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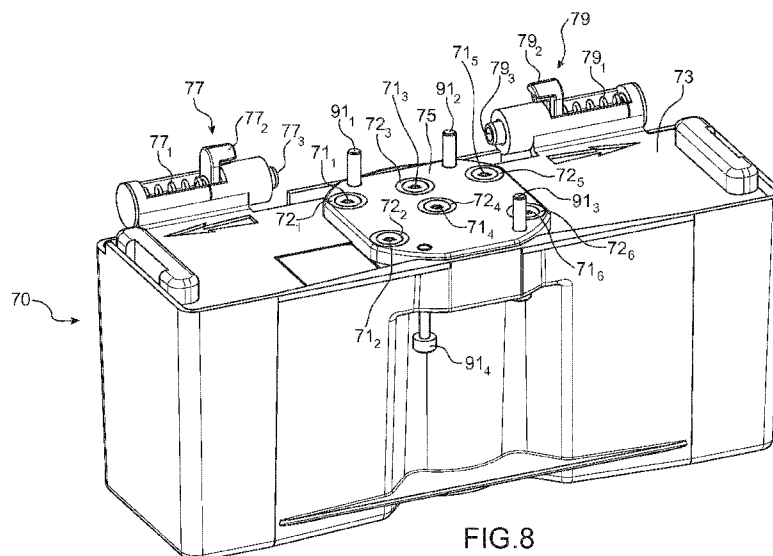
(54) **Title:** LOW-COST INK CIRCUIT

FIG. 8

(57) **Abstract:** The invention concerns a removable single-block assembly (70) for an ink circuit of a continuous inkjet printer, comprising a plate (73) having a first fluid inlet (71₁), a second fluid inlet (71₃) and a third fluid inlet (71₅) and a first fluid outlet (71₂), a second fluid outlet (71₄), and a third fluid outlet (71₆), this assembly further comprising: - a first pump (30) called pressure pump, a second pump (40) called recovery pump and a filter (33), - fluid connection means (301, 302, 331, 332, 401, 402) to allow fluids to flow: * between said first fluid inlet (71₁), the first pump and said first fluid outlet (71₂), * between said second fluid inlet (71₃), the filter (33) and said second fluid outlet (71₄), * and between said third fluid inlet (71₅), said second pump and said third fluid outlet (71₆), - means (77-79) for mounting and dismounting the assembly on the ink circuit.

LOW-COST INK CIRCUIT

DESCRIPTION

TECHNICAL FIELD AND PRIOR ART

The invention concerns the field of continuous inkjet printers (CIJ).

5 It also concerns the architecture (arrangement of the ink circuit) of CIJ printers, in particular for the purpose of minimizing the cost thereof.

It further concerns means for extending the operating scope of a diaphragm pump in relation to, or as a function of, temperature.

10 Continuous inkjet printers (CIJ) are well known in the field of industrial coding and labelling of various products, for example to mark barcodes or expiry dates on food items directly on the production line and at fast production rate. This type of printer is also found in some fields of design in which use is made of the graphic printing possibilities of the technology.

15 These printers contain several standard sub-assemblies as shown in Figure 1.

First a print head 1, generally offset from the body of the printer 3, is connected thereto by a flexible umbilical cable 2 grouping together the hydraulic and electrical connections required for operation of the print head and imparting flexibility thereto which facilitates integration on the production line.

20 The body of the printer 3 (also called console or cabinet) usually contains three sub-assemblies:

- an ink circuit 4 in the lower part of the cabinet (zone 4') allowing firstly the supplying of ink to the head at stable pressure and of adequate quality, and secondly the taking in charge of the jetted ink that is not used for printing;
- 25 - a controller 5 located in the upper part of the cabinet (zone 5'), capable of managing the sequencing of actions and of conducting processing to permit the actuation of the different functions of the ink circuit and the head;

- an interface 6 which provides the operator with the means to set the printer in operation and to be informed of the functioning thereof.

In other words the body 3 comprises 2 sub-assemblies: at the top part the electronics, electrical supply and operator interface; and in the lower part an ink circuit supplying the head with ink of nominal quality and under pressure and providing a negative pressure for recovery of the ink not used by the head.

Figure 2 schematically illustrates a print head 1 of a CIJ printer. It comprises a droplet generator 60 supplied with electrically conductive ink placed under pressure by the ink circuit 4.

This generator is capable of emitting at least one continuous jet through an orifice of small size called a nozzle. The jet is transformed into a regular succession of droplets of identical size under the action of a periodical stimulation system (not illustrated) located upstream of the nozzle outlet. If the droplets 7 are not intended for printing they are directed towards a gutter 62 where they are collected for recycling of the non-used ink through the ink circuit 4. Devices 61 placed along the jet (charge and deflection electrodes) when so commanded allow the electrical charging of the droplets and the deflection thereof into an electric field E_d . They are then deflected from their natural pathway when ejected from the droplet generator. The droplets 9 intended for printing are not driven into the gutter and come to be deposited on the substrate to be printed 8.

This description can be applied to so-called binary or multi-deflection continuous inkjet printers (CIJ). Binary CIJ printers are equipped with a head whose droplet generator has a plurality of jets, each droplet of one jet only being oriented towards 2 trajectories: printing or recovery. In multi-deflection continuous inkjet printers each droplet of a single jet (or of a few spaced apart jets) can be deflected over various trajectories corresponding to different charge commands from one droplet to another, thereby achieving scanning of the zone to be printed in a direction which is the direction of deflection, the other scanning direction of the zone to be printed being covered by relative movement of the print head and of the substrate to be printed 8. In general, the parts are arranged so that these 2 directions are substantially perpendicular.

An ink circuit in a continuous inkjet printer first allows ink under regulated pressure, and optionally solvent, to be supplied to the droplet generator of the head 1 and secondly creates negative pressure to collect fluids not used for printing that are returned from the head.

5 It also allows the managing of consumables (dispensing of ink and solvent from a reservoir) and the control and maintaining of ink quality (viscosity/concentration).

Finally, other functions are related to user comfort and the automatic taking in charge of some maintenance operations to guarantee identical functioning
10 irrespective of the conditions of use. These functions include solvent rinsing of the head (droplet generator, nozzle, gutter) assisted preventive maintenance such as the replacement of components having a limited lifetime (filters, pumps).

These different functions have most different end purposes and technical requirements. They are actuated and sequenced by the controller
15 of the printer which is all the more complex the greater the number and sophistication of these functions.

Some current printers are designed to be modular for extreme facilitation of maintenance of the machine through rapid replacement and without special tooling for some modules. These may form more or less complex functional sub-
20 assemblies of which one or more elements are components of limited lifetime (e.g. wear components) or components whose performance deteriorates with use (e.g. fouling of filters). In general this solution entails additional costs for strict obtaining of the function fulfilled by the module since an independent structure must be provided for the module, electrical connectors, hydraulic connecting members optionally self-closing to prevent
25 the flow of fluids during replacement of the module, and various other components which would not be necessary if there were no modular design.

An example of a modular device is given in Figure 1 in document WO2012066356. The hydraulic circuit illustrated therein uses exchangeable modules (references 50, 60 in Figure 1). This circuit is most complex using a high number of
30 components; in particular it uses numerous self-closing connectors (73) to isolate the

modules (50 and 60) from the body of the ink circuit at the time of disconnection and thereby avoid the flow of fluids.

In other words, the presence of complex, block-exchangeable modules generates major technical complexity and hence incompatible additional costs.

5 At the current time, facilitated maintenance leads to an increase in the costs of the machine. The relative positioning of the fluid-retaining components interconnected together leads to constraints related to the gravity flow of the fluids.

10 More generally, to provide the user with ever better comfort of use, performance levels ever more technically advanced allowing applications to be addressed that are ever more difficult to meet, today's printers are of increasing complexity in terms of sophistication and number of components.

Another example is given in application WO2009049135.

15 According to another aspect of known machines, the forced circulation of fluids and the control over their flow (closing/opening of lines, routing) are functions which are costly to achieve in particular for reasons of reliability of operation. They generally make use of pumps and valves or solenoid valves or gates in particular to ensure the pressurizing of the ink and optionally of the solvent towards the head, the setting up of negative pressure for collection and purge from the head, or the transfer of ink or solvent from one point to another within the ink circuit.

20 According to yet another aspect of known machines, the vast majority thereof use geared pump technology to pressurize the ink and in some cases to set up negative pressure for recovery. These high performance and high capacity pumps are most suitable from a technical viewpoint. In particular they can treat difficult inks and have a long lifetime. However they are most costly.

25 In general, the ink circuit of known machines remains a costly part on account of the numerous hydraulic components required.

30 The problem is therefore raised of producing all or part of the functions of an ink circuit in a printer of CIJ type at lower cost and with a reduced number of components, whilst guaranteeing minimum reliability. It is therefore sought to use the least number of components possible in particular for functions such as the management

of consumables and/or the control and maintaining of ink quality and/or solvent rinsing of the head.

In particular, one problem is to reduce the number of hydraulic components and to simplify the interconnection of these components. Despite this, user satisfaction must be ensured which means that efforts for this reduction in the number of components must not affect performance or reliability.

Another problem, related to the complexity of currently known machines, is the need for highly qualified operators. For example, maintenance sequencing may be very complex.

There is therefore a need for a printer adapted to handling by operators of little training.

An additional aspect is that ink circuits comprise a high number of hydraulic, hydro-electric components, sensors etc. Modern printers have numerous increasingly more sophisticated, precision functions. The hydraulic components (pumps, solenoid valves, self-closing connections, filters, various sensors) are present or are sized to meet a level of quality, performance and user service. And the maintenance functions are component-consuming since they are often automated.

There is therefore also a need for an ink circuit architecture which minimizes the number of components whilst guaranteeing good performance and reliability, ease of maintenance to allow rapid servicing, minimizing risks of spillage and able to be carried out by an operator without any particular training.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The invention concerns a removable assembly for an ink circuit of a continuous inkjet printer, comprising a plate or board which comprises a plurality of fluid inlets and a plurality of fluid outlets, this assembly further comprising:

- a first pump, called a pressure pump, a second pump called a recovery pump and a filter;
- fluid connection means ;
 - *between a first fluid inlet, the first pump and a first fluid outlet,

*between a second fluid inlet, the filter and a second fluid outlet,
*and between a third fluid inlet, the second pump and a third fluid outlet;

- means for mounting and dismantling the assembly on the ink circuit.

The invention also concerns an assembly for an ink circuit of a continuous inkjet printer, comprising a plate having a first fluid inlet, a second fluid inlet and a third fluid inlet and a first fluid outlet, a second fluid outlet, and a third fluid outlet, this assembly further comprising:

- a first pump, a second pump and a filter,
- fluid connection means to allow fluids to flow :
* between said first fluid inlet, the first pump and said first fluid outlet,
* between said second fluid inlet, the filter and said second fluid outlet,
* and between said third fluid inlet, said second pump and said third fluid outlet,
- means for mounting and dismantling the assembly on the ink circuit.

At least one among the first pump and second pump may be a diaphragm pump.

Preferably the means for mounting and dismantling the assembly on the ink circuit allow a rotation of the assembly about an axis of rotation.

The fluid inlet orifices are advantageously closer to the axis of rotation than the fluid outlet orifices.

The fluid inlet orifices and the fluid outlet orifices can be arranged on or in one same surface or plate or board, or on or in a plate arranged on a said surface or plate or panel.

Each fluid inlet and outlet preferably has a conduit end provided with a sealing gasket.

The means for mounting and dismantling the single-block assembly on the ink circuit may comprise means for bringing a locking member into locking position of

the single-block assembly and to return the locking member to an unlocked position of said single-block assembly.

Means can be provided to hold the said casing in position secured against the ink circuit.

5 The plate may advantageously be part of a case or casing which contains the first pump, the second pump, the filter and the fluid connection means.

The first pump, the second pump and the filter are disposed on a same side of said plate.

10 The first, second and third fluid inlets, and the first, second and third fluid outlets are disposed in a same plane of said plate.

The invention also concerns an ink circuit of a continuous inkjet printer, comprising:

15 - a first part comprising a pump called ink transfer pump, a reservoir called the main reservoir, the pump being used to transfer printing ink to the said main reservoir, a pump called a solvent transfer pump to transfer a solvent to said main reservoir;

- fluid connection means between the ink transfer pump and the main reservoir, and between the solvent transfer pump and the main reservoir;

20 - means for mounting and dismounting a second part of the ink circuit that is removable relative to the first part, this second part comprising a pump called a pressure pump, a pump called recovery pump and a filter;

- means forming a fluid connection interface between said first part and said second part.

25 At least one among the ink transfer and solvent transfer pumps may be a diaphragm pump.

Means can be provided to bring the first part and the second part from a first position in which at least the main reservoir, relative to a plane perpendicular to a direction of free flow of a fluid, is arranged fully or at least in part above the second part or above the pressure pump, to a second position in which at least the main reservoir
30 relative to the same plane is arranged underneath the second part.

Therefore the circuit may comprise a pivot pin about which the first part and the second part are able to be moved in rotation.

Means can be provided to bring the second part from a position in fluid connection with the first part, to a position in which it is not in fluid connection with the first part.

Therefore the circuit may comprise a pivot pin, or hinge, about which the second part is able to be moved in rotation relative to the first part.

An ink circuit according to the invention may further comprise means for regulating the pressure and/or flow rate of at least one of the pumps from among the solvent transfer pump and the pressure pump.

In particular, a singular restriction can be arranged as back-flow between the inlet and outlet of the solvent transfer pump.

Preferably the back-flow line returns part of said pumped fluid towards the said inlet conduit, at a point located upstream of the solvent transfer pump, in the direction of circulation of the fluid. More preferably, there is no intermediate reservoir or cartridge. In an embodiment, the back-flow line returns part of said pumped fluid directly towards the said inlet conduit. In other words, the fluid can be directly returned, via the restriction, to a point arranged between a fluid cartridge and the pump itself.

A singular restriction can be arranged in series with a line pressure drop restriction, as a back-flow between the outlet and inlet of the pressure pump.

Preferably, means are provided to transfer solvent from a solvent cartridge towards the pressure pump.

In an ink circuit of the invention the second part may comprise a removable assembly such as described above.

The invention also concerns a continuous inkjet printer comprising:

- an ink circuit such as described above;
- a print head connected to the ink circuit via a flexible umbilical cable firstly containing hydraulic connection means to bring ink to be printed from the ink circuit to the print head and to send back towards said ink circuit the ink to be recovered from the print head, and secondly electrical connection means.

In said printer, the ink circuit may further comprise means for transferring solvent from a solvent cartridge towards the print head.

The invention also concerns a method in which the second part of an ink circuit such as described above is dismounted.

5 This can be obtained after bringing the first part and the second part from a first position in which at least the main reservoir, relative to a plane perpendicular to a direction of free flow of a fluid, is positioned above the second part to a second position in which at least the main reservoir relative to the same plane is positioned below the second part.

10 This movement can be obtained after rotation about a pivot pin about which the first part and the second part are moved.

The second part can then be brought from a position in fluid connection with the first part, to a position in which it is not in fluid connection with the first part, for example by rotating the second part relative to the first part about a pivot pin or hinge.

