Optoelectronic Tweezers

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Abstract: *Optoelectronic tweezers is a new technique to trap and manipulate particles with sizes ranging from tens of nanometers to hundreds of micrometers. Using optically-controlled dielectrophoretic force on a photoconductive electrode, optoelectronic tweezers enables complex, dynamic manipulation functions using light intensities up to 100,000 times lower than that of conventional laser tweezers.*

1. Introduction

The ability to manipulate small objects such as cells, colloidal particles, nanowires and nanoparticles, and macromolecules in a non-contact manner opens up many new opportunities in bioscience and nanotechnology. Several micromanipulation mechanisms have been studied over the years, including optical tweezers, electrophoresis, dielectrophoresis (DEP), magnetic tweezers, acoustic and hydrodynamic forces. Among them, the optical tweezers [1] and the DEP [2] are commonly used to manipulate non-charged particles. Both use the interaction between a dipole and a non-uniform electromagnetic field. In optical tweezers, the non-uniform field is created by a tightly focused optical beam using an objective lens with a high numerical aperture. In DEP, it is generated by electrical microelectrodes patterned on a substrate. Both forces are proportional to the gradient of the intensity (square of the field). The force is usually positive (attractive) in optical tweezers, but it can be either positive (attractive) or negative (repulsive) for DEP, depending on the complex dielectric function of the particles and the media and the bias frequency. Simultaneous trapping of multiple objects are achieved by holographic optical tweezers [3] and matrix electrode arrays with integrated CMOS decoders [4].

The optical tweezers have revolutionized our understanding of molecular motors [5] and had a major impact in colloidal science [3]. However, they also have some drawbacks. The high optical power requirement (~ 1 mW/trap), especially in the visible wavelength, can result in optical and/or thermal damage to live biological specimens [6] and nanoparticles and nanowires. DEP can trap particles with sizes ranging from approximately 1 mm down to 14 nm [7]. Unlike optical tweezers, dielectrophoresis can have large manipulation areas, limited only by the size of the device. However, DEP needs microfabricated electrodes with hardwired electrical connection for particle manipulation, limiting its flexibility.

We have proposed a new optical manipulation technique that combines the flexibility of optical tweezers with the power of DEP without their drawbacks. This technique, called optoelectronic tweezers (OET), is shown schematically in Fig. 1 [8]. Instead of hardwired electrodes, OET uses a projected light pattern on a photoconductive surface to generate "virtual electrodes". Together with an ac voltage bias across the sample chamber, the DEP forces are initiated optically. Thanks to the photoconductive gain, the optical power requirement is reduced by about 100,000 times compared with optical tweezers. This enables the formation of large trap arrays. It also permits the use of low-cost light source such as lamps or light-emitting diodes (LED) as optical coherence is not required. Indeed we have demonstrated an individually addressable array with 15,000 particle traps over an area of 1.3 mm^2 using a single LED source and a digital micromirror device (DMD) spatial light modulator [8]. The trapped particles include polystyrene beads [9], *E. coli* bacteria [10], and red and white blood cells [8].

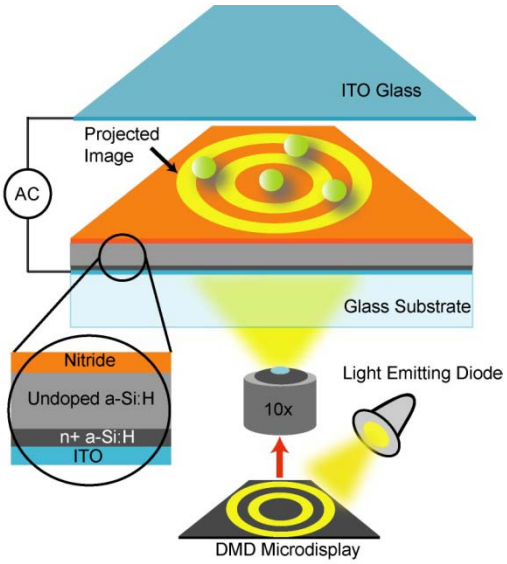

Fig. 1. Schematic of optoelectronic tweezers (OET) [8]. Optically patterned virtual electrodes for dielectrophoresis (DEP) are generated by a spatial light modulator. The example here uses a digital-micromirror-device (DMD) projector with an light-emitting diode (LED) source.

Using dynamic optical patterns, OET can also be used to separate particles or cells by sizes or other visual

attributes [11-14]. Since its introduction in 2003 [9], OET has attracted the attention of many research groups [15-21]. Recently, we have extended the capabilities of OET to trapping of semiconducting and metallic nanowires [22] and biological cells in highly conductive physiological buffer solutions [23]. This paper will provide an overview of the principle and experimental results of OET, and highlight the recent advances in trapping nanowires and biological cells.

