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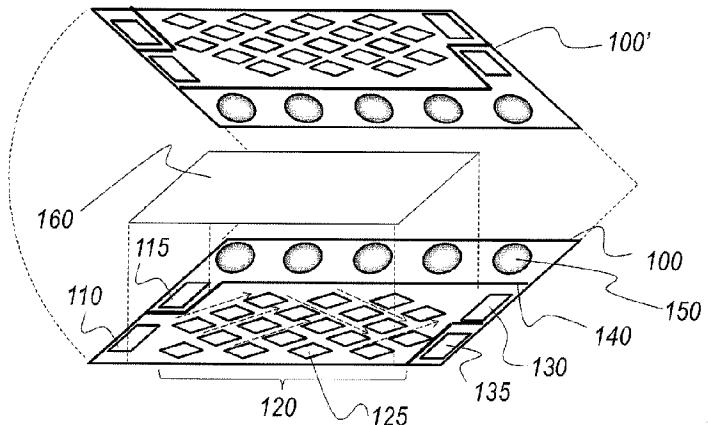
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(54) Titre : ELECTRODE BIPOLAIRE ET PROCEDE DE PRODUCTION DE CELLE-CI
(54) Title: BIPOLAR ELECTRODE AND METHOD FOR PRODUCING SAME



(57) Abrégé/Abstract:

Bipolar electrode (100) for use in an electrolysis unit, said bipolar electrode (100) comprising a planar main body having a first side and a second side, each of said first side and said second side being provided with a corresponding pattern of protrusions (125), wherein each of said protrusions has a geometrical base within the plane of said planar main body and a substantially planar top side (129), the orthogonal projection of said top side onto said main body being contained in said geometrical base, and wherein the top sides (129) of the respective protrusions (129) of said first side and said second side lie in two planes parallel to said planar main body, the electrode being further characterized by specific shape and orientation requirements. Method for producing the bipolar electrode as above described, which includes an embossing step.

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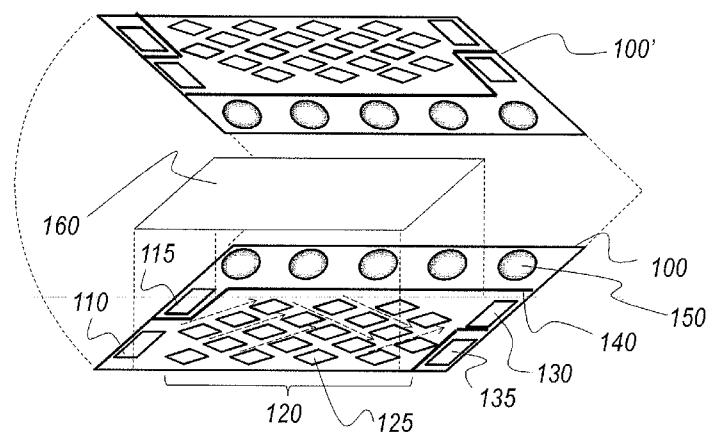
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Figure 1



(57) **Abstract:** Bipolar electrode (100) for use in an electrolysis unit, said bipolar electrode (100) comprising a planar main body having a first side and a second side, each of said first side and said second side being provided with a corresponding pattern of protrusions (125), wherein each of said protrusions has a geometrical base within the plane of said planar main body and a substantially planar top side (129), the orthogonal projection of said top side onto said main body being contained in said geometrical base, and wherein the top sides (129) of the respective protrusions (125) of said first side and said second side lie in two planes parallel to said planar main body, the electrode being further characterized by specific shape and orientation requirements. Method for producing the bipolar electrode as above described, which includes an embossing step.

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Bipolar Electrode and Method for Producing Same

The present invention relates to the field of membrane-electrode assemblies (MEAs) for electrolysis cells, and in particular to the field of bipolar electrodes for use in such assemblies.

Bipolar electrodes for use in electrolysis cells are known in the art.

In the design of bipolar electrodes for use in an electrolysis unit, one must balance the competing requirements of maximizing the active area that is available for carrying out the actual electrolysis, and avoiding the trapping of gas produced by the electrolysis process, which could locally inhibit further reaction and eventually bring the electrolysis process to a halt.

To date, no satisfactory solution for the above tradeoff has been described.

It is therefore an object of the present invention to provide a bipolar electrode that provides an adequate balance between providing sufficient active area for the electrolysis process and avoiding the entrapment of produced gas, and a method for producing the same.

This object is reached by a bipolar electrode for use in an electrolysis unit, comprising a planar main body having a first side and a second side, each of the first side and the second side being provided with a corresponding pattern of protrusions, wherein each of the protrusions has a geometrical base within the plane of the planar main body and a substantially planar top side, the orthogonal projection of the top side onto the main body being contained in the geometrical base, wherein the top sides of the respective protrusions of the first side and the second side lie in two planes parallel to the planar main body,

wherein the base of at least 75% of the protrusions has a convex polygonal shape and wherein the corresponding top side has a shape resulting from a homothetic transformation of the polygonal shape,

and wherein the polygonal shape has at least one side that is oriented in a direction substantially normal to the intended direction of flow, and wherein the total length of the at least one side does not exceed 35% of the perimeter of the polygonal shape, and/or the polygonal shape is oriented in such a way that a vector connecting the centroid of the polygonal shape with a corner of the latter having the smallest internal angle, has a direction that is substantially parallel to the direction of flow;

wherein the pattern of protrusions is such that two sets of straight channels are formed, wherein the channels within each respective set have an axis in a common direction, the common direction having its main component in the intended direction of flow;

wherein the pattern of protrusions extends at a given scale and is repeated on a smaller scale on the top sides of the protrusions; and is such that average width of the channels within each respective set increases along the common direction from the end nearest to the supply side to the end nearest to the exit side.

It is an advantage of the bipolar electrode according to the invention that a high yield can be achieved while the produced hydrogen gas retains adequate mobility without the need for forced convection. Hence, the need for moving parts (e.g., pumps to generate forced convection) is avoided, and an efficient, 5 low-maintenance electrolysis unit can be achieved.

It is an advantage of the use of polygonal protrusions with a homothetically transformed top side that material stresses caused by manufacturing are distributed in a homogenous way, which avoids the creation of points of weakness.

10 It is an advantage of the use of convex polygonal shapes that the protrusions don't present any "dead corners" which could constitute obstacles for a proper flow of the fluids in the reaction.

According to the invention, the polygonal shape has at least one side that is oriented in a direction substantially normal (ideally, normal) to the intended 15 direction of flow, and the total length of the at least one side does not exceed 35% of the perimeter of the polygonal shape.

20 A direction is considered "substantially normal" if it is within a small angular margin around the strictly normal direction. The small angular margin is preferably no more than 10° on either side of a strictly normal direction, more preferably no more than 5° on either side, and most preferably no more than 1° on either side.

25 Additionally or alternatively, the polygonal shape may be oriented in such a way that a vector connecting the centroid of the polygonal shape with a corner of the latter having the smallest internal angle has a direction that is substantially parallel (ideally, parallel) to the direction of flow.

