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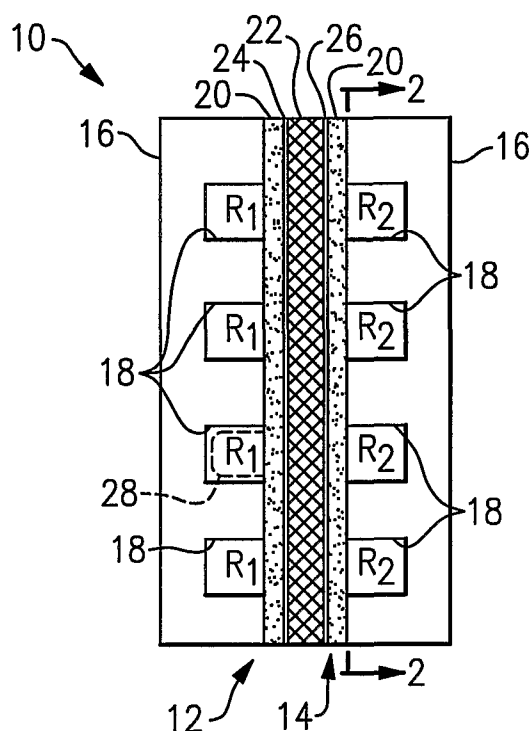
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(54) Title: FUEL CELL FLOW FIELD CHANNEL WITH PARTIALLY CLOSED END



(57) Abstract: A device (10) for use in a fuel cell includes a fuel-cell flow-field channel (18) having a channel-inlet section (42) and a channel-outlet section (44). At least one of the channel-inlet section (42) or the channel-outlet section (44) includes an obstruction member (46) that partially blocks flow through the fuel-cell flow-field channel (18).

FUEL CELL FLOW FIELD CHANNEL WITH PARTIALLY CLOSED END

5 1. Field of the Invention

[0001] This invention generally relates to fuel cells and, more particularly, to flow fields for fuel cells.

2. Description of the Related Art

10 [0002] Fuel cells are widely known and used for generating electricity in a variety of applications. A typical fuel cell utilizes reactant gases, such as hydrogen or natural gas and oxygen, to generate an electrical current. Typically, the fuel cell includes adjacent flow fields that each receives a reactant gas. Each flow field distributes the reactant gas through a gas distribution layer to a respective anode
15 catalyst or a cathode catalyst adjacent an electrolyte layer to generate the electrical current. The electrolyte layer can be any layer that effectively transports ions, but does not conduct ions. Some example fuel-cell electrolytes include: alkaline solutions (e.g., KOH), proton-exchange membranes (PEM), phosphoric acid, and solid oxides.

[0003] One type of flow field includes entrance channels interdigitated with
20 exit channels. The entrance channels have fully open inlets and fully closed outlets and the exit channels have fully closed inlets and fully open outlets. The fully closed outlets of the entrance channels force a reactant gas entering the entrance channels to flow through the gas distribution layer into an adjacent exit channel. This results in forced convection of the reactant gas toward the catalyst and relatively greater
25 exposure of reactant gas to the catalyst. The forced convection, however, increases a pressure drop of the reactant gases across the flow field and therefore requires a higher pressurization of the reactant gases, which undesirably consumes some of the electrical energy generated by the fuel cell and lowers overall efficiency.

[0004] A typical flow field includes open, or parallel, channels that have fully
30 open inlets and fully open outlets. A reactant gas entering though the channel diffuses through the gas distribution layer toward the catalyst. The open channels allow relatively unrestricted reactant gas flow and thereby produce a relatively low reactant gas pressure drop. However, a relatively low proportion of the reactant gases flowing

through the channels diffuses to the catalyst, which undesirably results in inefficient utilization of the reactant gases.

[0005] This invention addresses the need for improved balance between pressure drop and efficient reactant gas utilization.

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SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0006] One example device for use in a fuel cell includes a fuel cell flow field channel having a channel inlet section and a channel outlet section. At least one of the channel inlet section or the channel outlet section includes an obstruction member that partially blocks flow through the fuel cell flow field channel.

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[0007] One example includes a flow passage between elongated channel walls. An obstruction member extends into the flow passage between the elongated channel walls to partially block flow through the fuel cell flow field channel.

[0008] Another example includes a closure member that extends adjacent to a channel outlet section or a channel inlet section to partially block respective outlet or inlet flow.

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[0009] One example includes a plate having openings that extend through the plate. The plate is movable relative to a fuel cell flow field channel to partially block flow through the fuel cell flow field channel.

[0010] The above examples are not intended to be limiting. Additional examples are described below. The various features and advantages of this invention will become apparent to those skilled in the art from the following detailed description. The drawings that accompany the detailed description can be briefly described as follows.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[00011] Figure 1 schematically illustrates selected portions of a fuel-cell stack.

