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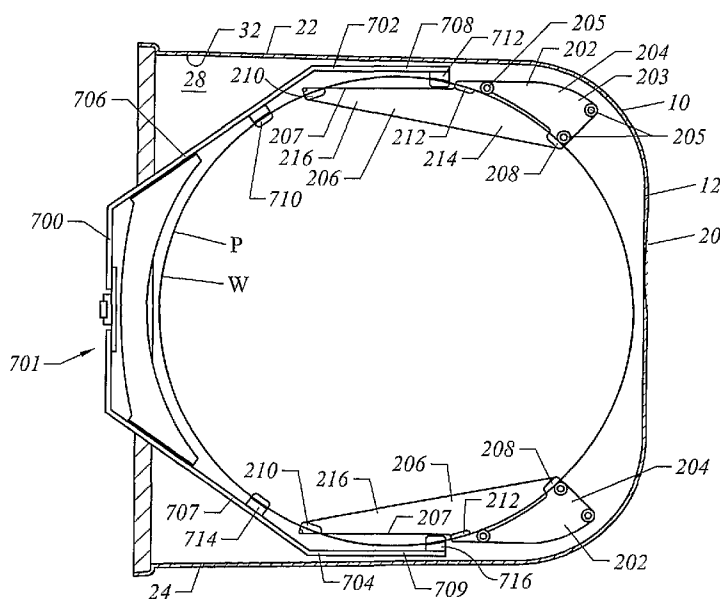
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(54) Title: WORKPIECE SUPPORT STRUCTURES AND APPARATUS FOR ACCESSING SAME



(57) Abstract: The present invention comprises a workpiece container for storing at least one workpiece having a bottom surface and a peripheral edge. In one embodiment, a workpiece support structure is located within the container enclosure, which forms multiple vertically stacked storage shelves within the enclosure. Each storage shelf includes, in one embodiment, a first tine and a second tine for supporting the workpiece in a substantially horizontal orientation. The bottom surface and peripheral edge of a workpiece seated on a storage shelf extends beyond the outer edge of both the first tine and the second tine. An end effector according to the present invention may engage these extended portions or "grip zones" of the workpiece.

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WORKPIECE SUPPORT STRUCTURES AND APPARATUS FOR ACCESSING SAME

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Claim of Priority

5 This application claims priority under 35 U.S.C. §119(e) to U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 60/697,528, entitled "End Effector Tine and Transfer Methods," which was filed with the U.S. Patent & Trademark Office on July 8, 2005, and which is incorporated in its entirety by reference herein.

Field of the Invention:

10 The present invention generally comprises workpiece support structures and a workpiece transfer apparatus for accessing the workpieces stored in the structures. More specifically, the present invention comprises a structure for supporting the workpieces such that the transfer device may randomly access any of the workpieces stored in the carrier.

15 Background of the Invention:

Conventional wafer containers, such as a Front Opening Unified Pod (FOUP) or a Standard Mechanical Interface (SMIF) pod, often contain shelves of fixed-pitch spacing to support the semiconductor wafers. Fig. 1 illustrates one embodiment of a conventional FOUP 10. The FOUP 10 includes a housing or shell 12 and a FOUP door 14 that
20 mechanically couples with the FOUP shell 12. The housing 12, which includes a top 18, a back 20, a first side 22, a second side 24 and a bottom 26, defines an enclosure 28. The enclosure includes a support 30 located on the interior surface 32 of the first side 22 and the interior surface (not shown) of the second side 24. Each support 30 includes multiple shelves 16. Each slot between a pair of shelves 16 stores a single wafer. Each support 30
25 covers a portion of the wafer's peripheral edge while the wafer is seated in the FOUP 10. Access to the outside edge of the wafer is blocked by the shelf structure. Wafers are therefore typically handled by thin-bladed end effectors that must reach between adjacent wafers and subsequently either secure the wafer with a vacuum chuck or some type of edge support and/or gripping arrangement. These methods of securing the wafer often
30 support the wafer by the wafer's back and front edges or elsewhere on the back edges.

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This conventional wafer securing approach has been in widespread use in the semiconductor manufacturing industry for over twenty-five years. But this approach has a number of shortcomings that become more serious as the wafer size becomes larger. Also, increasing use is being made of thinned wafers, which are prone to significant bending deflections when supported by the edge.

Some of the deficiencies of conventional wafer support and carrier architectures include:

1) Wafer Mapping – Break-the-beam mapping has proven to be the most reliable method of determining a wafer's presence or absence and its vertical position within the container. However, break-the-beam mapping with the 300mm FOUP architecture requires expensive and complex mechanisms to position sensing elements into the container.

