Culture

Nonsensical Engineering

Breitenholz: Dieter Stoll is a special kind of tinkerer: The physicist with a Ph.D. degree shows pointless apparatuses at Art Road Way Gallery.

By Thomas Morawitzky

A nervously clacking sound emanates from the small ground floor room in the gallery. Being a small room, it is only rarely used for exhibits. However, today's exhibit consists of only three items. But unlike most artwork shown in this place, the items don't hang on a wall in silence. Quite to the contrary: those instruments are flickering, making or reacting to noises, and thus are to be considered media, in a pleasingly old-school manner.

Dieter Stoll from Kusterdingen, the creator of these quirky machines, is a retired physicist and feels the urge to follow in the footsteps of the grandmaster of wacky kinetic objects – Jean Tinguely. There seems to be a deep-rooted urge in him to translate electronic goings-on into nostalgic objects of stunning visual beauty. At this time there are three finished works. He says he wants to stick to this weird hobby, and it is to be hoped that he will also keep on showing further inventions to the public, seeing as those on display here do in fact have a pleasing and soothing effect on the spectators' minds.

Dieter Stoll used to work for over 35 years as a geophysicist in a small outfit specializing in sensors and data acquisition instruments applied in seismology and volcanology. He'd write programs and was also involved in other technical aspects of development and manufacturing. "There were quite a few interesting machines at my work place that I would have loved to spend more time with", he says, "but there just wasn't enough time for that". After his retirement he managed to keep his urges at bay for a few years, but eventually gave in to them. The three devices shown in the Breitenholz gallery were created during the last two years. The first and largest one is named "Colossus mini". Not named after the 1966/1970 sci-fi novel/movie but after the groundbreaking British invention that

helped break the code used by the German "Lorenz SZ" stream cipher machines.

Colossus, says Dieter Stoll, has informed his creation in terms of visual and auditory appearance; for it to be used for decryption purposes remains a "very remote, theoretical possibility". While the British originals ran on more than 1,500 vacuum tubes, the Breitenholz version uses a mere 256. Dieter Stoll acquired those tubes (NOS) for comparatively little money, seeing as they are high voltage rectifier diodes. Used predominantly in old-school TV sets, nobody needs them any more nowadays.

Inside a nondescript gray box there is a rat's nest of wires and connectors, a random number generator and power supply; the front has an oversized on-off switch, an ammeter and an oscilloscope-based graphics terminal (Tektronix emulation). "This was the bee's knees back in the early seventies", says he.

The tubes located on the top side visualize binary code, but without any rhyme or reason. They certainly don't provide any real enlightenment, but are a sight for sore eyes. The incessant chattering of the relays inside the box is probably close to the sound of the original, or so he surmises. Sounds like an infinite chain of dominos collapsing, sounds like electronic rain falling densely and permanently on a roof made of digital corrugated cardboard. A nice fit for October 2024 weather.

Dieter Stoll's second machine implements the Fourier transform, hidden in the housing of a 1930s vintage Blaupunkt radio. He got the radio carcass on the cheap; the previous owner had brutally butchered it and had installed a 1980s car radio in place of the old radio's glass dial. "It's really unethical, an undignified mutilation", says the friend of vintage instruments. But the damage was already done, so he did not see a reason not to do what he eventually did: finally gut what was left of the innards (a moldy loudspeaker mainly)

and install a device that continually analyzes ambient sound and converts it into multiband spectra. To further illustrate the concept, the tinkerer has requisitioned a function generator from the electronics lab and put it next to the Fourier machine. Sine, triangle and rectangular waveform sounds are available, their frequency controlled in an intuitive (and fully analog) manner by a rotary dial. I have talked to spectators standing in line in front of these machines to observe the multitude of colorful and dynamic patterns visible on the round screen.

Finally, a third machine called "Cyclops" displays a seemingly endless flood of video clips behind a thick bulgy glass lens. It is housed in a mid-1950s vintage carrying case that once was home to an 8mm Eumig "P8 Imperial" projector. A witness of a bygone era - Austrian company Eumig used to be one of the top players in the era of 8mm and Super-8 home movies. But fame and fortune lasts only so long; they went bankrupt in 1985. Dieter Stoll has converted it into a portable porthole where more than 500 clips (collated from a vast collection of feature films, documentaries, vintage TV and movie advertisements) are shown. If you wait long enough you'll get to see Vladimir Putin on horseback, And Goldsworthy's ephemeral nature creations, malicious computer HAL 9000 and that much more.

The fat lens in front of the circular display exerts an almost eerie pull on the spectator. Gallery director Frederick Bunsen likes to call this work "TikTok, retro style". The clips are shown without accompanying sound, thus adding to the overall weirdness.

Dieter Stoll recently came into possession of a late 1960s battery operated "Camping TV set" made by Toshiba. He enthuses about the old-school channel selector knobs and the plastic housing with its coarsely painted-on faux wood grain. He is still undecided about what to do with this find, but I have no doubt something groovy will come out of it. No doubt whatsoever.

Die Röhren von „Colossus" visualisieren Binär-Codes, die Relais im Inneren des Geräts von Dieter Stoll schnattern wie umfallende Dominosteine. GB-Foto: Vecsey