

Things that Talk

The Secret Lives of Scientific Instruments



Things that Talk
Image © EPFL+ECAL Lab

This is an astonishing exhibition. Centred on a single scientific object, it offers the public the opportunity to discover its historical depth through new and playful forms of interaction. The object is revealed through the many turbulent stories – sometimes controversial, always surprising – that it has generated. Resulting from a collaboration between the EPFL Laboratory for the History of Science and Technology and the EPFL+ECAL Lab, *Things that Talk* does not look back at the origin of these scientific objects, but reveals their uses and consequences. The exhibition also links them to contemporary issues. To be discovered on the EPFL campus, from 14 April to 29 May 2022, three objects for three successive exhibitions!

The space opens on a beautiful brass object, with a sleek appearance, dating from the early 19th century: a dynamometer graces the entrance. People familiar with this instrument will associate it with its primary function: measuring physical strength. The exhibition highlights the richness of its unexpected uses.

Visitors are welcomed to sit around a large table. A viewfinder system invites them to interact with the environment to explore the narratives presented there. The many meanings and uses of this dynamometer gradually appear. The scientific interpretations of the time are displayed and come to life: at the beginning of the 19th century, this measuring instrument was used to demonstrate that “civilised man” had not become weak as Rousseau thought he would; at the end of the century, it could be used to measure willpower, and even served as a witness in a murder trial! Some of these considerations arouse indignation or ridicule today. The exhibition takes it a step further by suggesting a link between these past

stories and contemporary themes. For example, the connection between this ancient measure of human strength and the “Quantified Self”, i.e. the practice of self-tracking through wearable devices and smartphones, initiates reflection on today’s tools. The exhibition thus experiments with an original approach, based on the most recent work in the history of science, interaction design creativity and the possibilities of digital technology.

This approach is the fruit of collaboration between two EPFL units. On the one hand, the Laboratory for the History of Science and Technology (LHST), whose mission is, among other things, to promote the UNIL-EPFL Collection of Scientific Instruments, whose historical work has made it possible to document the secret lives of the chosen instruments and to offer cross-interpretations. On the other, the EPFL+ECAL Lab, the EPFL design research centre, which has imagined how to turn this new historical knowledge into an experience linked to our daily lives. The design work begins with an experimental exhibition concept to generate a physical engagement with the content, thereby stimulating debate and social interaction.

Unlike the cabinets of curiosities which feature a multitude of rare specimens, this exhibition focuses on a small number of everyday objects and avails itself of the means, via digital technology, to rediscover their richness and character through the abundance of their stories. This project required the design and development of interaction devices and the conception of a language able to associate the various elements in a coherent form. Thus, several viewfinders create interaction with the texts and images projected on the walls, giving life to these eventful stories. Designed as an experiment, the

exhibition will serve to establish new forms of interaction with heritage objects, not only to enhance them, but also to make them resonate with the present.

Three objects and their stories will be successively unveiled at the EPFL Pavilions:

- the *Dynamometer*, from 14 to 24 April 2022
- the *Globe of Mars*, from 28 April to 8 May 2022
- the *Crookes Tube*, from 11 to 29 May 2022

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Things that Talk on display at the EPFL Pavilions **from 14 April to 29 May 2022.**

On the EPFL campus,
Place Cosandey, 1015 Lausanne.

Press visit on 13 April 2022, at 11 am
please register with geraldine.morand@epfl.ch
Public opening on 13 April 2022, from 5.30pm.

ABOUT THE EPFL+ECAL LAB

The EPFL+ECAL Lab is the design research centre of the École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne. Founded in 2007 in cooperation with ECAL/University of Art and Design Lausanne, it explores the potential of emerging technologies through design, tackling the related challenges by combining artistic creativity, scientific knowledge, and the ability to measure user perception. Working on tangible projects, the EPFL+ECAL Lab collaborates with numerous companies, museums and institutes. With its expertise in design, engineering, architecture and psychology, it creates disruptive concepts and turns them into functional prototypes.

www.epfl-ecal-lab.ch

ABOUT THE LABORATORY FOR THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

The Laboratory for the History of Science and Technology (LHST) of the École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne was founded in 2019 with the support of the Loude Chair. In its research, teaching and scientific mediation, the lab strives to understand the transformations of science and technology in their historical, cultural, and social contexts, from the 17th century to the present day. The LHST is responsible for promoting the UNIL-EPFL Collection of Scientific Instruments and frequently collaborates with museums and cultural institutions.

www.epfl.ch/labs/lhst

EPFL+ECAL LAB CREDITS

Direction

Nicolas Henchoz

MAS in Design Research for Digital Innovation

Lucie Houel

Projet Management

Béatrice Durandard

Creative coding & Software Engineering

Delphine Ribes

Dr. Cédric Duchêne

Yves Kalberer

Gabriel Luthier

Sound Design

Dr. Cédric Duchêne

Scenography

Béatrice Durandard

Graphic Design

Lara Défayes

Emily Groves

UX/UI Psychology

Andrea Schneider

LHST CREDITS

Content & Curation

Pr. Jérôme Baudry, Director

Dr. Ion-Gabriel Mihailescu, Postdoctoral researcher

Dr. Simon Dumas Primbault, Postdoctoral researcher

CONTACTS

Nicolas Henchoz

Director, EPFL+ECAL Lab

nicolas.henchoz@epfl.ch | + 41 21 693 08 02

Pr. Jérôme Baudry

Director, Laboratory for the History of Science and Technology

jerome.baudry@epfl.ch | + 41 21 693 75 99

Géraldine Morand

Communication, EPFL+ECAL Lab

geraldine.morand@epfl.ch | + 41 78 742 44 08

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