15 Here again the second part may comprise a removable single-block assembly such as described above.

The invention also concerns a method in which a second part of an ink circuit such as described above can be re-mounted or mounted on the first part.

20 According to yet another aspect, the invention concerns an ink circuit for continuous inkjet printer, comprising:

- a reservoir called main reservoir;
- 4 diaphragm pumps, including:

*an ink transfer pump, to transfer printing ink from an ink reservoir to said main reservoir;

25 *a pump called solvent transfer pump, to transfer a solvent from a solvent reservoir to said main reservoir;

*a pressure pump to pump ink from said main reservoir and send the fluid towards a print head;

30 *a pump to recover fluid from a print head and to send the fluid towards said main reservoir.

A said ink circuit may comprise a singular restriction arranged as a back-flow between the outlet and inlet of the solvent transfer pump.

Preferably, the back-flow line returns part of said pumped fluid directly towards an inlet conduit of the solvent transfer pump, without any intermediate reservoir or cartridge, at a point located upstream of this solvent transfer pump, in the direction of circulation of the fluid. In other words the fluid, via the restriction, is directly returned to a point arranged between a fluid cartridge and the pump itself.

A singular restriction can be arranged in series with a viscous leak (or means for forming a pressure drop by friction loss) restriction, as back-flow between the outlet and inlet of the pressure pump.

Said ink circuit may comprise at least one valve and at least one conduit used to bring the solvent towards the pressure pump.

In said circuit, the pressure pump and the recovery pump may be those of a removable assembly such as described above or according to one of the variants described above.

Said ink circuit may have a structure such as described above or according to one of the variants described above, with a first part, a second part removable relative to the first part, fluid connection means between the ink transfer pump and the main reservoir, and between the solvent transfer pump and the main reservoir, means for mounting and dismounting said second part from the ink circuit, means forming a fluid connection interface between said first and said second part.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE FIGURES

- Figure 1 illustrates a known printer structure.
- Figure 2 illustrates a known structure of a print head for a printer of CIJ type.
- Figure 3 gives an example of embodiment of a hydraulic scheme for CIJ-type printer;
- Figure 4 gives operating curves of a diaphragm pump;

- Figure 5 is a schematic of a fluid circuit, provided with a singular restriction;
- Figure 6 gives operating curves of a circuit comprising a diaphragm pump and a singular restriction;
- 5 - Figure 7 gives operating curves of a circuit comprising a diaphragm pump, a singular restriction and a viscous leak restriction;
- Figure 8 is one embodiment of a removable component or module;
- Figures 9A–9D illustrate dismounting steps of a removable component or module in one embodiment of a fluid circuit;
- 10 - Figure 10 gives a rear view of a fluid circuit embodiment;
- Figures 11A–11E illustrate dismounting steps of a removable component or module.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EMBODIMENTS

First a description is given of an example of a hydraulic scheme for a CIJ–
15 type printer. This example is illustrated in Figure 3. The sub–assembly 1 on the right of the scheme represents the hydraulic part of the print head designed to be connected to the ink circuit.

The dotted ellipse 2 symbolises the umbilical cable, generally several metres long, connecting the ink circuit to the head 1. For example it may contain at least
20 the 4 lines or conduits for hydraulic management of the head: the ink conduit 39, the recovery conduit 42, the purging circuit 43 and the solvent conduit 29. A fifth conduit or line may also be provided to bring a gaseous fluid towards the head for pressurising needs.

The head 1 comprises a solenoid valve 63–66 for each of the lines
25 transiting via the umbilical cable. It also comprises elements 60–62 already described above with reference to Figure 2.

The remainder of the scheme on the left of the umbilical cable 2, concerns the ink circuit itself installed in zone 4' of the printer body or console or cabinet

(in Figure 1). Controlling of the ink circuit can be obtained by means of a controller card installed in zone 5' of the printer body.

It can be seen in Figure 3 that the number of components in this circuit is reduced compared with prior art ink circuit diagrams previously described and intended for top-range machines. Nevertheless, the basic functions and some of the functions described above remain operational without impairing the reliability of the ink circuit.

This example of a hydraulic circuit uses 4 pumps 10, 20, 30, 40 for the different functions of forced fluid circulation. In the rest of this description, pump 30 may also be called the first pump, and pump 40 may be designated as the second pump. Flow dispensing and/or control means in the ink circuit can be provided, for example in the form of solenoid valves, here two-way valves 11, 21, 32 and 37 which can only be 4 in number. Advantageously, these solenoid valves are identical since the required characteristics are substantially the same.

The pumps used here are preferably diaphragm pumps; each thereof fulfils a different function from each of the others.

The characteristics of these pumps are described further on.

The functions of forced fluid circulation included in the main hydraulic functions of the ink circuit are distributed among these pumps: regulated pressurizing of the ink, ink recovery ; solvent pressurizing and dispensing, ink dispensing.

The references 110 200, 201, 231, 232, 250, 202, 233, 310, 301, 302, 331, 332, 401, 402, 370, 371 designate fluid connection means, in general portions of conduits or pipes which connect two elements of the circuit or an element of the circuit and an inlet or outlet port.

A reservoir 50, called main reservoir, contains ink ready to use by the head for printing i.e. a sufficient reserve of suitable quality (viscosity/concentration). It is also the return destination for ink recovered from the head 1 via the gutter 62.

References 12 and 22 respectively designate an ink cartridge and a solvent cartridge. These cartridges are removable and can easily be replaced. They supply the ink and solvent which allow the mixture to be formed that is contained in the main reservoir 50. The solvent is transferred from its cartridge 22 by the pump 20, and the ink

is transferred from its cartridge 12 by means of pump 10. Means allow the connecting of each of these cartridges with the fluid circuit, for example the means 120, 220 described below with reference to Figure 9A.

5 The device may further comprise filters. References 24, 31, 33, 41 designate these filters.

A filter screen (or strainer) 31 can be provided to protect the circuit against coarse impurities originating from the reservoir. Another filter (e.g. 250 μm), upstream of the restriction 35, can be provided to protect the latter against pollution which may risk fouling thereof. Yet another filter 38 can be provided to protect the head
10 against pollution which may infiltrate when disconnecting the head. Preferably, it retains impurities within the range of 30 μm –100 μm .

Preferably, a filter 33 called main filter is used to get rid the ink of impurities which might perturb the formation of droplet jets. This may have high filtering capacity; its lifetime is preferably equivalent to that of the pump 30.

15 Other filters or screens can be present in the circuit to protect the components when dismounting, and in particular when exposing circuits to open air which is generally polluted.

The power of the motor of the pump 30 can be controlled by controller-forming means. For example, these means comprise a micro-processor which transmits
20 printing instructions to the head but also drives the system motors to manage supply to the ink circuit. They may also comprise means for comparing measured data, originating for example from sensors 34 or 54, with reference data to trigger necessary commands e.g. the supply of solvent to the reservoir 50.

25 In the embodiment described here, the fluid connection between the main reservoir 50 and this pump solely comprises a filter 31. A solenoid valve 32 is normally in open position to allow the passing of ink from the reservoir 50. This solenoid valve 32, when placed in its other state i.e. closed to prevent the flow of ink from the reservoir 50 but open to allow the passing of solvent flow from the solvent cartridge 22, allows rinsing of the pump 30 by the solvent.

As a result, the pump 30 draws ink - when the solenoid valve 32 is not commanded to be in a state other than its « normally open » state - from the reservoir 50, through the filter screen (or strainer) 31, and places it under pressure.

Preferably the ink circuit comprises means to damp ink pressure fluctuations or waves caused by functioning of the pump, bringing them to within a few mb. More specifically, via the opening and closing action of the flap valves of the pump 30, the fluid flow is periodically switched between zero pressure and a given pressure, the mean value lying between 2 and 4 bars. This fluctuation may be major and scarcely compatible with the functioning of a CIJ printer. The droplet charging system is synchronized with a phase of the stimulation signal locked on the time when the droplet separates from the jet. Yet this instant is defined for a given jet velocity; any variation in jet velocity induced by these still perceivable pressure fluctuations would periodically de-synchronize the charge in relation to the droplet separation time which would perturb the droplet trajectories and hence the quality of printing.

Said means for damping ink pressure fluctuations or waves are advantageously arranged here at the outlet of the pump 30. In the illustrated embodiment they comprise an « anti-pulse » device 80. This itself comprises two bellows 801 and 802 hydraulically connected via a hydraulic pressure drop connection 803. The assembly can be calculated to have optimum efficiency in the frequency bandwidth used by the pump.

The ink is then able to pass through the main filter 33, and then a filter 38 called a head protection filter. Here again, the path followed by the ink is simple without any additional complex fluid component.

The ink is then sent by the umbilical line 39 towards the head via the solenoid valve 66.

Preferably a branch of the ink circuit, downstream of the pump 30 and of the filter 33, allows part of the ink under pressure to be sent towards the main reservoir 50 thereby creating a back-flow (or feedback) of the pump 30. A 2-way solenoid valve 37 (one inlet towards two outputs) can be arranged on the pathway of the ink, downstream of the pump 30 and of the filter 33; this valve in rest position is normally

open (« NO », as indicated in Figure 3) so as to allow part of the pressurized ink to circulate towards the reservoir 50. On this portion of the pathway there are advantageously arranged a singular restriction 35 and a viscous leak 36 or means 36 to create a pressure drop by friction loss to regulate the ink pressure and flow rate as explained below with reference to Figure 7.

It is specified that a singular restriction is restriction is a localized narrowing of a fluid conduit whose length L is smaller than its diameter d or short compared to its diameter, and which creates a pressure drop insensitive to the viscosity of the fluid passing through it. Advantageously $L/d < 1/2$; according to some examples L/D is between $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ (e.g. $D = 0.3$ mm and $L = 0.1$ mm). It is possible to use a restriction having special behaviour in which L/D is higher than 1 and may reach 10 (in other words, $1 < L/D < 10$).

Similarly a viscous leak 36 or means 36 to create a pressure drop by friction loss comprises a narrowing which is long compared with its diameter, setting up a pressure drop sensitive to, or dependant on, the viscosity of the fluid circulating therein. A viscous leak 36 or means 36 to create a pressure drop by friction loss comprise a narrowing of a fluid conduit whose length L is substantially greater than its diameter D . Advantageously L/D is equal to or higher than 100, for example in the order of 500 (e.g. $L = 500$ mm for $D = 1.1$ mm). It is also possible to use a restriction having special behaviour for which L/D is equal to or higher than 10 (in other words, $L/D \geq 10$).

Advantageously in its other position, the valve 37 facilitates maintenance: it is possible at any time to recover all the ink present in the circuit and to transfer it towards a cartridge 12 allocated to recovery. Switching of the valve 37 to the open position towards this cartridge 12 allows the sending of ink thereto from the circuit passing through the pump 30.

The remainder of the ink is sent towards the head 1 as described above.

As will be understood, the 2-way valves 32 and 37 are only commanded during maintenance sequencing.

The pressure of the ink can be measured at the outlet of the main filter 33 by means of the pressure sensor 34. Advantageously this sensor also allows

measurement of ink temperature. This sensor can also be used by the controller to monitor the filling of the cartridge 12 during a maintenance operation to purge the circuit of ink. When the cartridge is full the pressure in the circuit continuously increases. The controller can compare this value with a threshold which, if exceeded, causes the
5 stoppage of pumping. Similarly, if the signal from the sensor becomes unstable whilst remaining weak, the controller can infer that the pump is agitating or churning air and that therefore the reservoir is empty.

The recovery and optionally purging of fluids from the head 1 is ensured by the pump 40 which sets up a negative pressure respectively applied to the recovery 42
10 and purge 43 lines of the umbilical cable. In the head 1, this negative pressure is transmitted to the gutter and the droplet generator under the control of the solenoid valves 63 and 64 respectively.

A protective filter 41, upstream of the pump 40, can be provided to retain polluting elements (particles) of large size which may have been aspirated into the
15 gutter. The air/ink mixture leaving the pump is directly repelled towards the main reservoir 50.

Much demand is placed on this pump 40 since it operates permanently at fast rate and conveys a two-phase air/ink mixture. It is the free flow characteristic of the pump which is called upon here: the pump then operates with practically no pressure
20 drop downstream, undergoes no or only little stress and provides no or little pressure. Control over the motor power allows adjustment of the gutter flow rate to recovery needs (these needs may change as a function of the conditions of use of the printer). This control can be performed by the controller which sends instructions in relation to various parameters (e.g. temperature) in particular to optimise solvent consumption.

25 The solvent, brought from the cartridge 22, can be dispensed by means of the pump 20 and dispensing means for example comprising a set of valves 11, 21, 32, 65:

- towards the main reservoir 50 and/or towards the motor 30 (for cleaning thereof) for example by means of a 2-way valve (1 inlet towards 2 outlets) 21
30 when so commanded (changeover to NC);

- towards the head 1, for cleaning thereof for example again by means of a valve such as valve 21, in this case not commanded, the solvent taking the NO pathway of the valve 21 to return to the inlet of the pump 20 (for example via a back-flow or a feedback, as described below).

5 With this system it is possible to bring the solvent to the head at a pressure close to the ink pressure to allow the changeover of the jet to solvent without destabilising the jet (risk of soiling) in order to clean the head.

 It also allows the dispensing of determined quantities of solvent towards the main reservoir 50, to correct ink viscosity.

10 The diaphragm pump 20 allows the dispensing of solvent. A filter 24 can be arranged on the pathway of the solvent downstream of the pump.

 According to one embodiment, the valve 21, of « 1-2 » type (1 inlet-2 outlets), allows the dispensing of solvent towards the main reservoir 50 and towards the pump 30 if the valve 32 is switched to allow the passing of solvent thereto. The solvent is sent to the head 1 when the valve 65 is in open position. There is therefore no specific valve, in the part dedicated to managing the solvent, to send solvent towards the head 1.

15 In particular, the pump 30 is sensitive to drying of the ink in the event of a more or less extended period of non-use. To rinse the pump with solvent, solvent is sent to it (for example by actuating the valves 21 and 32) and the solvent pump 20 is set in operation; the solvent is then propelled towards the pump in its through direction (or flow or throughflow direction). More generally, provision can be made so that all the hydraulic elements of the ink circuit and of the head are able to be reached by the solvent, following adapted sequencing of the pump or solenoid valve commands.

20 Preferably, as illustrated in Figure 3, the solvent pump e.g. through a filter 24, feeds a cavity 23 via an inlet located in a so-called lower part thereof. The upper part of the cavity is insulated and encloses an air bubble 28. Another connection point called median connection, located above the inlet arranged in the lower part, connects the cavity 23 to the inlet of the valve 21. As soon as the pump 20 is set in operation, it draws solvent and feeds the cavity 23. The solvent originates either from the cartridge 22 or from a back-flow (described below). In the cavity 23, the level of solvent passes above

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the median connection point and the air bubble is isolated. When the valve 21 is actuated (NC) the pump supplies sufficient pressure to the solvent circuit to send solvent towards the reservoir 50 and towards the pump 30.