2. Principle and Design

The schematic of the OET device is shown in the inset of Fig. 1. It consists of a bottom photosensitive electrode and a top transparent indium-tin-oxide (ITO) electrode. The liquid containing the particles is sandwiched between these two electrodes. Our initial experiments used a 1-μm-thick amorphous Si as the photosensitive electrode. An ac voltage bias is applied across the electrodes. Light patterns generate virtual electrodes on the photoconductive surface and interact with particles through DEP, as illustrated in Fig. 2. The particle will either be attracted to the highest light intensity spot (positive OET) or repelled to the lowest intensity region (negative OET). The optical power density on OET depends on the type of photoconductors used. For the amorphous-Si used in our experiments, it is typically between 0.1 to 10 W/cm^2.

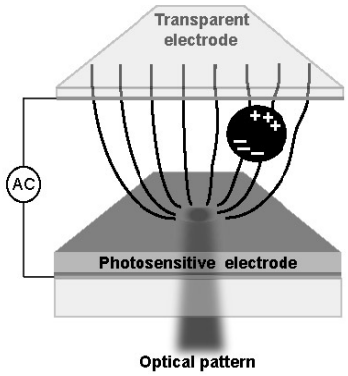

Fig. 2. Schematics illustrating the principle of optoelectronic tweezers.

3. Optoelectronic Trap Array

Polystyrene beads experience negative OET force at 100 kHz bias. They can be confined by "light cages". Fig. 3 shows a 4x5 array of individually addressable traps for 45-μm beads. The size of the cage can be tailored according to the particle size. Once trapped, the beads can be transported by moving the light cage, at velocities up to 40 μm/sec. Since DMD can generate any arbitrary pattern in real time, we can program it to perform a wide variety of functions. For example, Fig. 4 shows the operation of an "optical sorter". A scanning optical comb pattern separates 20-μm particles from 45-μm particles.

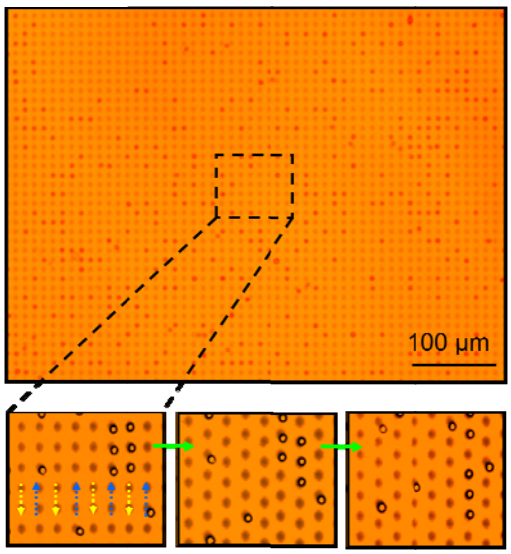

Fig. 3. 15,000 individually addressable trap array created by OET. The low figures are snap shots of a video clip showing the transport of 4.5-μm beads.

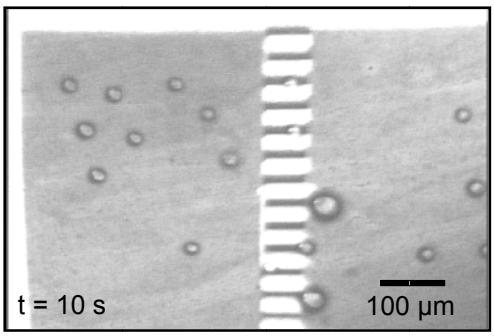

Fig. 4. Scanning optical comb pattern for separating 20 and 45μm beads.

4. Trapping of Single Semiconductor Nanowires

Trapping of semiconductor nanowires have been demonstrated using both holographic optical tweezers [24] and single-trap optical tweezers [25]. However, it requires a very high optical power density (~ 10^7 W/cm^2). It was noted that such high optical power could induce rapid heating and result in vaporization of the nanowire for wavelength shorter than that of the nanowire bandgap [24]. This is mitigated by spreading the traps along the nanowire using holographic optical tweezers, at the expense of more complexity.

OET provides a much more effective means for trapping nanowires. OET utilizes electrical gradient force. Like its optical counterpart, it is proportional to the volume of the particle and the Clausius-Mossotti (CM) factor. The magnitude of the CM factor is usually limited to below one. Fortunately, for high-aspect-ratio particles such as nanowires, the real part of the CM factor is 100 to 1000 times larger than that of the spherical nanoparticles with the same diameter. Therefore, the force exerted on nanowires by OET is significantly larger than that by optical tweezers.

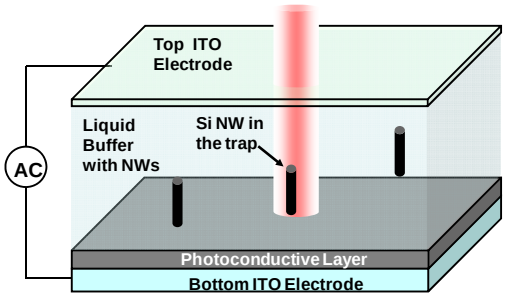

Fig. 5. Schematic illustrating OET trapping of nanowires. When the ac voltage bias is applied, the nanowires are aligned vertically and trapped at the highest intensity spot.