[00012] Figure 2 is a cross-sectional view taken along the lines shown in Figure 1 that illustrates an embodiment having channels with example obstruction members that partially block flow through the channels.

30

[00013] Figure 3 shows another example obstruction member embodiment having a curved shape.

[00014] Figure 4 shows example obstruction members and tapered channels.

[00015] Figure 5A shows an example obstruction member plate with openings that extend through the plate, wherein the plate is movable relative to the channels to partially block flow through the channels.

5 [00016] Figure 5B shows a perspective view of the example obstruction member plate of Figure 5A.

[00017] Figure 6 illustrates an embodiment wherein channels with obstruction members are arranged in series upstream from an interdigitated flow field.

10 [00018] Figure 7 illustrates an embodiment wherein the channels with obstruction members are arranged in series downstream from a parallel flow field.

[00019] Figure 8 graphically illustrates an example expected and actual cell voltage vs. pressure drop over a range of obstruction member sizes.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

15 [00020] Figure 1 schematically illustrates selected portions of an example fuel cell stack 10 for generating electricity. In this example, an anode side 12 receives a reactant gas R_1 and a cathode side 14 receives a reactant gas R_2 to generate an electric current in a known manner. Each of the anode side 12 and the cathode side 14 includes a flow field plate 16, such as a machined plate, molded plate, stamped plate,
20 solid plate, porous plate, or other type of plate, having channels 18 for distributing the reactant gasses R_1 and R_2 over the respective anode side 12 and cathode side 14.

[00021] In the illustrated example, a gas exchange layer 20 is located adjacent each of the flow field plates 16. An electrolyte layer 22 spaces an anode catalyst 24 from a cathode catalyst 26 between the gas exchange layers 20.

25 [00022] In the illustrated example, the channels 18 have a rectangular cross-sectional profile. In another example, the channels 18 have a curved profile, such as that shown in phantom at 28. Given this description, one of ordinary skill in the art will recognize what channel shapes will meet their particular needs.

30 [00023] In one example, to demonstrate the operation of the fuel cell stack 10, the reactant gasses R_1 and R_2 are fed into the channels 18 of the respective anode side 12 and cathode side 14. The reactant gasses R_1 and R_2 diffuse, or move by forced convection, through the gas exchange layers 20 toward the respective anode catalyst

24 or cathode catalyst 26. The electrolyte layer 22 operates in a known manner to allow ion exchange between the anode catalyst 24 and the cathode catalyst 26 to generate an electrical current through an external circuit (not shown).

5 [00024] Figure 2 shows one of the flow field plates 16 according to the section lines shown in Figure 1. In this example, the channels 18 extend between opposed channel walls 40. Each of the channels 18 includes an inlet section 42 and an outlet section 44. The reactant gas flows into the inlet section 42, through the channels 18 and out the outlet section 44. In this example, the outlet sections 44 of channels 18a and 18c and the inlet sections 42 of channels 18b and 18d each include an obstruction member 46.

[00025] In the illustrated example, the obstruction members 46 extend from the elongated channel walls 40 into the channels 18. The obstruction members 46 partially block the channels 18 to restrict the flow of reactant gas into channels 18b and 18d and restrict outflow of reactant gas from channels 18a and 18c.

15 [00026] In one example, the size of at least one of the obstruction members 46 is determined as a percentage of the cross-sectional area of the channel 18 (best shown in Figure 1) into which the obstruction member 46 extends. A higher percentage blocks more flow and a lower percentage blocks less flow.

20 [00027] In one example, the obstruction member 46 blocks greater than about 0% and below about 100% of the respective channel 18 cross-sectional area. In another example, the obstruction member 46 blocks between about 70% and about 90% of the channel 18 cross-sectional area. In another example, the obstruction member 46 covers about 80% of the channel 18 cross-sectional area.

25 [00028] The obstruction members 46 of the above examples are formed by any of a variety of methods. In one example, a known compression molding process is used to form the flow field plate 16. Selected inlet sections 42 and outlet sections 44 are molded with fully closed ends. The obstruction members 46 are then machined from the fully closed ends of the selected inlet sections 42 and outlet sections 44. In another example, the obstruction members 46 are formed in a near net-shape molding process and require little or no machining. Given this description, one of ordinary skill in the art will recognize additional methods of making the obstruction members 46 to suit their particular needs.

[00029] The size of the obstruction members 46 controls a balance between reactant gas pressure drop across the fuel cell stack 10 and reactant gas utilization efficiency. Channels 18a and 18c receive reactant gas through fully open inlet sections 42. The obstruction members 46 at the outlet sections 44 of channels 18a and 18c restrict reactant gas outflow. The unrestricted inflow and restricted outflow results in a pressure build-up in channels 18a and 18c that forces the reactant gas into the gas exchange layer 20 toward the catalyst (24 for anode side 12 or catalyst 26 for cathode side 14). The reactant gas moves through the gas exchange layer 20 into an adjacent channel 18b or 18d and exits through the fully open outlet section 44 of channels 18b and 18d. Forced convection of reactant gas in this manner provides the benefit of greater exposure of reactant gas to the catalyst 24 or 26, thereby increasing the concentration of reactant at the catalyst 24 or 26 and thereby decreasing the performance losses known as diffusion overpotential. However, the restriction of reactant gas flow and associated pressure build-up in the channels 18a and 18c leads to an increased pressure drop of the reactant gas across the fuel cell stack 10.