When the valve 21 is at rest (NO), the solvent circuit is configured to feed solvent under a pressure close to the pressure of the ink when the jet is formed at the head (this is the case when cleaning the head 1). The median take-off is recycled towards the inlet of the pump 20, advantageously through a singular restriction 25, which allows convenient regulation of the pressure and flow rate of solvent by the pump 20, as explained below with reference to Figures 4 and 6. Advantageously, the outlet of the restriction leads directly to the intake of the pump via which the solvent arrives from the cartridge 22, or to a point on the conduit 200 (which brings the solvent from the solvent cartridge) arranged upstream of the pump 20, between the outlet of the solvent cartridge and the intake of this same solvent in the pump. If the pressure is insufficient in the cavity 23, the flow rate in the restriction 25 will drop, as in the pump 20, which will tend to increase the pressure at the terminals thereof, conforming to the curves in Figures 4 and 6 (in which it can be seen that the pressure/flow rate characteristic of the pump, with command being constant, has a negative slope).

It will therefore be understood that an equilibrium situation may result from this system in which, for a given pressure in the cavity, the flow rates of the restriction and of the pump are identical. The variation in volume of solvent in the closed circuit, due to variations in volume of the air bubble, is naturally offset by a supply of solvent from the solvent cartridge which is directly connected to the intake of the pump 20.

When the pump 20 is set in operation, the pressure increases in the cavity and compresses the air bubble. This then acts as the anti-pulse system 80 and damps the pressure waves caused by the diaphragm pump when the head is fed with solvent. The solvent may take the median conduit towards the restriction 25 whose flow rate is determined by the pressure difference at its terminals. It is noted that this cavity 23 has the sole function of reducing pressure fluctuations, but does not take part in

regulating the pressure and flow rate of the pump. In other words, a regulation loop with the restriction 25 can be used without the said cavity 23.

If the head cleaning valve 65 is open, the solvent under pressure is applied to the inlet of the droplet generator. The solvent consumed is then naturally drawn from the removable solvent cartridge 22 so as substantially to maintain an identical flow rate in the restriction 25 and the pump 20 (the flow rate of the jet being low compared with the flow rate in the restriction 25).

When the valve 21 is actuated (NC) (the case when it is sought to correct viscosity) the median connection of the cavity is placed in communication with the inlet, that is open and at rest, of the valve 11 which is of 2-1 type (2 inlets - 1 outlet). The circuit continues through the pump 10, which even at rest is in the through-state, and arrives at the main reservoir 50. When the pump 20 is set in operation, solvent drawn from the cartridge 22 is brought into the cavity 23 and causes compression of the air bubble until the pressure drop in the circuit: valve 21- valve 11- pump 10 at rest - reservoir 50 is overcome and the solvent is able to flow into the reservoir 50. The flow characteristics of this circuit can be experimentally identified to relate the actuation time of the pump 20 with the quantity of transferred solvent. These data can be memorised by the control means.

The ink used in CIJ printers is partly composed of solvent that is often volatile. The circulation of this ink by the jet and the ink circuit causes evaporation of the solvent the result of which is to change the rheological characteristics (viscosity in particular) of the ink and to deteriorate the functioning of the machine. It is therefore sought to readjust the viscosity (or concentration) of the ink by periodically adding a quantity of solvent in relation to the level of viscosity change. Viscosity can be measured, for a given jet velocity servo-controlled by ink pressure, by identifying the pair (Pressure, Temperature) representing the viscosity of the ink. Knowing the difference in viscosity and the quantity of ink to be adjusted, the controller infers therefrom the quantity of solvent to be added and/or the actuation time of the solvent pump when the valve 21 is actuated.

The main reservoir 50 is fed with ink as soon as the level, related to printing consumption, falls to below a certain value. For this purpose, the intake of the diaphragm pump 10 is connected to the ink cartridge 12 via the valve 11 which sets up a connection when it is actuated. The outlet of the pump preferably leads directly into the reservoir 50. The commands of the pump 10 and of the valve 11 can be associated with the low-level detector 51 to re-supply ink if the ink level falls below the detector 51. It is recalled here that the pump 10, on account of its technology, is in a through-state when at rest in the direction of active flow and, since the valve 11 when at rest connects the intake of the pump to the solvent function, the management of the ink does not interfere with the adding of solvent when it is at rest. In other words, the two functions of adding solvent and adding ink are made independent by the position of the valve 11 which causes the flows of solvent or ink to be exclusive.

Maintenance functions, preferably automated, can also be carried out.

For example a draining function of the main reservoir allows the content of the reservoir 50 to be led back to the cartridge 12. For this purpose, an empty (or rather non-full) cartridge is arranged at the location provided. In practice, a specifically packaged cartridge is used in which a vacuum has been set up; it comprises a flexible bag, the vacuum making its complete emptying possible. The valve 11 being at rest, valve 37 is actuated which places the outlet of the main filter 33 in hydraulic communication with the inlet of the cartridge 12. When the pressure pump 30 is set in operation the content of the reservoir 50 is repelled into the cartridge.

As will already have been understood, the architecture of the ink circuit presented here makes it possible to overcome the use of closing or self-closing connections which are costly.

A diaphragm pump comprises a cavity whose volume is alternately caused to be variable via the back and forth movement of a piston actuated by a motor. Two flap valves operating in opposition are placed between the cavity and respectively a fluid inlet path and a fluid outlet path. The inlet flap valve opens when the volume of the cavity increases (respectively the outlet flap valve closes) and it closes (respectively the outlet flap valve opens) when the volume of the cavity decreases. The duty point,

characterized by the flow rate/pressure (or flow rate/ vacuum) pair provided by the pump will depend on the viscosity of the fluid, on the pressure drop in the inlet and/or outlet lines, on the power supplied to the motor (torque/speed) and on the characteristics of the pump parts.

5 The performance of a pump is characterized by a network of curves giving the pressure or vacuum obtained as a function of flow rate for different powers supplied to the motor, one example of these curves being given in Figure 4.

This Figure gives a network of curves defining the characteristic of pressure behaviour as a function of flow rate, of a diaphragm pump used as an example.

10 For a given command voltage, the characteristic is a decreasing function, which starts at a maximum pressure for a zero flow rate and reaches zero pressure for a maximum flow rate called free flow rate. Each curve is defined by a given operating voltage (and hence by a given speed of rotation) as per Table 1 below:

15

Table 1

Command voltage in Volts	Rotation speed in rpm
24	3700
22	3300
20	2900
18	2600
16	2200
14	1800
12	1400
10	1000

The power supplied to the motor (which may be of « brushless » technology for example, for which the supply voltage determines the speed of rotation hence the cycle frequency of the pump) is directly related to the command voltage of the motor which translates as a given speed of rotation.

20

This type of pump has certain characteristics:

- the pump when at rest is in the through-state in the direction from the inlet to the outlet (see the direction of the apex of the triangles arranged in each of the pumps in Figure 3) and in a non-through state in the opposite direction;

5 - it is self-priming, in the limit of its air suction capacity if a column of liquid is to be lifted. For proper functioning it is preferable that the pump should be in flooded suction, or submerged, at rest as well as its upstream hydraulic circuit;

 - its lifetime, characterized by a number of cycles before failure under given environmental conditions (temperature, pressure, flow rate, fluid composition), is
10 limited.

The motorisation, whose choice is partly determined by the expected cost of the pump, and the limited performance level of this type of pump have consequences on the functions of ink pressurization and recovery.

In particular, as explained below, the duty point determined by the supply voltage of the motor and the back-flow rate defined by the singular restriction
15 do not entirely cover the expected scope of operation of a printer (in particular the extent of variation in temperature withstood by the inks).

However these pumps can replace other pumps, in particular gear pumps usually used for an ink circuit.

20 They can be used here for:

- the transfer of ink or solvent from one point to another in the ink circuit ; in this case the pressure (or negative pressure) to be obtained with said pump allows static pressures of the fluids to be overcome related to the different levels between the origin and destination of fluid transfer ;

25 - the setting up of negative pressure for recovery and purging from the head ;

- the pressurizing of ink and optionally of solvent towards the head.

Since this type of pump when at rest is in a through-state in one direction, the flow can be blocked either by inter-positioning a hydraulic member (e.g. a

solenoid valve) or by avoiding a difference in positive pressure between the inlet and outlet of the pump.

The quantity of liquid transferred by a pump can be evaluated by a number of pump cycles, the hydrostatic conditions upstream and downstream of the pump being kept within known values (to within the desired accuracy); the quantity of fluid displaced per cycle can be previously identified (in general by experimentation) under these conditions.

It can be noted that, for a diaphragm pump, the setting up of negative pressure for recovery and purging from the head is restrictive. The fluid suctioned from the gutter is two-phase (air + ink) since recovery is obtained by air entrainment effect on the ink. This requires a major air flow-rate characteristic (high cycle frequency) and almost permanent demand placed thereupon during the functioning of the printer.

One example of the regulated pressurizing of a pumped fluid (for example the ink and optionally the solvent of a circuit such as described above) by a diaphragm pump can be explained with reference to Figure 5.

This schematic illustrates a diaphragm pump 100 actuated by the motor M itself supplied with a given power.

This pump allows a fluid to be pumped from a reservoir 103.

At the outlet of the pump the fluid can either return to the reservoir via a singular restriction (pressure drop) 102 or escape via a valve 104.

When the valve 104 is closed, the pump causes the fluid to circulate in the loop which starts at the reservoir 103, passes through the pump 100 and returns to the reservoir 103 via the restriction 102.

However the flow rate Q of a singular restriction (whose length is short compared with its diameter) is dependent on the pressure difference ΔP at its terminals through the equation $\Delta P = R_h(\rho) \times Q^2$, where R_h is hydraulic resistance dependent on the density ρ of the fluid but very little upon its viscosity.

Figure 6 illustrates the network of curves (pressure as a function of flow rate) of the pump used as an example, these curves being defined by a given operating voltage (and hence by a given speed of rotation) in accordance with Table 1 given above.

Also, the characteristic ΔP is given as a function of Q of the singular restriction used in the example for 3 different temperatures ($T_1=0^\circ\text{C}$, $T_2=25^\circ\text{C}$, $T_3=50^\circ\text{C}$).

It is noted that the characteristics of this type of restriction depend very little on temperature since they are sensitive to the density of the fluid which itself is scarcely dependent on temperature.

It will be understood that having regard to the flow rate/pressure characteristics of the pump, equilibrium is set up at the intersection of the characteristic curve of the pump defined by the control voltage of the motor and the restriction curve. A duty point is thereby defined which relates the power supplied to the motor with pressure (Figure 4).

The pressure supplied by the system can therefore be commanded and/or regulated by acting on the power supplied to the motor. A pressure regulation system can therefore be used and the motor power adjusted to reach a previously defined set pressure.

When the valve 104 is open the pump outlet flow rate increases and, in accordance with the curves of pump characteristics, this causes the pressure to be lowered. The regulation system can correct the commanding of the pump to restore the pressure insofar as the flow rate added by opening the valve is low compared with the flow rate through the restriction 102.

This is a scheme close to the one explained above which can be used in the solvent circuit already presented above, with the pump 20 and a restriction 25 arranged on a back-flowline of this pump.

Another scheme can be used in the circuit which comprises the pump 30, the restriction 35, the reservoir 50 and the valve 66, the pressure being measured by means 34.

It uses a viscous leak 36 (or means 36 to create a pressure drop by friction loss) associated with a singular restriction 35.

A viscous leak can be formed by means of a narrowing whose length is long compared with its diameter, for example a pipe of length between 50 cm and 1 m and diameter of between 0.5 mm and 2mm. Its behaviour obeys a different law to that of

a singular restriction. The relationship between the difference in pressure ΔP at its terminals and the flow rate Q is the following: $\Delta P = R_h(\mu) \times Q$, where R_h is the hydraulic resistance which is dependent in a linear fashion on the viscosity of the fluid μ .

The inks used in CIJ printers have viscosities which are highly dependent on their temperature. To maintain jet velocity constant when the temperature varies, the system regulating jet velocity, as we have seen, adjusts the pressure of the ink by acting on the voltage of the motor of the pump 30. Therefore:

- at low temperature the pressure will be high and more demand will be placed on the pump;

- conversely, at high temperature the pressure will be lower and less demand will be placed on the pump.

If the two types of restrictions are placed in series (viscous leak 36 and singular restriction 35) in the pump back-flow as illustrated in the schematic in Figure 3, the characteristics ΔP as a function of Q will then be of the type of those illustrated in the graph in Figure 7. It can be seen here that the characteristics strongly depend on the temperature of the ink ($T_1 = 0^\circ\text{C}$, $T_2 = 25^\circ\text{C}$ and $T_3 = 50^\circ\text{C}$). The duty point of the pump will therefore change as a function of temperature.

The use of a viscous leak in the back-flow of a diaphragm pump allows an improvement in two detrimental aspects related to the use of this type of pump:

- its lifetime is strongly dependent on the demand placed upon it (power, speed of rotation). In the application described here, the duty point shifts favourably as a function of temperature since its trend tends to reduce stress on the pump whilst the system regulating jet velocity, at the same time, tends to increase this stress. Overall, the lifetime of the pump is therefore improved;

- the operating range of the printer as a function of ink circuit temperature applicable without adjustment (optionally manual) is thereby widened and allows coverage of a broader field of application of the printer. This offsets part of the performance limits of diaphragm pumps.

As seen above, strong demand is placed on 2 of the 4 pumps which are in permanent operation as soon as the machine is used for printing: these are pump 30

called the « pressure» and pump 40 called the recovery pump. It is these pumps which will have the shortest lifetime. Also the main filter 33 gradually becomes clogged during the functioning of the machine until it needs to be replaced by a new filter.

A maintenance module (or component) 70 has therefore been designed comprising a casing which contains the pressure pump 30, the recovery pump 40 and the main filter 33. Preferably the filter is sized to have a lifetime comparable to that of the pumps. On this account a given lifetime can be assigned to the maintenance module itself. In practice, a user of the printer may replace a maintenance module e.g. as a preventive measure after each time lapse corresponding to the standard lifetime of the module. This module 70 is illustrated and described herein as having a casing. However it may also be a plate or board such as plate 73 to which the pressure pump 30, the recovery pump 40 and the main filter 33 are connected without any other side walls. As a further variant, the plate 73 is associated with flexible walls, the assembly therefore being closed but only the wall 73 is solid. The embodiment with a closed casing is advantageous since the casing acts as mechanical protection for the components contained therein. It is this embodiment which is described below but the other embodiments can easily be inferred therefrom, in particular since the plate 73 remains substantially the same for each thereof.

The first pump, the second pump and the filter are disposed on a same side of plate 73.

The maintenance module has a compact connection interface with the remainder of the ink circuit. This interface connects the inlets and outlets 71₁–71₆ of the 3 elements grouped together in the module, to the inlets and outlets of the remainder of the ink circuit. This interface is advantageously formed in the plate or board 73 from which the inlet and outlets 71₁–71₆ therefore emerge. This interface is advantageously formed in a plane of said plate or board 73.

Finally the module 70 also contains the fluid connection means between each of the elements it contains (the pressure pump 30, the recovery pump 40 and the main filter 33) and the inlet and outlet associated with this element. These fluid connection means correspond to the conduits 301, 302, 331, 332, 401, 402 in Figure 3.