30 A direction is considered "substantially parallel" if it is within a small angular margin around the strictly parallel direction. The small angular margin is preferably no more than 10° on either side of a strictly parallel direction, more preferably no more than 5° on either side, and most preferably no more than 1° on either side.

These particular combinations of shape and orientation minimize the occurrence of ridges of the protrusions that would be substantially transverse to the direction of flow, which would otherwise be prone to collecting gas bubbles and impeding their natural flow.

In an embodiment of the bipolar electrode according to the present invention, the ratio of the area of the planar top side of the protrusions to the area of their respective geometric base exceeds 1/4.

5 This ratio has given good results in experiments. Reducing the ratio to a lower number is expected to reduce the efficiency of the electrode, as the total active surface participating in the electrolysis becomes too small.

10 In an embodiment of the bipolar electrode according to the present invention, the pattern of protrusions is repeated on a smaller scale on the top sides of the protrusions. For example, if the protrusions are diamond-shaped, their top surfaces may further be provided with a pattern of multiple smaller diamond-shaped protrusions.

15 This embodiment improves the distribution of water between the different electrodes of a reactor, ensuring adequate presence of reactant to keep the electrolysis reaction going.

20 15 In an embodiment of the bipolar electrode according to the present invention, the pattern of protrusions is such that two sets of straight channels are formed, wherein the channels within each respective set have an axis in a common direction, the common direction having its main component in the intended direction of flow. In other words, if the vectors representing the direction of the axes of the channels are decomposed in a component parallel to the intended direction of flow and a component perpendicular thereto, the former component is greater than the latter.

25 20 It is an advantage of this embodiment that the bubbles of produced gas have a convenient way out of the reactor, without creating “dead zones” in the areas in which the reaction should continue to take place (i.e., the top surfaces of the protrusions).

30 30 In a particular embodiment, the pattern of protrusions is such that average width of the channels within each respective set increases along the common direction. In other words, the channels defined by the protrusions widen from the end nearest to the supply side to the end nearest to the exit side.

It is an advantage of this embodiment that bubbles of increasing size, notably as a result of the gradual coalescence of smaller bubbles, have an appropriate exit path.

35 35 In an embodiment of the bipolar electrode according to the present invention, the planar main body is made of metal.

For the purposes of the bipolar electrode according to the invention, metals provide a good tradeoff between molding ability and shape stability. Preferred metals include steel and titanium.

According to an aspect of the present invention, there is provided an electrolysis unit comprising a plurality of bipolar electrodes as described above and associated ion exchange membranes placed between the bipolar electrodes, the electrodes being electrically connected in series and arranged in a stack.

Thanks to the efficient flow properties of the bipolar electrodes, a membrane-electrode assembly can be constructed which has no need for forced convection means. Hence, the electrodes can be combined in a very dense stack to produce a compact and reliable electrolysis unit.

According to an aspect of the present invention, there is provided an energy storage and supply unit comprising the aforementioned electrolysis unit, a fuel cell, an electrical current interface, and a hydrogen storage tank; said electrolysis unit being coupled to said electrical current interface for receiving current and to said hydrogen storage tank for storing produced hydrogen; and said fuel cell being coupled to said electrical current interface for supplying current thereto and to said hydrogen storage tank for receiving stored hydrogen.

The advantages of the bipolar electrode according to the invention may be applied to an electrolysis unit and/or a fuel cell to produce an efficient, compact, and reliable energy storage and supply unit, which can be used instead of batteries in energy storage applications.

According to an aspect of the present invention, there is provided the use of the aforementioned electrolysis unit for the production of hydrogen.

According to an aspect of the present invention, there is provided a method for producing the bipolar electrode as described above, the method comprising: embossing a first metal sheet and a second metal sheet with the corresponding patterns of protrusions; and joining the first metal sheet and the second metal sheet together with the protrusions facing outwards so as to produce the planar main body.

It is an advantage of this method that the planar main body can be produced with appropriate protrusion patterns on both side, using only metal sheets of substantially uniform thickness.

In an embodiment of the method according to the present invention, the first metal sheet and the second metal sheet are embossed prior to cutting the first metal sheet and the second metal sheet out of a common mother sheet.

It is an advantage of this embodiment that the embossing for both sides of the planar main body can happen in a single step.

In an embodiment, the method according to the present invention further comprises applying a surface coating to the first metal sheet and the second metal sheet.

In an embodiment of the method according to the present invention, the embossing is carried out by hydroforming.

It is an advantage of this embodiment that protrusions, even multiple levels of protrusions, can be produced with very high precision without damaging the surface of the material. It is a further advantage that hydroforming is a single-stage process.

US patent 1,328,981 to Edward O. Benjamin discloses an electrode for use in an electrolytic cell, comprising a plate of conducting material having its surface formed or provided with flat-topped projections vertically aligned so as to form upward channels between them. This electrode is intended for use in monopolar arrangements, and its protrusions do not have the characteristics of those of the electrodes according to the present invention.

International patent application publication WO 91/00379 A1 in the name of Heraeus Elektroden discloses an electrolytic cell for electrolytic processes in which gas is evolved, comprising at least one electrode with parallel electrode elements. The electrode elements have a thickness up to three times the average diameter of a released bubble and the capillary gap between the electrode elements is such that the gas bubbles move through the electrodes essentially in the direction of the electric field between the reaction surfaces of the anode and the cathode, or the opposite direction. This electrode is intended for use in monopolar arrangements, and its protrusions do not have the characteristics of those of the electrodes according to the present invention.

International patent application publication WO 2009/043600 A1 in the name of Reinz Dichtung GmbH discloses an electrochemical system as well as a bipolar plate for use in an electrochemical system. The electrochemical system consists of a layering of several cells, which in each case are separated from one another by bipolar plates, wherein the bipolar plates comprise openings for the cooling or for the removal and supply of operating media to the cells, and the layering may be set under mechanical compressive stress, wherein at least one cell comprises an electrochemically active region which is surrounded by a boundary wall of the bipolar plate, and a channel structure of the bipolar plate is

provided within the electrochemically active region, for the uniform media distribution, wherein at least one gas diffusion layer is provided for the micro-distribution of media. Limitation elements are provided in the border region between the channel structure as well as the boundary wall, for avoiding fluid 5 from bypassing between the channel structure and the boundary wall, wherein the gas diffusion layer covers the channel structure and/or at least parts of the limitation elements. The described bipolar plate is suitable for use in fuel cells, but not in electrolysis cells. Its protrusions do not have the characteristics of those of the electrodes according to the present invention.