[00030] The obstruction members 46 at the outlet section 44 of channels 18a and 18c allow restricted outflow of reactant gas from the channels 18a and 18c, which reduces the pressure build-up and leads to a lower pressure drop across the fuel-cell stack 10 relative to interdigitated channels that are completely obstructed at either the inlet or the outlet. Thus, the restricted outflow provides a balance between pressure build-up (for forced convection) and pressure drop across the fuel-cell stack 10 (from high pressure build-up).

[00031] In one example, the size of the obstruction members 46 is designed to obtain a desirable balance between reactant-gas utilization efficiency and pressure drop across the fuel-cell stack 10. Use of relatively small obstruction members 46 results in lower efficiency (i.e., from less forced convection) and lower pressure drop across the fuel-cell stack 10 (i.e., from less pressure build-up). Use of relatively large obstruction members 46 results in higher efficiency (i.e., from more forced convection) and higher pressure drop across the fuel-cell stack 10 (i.e., from higher pressure build-up in some channels coupled with higher utilization). Given this description, one of ordinary skill in the art will recognize suitable obstruction member 46 sizes to meet their particular efficiency and pressure-drop requirements.

[00032] The obstruction members 46 in the illustrated example are shown in a rectangular shape. In another example shown in Figure 3, the obstruction members 46 have a rounded shape. Given this description, one of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that a variety of different obstruction member 46 shapes can be used to achieve the beneficial results disclosed and to meet the particular needs of their application.

[00033] Referring to Figure 4, the channel walls 40 are angled relative to one another to provide a taper in the channels 18 rather than the relatively uniform channel widths of the previous examples. The tapered channels 18 restrict reactant gas flow from the inlet sections 42 to the outlet sections 44 of the channels 18e and 18g. The reactant gas flow restriction results in pressure build-up in channels 18e and 18g. As described above, this in turn results in forced convection of the reactant gas toward the catalyst 24 or 26 and into adjacent channels 18f and 18h. The obstruction members 46 in this example function similarly to those described above to promote forced convection while allowing restricted outflow. Thus, the obstruction members 46 and the taper of the channels 18 cooperate to achieve a desired balance between reactant gas efficiency and pressure drop.

[00034] Figures 5A and 5B show an obstruction member 46 embodiment wherein obstruction members 46 include plates 56a and 56b having openings 58 that extend through the respective plates 56a and 56b. In this example, each of the channels 18i, 18j, 18k, 18l, 18m, and 18n and the channel walls 40 are approximately the same width. Actuators 60a and 60b, such as solenoids, move the respective plates 56a and 56b back and forth along a direction of movement D. In one example, respective tracks 59 guide movement of the plates 56a and 56b and restrict movement in a direction transverse to the direction of movement D.

[00035] In one example, to demonstrate the operation of the plates 56a and 56b, the actuators 60a and 60b independently move the respective plates 56a and 56b to obtain a desired balance between reactant gas efficiency and pressure drop as described above. In the example shown in the illustration, plate 56a is in position to block about 50% of the flow passage 38 at the inlet sections 42 of channels 18i, 18k, and 18m. Plate 56b is in position to block about 50% of the flow passages 38 at the outlet sections 44 of channels 18j, 18l, and 18n. The actuators 60a and 60b selectively

move the respective plates 56a and 56b to block a greater or lesser percentage (e.g., between 0% and 100%) of the flow passage 38 cross-sectional area to shift the balance between reactant gas efficiency and pressure drop.

[00036] In another example, the plates 56a and 56b provide the benefit of being able to dynamically adjust reactant gas flow through the flow passages 38 in response to differing conditions. In one example, the plates 56a and 56b are moved to block only a small percentage of the flow passage 38 areas during fuel cell start-up (e.g., almost 0% blockage). In another example, plate 56a is moved to the right in the illustration to block a large percentage of the flow passages 38 at the inlet sections 42 of channels 18i, 18k, and 18m (e.g., almost 100% blockage). Plate 56b is moved to the left in the illustration to block a large percentage of the flow passages 38 at the outlet sections 44 of channels 18j, 18l, and 18n (e.g., almost 100%) in response to the end of fuel cell start-up.

[00037] In one example, this feature provides the benefit of reducing a phenomenon known as a "start-stop loss." Closure of the channels 18 when the fuel cell stack is inactive (e.g., shut down) resists air infiltration into the channels 18. This minimizes a condition at start-up in which air and an initial flow of reactant gas fuel (e.g., H_2) exist on the anode side 12, which can lead to parasitic electrochemical reactions, corrosion, catalyst dissolution, and oxygen evolution in the cathode side 14.