One problem which is then raised is the replacement of this maintenance module quickly and cleanly with no risk of ink flow during the operation. A certain number of constraints are to be taken into account (as mentioned above):

5 *the pressure pump 30 is advantageously kept in load, during functioning thereof to avoid air entering the pressure circuit. The pump is statically fed with ink.

 *for cost-related reasons it is sought to obtain a very simple module connection system, in particular without self-closing connectors.

10 One example of embodiment of a said module is given in Figure 8. It is in the form of a parallelepiped module which contains the pressurising pump 30, the recovery pump 40 and the main filter 33 and, as explained above, the lines which place them in fluid connection with the inlets and outlets of the remainder of the ink circuit.

15 In Figure 8 the inlets and outlets can be seen of the 3 elements grouped together in the module which allow connection of the module to the remainder of the ink circuit:

- an inlet 71₁ (or first inlet) for intake of ink into the pump 30;
- an outlet (or first outlet) 71₂ for discharge of ink from the pump 30;
- an inlet 71₃ (or second inlet) for intake of ink into the filter 33;
- an outlet 71₄ (or second outlet) for discharge of ink from the filter 33;
- 20 - an inlet 71₅ (or third inlet) for intake of fluid into the pump 40;
- an outlet 71₆ (or third outlet) for discharge of the fluid from the pump 40, in the direction of the main reservoir.

25 Preferably these inlets and outlets are arranged on one same surface or plate 73 of the module. They may be grouped together on one same plate or board 75 so as to raise them relative to the surface 73, which facilitates their positioning opposite the inlets and outlets of the fixed part of the circuit. The first, second and third fluid inlets, and the first, second and third fluid outlets are disposed in a same plane of said plate.

30 The inlets 71₁, 71₃, 71₅ cooperate with the corresponding outlets 73₁, 73₃, 73₅ of the remainder of the fluid circuit. The outlets 71₂, 71₄, 71₆ cooperate with the corresponding inlets 73₂, 73₄, 73₆ of the remainder of the fluid circuit. These outlets 73₁,

73₃, 73₅ and inlets 73₂, 73₄, 73₆ can be seen in Figure 9C. They are arranged so as to position an inlet or outlet of the module 70 opposite each thereof.

As will have been already understood it is therefore possible, between the maintenance module and the other components of the ink circuit, to do away with the use of closing or self-closing connections which are costly.

As can be seen in Figure 8, each of the ends of the conduits intended to form a fluid connection can be equipped with an O-ring 72₁ - 72₆ which, in functioning position, comes to lie against a concentric gasket surface having a corresponding opening on the fixed part. The inlets and outlets 73₁ - 73₆ of this latter part have the same type of configuration as the inlets and outlet of the module 70, with conduit ends each of which has a concentric gasket surface.

The references 91₁, 91₂, 91₃ and 91₄ designate screws, for example captive screws, which allow the securing of the component onto the remainder of the ink circuit. Other securing solutions known to persons skilled in the art can be used.

One of the surfaces of the module, preferably the one on which the fluid inlets and outlets are arranged, further comprises means 77, 79 to allow mounting and dismounting of the module 70. These means may allow the defining of a hinge (or pivot pin) about which the module is able to pivot. They may be in the form of retractable pins returned by a spring 77, 79.

According to one embodiment, each thereof comprises a cylinder in which a spring 77₁ and 79₁ is able to slide under the action of bearing means 77₂ and 79₂, e.g. a lug that an operator can easily move with a finger between a locked position as in Figure 8 and an unlocked position. At one end of each cylinder there is provided an opening through which a locking member 77₃ and 79₃ can easily enter and exit and thereby be placed in a locking position (as in Figure 8) and an unlocked position (in which the locking member is at least partly engaged in the cylinder).

The two cylinders of the means 77, 79 are arranged aligned along an axis intended to be an axis of rotation, the locking members 77₃ and 79₃ coming to cooperate with corresponding members on the remainder of the machine. Conversely, it is the remainder of the machine which may comprise one or more locking members of

this type, the module being equipped with corresponding means to cooperate with this or these members, the assembly forming means to allow the mounting and dismounting of the module.

As will be seen below, advantageously the inlet orifices 71₁, 71₃, 71₅ are arranged in a position closer to this rotational axis than the outlet orifices 71₂, 71₄, 71₆.

Electrical connection wires (not illustrated in the Figures) to bring the supply voltages to the pumps (pressure pump, recovery pump) can emerge from the casing for connection thereof, when the module is mounted, to printer powering means 3. These wires may for example be connected to a connector (not illustrated in the Figures) of the printer.

One embodiment of a device for mounting a module such as described above is illustrated in Figures 9A–9B.

It comprises two plates or boards 81, 83, which do not lie in the same plane (for example they are perpendicular to each other).

The components of the ink circuit are distributed over these two plates.

One (plate 81) supports at least one component (in practice: the maintenance module 70) that can easily and cleanly be replaced. The other (plate 83) supports the parts of the circuit retaining large volumes of fluid, in particular the reservoir 50 and the anti-pulse 80. The other components can advantageously be positioned at the rear of the plate 81 in the space delimited between this plate and plate 83. These components can also be dismounted without any risk of spillage when the plates are in maintenance position, as illustrated in Figure 9B.

Advantageously the plates 81 and 83 are secured to one another, for example held at 90° to each other. A space delimited between them can also be delimited laterally by side plates or cheeks 831, 832.

The module 70 is held in position by its means 77, 79 along one edge of the plate 81. This edge is itself provided with means corresponding to these means 77, 79, intended to cooperate therewith. These may be two cylindrical tubes 77', 79' for example (that can be seen in Figure 9D), arranged aligned and each provided with an

opening at one of its ends arranged towards the outside of the device so as to cooperate with the locking members 77₃ and 79₃.

Reference 731 designates one face of the device, substantially perpendicular to the plate 73, but having an intersection therewith along an edge opposite the edge on which the means 77, 79 are arranged, in other words opposite the hinge or pivot pin.

Preferably the plates have two functional locking positions such as illustrated in Figures 9A and 9B:

* Figure 9A : a so-called normal functioning position in which the circuit parts (and in particular the main reservoir) arranged on or associated with the plate 83 lie fully or at least in part above the module 70, or at least above the pressure pump, so that the module 70 is statically fed with fluid under gravity (when loaded) from the main reservoir; more precisely the expression « above the module 70 » means above a plane P (Figure 9A) perpendicular to a direction of free flow of a fluid or perpendicular to the direction of the gravitational field and which substantially coincides with the wall 731 (which lies facing upwards in normal functioning position). Figure 9A shows the intersection p formed of this plane with one edge of the device;

* Figure 9B: this shows another position so-called maintenance position, in which the circuit parts arranged on or associated with the plate 83 lie underneath the module 70 so that this module can be dismounted without any risk of fluid flowing from the module 70. More precisely, the expression « underneath the module 70 » means underneath any part of the module 70, and in particular underneath a plane P' which substantially coincides with the plate 81.

It is possible to lock the assembly in each of these positions via locking means, for example one or more side tongues 97 forming a spring which come to cooperate with one and/or the other of the two vertical uprights of the printer body which surrounds the access opening to the ink circuit as can be seen in Figure 11C. These means can be arranged on one and/or the other of the side plates or cheeks 831, 832. The changeover from one position to the other is obtained by rotating the plates 81, 83 about a pivot pin 85. In normal functioning position (Figure 9A) the plate 83 is horizontal

and plate 81 is vertical. In maintenance position (Figure 9B), the plate 83 is vertical and the plate 81 is horizontal. Figures 9B–9D give detailed illustrations of various maintenance steps, the plates 81, 83 therefore remaining in the position shown Figure 9B.

The two plates 81, 83 are preferably secured together along a common axis of rotation 85. They may therefore jointly change over from one position called the normal functioning position to the other so-called maintenance position.

It can also be seen that the assembly of the two plates 81, 83 is attached to a plate 95 which is secured onto the body 3 of the printer (as can be seen in Figures 11A - 11E). A lower edge of this plate allows the defining of the axis of rotation 85. This plate 95 can be provided with means 105 for positioning and holding the cartridges 12, 22 in place.

In maintenance position (Figure 9B), the inlets and outlets $71_1 - 71_6$ of the exchangeable component 70, grouped together at the connection interface, lie substantially in one same horizontal plane. The fixed part of the connection interface is on the plate 81 and is then arranged underneath the component 70.

In this position, before dismounting, the component is able to be drained under gravity into the elements arranged on or associated with the plate 83, and in particular towards the main reservoir 50. Also the sealing of the connections between the two parts of the interface is achieved by means of individual O-rings for each inlet and outlet as already described above.

On dismounting, the inlets and outlets of the component 70 are first oriented downwards (Figure 9B), and any fluid still contained in the component 70 is therefore able to flow towards the elements arranged on or associated with the plate 83, and in particular towards the main reservoir 50 and the anti-pulse 80; this is particularly the case for the main filter 33 which has a large retention volume. For maximum prevention of this type of flow, the separating movement (tilting) between the component 70 and the fixed connection interface is guided in rotation about the pin 87 (on the changeover from Figure 9B to Figure 9C) defined by the means 77, 79, lying substantially in the plane of the interface. This pin is offset on the edge of the interface, more specifically on the edge of the plate 81.

The interface is designed so that the inlet orifices of the component are closer to the pin 87 than the outlet orifices. Therefore, when separating the two parts of the interface and, on account of the gradual relaxing of the compressed seals, an air intake is formed at the inlet orifices before the outlet orifices are opened. The inventors have ascertained that under these conditions and under the action of the surface tensions retaining the fluids against the walls of the cavities, no or only little residual flow of fluid occurs from the main filter 33.

The component 70 is then rotated about the pivot pin 87, preferably by about 180°.

On completion of this rotation (figure 9C), the connection interface of the maintenance module comes to lie face upwards and there is no longer any risk of residual fluid flow. The module can then be separated from the pivot pin 87 (Figure 9D) and placed in a sealed container (bag) for evacuation.

The installing of a new module is carried out in reverse order: the new module 70 is initially positioned with its connection interface facing upwards. It is secured to the pin 87, and then tilted from its initial position so that the two parts of the interface come to be positioned facing one another, and it is then immobilised by the securing system 91 (screw, fastener,...). Finally the plates 81 and 83 are tilted towards the normal functioning position, which re-places at least the pressure pump 30 in flooded suction or in a loaded state. The printer is again ready for operation.

As will be appreciated from the above, the exchange of the maintenance module is made quickly and cleanly without any specific tooling. It can be carried out by an operator not having any dedicated training and does not require the prior draining of reservoirs, conduits, pumps or filters.

The views in Figures 9A–9B are views from one same side, the side of the module 70.

Figure 10 gives a view of the same device from the side opposite the module 70. On the plate 83, the securing can therefore be seen firstly of the main reservoir 50 and secondly of the anti-pulse device 80. Advantageously, these two parts are covered by a lid which is identical.

In the space between the two plates 83, 81 the other means of the fluid circuit can be arranged, in particular the pumps 10, 20, the cavity 23, the filters and the valves 11, 21, 32, 37.

In each of these Figures the means 105 can be seen which allow the positioning and holding in place of the ink and solvent cartridges 12, 22. These are illustrated in Figure 11A in operating position above the module 70. The bottom part of these cartridges communicates via orifices 120, 220 (see Figure 9A) with the fluid circuit. During an exchange operation of the module 70, first these two cartridges 12, 22 are removed, then the operations are performed that are described above with reference to Figures 9A–9D.

Figures 11A–11E illustrate the body 3 of the printer, which comprises the elements already described above with reference to Figure 1. In particular, in the lower part there can be seen the ink circuit 4, of the type described above with reference to the preceding figures.

Figure 11A illustrates the body of the printer of which one side panel has been removed: the cartridges 12, 22 can therefore be seen and the module 70 in operating position.

To remove this module 70 first the cartridges 12, 22 are removed, this is the stage illustrated in Figure 11B. As explained above with reference to Figure 9B, the assembly of plates 81, 83 is then rotated to bring the module 70 to the top position (Figure 11C). This tilting assembly 81, 83 is immobilized by action of the locking means 97 already described above. Next, the module 70 undergoes a rotation about the pin 87: this is the stage illustrated in Figure 11D. It is then possible to remove the module 70 and optionally to replace it with a new module.

One aspect of the invention therefore also concerns a CIJ printer body 3 provided with an ink circuit, whose components are arranged on three plates, one fixed plate 95 and two plates 81, 83 mobile in rotation each relative to a horizontal axis defined on the fixed plate. The axis of rotation of each plate is substantiated by a hinge 85.

One of the mobile plates 81 is able to receive a maintenance module 70 that can easily be separated from its base itself fixed onto the plate 81. The other mobile

plate 83 particularly supports the main reservoir and the anti-pulse 80 which are hydraulically connected to the maintenance module. The other components can advantageously be placed at the rear of the plate 81 in the space delimited between this plate and plate 83. These components can also be dismounted without any risk of spillage when the plates are in maintenance position as illustrated in Figure 9B.

The three plates and the hinges are arranged so that two operational configurations are possible, described above with reference to Figures 9A and 9B.

A description has been given on how to obtain an ink circuit doing away with usual costly fluid components, which allows the cost of the ink circuit to be reduced whilst maintaining acceptable performance and reliability.

It is thereby possible to meet the need for a printer that is simplified from a technical viewpoint, and hence low-cost, whilst ensuring user satisfaction in terms of performance levels of basic functionalities and machine reliability.

The hydraulic circuit presented herein is simple: it minimizes the number of components, and simplifies the assembly of the ink circuit.

When using a machine of this type, a user is able to minimize risks concerning the availability factor of the machine following from the need for curative maintenance, by setting up of preventive maintenance operations that are automated or planned and have no significant impact on cost. It is recalled that:

- * the objective of automatic preventive maintenance operations is to guarantee the functional integrity of the components at every operating phase of the machine. In particular they allow clogging of pumps and solenoid valves to be avoided and the fouling or the obstruction of lines when the ink has dried;

- * planned maintenance operations consist for example of exchanging those components having a limited lifetime under optimal conditions of servicing time and cleanliness.

The invention can be applied to a printer such as described above with reference to Figure 1. This particularly comprises a print head 1, in general offset from the body of the printer 3, and connected thereto by means e.g. in the form of a flexible

umbilical cable 2 grouping together the hydraulic and electrical connections allowing functioning of the head.

Mention was made above of means forming a controller or control means. These means comprise a microcomputer for example or a microprocessor which transmits printing instructions to the head but also drives the motors and valves of the system to manage feeding of ink and/or solvent to the circuit and recovery of the ink-air mixture from the head. They are therefore programmed for this purpose. These controller-forming means or these control means are arranged in part 5' of the system or printer body.

In the various embodiments, and in particular on figures 3, 5, 8, 9A-11E conduits or pipes connect the different elements (pumps, filters...etc) together.