10 Some embodiments of apparatus and/or methods in accordance with embodiments of the present invention are now described, by way of example only, and with reference to the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

15 Figure 1 schematically illustrates an exemplary bipolar electrode in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

Figure 2 schematically illustrates alternative shapes for the protrusions used in electrodes according to embodiments of the present invention;

20 Figure 3 schematically illustrates further alternative shapes for the protrusions used in electrodes according to embodiments of the present invention, having a second level of channels;

Figure 4 schematically illustrates the geometric transformation projecting the footprint of a protrusion onto its top face;

Figure 5 schematically illustrates an energy storage and supply unit according to an embodiment of the present invention;

25 Figure 6 provides a flow chart of a method for producing a bipolar electrode according to an embodiment of the present invention; and

Figure 7 is an annotated photographic reproduction of an exemplary bipolar electrode in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

30 The following description of embodiments of the present invention is directed to the application of electrolysis of water. This is intended to clarify and not to limit the invention. A skilled person will understand that the invention also applies to the electrolysis of other substances than water, for instance to chlor alkali electrolysis. In addition, a skilled person will understand that electrodes and assemblies according to the present invention may in principle also be used 35 for a reverse process, *i.e.* for the process of converting hydrogen and oxygen into water and electricity, as occurs in a fuel cell.

As decentralized generation of electricity from renewable and in particular intermittent energy sources becomes more prevalent, *inter alia* as a result of the increasing number of photovoltaic panels installed by households, and as return of surplus energy to the grid is not always desirable or even possible, the need 5 for an efficient storage of surplus energy becomes more pressing. Batteries have been used for this purpose, but these have limited efficiency. Combined electrolysis and fuel cell units are a promising alternative, which present a higher conversion efficiency. In these combined units, any available surplus electricity is used to produce gaseous hydrogen by electrolysis, and the stored hydrogen is 10 used to power the fuel cell (in combination with stored or atmospheric oxygen) to produce electricity when the demand exceeds the immediate production by the renewable source.

The electrolysis cell and/or the fuel cell of the above mentioned unit is advantageously built up as a stacked membrane-electrode assembly (MEA), in 15 which the electrodes are electrically connected in series. Each one of the electrodes of such a stack is placed at different electrical potential, in a monotonously increasing or decreasing sequence, such that each electrode acts as a cathode towards the electrolyte on one side, and as an anode towards the electrolyte on the other side.

20 Figure 1 schematically illustrates a first bipolar electrode **100** and a second bipolar electrode **100'** according to a general embodiment of the present invention. The top side of the first electrode **100** and the bottom side of the second electrode **100'** are visible in the selected view. The position of an ion exchange membrane **160** between the electrodes is also illustrated. Only the first 25 electrode **100** will be described in detail, the second one being substantially identical. Certain features of the electrode have been represented in a simplified manner.

The electrode **100** comprises a planar main body with a supply opening 30 **110**, an active zone **120** comprising a plurality of protrusions **125**, and an exit opening **130**. A flow path is thus provided on one side of the membrane **160** from the supply opening **110** via the active zone **120** and to the exit opening **130**. An additional supply opening **115** and exit opening **135** are provided to provide a flow path on the other side of an ion exchange membrane, via the active zone on the other side of the electrode **100**. Thanks to judicially placed barriers **140**, the 35 flow path between the pair of openings **110/130** pertaining to the first side of the first electrode **100** is not in fluid communication with the flow path between the

pair of openings **115/135** pertaining to the second side of the first electrode **100** or the corresponding flow path on the second side of the second electrode **100'**.

The planar main body, and in particular the active zone **120**, are preferably substantially polygonal, more preferably substantially rectangular; they may be 5 perfect polygons or perfect rectangles. In use, the bipolar electrode **100** is normally arranged vertically, such that the direction of flow, as imposed by the rising direction of gas bubbles in a liquid due to gravity, is substantially parallel with the long edge of the rectangle. To ensure proper coalescence of the 10 produced gas bubbles, the actual flow path between the supply opening **110** and the exit opening **130** should be as long as possible, thus preferably comprising a diagonal path across the active zone.

The protrusions **125** have a substantially planar (ideally, planar) top portion, the top plane of each protrusion being parallel with the plane of the main body of the electrode **100**. By "substantially planar" is generally meant that the 15 surface may deviate from a strictly planar form due to production tolerances, or due to the presence of further protrusions on top of the surface of the main protrusions. The protrusions **125** are present on both sides of the main body in a corresponding pattern, such that the top plane of a protrusion on the top side of the main body of one electrode will always be in proximity of the top plane of a 20 protrusion on the bottom side of the main body of the next electrode up the stack, so as to create an adequate active zone for electrolysis. However, the protrusions on either side of the planar main body are not necessarily identical. In particular, their height may vary. In an exemplary embodiment for use in electrolysis, the channel depth (protrusion height) at the air/oxygen side (*i.e.*, the side acting as 25 the anode) may be 1.0 mm or thereabout, and the channel depth (protrusion height) at the hydrogen side (*i.e.*, the side acting as the cathode) may be 0.6 mm or thereabout.

The protrusions **125** preferably cover 20% to 80% of the surface of the active zone **120**, most preferably 40% to 50%.

30 The general direction from **110** to **130** will be referred to as the "flow path direction". The direction corresponding to the left-right axis in Figure 1 will be referred to as the "direction of flow" or the "length direction", regardless of whether the electrode is elongate in this direction or not. The "direction of flow" corresponds to the vertical direction when the electrode is placed in its position 35 for normal use. The "flow path direction" preferably doesn't deviate much from

the length direction. A deviation between 5° and 15° is preferred. Good results have been obtained with a deviation of 9°.

Figure 1 further shows a number of depressions **150**. The shape of the depressions **150** is not particularly critical; the depressions **150** may be, *inter alia*, 5 square, rectangular, circular or elliptic, with circular depressions **150** being preferred. The depressions **150** are advantageously located at part of the periphery of the electrode **100**; when the planar main body of the electrode **100** has or has substantially the shape of a polygon, in particular of a rectangle, the depressions **150** are preferably located along one side of the polygon, much 10 preferably all along one side of the polygon. Besides, the centers of mass of the depressions **150** are desirably substantially aligned, when not perfectly aligned, with each other. The depressions **150** may be used in cooperation with corresponding depressions of an adjacent electrode **100'** to mechanically secure 15 two side-by-side membrane-electrode assemblies, for instance an electrolysis unit and a fuel cell. Depressions **150** may also be useful for ensuring thermal transfer from one side of the electrode **100** to the other side thereof; hence, in a preferred embodiment, the depressions **150** can provide a device exhibiting a substantially isothermal behaviour (ideally, an isothermal behaviour). Adjacent electrodes **100** and **100'** are advantageously connected to each other at part of 20 their periphery (which part contains the depressions **150**) through a layer composed of a thermally conductive polymer composition; the thermally conductive polymer composition comprises desirably a polymer and thermally conductive inorganic particles. The polymer can be or include a polyoxymethylene or an aromatic polycondensate. Aromatic polycondensates can 25 be any polymers obtained by a polycondensation reaction, of which more than 50 wt.% of the repeat units comprise at least one aromatic moiety. Suitable aromatic polycondensates in accordance with the present invention are poly(aryl ether sulfone)s [such as bisphenol A polysulfones (PSU), polyethersulfones (PES) and polyphenylsulfones (PPSU)], semi-aromatic polyamides [such as 30 polyphthalamides, MXD6 and MXD10], wholly aromatic polyesters (LCP), polyphenylene sulfides (PPS), polyamideimides, polyimides, polyetherimides and mixtures thereof. In a particular embodiment, the polymer includes an aliphatic polycondensate in addition to the aromatic polycondensate, desirably in a weight ratio aliphatic polycondensate: aromatic polycondensate of at most 0.20 35 (for example, the polymer can be a mixture of MXD6 with at least one aliphatic polyamide such as nylon 6 or nylon 66). The weight of the polymer, based on the

total weight of the polymer composition, ranges usually from 10 to 90 wt.%, preferably from 30 to 70 wt. %. Preferred thermally conductive inorganic particles are ceramic particles, in particular oxides, nitrides, carbides and silicides of an element chosen from Al, B, Be, Ce and Zr, and mixtures thereof;