[00038] Referring to an example shown in Figure 6, a modified fuel cell stack 10 includes an interdigitated flow field portion 70. In the illustrated example, the interdigitated flow field portion 70 includes entrance channels 72 and exit channels 74. The entrance channels 72 include fully open inlet sections 76 and fully closed outlet sections 78. The exit channels 74 each include fully closed inlet sections 80 and fully open outlet sections 82. Reactant gas flows from channels 18 that utilize the obstruction members 46 to the interdigitated flow field portion 70.

[00039] Generally, the reactant gas concentration decreases as it becomes used up by the catalyst 24 or 26. Thus, at the upstream position of the channels 18, the reactant gas concentration is relatively high and at the downstream position of the interdigitated flow field portion 70 the reactant gas concentration is relatively low. At a relatively high reactant gas concentration, there is significant exposure of reactant gas to the catalyst 24 or 26 without a high degree of forced convection (e.g., from

diffusion of reactant gas into the gas exchange layer 20). At a relatively low reactant gas concentration, there is less exposure of reactant gas to the catalyst 24 or 26 and a greater degree of forced convection is useful to increase the exposure.

[00040] In the illustrated example, the channels 18 with obstruction members 5 46 provide a relatively low degree (compared to the interdigitated flow field portion 70) of forced convection, which is appropriate for a relatively high reactant gas concentration, while reducing (or even minimizing in some examples) pressure drop as described above. The interdigitated flow field portion 70 provides a relatively high degree of forced convection to obtain efficient utilization of the relatively lower 10 concentration of reactant gas flow received from the channels 18.

[00041] Referring to Figure 7, another modified fuel cell stack 10 example includes a parallel flow field portion 92. The parallel flow field portion 92 includes channels 94 that each have fully open inlet sections 96 and fully open outlet sections 98. The fully open inlet sections 96 and outlet sections 98 allow unobstructed 15 reactant gas flow through the channels 94. This results in diffusion of the reactant gas toward the catalyst 24 or 26 rather than forced convection of the reactant gas.

[00042] In this example, the parallel flow field portion 92 provides little or no forced convection, which is appropriate for a relatively high reactant gas concentration, while reducing (or even minimizing in some examples) pressure drop. 20 The channels 18 and obstruction members 46 provide a limited degree of forced convection to obtain efficient utilization of the relatively lower concentration of reactant gas flow received from the parallel flow field portion 92.

[00043] Another benefit of the configurations depicted in Figs. 6 and 7 is that the reactant gas velocities are lower in the inlet regions 18 and 92 than they would be 25 if they had a greater degree of obstruction like the downstream portions of the flow fields. Lower gas velocities can be beneficial because it reduces the risk of dry-out in the inlet region where the inlet gases are typically not fully saturated with water. Lower inlet gas velocities enable relatively small humidification zones.

[00044] Figure 8 illustrates an example graph 100 showing cell voltage 30 (measure at a current density of 1300mA/cm^2) on the vertical axis 102 and pressure drop on the horizontal axis 104. Point X represents cell voltage versus pressure drop for a parallel flow field (such as the parallel flow field portion 92 of Figure 7). Point

Y represents cell voltage versus pressure drop for an interdigitated flow field (such as the interdigitated flow field portion 70 shown in Figure 6). All other aspects of these two cells were identical. One can see from this graph the trade-off between cell performance and pressure drop for these two known types of flow fields.

5 [00045] The line 110 represents an expected cell voltage vs. pressure drop relationship for a range of obstruction member sizes in terms of percentage blocked between 0% (Point X) and a 100% (Point Y). The line 112 is based upon actual data of cell voltage vs. pressure drop over the range of obstruction member 46 sizes. Surprisingly, the line 112 shows higher cell voltages for the same pressure drops
10 compared to the line 110. It should be appreciated that by practicing the flow field design taught herein, one can obtain almost the full performance benefit of a fully interdigitated flow field with just a fraction of the increase in pressure drop associated with this type of flow field.

 [00046] Although a combination of features is shown in the illustrated
15 examples, not all of them need to be combined to realize the benefits of various embodiments of this invention. In other words, a system designed according to an embodiment of this invention will not necessarily include all of the features shown in any one of the Figures or all of the portions schematically shown in the Figures. Moreover, selected features of one example embodiment may be combined with
20 selected features of other example embodiments.

 [00047] The preceding description is exemplary rather than limiting in nature. Variations and modifications to the disclosed examples may become apparent to those skilled in the art that do not necessarily depart from the essence of this invention. The scope of legal protection given to this invention can only be determined by studying
25 the following claims.

CLAIMS

We claim:

5 1. A device for use in a fuel cell, comprising:
 a fuel cell flow field channel having a channel inlet section and a channel
 outlet section, wherein at least one of the channel inlet section or the channel outlet
 section includes an obstruction member that partially blocks flow through the fuel cell
 flow field channel.