CLAIMS

1. A removable single-block assembly (70) for an ink circuit of a continuous inkjet printer, comprising a plate (73) having a first fluid inlet (71₁), a second fluid inlet (71₃) and a third fluid inlet (71₅) and a first fluid outlet (71₂), a second fluid outlet (71₄), and a third fluid outlet (71₆), this assembly further comprising:

- a first pump (30), called pressure pump, a second pump (40), called recovery pump and a filter (33),

- fluid connection means (301, 302, 331, 332, 401, 402) to allow fluids to flow :

- * between said first fluid inlet (71₁), said first pump and said first fluid outlet (71₂),

- * between said second fluid inlet (71₃), said filter (33) and said second fluid outlet (71₄),

- * and between said third fluid inlet (71₅), said second pump and said third fluid outlet (71₆),

- means (77-79) for mounting and dismounting the assembly on the ink circuit.

2. The assembly according to claim 1, at least one among the first pump (30) and the second pump (40) being a diaphragm pump.

3. The assembly according to one of claims 1 to 2, the means (77, 79) for mounting and dismounting the assembly on the ink circuit allowing a rotation of the assembly to be performed about a pivot pin (87).

4. The assembly according to claim 3, the fluid inlet orifices (71₁, 71₃, 71₅) being closer to the pivot pin (87) than the fluid outlet orifices (71₂, 71₄, 71₆).

5. The assembly according to one of claims 1 to 4, the fluid inlet orifices (71₁, 71₃, 71₅) and the fluid outlet orifices (71₂, 71₄, 71₆) being arranged on or in said plate (73), or on or in a plate (75) arranged on a surface (73).

5 6. The assembly according to one of claims 1 to 5, each fluid inlet and each fluid outlet comprising a conduit end provided with a sealing gasket (72₁ - 72₆).

7. The assembly according to one of claims 1 to 6, the means (77-79) for mounting and dismounting the single-block assembly (70) on the ink circuit comprising means (77₁, 77₂, 79₁, 79₂) for bringing a locking member (77₃, 79₃) to a locking position of the single-block assembly (70) and to return it to an unlocked position of the single-block assembly (70).

8. The assembly according to one of claims 1 to 7 further comprising means (91₁-91₄) for holding said casing in fixed position against the ink circuit.

9. The assembly according to one of claims 1 to 8, the plate (73) being part of a casing (70) or a bag which contains the first pump (30), the second pump (40), the filter (33), and the fluid connection means (301, 302, 331, 332, 401, 402).

10. The ink circuit of a continuous inkjet printer, comprising:
- a first part comprising a pump (10), also called ink transfer pump, a reservoir called main reservoir (50), said pump (10) allowing the transfer of printing ink from an ink cartridge (12) to said main reservoir (50), another pump (20), also called solvent transfer pump, to transfer solvent from a solvent cartridge (22) to said main reservoir (50),

- fluid connection means (21, 110, 201, 232, 233) between said ink transfer pump (10) and the main reservoir (50), and between said solvent transfer pump (20) and the main reservoir (50),

5 - means (77', 79') for mounting and dismounting a removable assembly or single-block assembly (70), according to any of claims 1 to 9, said single-block assembly being removable relative to the first part,,

- means (73₁– 73₆) forming a fluid connection interface between said first part and said second part.

10 11. The ink circuit according to claim 10, at least one among the ink transfer pump (10) and solvent transfer pump (20) being a diaphragm pump.

12. The ink circuit according to claim 10 or 11 comprising means (85) to bring the first part and the single-block assembly (70) from a first position in which at least the main reservoir (50), relative to a plane perpendicular to a direction of free flow of a fluid, is arranged in full or at least in part above the single-block assembly (70) or above the pressure pump, to a second position in which at least the main reservoir relative to the same plane is arranged underneath the single-block assembly (70).

20 13. The ink circuit according to claim 12 comprising a pivot pin (85) about which the first part and the single-block assembly (70) can be moved in rotation.

14. The ink circuit according to one of claims 10 to 13, comprising means (87) to bring the single-block assembly (70) from a fluid connection position with the first part, to a position in which it is not in fluid connection with the first part.

25 15. The ink circuit according to claim 14 comprising a pivot pin (87) about which the single-block assembly (70) can be moved in rotation relative to the first part.

16. The ink circuit according to one of claims 10 to 15 further comprising means (25, 35, 36) for regulating the pressure and/or flow rate of at least one of the pumps from among the solvent transfer pump (20) and the first pump (30) of said removable single-block assembly (70).

5

17. The ink circuit according to claim 16 comprising a singular restriction (25) arranged as a back-flow between the outlet and inlet of the solvent transfer pump (20).

10

18. The ink circuit according to claim 16 or 17 comprising a singular restriction (35) arranged in series with a viscous leak (36) or means (36) to create a pressure drop by friction loss, as a back-flow between the outlet and inlet of the first pump of said single-block assembly.

15

19. The ink circuit according to one of claims 10 to 18 further comprising means (21, 32) for transferring solvent from a solvent cartridge (22) to the first pump (30) of said single-block assembly.

20

20. A continuous inkjet printer, comprising:

- an ink circuit according to one of claims 10 to 19,
- a print head (1) connected to the ink circuit via a flexible umbilical cable (2) containing firstly hydraulic connection means to bring printing ink from the ink circuit to the print head (1) and send ink to be recovered from the print head (1) towards said ink circuit, and secondly electrical connection means.

25

21. The continuous inkjet printer according to claim 20, the ink circuit further comprising means (28, 65) to transfer solvent from a solvent cartridge (22) towards the print head (1).

30

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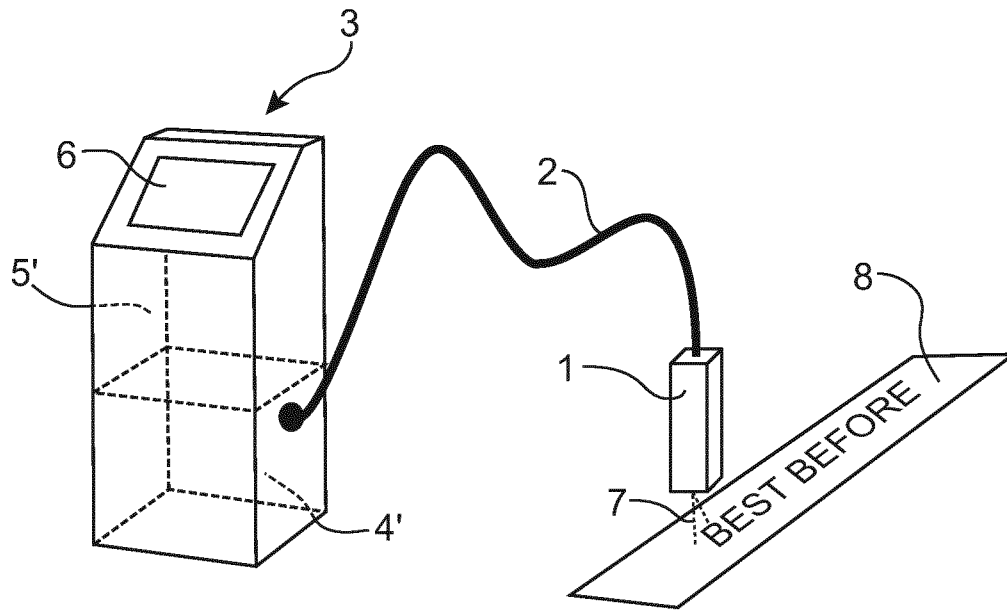