5 very preferred thermally conductive inorganic particles are particles of aluminum oxide, particles of boron oxide, particles of boron nitride and mixtures thereof; the weight of the inorganic particles, based on the total weight of the polymer composition, ranges usually from 10 to 90 wt.%, preferably from 30 to 70 wt.%; it can be of about 50 wt. %. The polymer composition may further comprise

10 additives, such as heat stabilizers, light stabilizers and flow modifiers; when present, their amount does not generally exceed 25 wt. % and it is often of at most 5 wt.%; in certain embodiments, the polymer composition consists essentially of the polymer and the thermally conductive inorganic particles. The polymer forms generally the matrix of the polymer composition, while the

15 thermally conductive inorganic particles are generally dispersed in said matrix. The polymer composition may be further characterized by its thermal conductivity; this one, when measured at room temperature (23°C) is advantageously of at least 2.0 W/(m.K), preferably at least 4.0 W/(m.K), more preferably at least 6.0 W/(m.K) and still more preferably at least 7.0 W/(m.K). It

20 is usually of at most 20.0 W/(m.K), and very often of at most 10.0 W/(m.K). Embodiments of the invention are based *inter alia* on the insight that a judicial choice of the shape of the protrusions 125 improves the formation of gas bubbles that progressively aggregate to facilitate their transport through the liquid electrolyte in the direction of flow.

25 Embodiments of the invention are based *inter alia* on the insight that a judicial design of the pattern of the protrusions will allow the creation of virtual channels between the protrusions, whose primary function is to supply water to the reaction sites, and whose secondary function is to ensure that the gas bubbles can efficiently be removed from the electrode. Such a virtual channel may be

30 defined by the parallel sides of polygonal protrusions, which are preferably arranged along straight lines. These virtual channels are indicated in Figure 1 as dashed arrows. The channels preferably have a width of 1 mm to 5 mm, more preferably between 2 and 4 mm, and most preferably 2.6 mm, 3 mm, or thereinbetween.

35 Good results have been obtained with polygonal protrusions, in particular protrusions shaped as parallelograms, and most preferably diamond-shaped

protrusions. More in particular, diamond-shaped protrusions with one diagonal, preferably the long diagonal, oriented in the length direction, as illustrated in Figure 1, have given good results, as the symmetrically oriented acute angle of the diamond is well suited to divide the oncoming flow of fluids over the surface 5 of the electrode. The angle pointed towards the oncoming flow is preferably acute, more preferably in the range of 40° to 80°, and most preferably about 60°, which avoids creating ridges onto which oncoming gas bubbles would cling. Conversely, the diametrical angle, pointed towards the departing gas bubbles, is also preferably acute, more preferably in the range of 40° to 80°, and most 10 preferably about 60°, to allow bubbles that travel along the edge towards the angle to overcome the surface tension barrier and break loose from the protrusion. The protrusions preferably have a size in the order of 10 mm.

Protrusions in the shape of parallelograms correspond to a pattern consisting of two sets of parallel channels. When the channels are spaced at 15 regular distances, the same distance being used for each set, the corresponding protrusions will be diamond shaped, as illustrated in Figure 2a. Diamond-shaped protrusions are preferably oriented with their longest diagonal along the direction of flow. They preferably have a length (long diagonal) between 10 mm and 20 mm, more preferably between 14 mm and 17 mm, for instance approximately 20 15.8 mm.

More generally, the protrusions may be shaped as convex polygons. If a polygon is arranged in such a way that one or some sides of the polygon are normal to the direction of flow, their combined length should not exceed 35% of the total perimeter of the polygon. The polygon is preferably oriented in such a 25 way that the corner with the smallest internal angle is oriented with respect to the centroid of the polygon in a direction substantially parallel to the direction of flow.

In order to benefit from the aforementioned effects, it is preferred that a substantial portion of the protrusions provided on the planar main body, for 30 example at least half of them, are shaped as convex polygons. More preferably, at least 60% of the protrusions are shaped as convex polygons. Most preferably, at least 75% of the protrusions are shaped as convex polygons. In order to avoid trapping of gas bubbles at the edges of the protrusions to the greatest possible extent, it is recommended use only protrusions shaped as convex polygons.

35 In a particularly advantageous arrangement, the size and/or arrangement of the protrusions is such that the channels defined between them have a gradually

increasing width in the direction of flow, to accommodate gas bubbles of increasing size (due to the aggregation of growing numbers of smaller gas bubbles). The corresponding protrusions have a shape of a kite as illustrated in Figure 2b, rather than a perfect parallelogram or diamond, because the exit-side 5 corner (the corner pointed to the exit opening, *i.e.* pointing substantially in the direction of flow) will be less acute than the corner pointing to the incoming flow.

The substantially planar top surface of the protrusions may in fact support a further level of protrusions and channels, allowing the active zones of the 10 electrodes to more efficiently discharge the formed gas pockets into larger gas bubbles travelling through the broader channels present between the first level of protrusions. Thus, every protrusion may for example have four second-level protrusions. The application of this principle is schematically illustrated in Figure 3a for diamond-shaped protrusions and Figure 3b for kite-shaped 15 protrusions. In the former case, the second-level protrusions are preferably also diamonds. The process may be repeated to produce a third level of protrusions, as illustrated in Figure 3c for the case of diamond-shaped protrusions, and even higher-order protrusions.

It will be understood that the top face of the protrusions does not 20 necessarily have exactly the same shape as its footprint in the plane of the main body of the electrode. If these shapes are identical, with a 1/1 ratio of the area of the top side of the protrusion to the area of its geometric base, the protrusion would have a prismatic form which stands out from the plane of the main body. Although it is desirable to approximate this ratio to optimize the total active area 25 of the electrode, a 1/1 ratio is not optimal from a mechanical point of view, because cracks in the material surface might appear at the right or acute angles, and the upright sides of the prism would undergo substantial thinning. Hence, the shape of the top plane of the protrusions is preferably reduced in size relative to its footprint, most particularly preferably by means of a homothetic 30 transformation. Such a homothetic transformation is schematically shown in Figure 4 for diamond-shaped protrusion 125, the result being a shape having the mantle and top face 129 of a clipped pyramid. The angle between the main body of the electrode and each of the sides of the protrusion is preferably obtuse (one such angle is indicated in Figure 4 with the symbol α) to minimize the risk of 35 damage (cracking) at the surface. This geometrically corresponds to the constraint that the orthogonal projection of the top face onto the main body of the

electrode is completely inscribed into the footprint of the protrusion **125**.