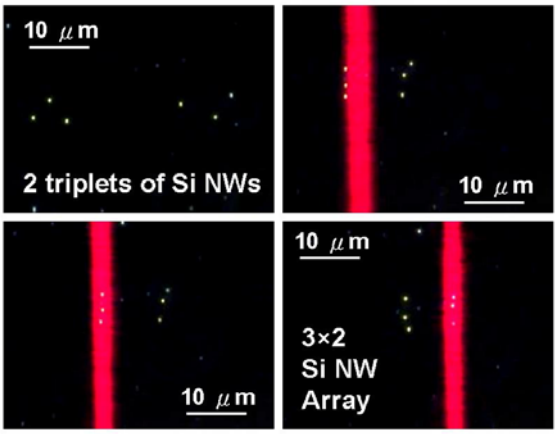

Fig. 6. Snap shots of video clips illustrating OET trapping and assembly of a 3x2 array of Si nanowires with 100 nm diameter.

We have successfully trapped individual semiconductor as well as metallic nanowires with diameters of 100 nm and length of several microns [22]. Doped semiconductor nanowires as well as metallic nanowires experience positive OET force. We have successfully trapped and transported single nanowires using a 100-μW HeNe laser source. It is interesting to note that even with an optical beam diameter of 10 μm, we are able to separate nanowires spaced by less than 1 μm by moving the light spot. Fig. 6 shows the assembly of a 3x2 array of nanowires using a line-shaped light pattern in OET. The maximum transport speed of Si nanowire (100 nm diameter) is 135 μm/sec at a voltage bias of 20 V_{pp}.

5. Cell Manipulation in Physiological Media

The OET manipulation of red and white blood cells and HeLa cells have been previously demonstrated [26], as well as the selective concentration of live human B cells from dead cells [8]. However, the amorphous-Si-based OET can only operate in low-conductivity solutions (< 0.1 S/m). Typical culture media has a conductivity of 1.5 S/m. Thus, to manipulate cells in a conventional OET device, the salts that are usually present in cell culture media are replaced by osmotically-equivalent amounts of non-electrolytes to maintain the osmotic pressure on the cell membranes. These low-conductivity media are non-physiological, and eventually reduce cell viability [27]. The usage of non-physiological media also limits many biological applications, such as cell culturing and electroporation.

We have proposed a single crystalline Si phototransistor-based OET (Ph-OET) that enables the manipulation of cells in highly-conductive physiological buffers and cell culture media [23]. The schematic structure of Ph-OET is shown in Fig. 7. With 100 times higher photoconductivity, we were able to trap HeLa and Jurkat cells with optical power density as low as 1 W/cm^2. A transport velocity of 35 μm/sec is achieved at 10 W/cm^2 (Fig. 8).

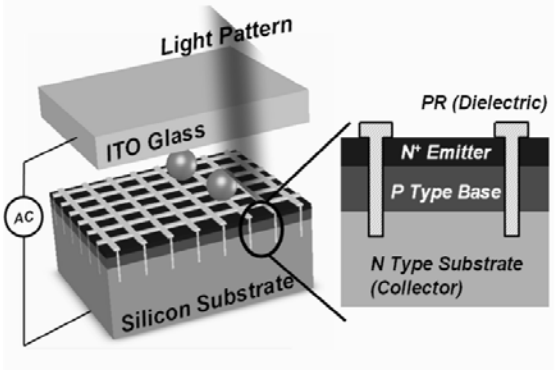

Fig. 7. Schematic of phototransistor-OET for manipulating biological cells in physiological buffer solutions.

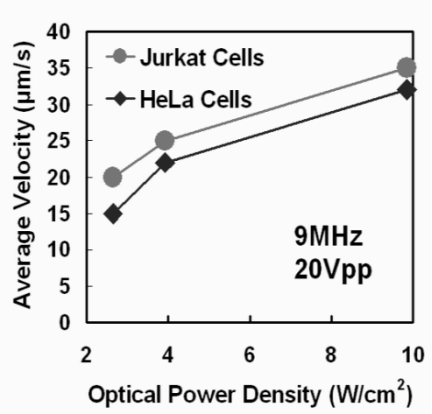

Fig. 8. The maximum transport speed of trapped cells versus the optical power density illuminated on the phototransistor-OET. A maximum speed of 35μm/sec is achieved at a very low power density of 10 W/cm2.

6. Conclusions

We have described a new optical manipulation technique called optoelectronic tweezers (OET). It combines the advantages of optical tweezers and dielectrophoresis, and is capable of trapping and transporting colloidal particles with diameters of tens of nanometers to hundreds of micrometers. Trapping of individual semiconductor nanowires with 100-nm diameter has been achieved. Novel phototransistor-OET capable of trapping live cells in physiological buffer solutions is also discussed.

Acknowledgement

The work described here was performed by A.T. Ohta, A. Jamshidi, H.Y. Hsu, and J. Valley at the University of

California, Berkeley. The work on nanowires is in collaboration with P. J. Pauzauskie and Prof. Peidong Yang of UC Berkeley. This work was funded by the National Institutes of Health through the NIH Roadmap for Medical Research, Grant # PN2 EY018228 (CCC), a DARPA seedling grant by Dr. Dennis Polla, and Center for Cell Mimetic Space Exploration (CMISE).

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