FIG.1

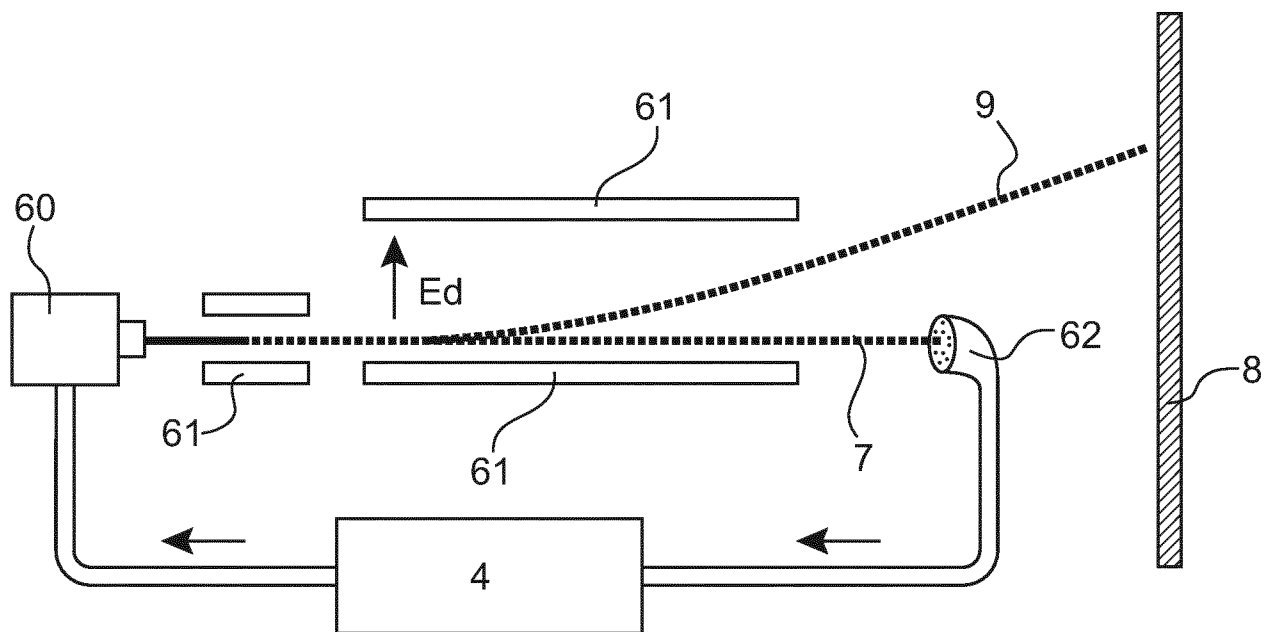


FIG.2

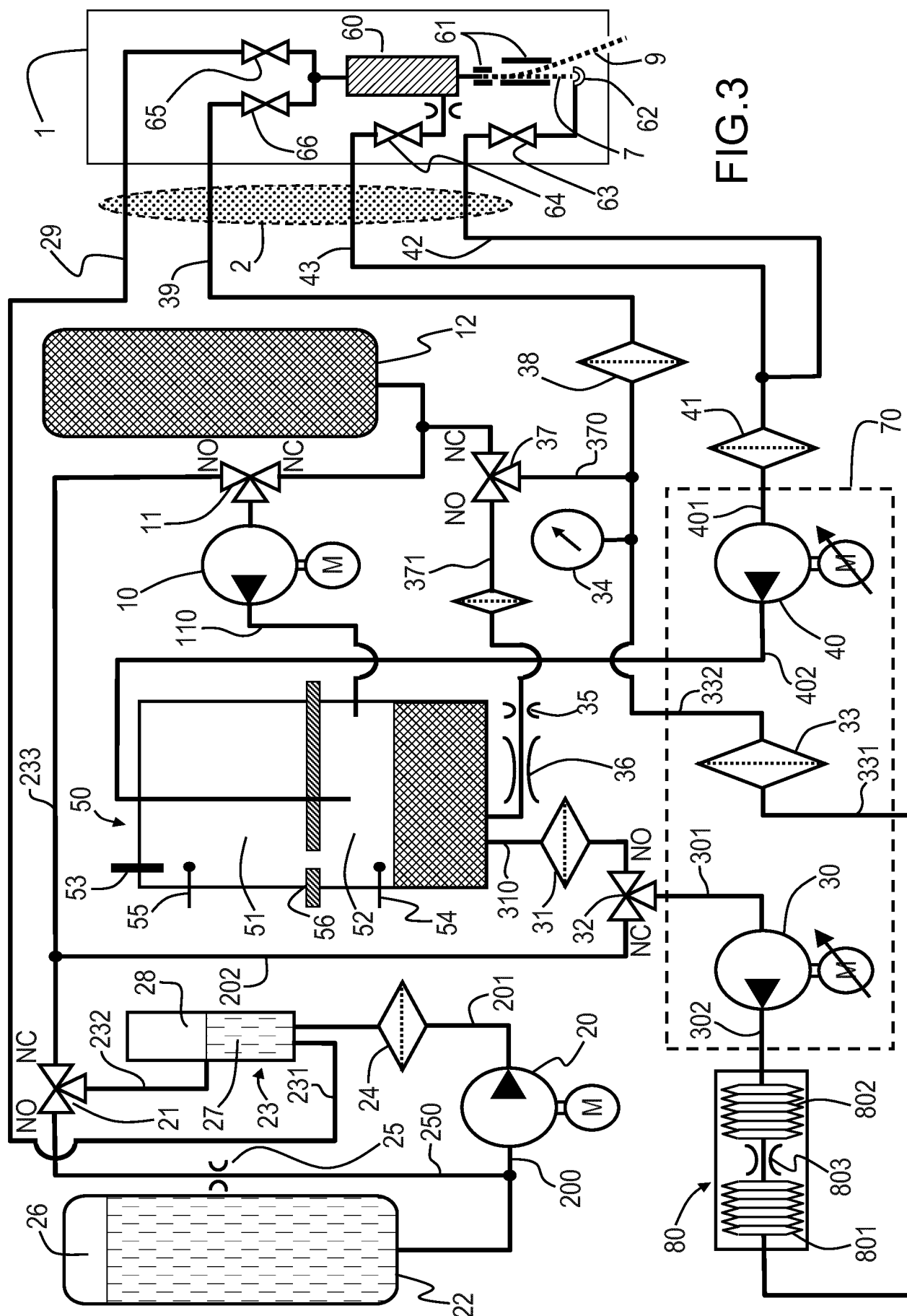


FIG.3

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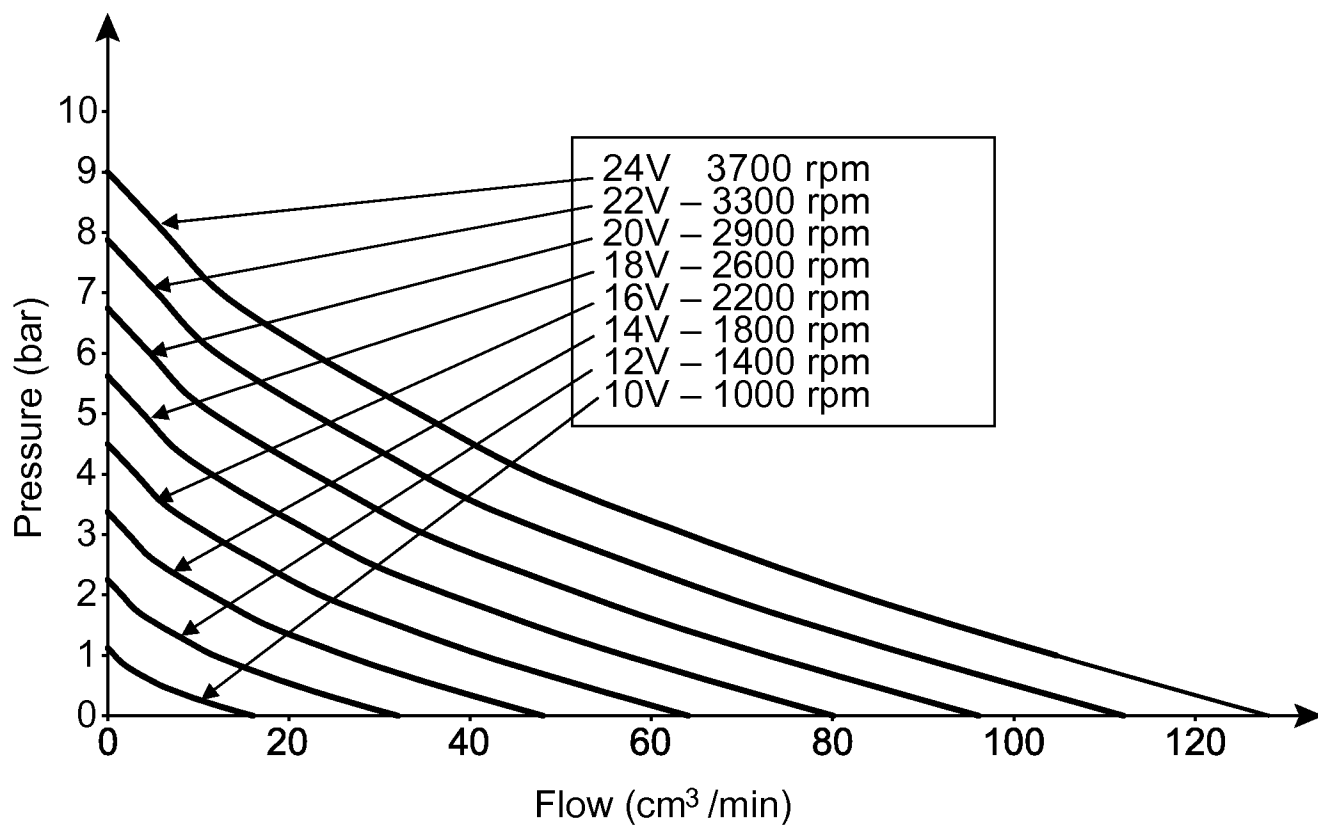
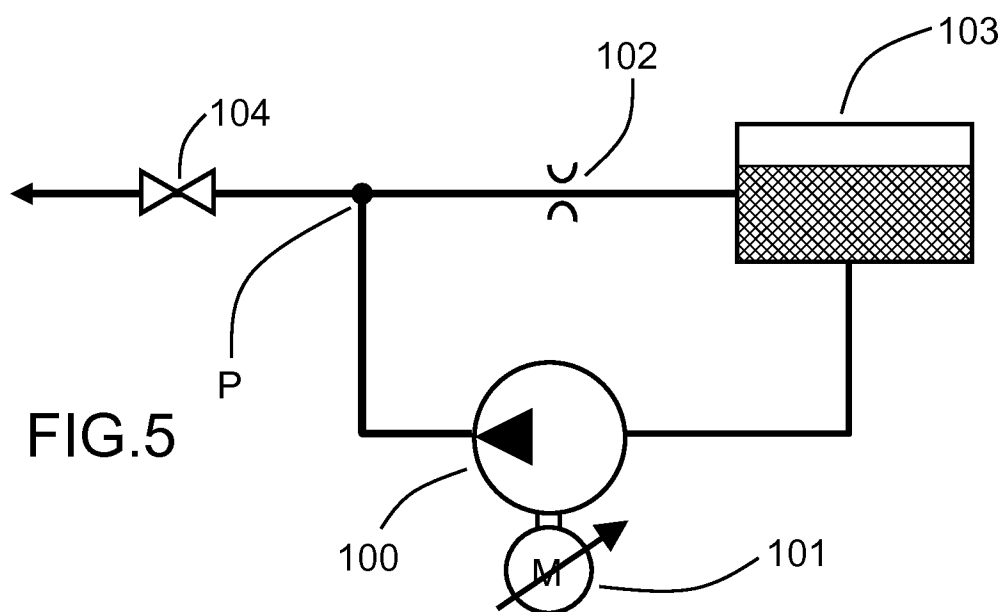


FIG. 4



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FIG.6

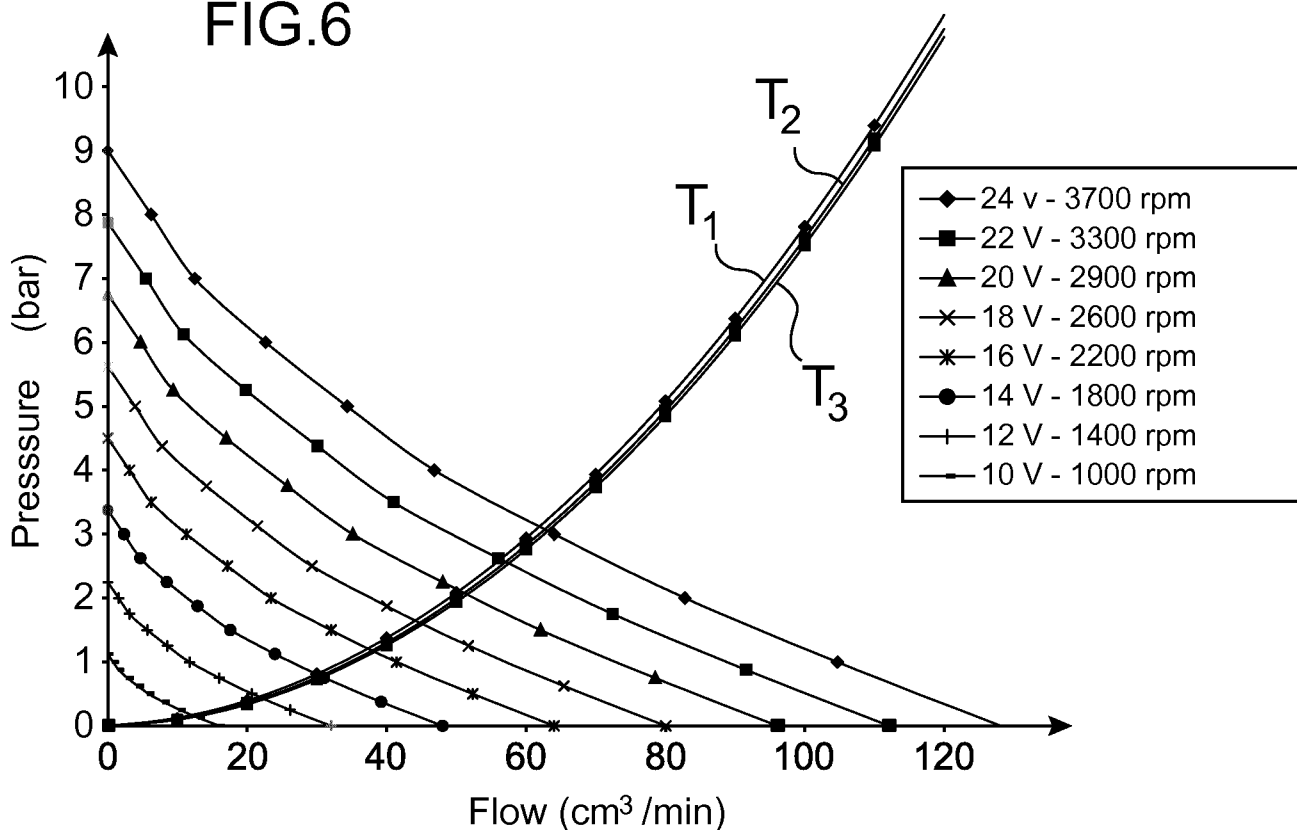
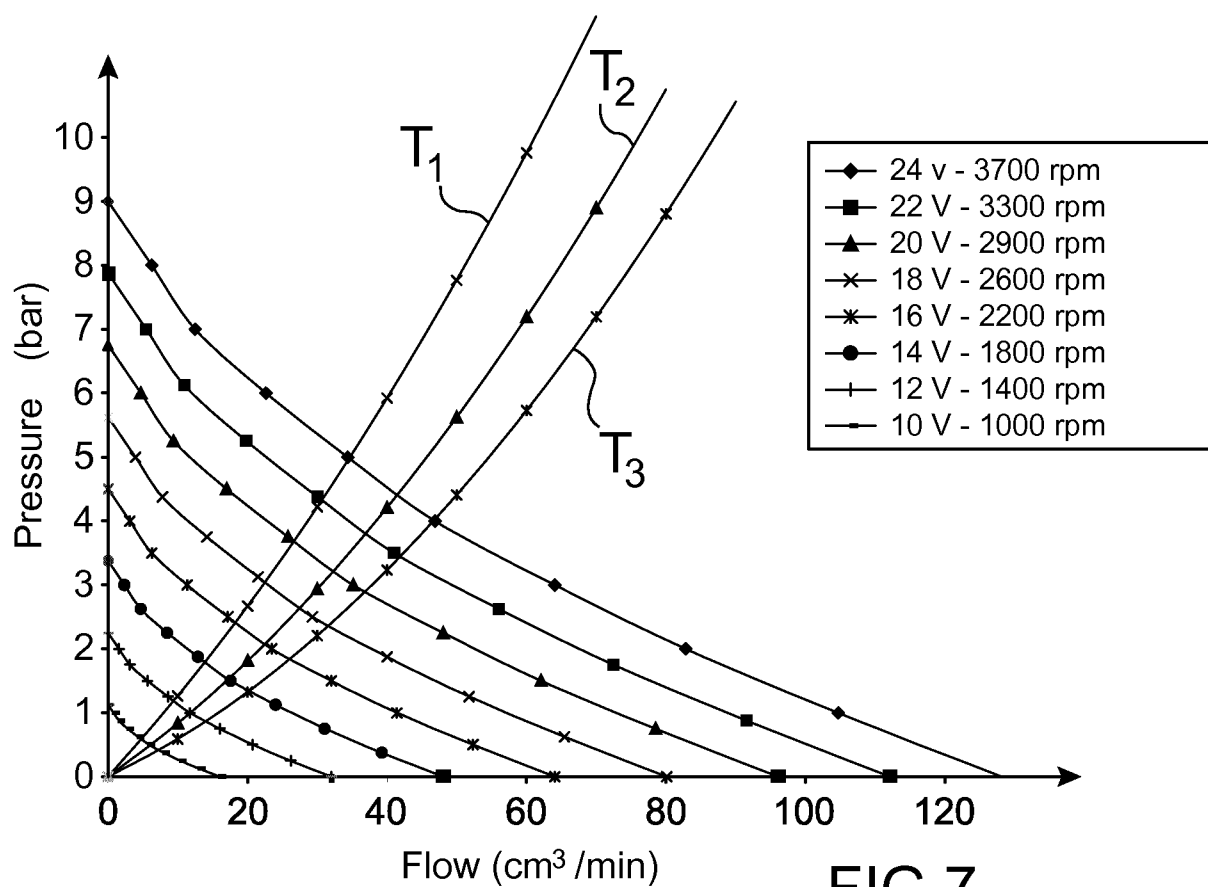
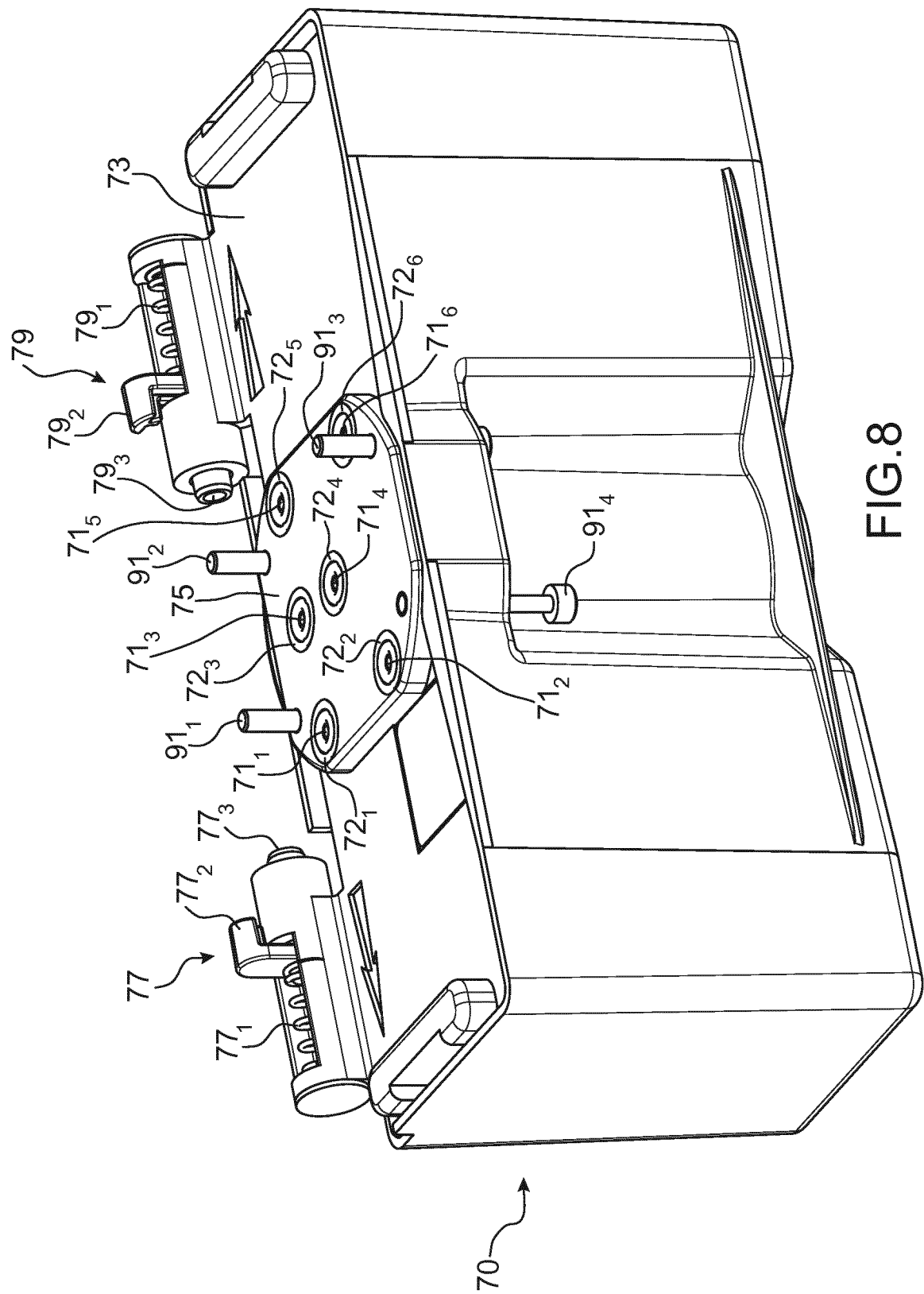