Preferably, the ratio of the area of the top side of the protrusion to the area of its geometric base is at least 1/4, more preferably more than 1/2, and even more preferably more than 2/3.

5 The protrusions **125** preferably have a symmetry axis parallel to the length direction. Alternatively, they may have a symmetry axis parallel to the flow path direction.

The bipolar electrode of the invention may be very compact. The active area of the electrode may be 100 cm² or less, preferably even 50 cm² or less.

10 The bipolar electrode of the invention may be used in an electrolysis unit or in a fuel cell, typically constructed as a stacked membrane-electrode assembly (MEA).

15 With reference to Figure 5, an electrolysis unit and/or a fuel cell constructed with bipolar electrodes **100** according to the invention may be used in an energy storage and supply unit **500** comprising an electrolysis unit **510**, a fuel cell **520**, an electrical current interface **540 a/b**, and a hydrogen storage tank **530**. The electrolysis unit **510** includes a set of bipolar electrodes **100** as described before, connected in series in a membrane-electrode assembly. The bipolar electrodes **100** are preferably arranged substantially vertically, to facilitate the natural migration of the formed gas bubbles as a result of the difference in density between the gas and the surrounding water. The electrolysis unit **510** is coupled to the electrical current interface **540a** and the hydrogen storage tank **530**, in order to withdraw the necessary current for the electrolysis process and to store the produced hydrogen. The fuel cell **520** is coupled to the electrical current interface **540b** and the hydrogen storage tank **530** in order to withdraw stored hydrogen as fuel and to supply the produced electrical current to the grid or a consumer of electric energy. In normal operation, at most one of the electrolysis unit **510** and the fuel cell **520** is active at any given time.

20 For clarity purposes, the electrical current interface has been illustrated as a separate input interface **540a** and output interface **540b**. In practice, this may be a common interface. It will be understood that any produced electricity may be simultaneously consumed or returned to the grid in accordance with the needs and preferences of the user.

25 To reduce the space requirements of the energy storage and supply unit **500**, the produced hydrogen is preferably stored under pressure. One or more pumps, schematically illustrated as a pump unit **535**, may be used to pressurize

the hydrogen gas for storage up to a pressure preferably in excess of 10 MPa, more preferably in excess of 50 MPa, and most preferably at or around 70 MPa.

5 The oxygen produced by the electrolysis unit **510** may be discharged into the atmosphere, or stored in an adequate container. Likewise, the oxygen required by the fuel cell **520** may be withdrawn from the atmosphere (which normally contains around 21% of molecular oxygen by volume) or from an adequate container (which preferably contains a gas with a higher oxygen content than atmospheric air).

10 The water required by the electrolysis unit **510** may be obtained from a utility water supply or an adequate container. Alternatively or additionally, atmospheric water may be used if it is available, for example from the exhaust of an air conditioning appliance. The water produced by the fuel cell **520** may be discharged as vapor into the atmosphere, where this is acceptable from an environmental point of view, or stored for future use. The electrolysis unit **510** 15 may operate with water at atmospheric pressure. In an embodiment, the electrolysis unit **510** operates with water at pressures up to 10 bar. In another embodiment, the electrolysis unit **510** operates with water at pressures up to 50 bar.

20 Each stage of the electrolysis unit may correspond to a stage of the fuel cell, whereby continuous or joined metal sheets are each used as an electrode of the electrolysis unit in the electrolysis zone and as an electrode of the fuel cell in the fuel cell. A continuous membrane, such as the one described in patent application EP 2 424 105 A in the name of the present applicant, may extend

25 over both zones. This allows for an extremely compact realization of the aforementioned energy storage and supply unit **500**. It will be understood that in such an assembly, the necessary measures must be taken to avoid fluid communication between the electrolysis zone and the fuel cell zone.

30 A process for producing a bipolar electrode according to the present invention will now be described with reference to Figure 6. Although the steps of the method are illustrated in Figure 6 in a particular order, this is order must be considered exemplary and non-limiting.

35 The main body of the electrode may advantageously be produced from two pieces of sheet metal, which will correspond to the top side and the bottom side of the planar main body. The advantage of using a pair of metal sheets, is that the protrusions of the bottom side and the top side may be formed independently in

steps **610** and **620**. At this same stage, appropriate openings **110**, **115**, **130**, **135** and barriers **140** may also be provided.

It must be noted that the two sheets may, at this stage, be contained in a single mother sheet or matrix, from which they will be cut out at a later stage, in 5 steps **650** and **660**. This way of operating allows an efficient simultaneous embossing of both sheets, as well as the sheets required for additional electrodes.

The two sheets are then placed on top of each other with the protrusions facing outwards **670** and optionally joined by any suitable means.

10 The sheets are preferably between 100 µm and 1000 µm in thickness, more preferably between 100 µm and 500 µm, and most preferably between 100 µm and 200 µm. The metal is preferably stainless steel, most preferably 316L grade stainless steel. Stainless steel provides a good trade-off between material strength and moldability. Another preferred material is titanium, which also lends itself to other manufacturing techniques, such as 3D printing. Various coatings or surface 15 treatments may be applied to the metal, e.g. in steps **630** and **640**, in order to make it more suitable for the intended process, notably catalytic electrolysis of water. The coating or surface layer may present a porous structure, which provides nucleation sites for the formation and coalescence of gas bubbles.

20 The protrusions in each sheet, which correspond to dimples if viewed from the reverse side of the sheet, may be formed by moulding or stamping. One particularly advantageous way of forming the protrusions, is to emboss them by hydro forming. This is a type of die forming that uses a high pressure hydraulic fluid, typically up to 2000 bar, and in some embodiments even up to 2500 bar, to 25 press the working material into a die, without melting the working material.

25 Figure 7 is an annotated photographic reproduction of an exemplary bipolar electrode in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. It is, in all relevant aspects, similar to the embodiment shown in Figure 1, and has been provided with corresponding reference signs. Reference is made to the description of Figure 1 for further details. Special attention is drawn to the upper 30 surface of the individual diamond-shaped protrusions **125**, which are in turn provided four smaller diamond-shaped protrusions, in accordance with the principle illustrated in Figure 3a and explained hereinabove.

35 Although certain features and advantages of the invention have only been described hereinabove in connection with embodiments of the electrode or embodiments of the process for manufacturing the electrode, it must be

recognized that this is done for clarity reasons only, and that the features are in fact interchangeable unless it is stated otherwise.

The invention has been described hereinabove with reference to a limited number of concrete embodiments. These embodiments are only intended to 5 clarify the invention, and not to limit its scope, which should be determined in accordance with the enclosed claims.