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 2. The device as recited in Claim 1, wherein the fuel cell flow field
 channel comprises a flow passage between elongated channel walls, and the
 obstruction member extends into the flow passage between the elongated channel
 walls.

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 3. The device as recited in Claim 2, wherein the obstruction member
 comprises a first protrusion that extends from one of the elongated channel walls into
 the flow passage.

20

 4. The device as recited in Claim 3, wherein the obstruction member
 comprises a second protrusion that extends from the other of the elongated channel
 walls into the flow passage.

 5. The device as recited in Claim 2, wherein the flow passage includes a
25 nominal cross-sectional area, and the obstruction member blocks greater than 0% and
 less than 100% of the nominal cross-sectional area.

 6. The device as recited in Claim 5, wherein the obstruction member
 blocks greater than about 70% and less than about 90% of the nominal cross-sectional
30 area.

7. The device as recited in Claim 6, wherein the obstruction member blocks about 80% of the nominal cross-sectional area.

8. The device as recited in Claim 2, wherein the obstruction member
5 includes a first closure member that extends adjacent to one of the channel inlet section or the channel outlet section to partially block flow through the flow passage.

9. The device as recited in Claim 8, wherein the first closure member is selectively moveable to provide a range of flow through the corresponding section.
10

10. The device as recited in Claim 9, including a second closure member that extends adjacent the other of the channel outlet section or the channel inlet section to partially block flow through the flow passage.

11. The device as recited in Claim 10, wherein the second closure member is selectively moveable to provide a range of flow through the corresponding section.
15

12. The device as recited in Claim 11, wherein the first closure member and the second closure member each comprise a plate having at least one opening,
20 wherein the plate is moveable between a first position having the opening at least partially aligned with at least one of the elongated channel walls and a second position having the opening at least partially aligned with the flow passage.

13. A method of controlling flow through the device recited in Claim 12,
25 including moving the first closure member and the second closure member to provide a desired amount of flow through the flow passage in response to a vehicle condition selected from a vehicle start or a vehicle stop.

14. The device as recited in Claim 1, wherein the channel outlet section
30 includes an outlet opening at least partially formed by the obstruction member and the channel inlet section includes an inlet opening that is larger than the outlet opening.

15. The device as recited in Claim 1, wherein the fuel cell flow field channel comprises a curved channel surface.

5 16. The device as recited in Claim 1, including a parallel fuel cell flow field section having unobstructed channel inlets and unobstructed channel outlets, wherein the fuel cell flow field channel is in flow-receiving communication with the parallel fuel cell flow field section.

10 17. The device as recited in Claim 1, including an interdigitated fuel cell flow field section having entrance channels with fully open inlets and fully closed outlets and exit channels with fully open outlets and fully closed inlets, wherein the interdigitated fuel cell flow field section is in flow-receiving communication with the fuel cell flow field channel.

15 18. A method for controlling flow through a fuel cell flow field, comprising:

obstructing a fuel cell flow field passage to provide a desired balance between fuel cell flow field flow characteristics comprising efficiency and pressure associated
20 with a fluid flowing in the passage.

19. The method as recited in Claim 18, wherein the fuel cell flow field flow characteristics comprise reactant gas utilization efficiency and reactant gas pressure drop through the fuel cell flow field passage.

25 20. The method as recited in Claim 18, including changing the size of the obstruction to shift between a first desired balance and a second desired balance.

21. The method as recited in Claim 18, including obstructing about 80% of
30 a nominal cross-sectional flow area of at least one portion of the flow field passage.

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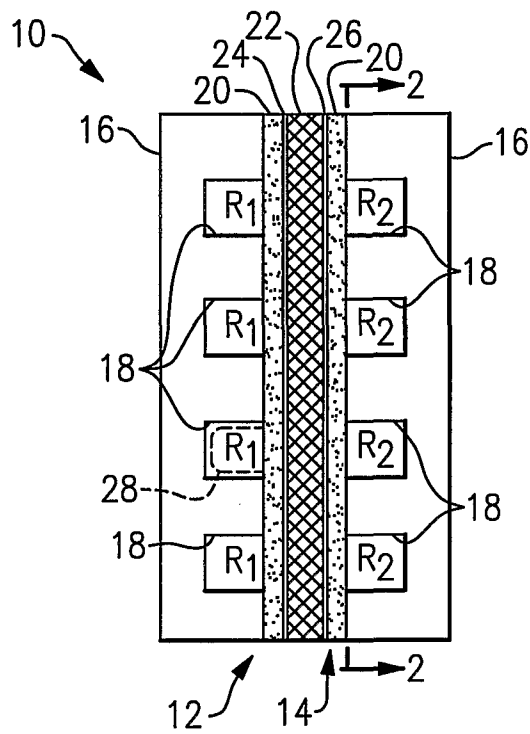


