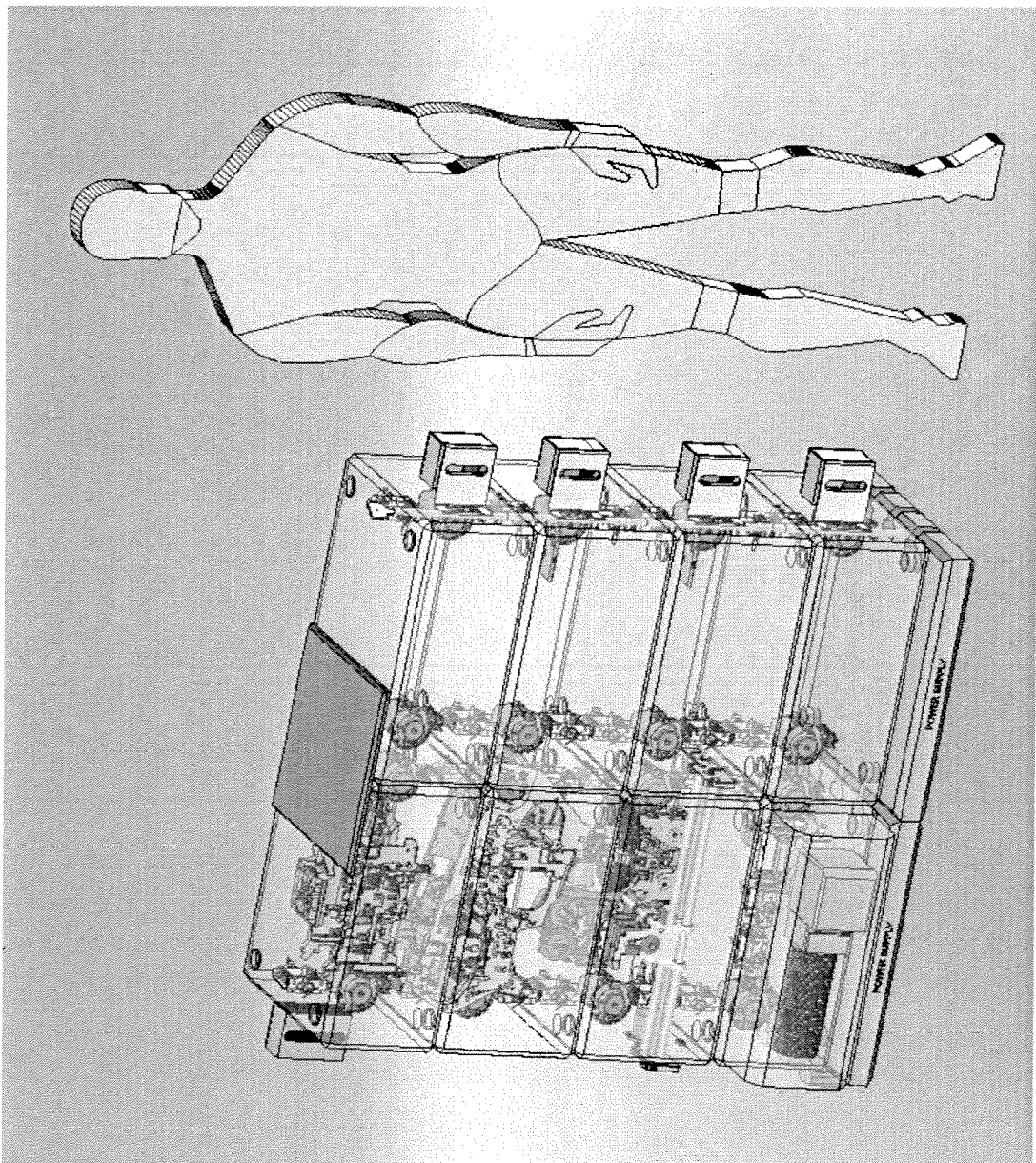


FIG. 8J

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FIG. 9



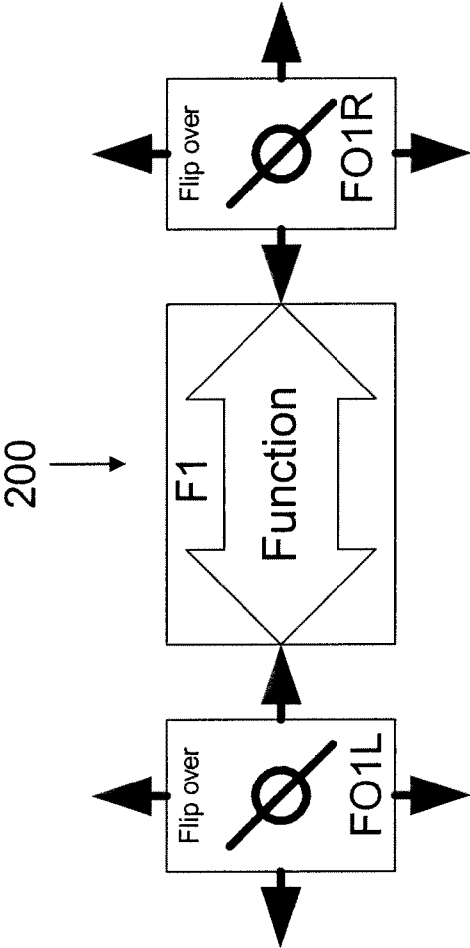


FIG. 10

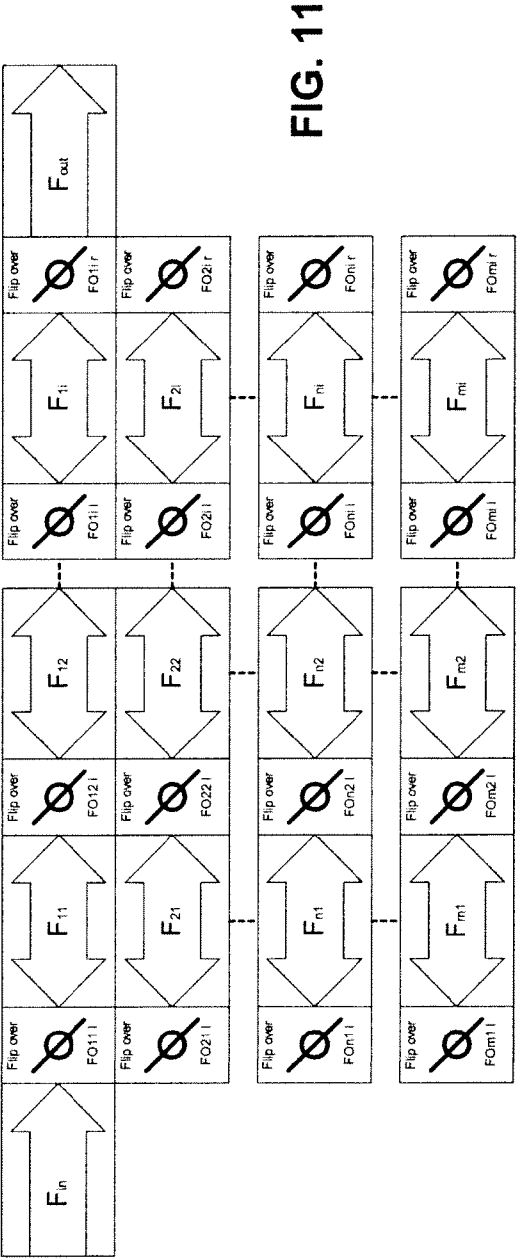


FIG. 11

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No
PCT/IB2010/002567

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

INV. B65H5/26 B65H29/60
ADD.

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

B65H G06K B41J

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practical, search terms used)

EP0-Internal

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	US 2002/036376 A1 (YUI KENICHI [JP]) 28 March 2002 (2002-03-28) the whole document -----	1-21
X	EP 0 835 739 A2 (NISCA CORP [JP]) 15 April 1998 (1998-04-15) the whole document -----	1-21
X	US 2006/039729 A1 (MANDEL BARRY P [US] ET AL MANDEL BARRY PAUL [US] ET AL) 23 February 2006 (2006-02-23) the whole document -----	1-4, 6-16, 18-21
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Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.



See patent family annex.

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Date of the actual completion of the international search

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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No

PCT/IB2010/002567

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