While the invention as described above pertains to electrodes as well as to an electrolysis unit comprising same, a corresponding 10 energy storage and supply unit, and use thereof, the inventors have also found that similar units may also be used with bipolar electrodes other than those 15 described herein.

Accordingly, a separate inventive aspect disclosed herein consists of an electrolysis unit comprising a plurality of bipolar electrodes and associated ion 15 exchange membranes placed between said bipolar electrodes, said electrodes being electrically connected in series and arranged in a stack, wherein said electrodes comprise a planar main body having a first side and a second side, each of said first side and said second side being provided with a corresponding pattern of protrusions, wherein each of said protrusions has a geometrical base within the plane of said planar main body and a planar top side, the orthogonal 20 projection of said top side onto said main body being contained in said geometrical base, and wherein the top sides (129) of the respective protrusions (129) of said first side and said second side lie in two planes parallel to said planar main body.

Thanks to the efficient flow properties of the bipolar electrodes, a 25 membrane-electrode assembly can be constructed which has no need for forced convection means. Hence, the electrodes can be combined in a very dense stack to produce a compact and reliable electrolysis unit.

Preferably, in the bipolar electrodes, the ratio of the area of the planar top side (129) of said protrusions to the area of their respective geometric base, 30 exceeds 1/4. Preferably, in the bipolar electrodes, said pattern of protrusions is repeated on a smaller scale on said top sides of said protrusions. Preferably, in the bipolar electrodes said pattern of protrusions is such that two sets of straight channels are formed, wherein the channels within each respective set have an axis in a common direction, said common direction having its main component in the intended direction of flow. Preferably, in the bipolar electrodes, said 35 pattern of protrusions is such that average width of the channels within each

respective set increases along said common direction. Preferably, in the bipolar electrodes, the planar main body is made of metal.

A further separate inventive aspect disclosed herein consists of an energy storage and supply unit comprising the aforementioned electrolysis unit, a fuel cell, an electrical current interface, and 5 a hydrogen storage tank; said electrolysis unit being coupled to said electrical current interface for receiving current and to said hydrogen storage tank for storing produced hydrogen; and said fuel cell being coupled to said electrical current interface for supplying current thereto and to said hydrogen storage tank for receiving stored hydrogen.

The advantages of the bipolar electrode according to the invention may be applied to an 10 electrolysis unit and/or a fuel cell to produce an efficient, compact, and reliable energy storage and supply unit, which can be used instead of batteries in energy storage applications.

A further separate inventive aspect disclosed herein consists of the use of the aforementioned electrolysis unit for the production of hydrogen.

C L A I M S

1. A bipolar electrode for use in an electrolysis unit, said bipolar electrode comprising a planar main body having a first side and a second side, each of said first side and said second side being provided with a corresponding pattern of protrusions, wherein each of said protrusions has a geometrical base within the plane of said planar main body and a substantially planar top side, the orthogonal projection of said top side onto said main body being contained in said geometrical base,

5 wherein the top sides of the respective protrusions of said first side and said second side lie in two planes parallel to said planar main body,

wherein the base of at least 75% of said protrusions has a convex polygonal shape and wherein the 10 corresponding top side has a shape resulting from a homothetic transformation of said polygonal shape,

and wherein said polygonal shape has at least one side that is oriented in a direction substantially normal to the intended direction of flow, and wherein the total length of said at least one side does not exceed 35% of the perimeter of said polygonal shape, and/or said polygonal shape is oriented in 15 such a way that a vector connecting the centroid of said polygonal shape with a corner of the latter having the smallest internal angle, has a direction that is substantially parallel to the direction of flow;

wherein said pattern of protrusions is such that two sets of straight channels are formed, wherein the 20 channels within each respective set have an axis in a common direction, said common direction having its main component in the intended direction of flow;

wherein said pattern of protrusions extends at a given scale and is repeated on a smaller scale on said top sides of said protrusions; and is such that average width of the channels within each respective set increases along said common direction from the end nearest to the supply side to the end nearest to the exit side.

25 2. The bipolar electrode according to claim 1, wherein the ratio of the area of the planar top side of said protrusions to the area of their respective geometric base, exceeds 1/4.

3. The bipolar electrode according to claim 1 or 2, wherein the base of each of said protrusions has a convex polygonal shape and wherein the corresponding top side has a shape resulting from a homothetic transformation of said polygonal shape.

4. The bipolar electrode according to any one of claims 1 to 3, wherein the top side is planar and wherein said polygonal shape has at least one side that is oriented in a direction normal to the intended direction of flow, and wherein the total length of said at least one side does not exceed 35% of the perimeter of said polygonal shape.

5 5. The bipolar electrode according to any one of claims 1 to 4, wherein the base of at least 75% of said protrusions are shaped as diamonds and wherein the corresponding top side has a shape resulting from a homothetic transformation of said diamonds.

10 6. The bipolar electrode according to any one of claims 1 to 5, wherein the electrode has substantially the shape of a polygon, and contains depressions located at part of its periphery, along one side of the polygon.

7. An electrolysis unit comprising a plurality of bipolar electrodes according to any one of claims 1 to 6 and associated ion exchange membrane placed between said bipolar electrodes, said electrodes being electrically connected in series and arranged in a stack.

15 8. An energy storage and supply unit comprising the electrolysis unit according to claim 7, a fuel cell, an electrical current interface, and a hydrogen storage tank; said electrolysis unit being coupled to said electrical current interface for receiving current and to said hydrogen storage tank for storing produced hydrogen; and said fuel cell being coupled to said electrical current interface for supplying current thereto and to said hydrogen storage tank for receiving stored hydrogen.

9. Use of the electrolysis unit of claim 7 for the production of hydrogen.

20 10. A method for producing the bipolar electrode according to any one of claims 1 to 6, the method comprising:

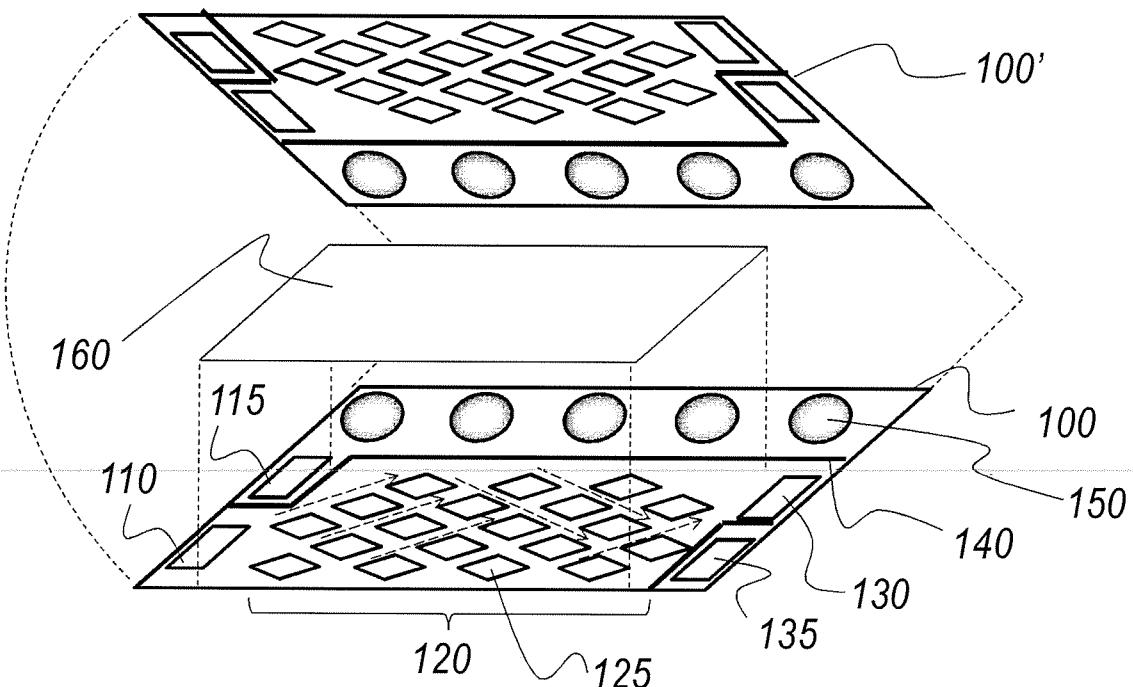
- embossing a first metal sheet and a second metal sheet with said corresponding patterns of protrusions; and
- joining said first metal sheet and said second metal sheet together with said protrusions facing outwards so as to produce said planar main body.

25 11. The method according to claim 10, wherein said first metal sheet and said second metal sheet are embossed prior to cutting said first metal sheet and said second metal sheet out of a common mother sheet.

30 12. The method according to claim 10 or 11, wherein said embossing is carried out by hydroforming.

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Figure 1



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Figure 2a

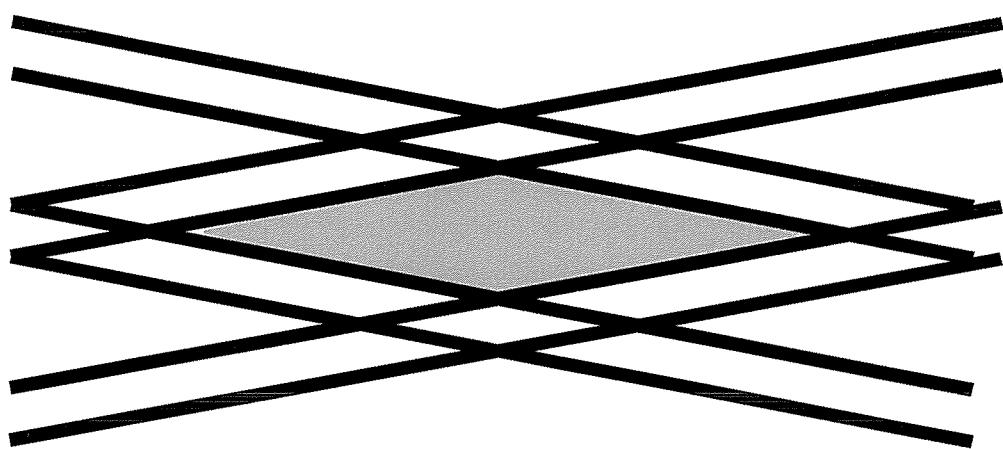
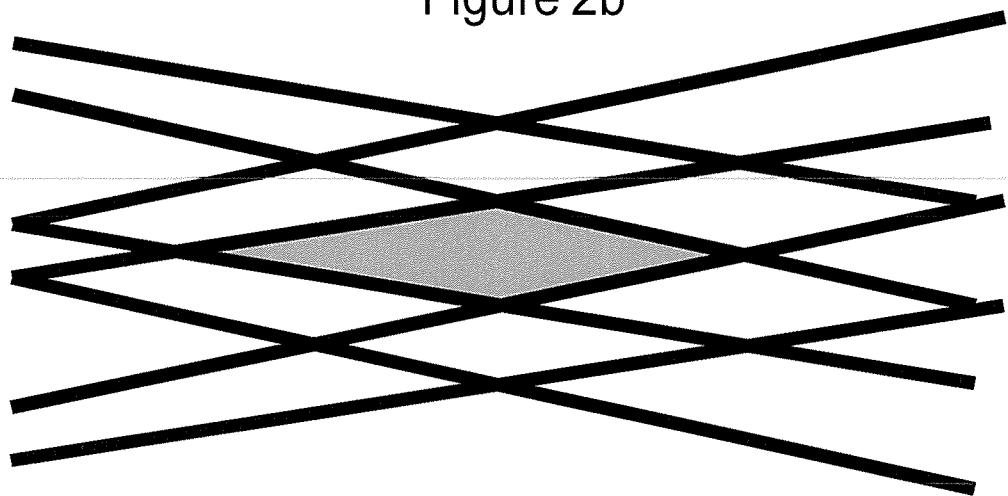