FIG. 1

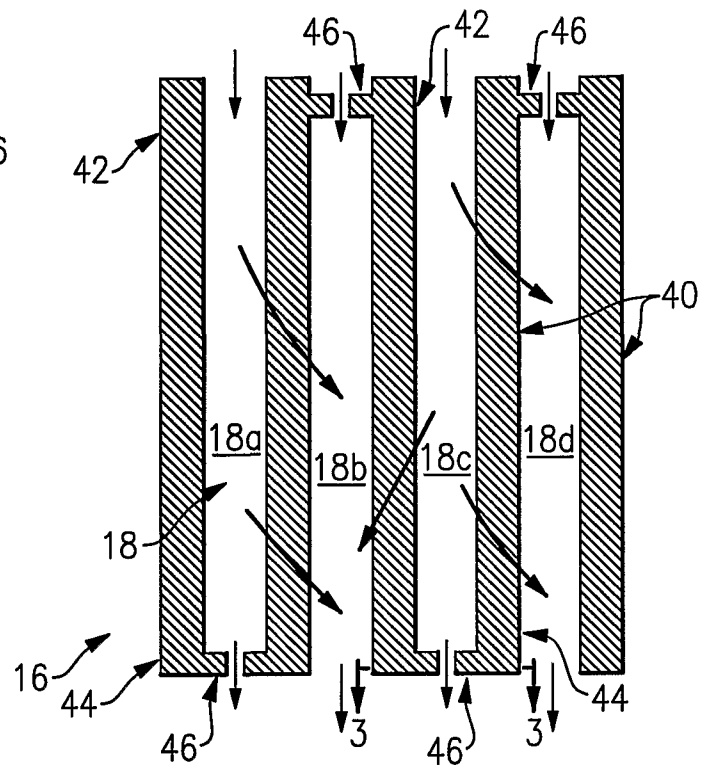


FIG. 2

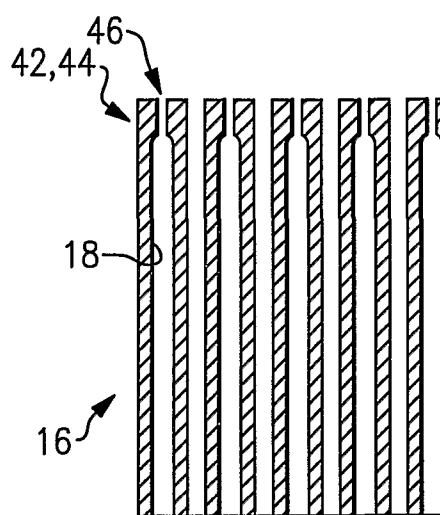


FIG. 3

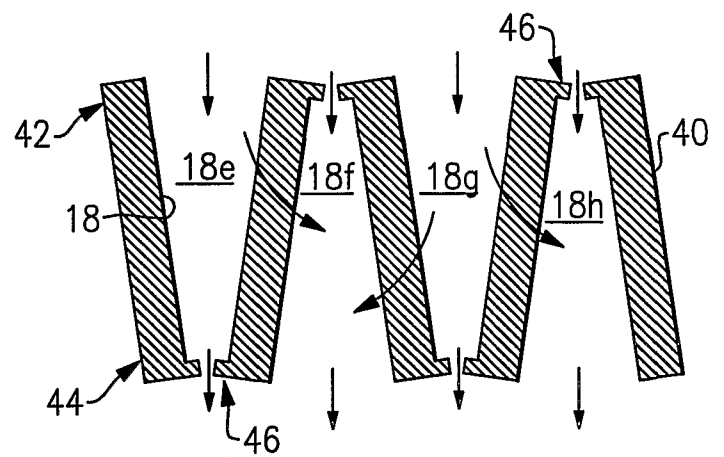


FIG. 4

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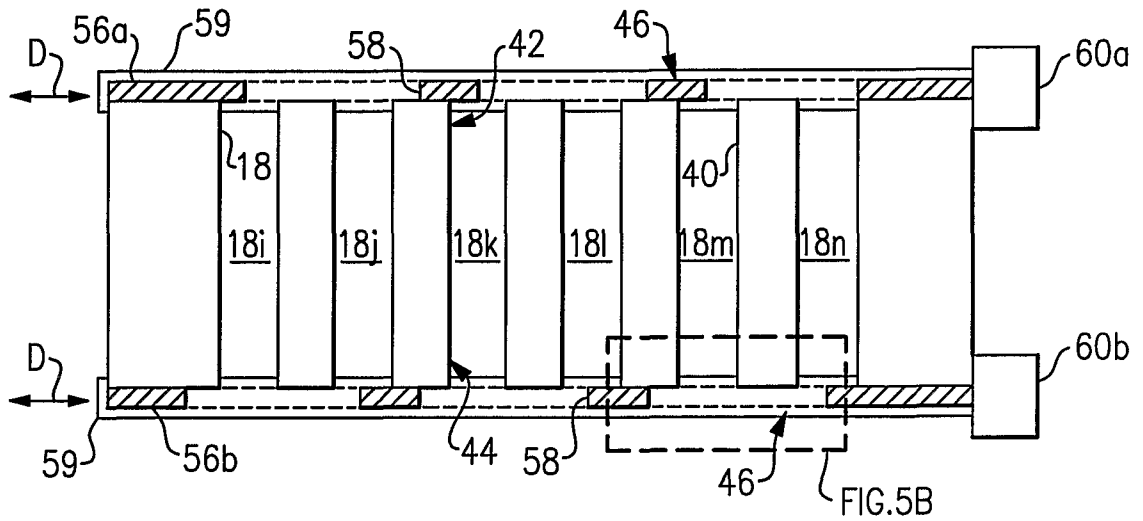