FIG.7



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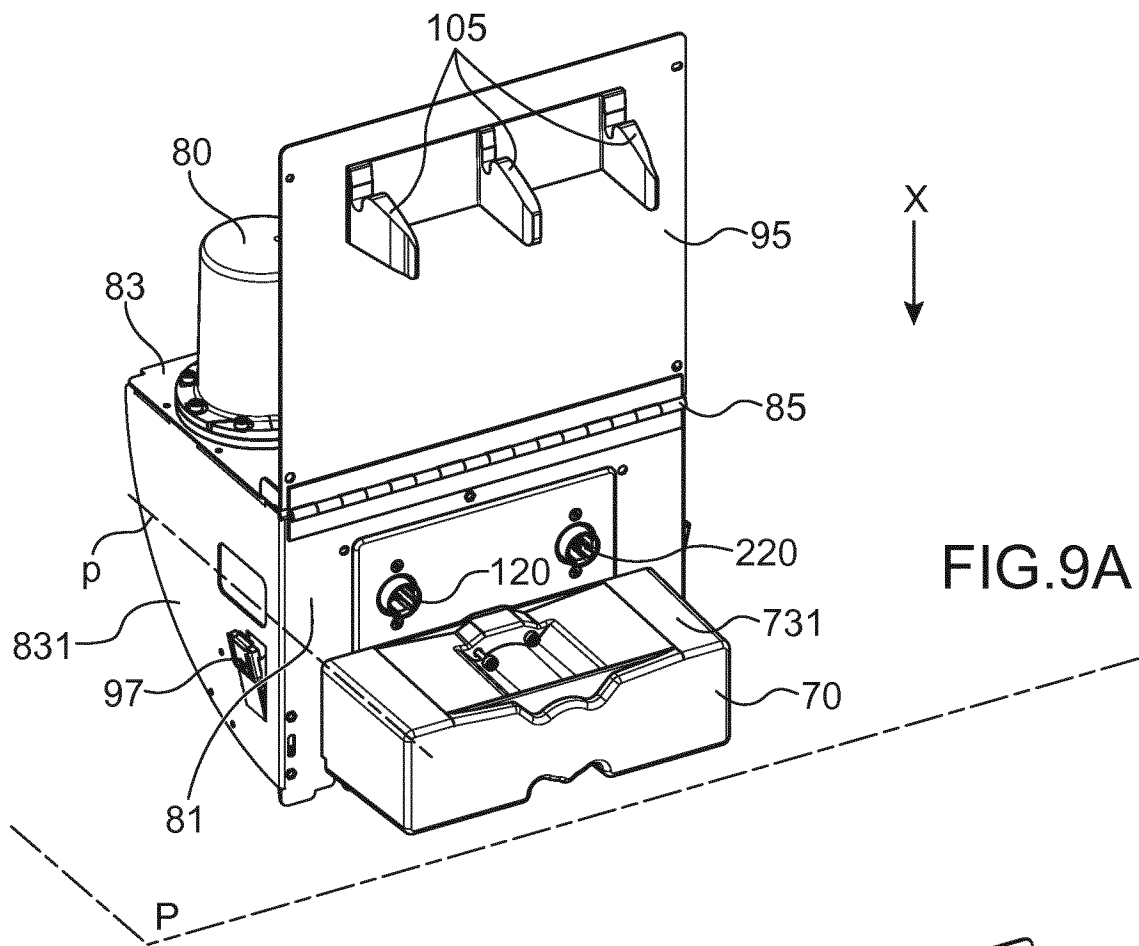
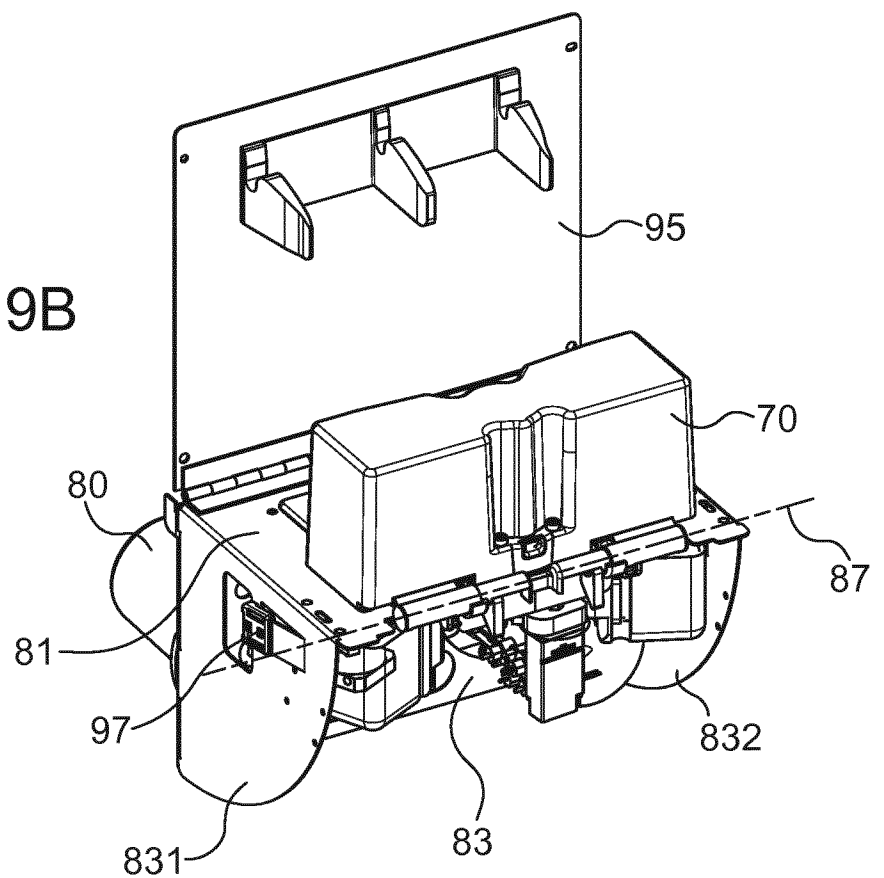
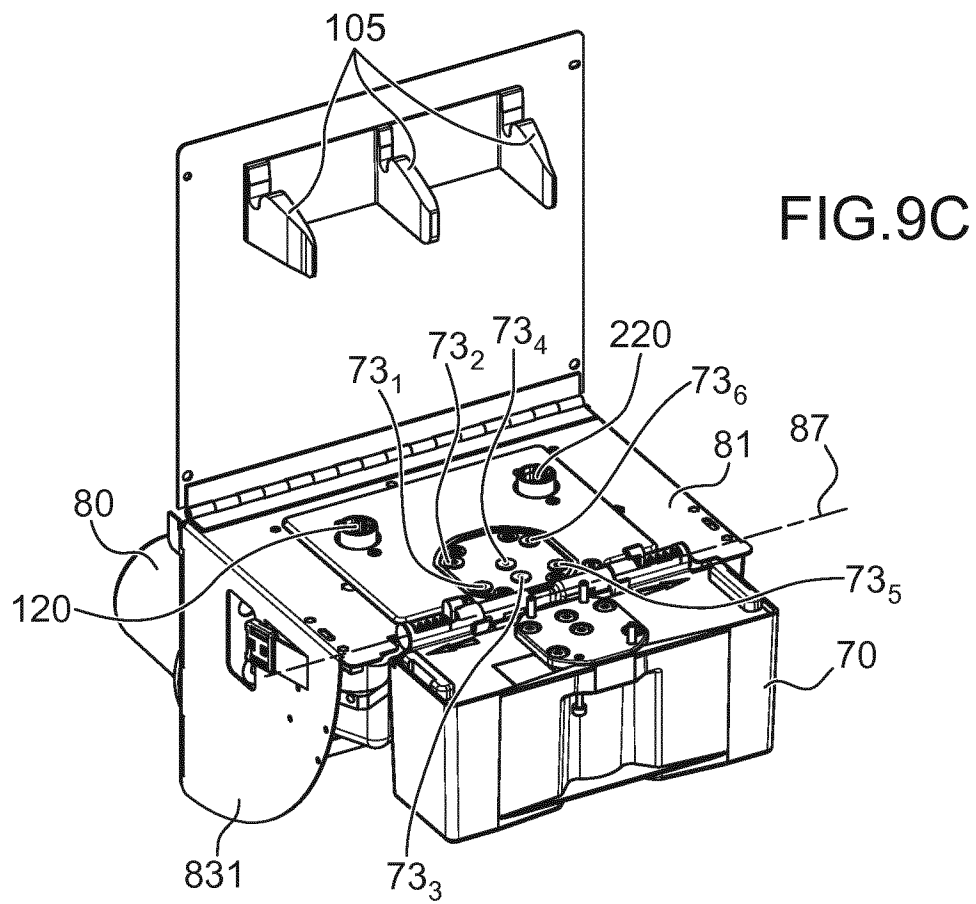
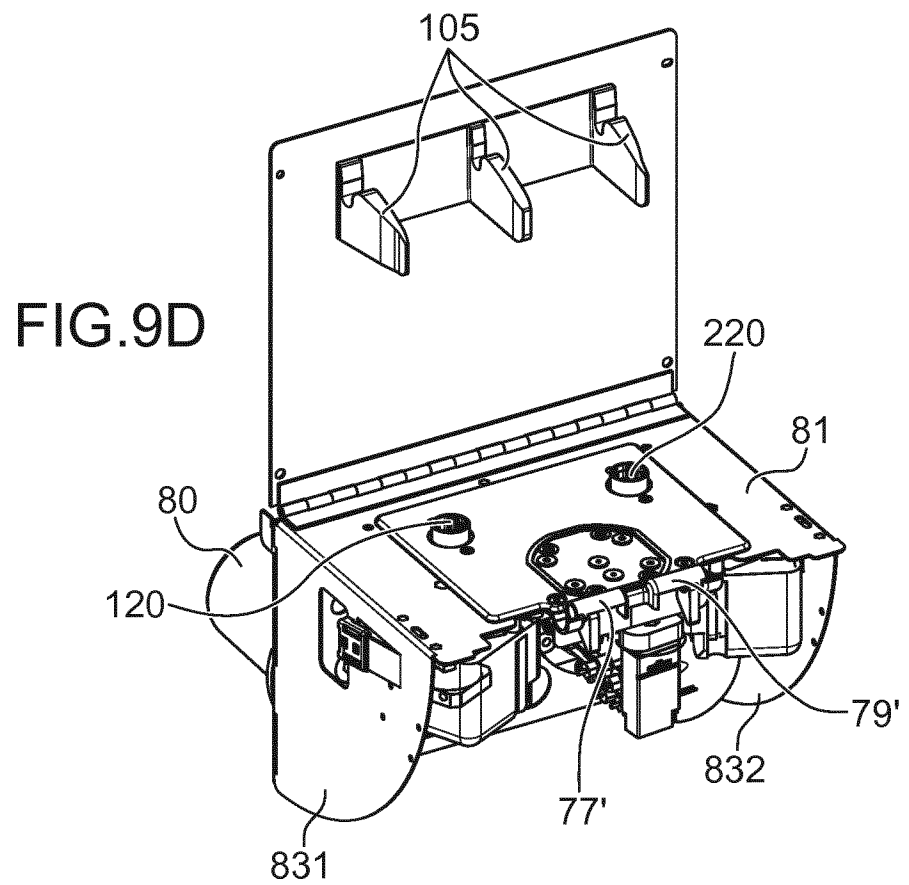


FIG. 9B



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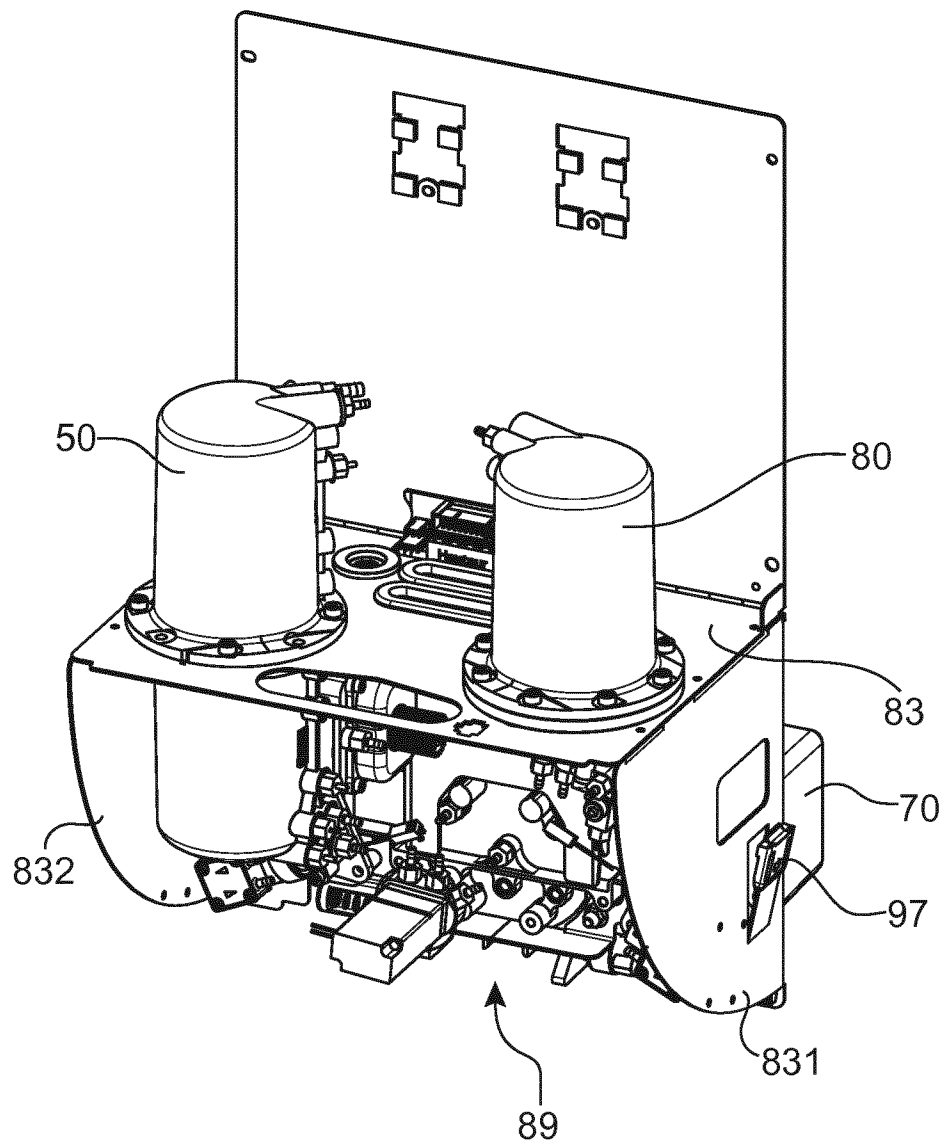