Figure 2b



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Figure 3a

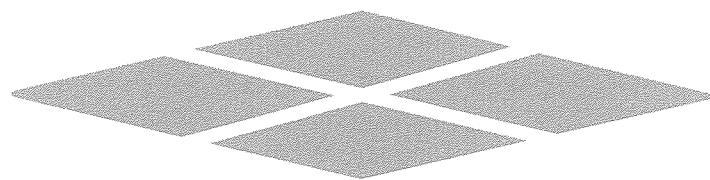


Figure 3b

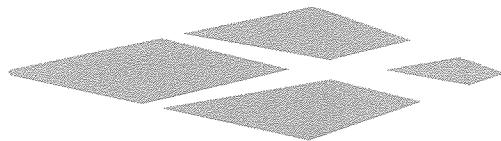
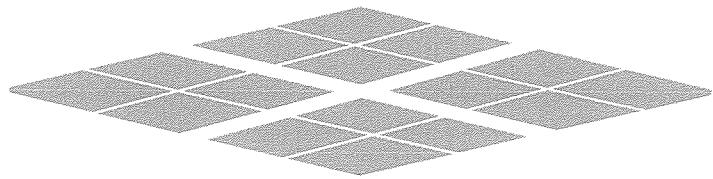
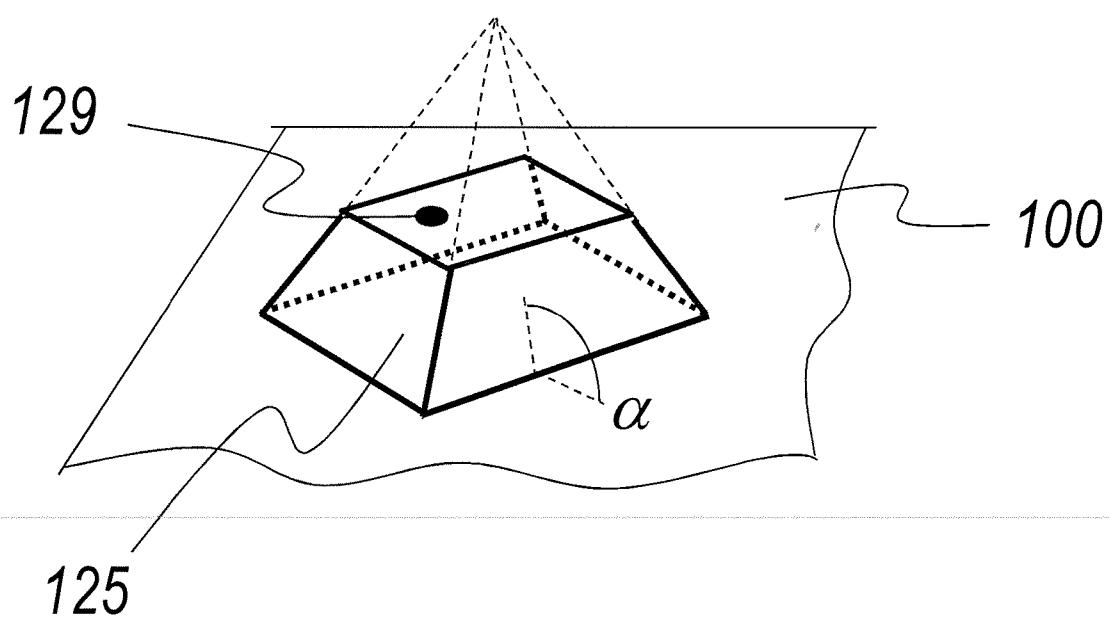


Figure 3c



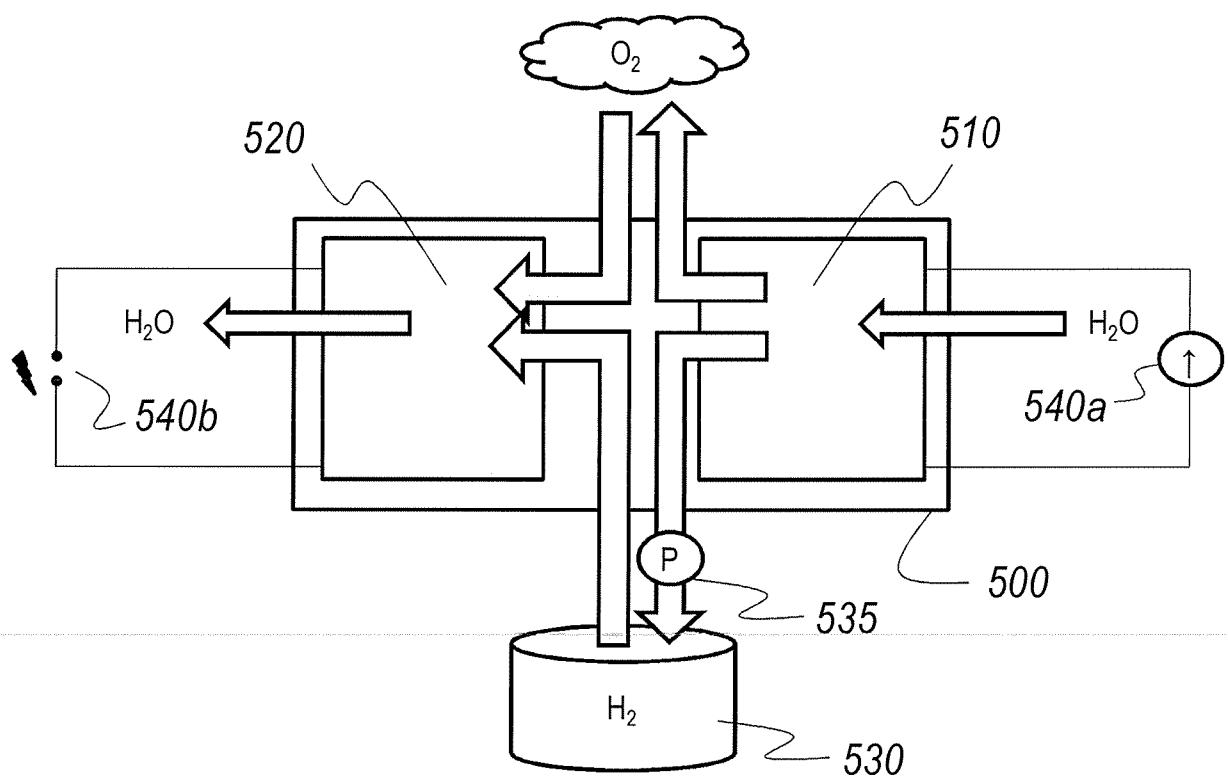
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Figure 4



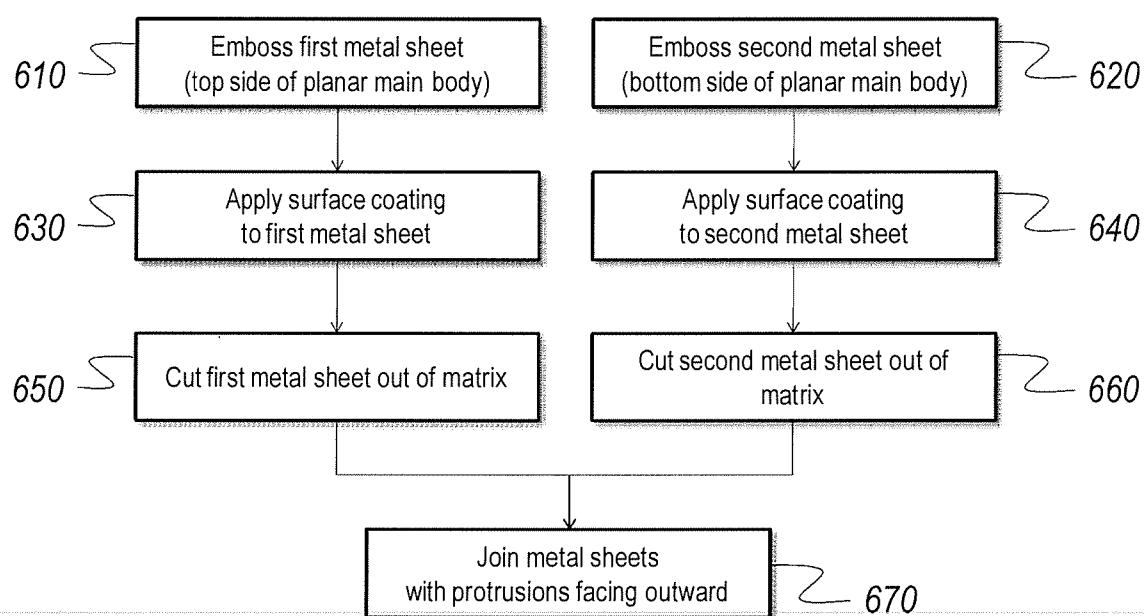
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Figure 5



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Figure 6



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Figure 7