FIG. 5A

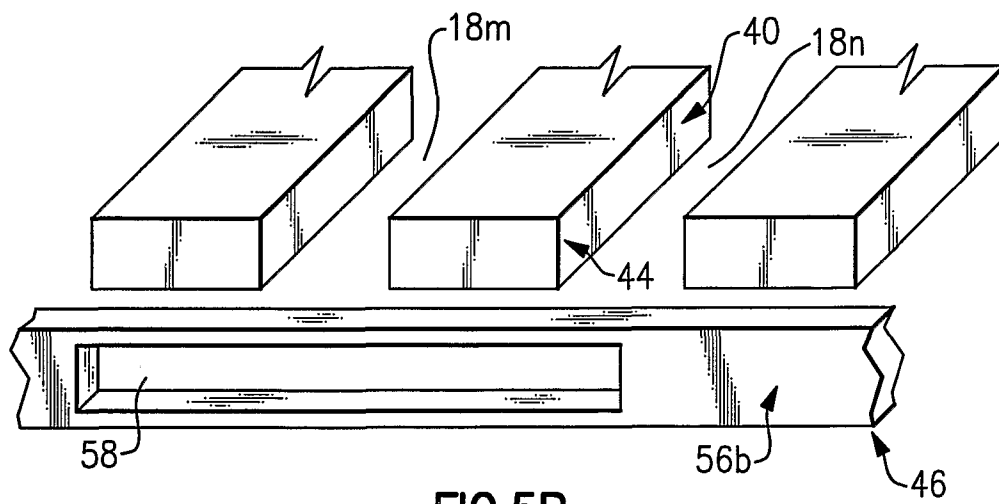
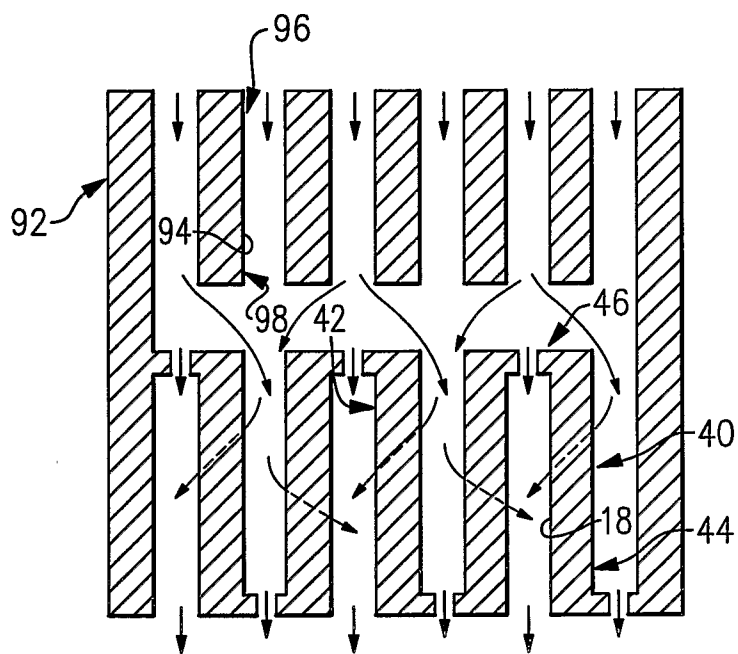
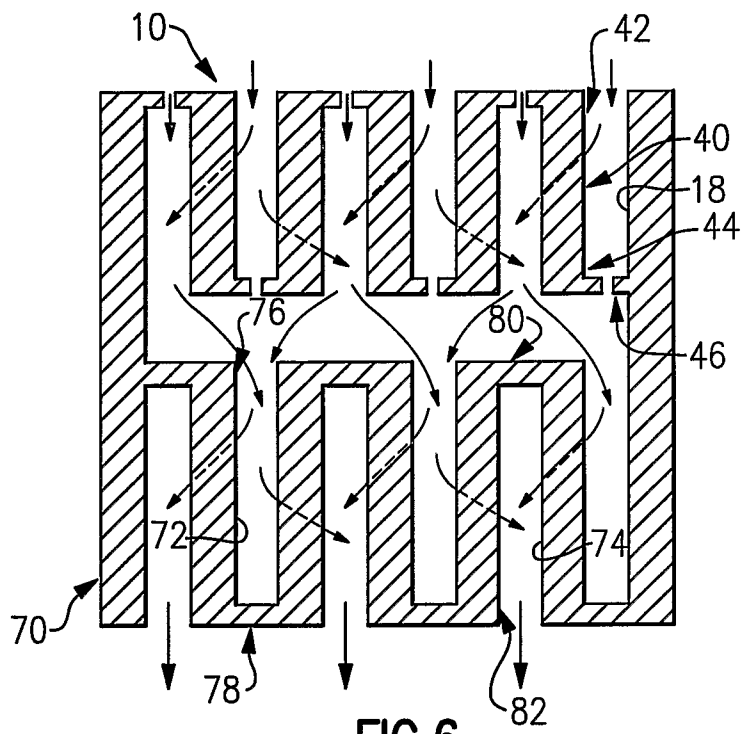