FIG.10

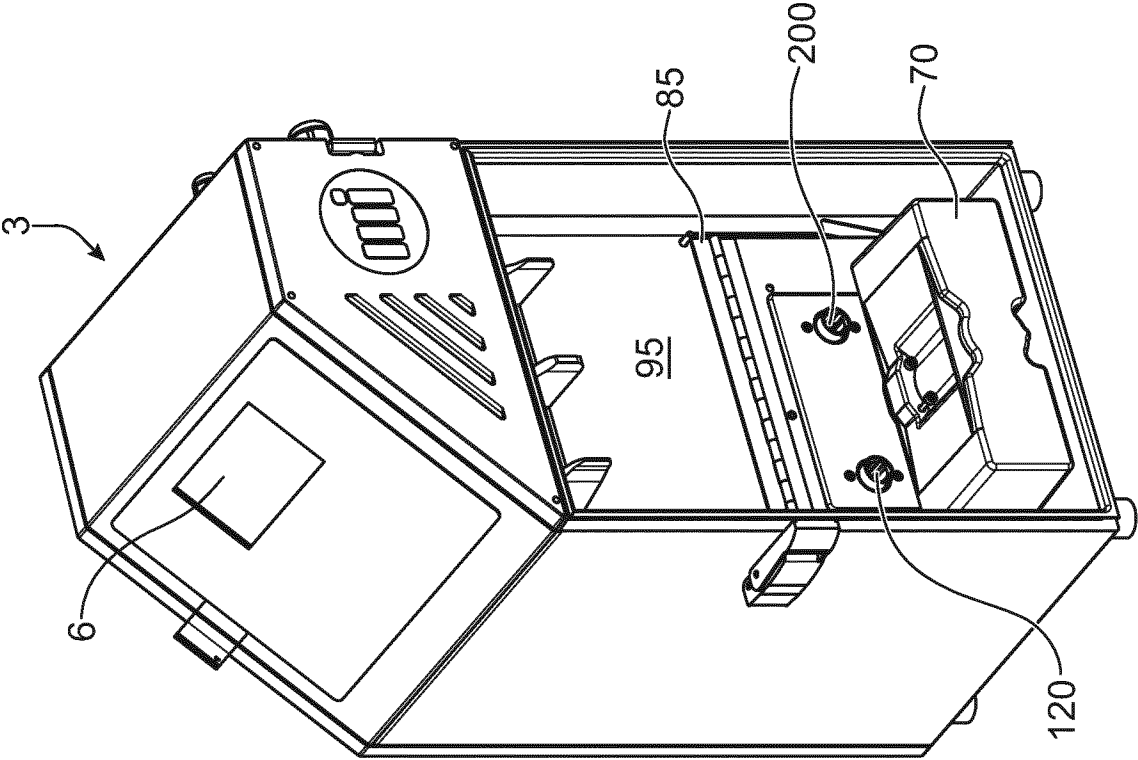


FIG. 11B

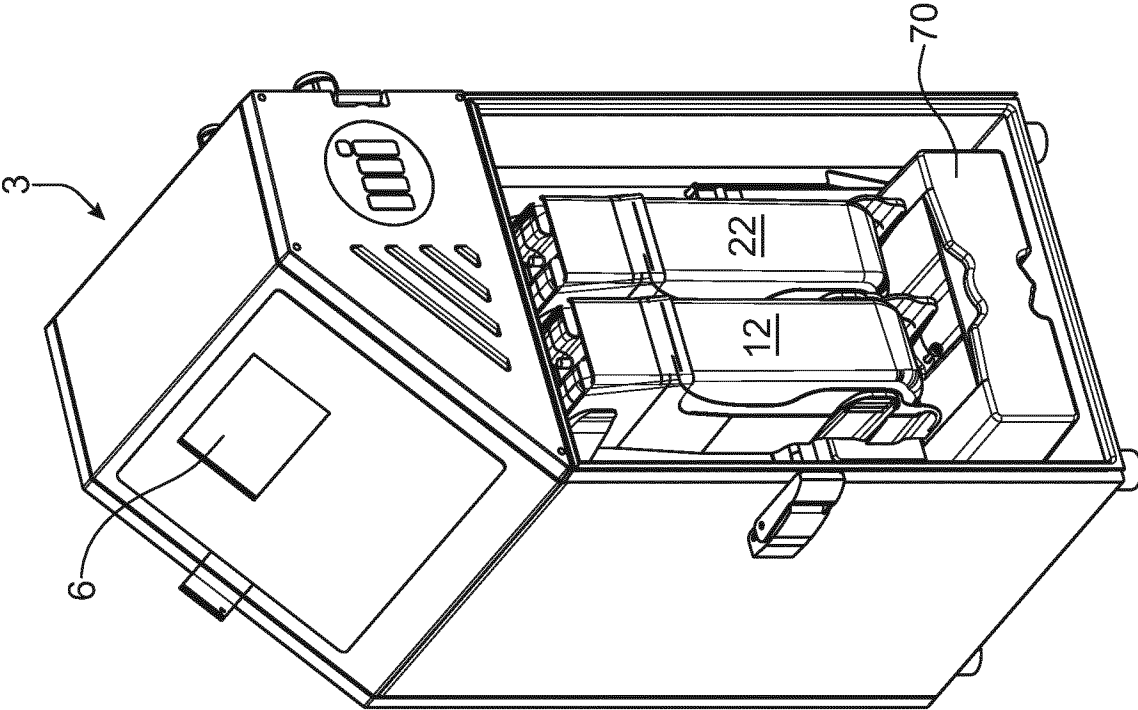


FIG. 11A

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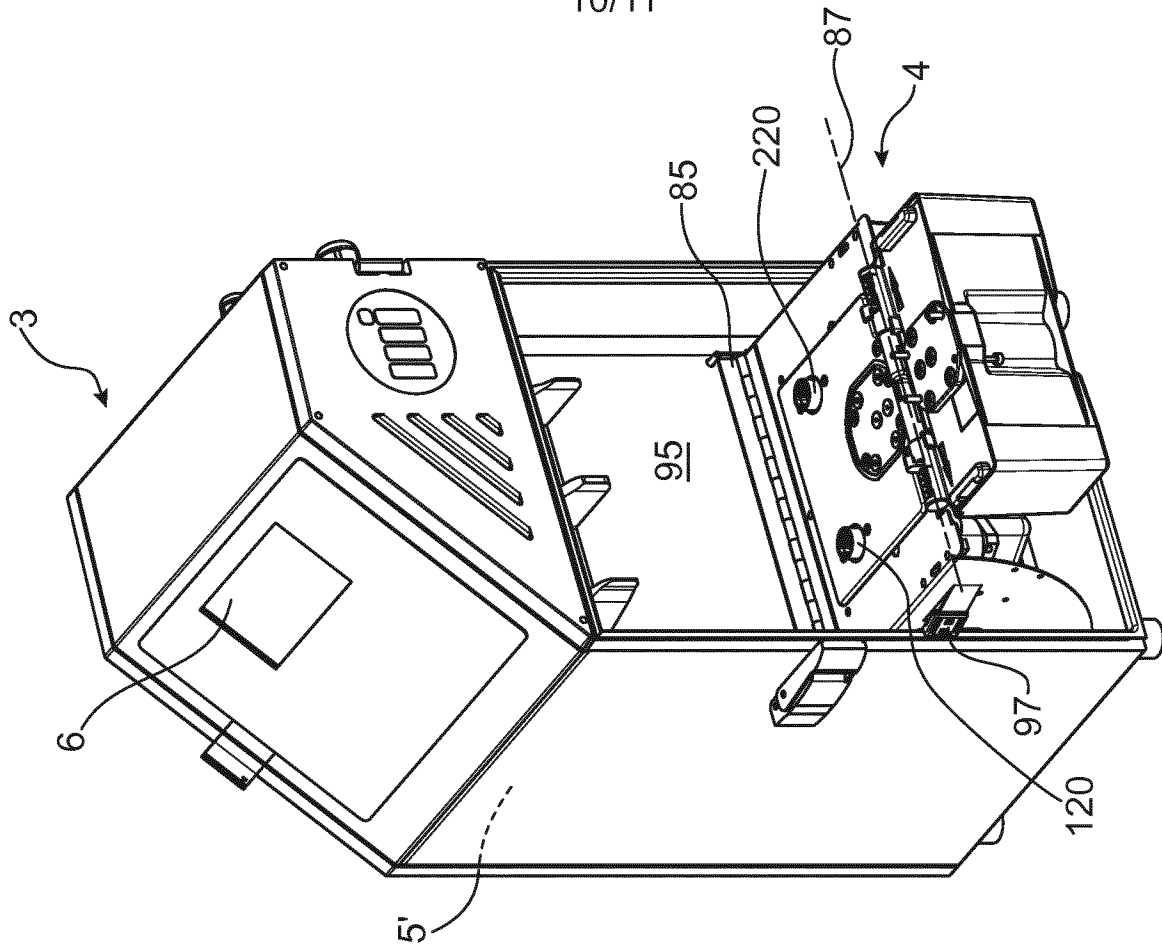


FIG. 11D

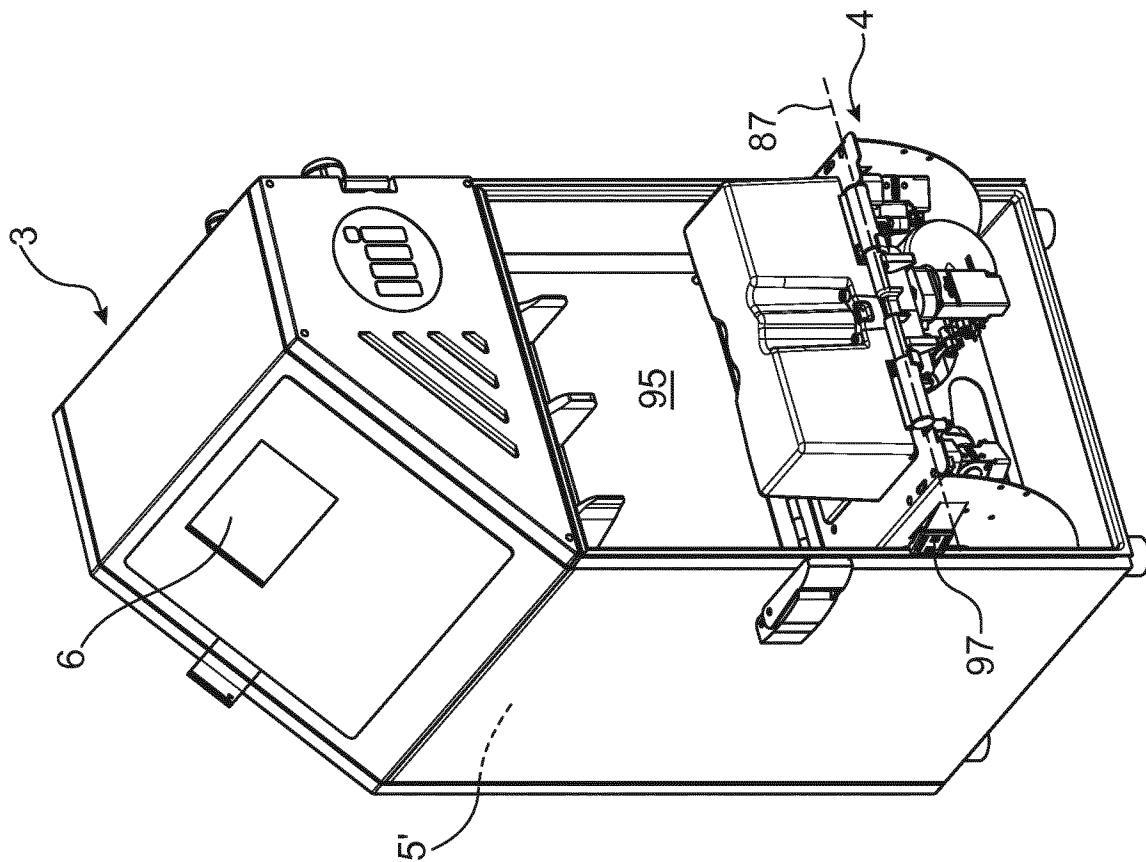
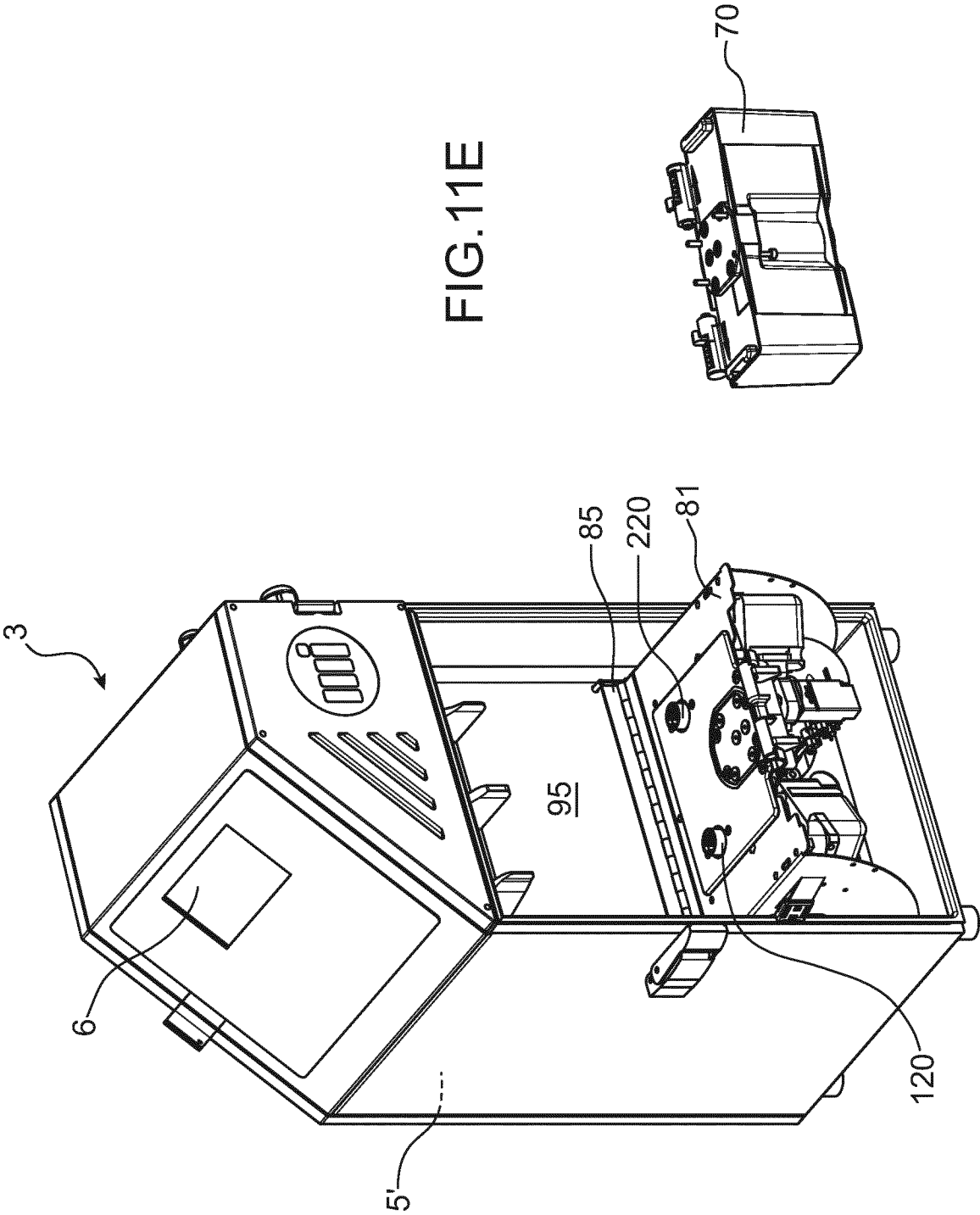


FIG. 11C



INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No
PCT/EP2014/056215

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER
INV. B41J2/175 B41J29/02
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)
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 practicable, search terms used)

EPO-Internal, WPI Data

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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

14 May 2014

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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

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