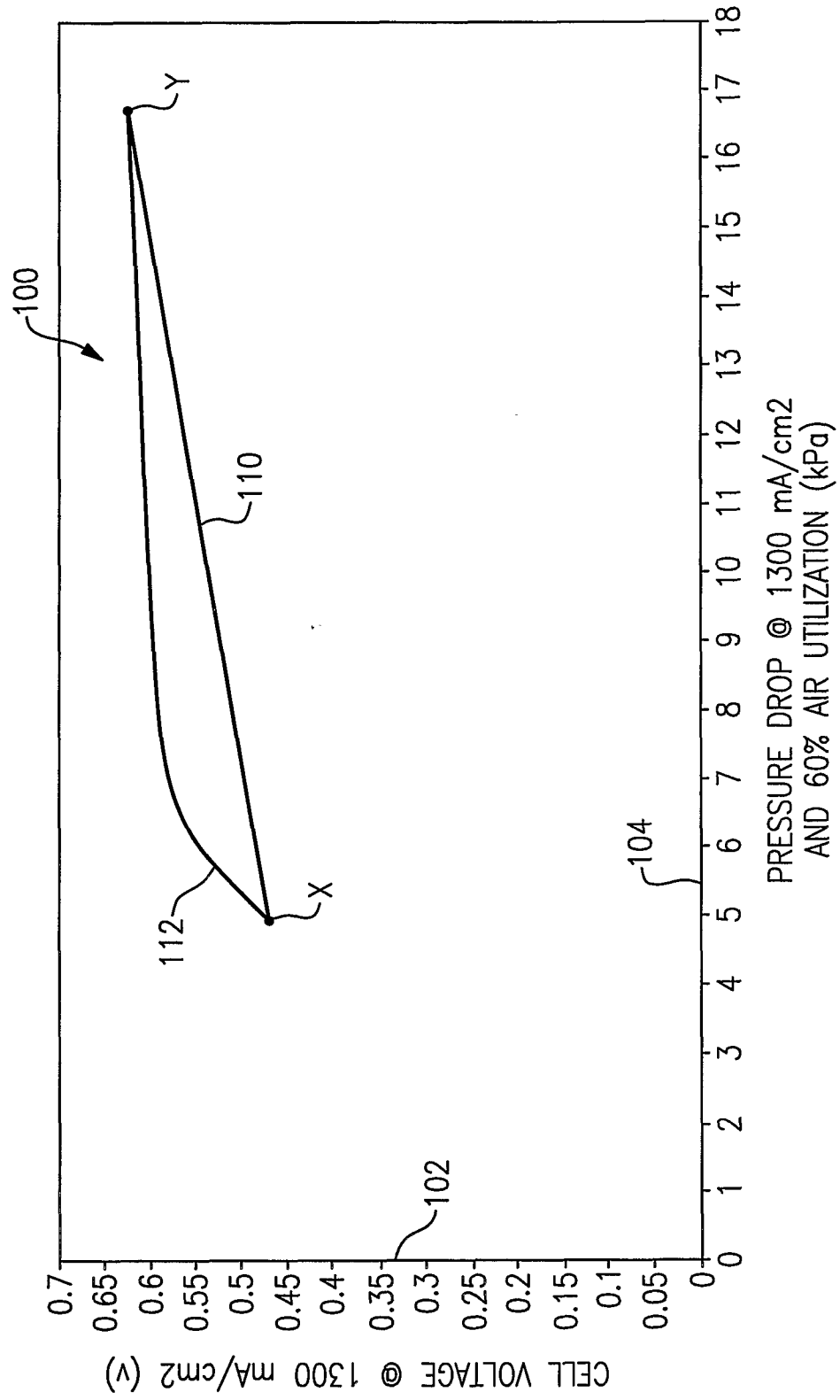


FIG. 5B

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**FIG.8**