2) End effector blade travel zone – To access a wafer, the end effector blade must first travel between adjacent wafers until it reaches a desired position, and at that position, lift the wafer from the support shelf. As wafer diameter increases, the mass of the wafer and the blade length required to support the wafer also increases. To maintain reasonable deflection characteristics of the end effector for larger diameter wafers, the end effector blade must be thicker. If the thickness of the end effector blade increases, the pitch between the wafers must also increase to allow the thicker end effector to pass between wafers without contacting the wafers. Either container size will have to increase or fewer wafers can be stored in conventional containers. Additionally, the extra travel length of the end effector is subject to wafer bow, distortion and warping, as well as the vibration characteristics of the end effector due to the rapid horizontal and vertical motions required for time efficient wafer handling. All of this must be accomplished without any accidental contact between a moving end effector and a wafer. Contact between the end effector and a wafer will likely to cause serious damage to sensitive circuits on the wafer as well as generating particle bursts that may contaminate all the other wafers in the container.

3) End effector travel path efficiency – A conventional end effector places a wafer in a container and then withdraws to enable vertical motion clearance for randomly accessing the next wafer, which is then withdrawn and taken to a process or metrology

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location. Thus, four horizontal moves are required for each wafer exchange at the container.

4) Process/Metrology chuck complexity – Typically, wafers are placed on flat chucks or platens for processing or measurement. In many applications, the wafer is
5 secured to the chuck (and planarized) by applying vacuum. Use of conventional vacuum or edge grip end effectors necessitates large cutaway areas in the chuck to enable release of the wafer and withdrawal of the end effector blade.

5) Multiple wafer handling – It is very difficult in today's architecture to pick or place multiple wafers simultaneously or to enable individual selection of desired wafers in
10 a mass transfer mode.

Thus, it would be advantageous to have an end effector with these features. The various embodiments of an end effector and a tine structure described herein provides such features.

Summary of the Invention:

15 One aspect of the present invention is to provide a new apparatus for supporting semiconductor wafers or substrates. In one embodiment, the present invention comprises a structure that enables storage and transport of one or more wafers as well as random access pick and place handling of individual wafers or groups of wafers.

Another aspect of the present invention is to provide a tine structure that supports
20 each wafer by a pair of cantilevered structures. In one embodiment, the pair of cantilevered structures each include two contact surfaces for supporting the wafer; one contact surface at the distal end and the other contact surface at the proximal end. While a wafer is seated on the cantilever structures, the peripheral edge of the wafer is exposed or accessible by an end effector. A portion of the wafer's bottom surface is also exposed or
25 accessible by an end effector, and in one embodiment is referred to as a "grip zone." In another embodiment, each cantilever structure includes a third contact surface.

Yet another aspect of the present invention is to provide a tine structure whereby an end effector may travel along the outside of the support structure between wafers. In one embodiment, the pair of cantilevered structures are spaced apart such that a portion of
30 a wafer, seated on the cantilever structures, extends out beyond the outer edge of each cantilever structure. An end effector according to the present invention may then travel

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between wafers along the outside of each wafer; eliminating the need to travel across the entire wafer surface simply to lift a wafer off the support shelves. In one embodiment, the end effector travels along the outside of the wafer until the end effector is at a height whereby the end effector arms can be positioned underneath the wafer. This distance, by way of example only, comprises a few millimeters, and does not require the end effector to travel across the wafer surface.

Brief Description of the Drawings

FIGURE 1 provides a perspective view of a FOUP, according to the prior art;

FIGURES 2A-2B provide a cross-sectional plan view and a side elevation view of an embodiment of the present invention;

FIGURE 3 provides a plan view of another embodiment of the present invention;

FIGURE 4 provides a perspective view of another embodiment of the present invention;

FIGURE 5 provides a perspective view of yet another embodiment of the present invention;

FIGURE 6 provides a perspective view of still another embodiment of the present invention;

FIGURE 7 provides a perspective view of another embodiment of the present invention;

FIGURE 8 provides a perspective view of yet another embodiment of the present invention;

FIGURE 9 provides a plan view of yet another embodiment of the present invention; and

FIGURE 10 provides a cross-sectional plan view of the container shown in FIG. 10 in conjunction with one embodiment of an end effector according to the present invention.

Detailed Description of the Invention:

For the purposes of describing this invention only, the workpiece support structure **102** will be described in reference to a carrier or container. A container or carrier may include, but is not limited to, a moveable, closed or open structure used to hold, store,

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transport or protect semiconductor wafers, substrates, flat panel displays and the like. Such a container includes, but is not limited to, a wafer cassette, a Standard Mechanical Interface (SMIF) pod, and a Front Opening Unified Pod (FOUP). For containers that include mechanically openable doors, the present invention may be used in conjunction with front opening and/or bottom opening containers. Of course, the workpiece support structure **102** is not limited to such containers and may be used in conjunction with any type of workpiece storage needs.

Figs. 2 and 4-8 illustrate one embodiment of a support structure **102**. In this embodiment, each support structure **102** includes a base member **104** and multiple tines **106**. Each tine **106** forms a cantilevered structure extending or projecting from the base member **104**. A tine **106** may comprise any shape including, but not limited to, a flat surface, a shape having a rectangular cross-sectional area, a shape having a circular cross-sectional area, and so on. Fig. 2A illustrates that each tine **106** is separated by a distance **d1**, which in a preferred embodiment, comprises 10mm. The distance **d1** may comprise other distances as well. There is no ideal distance **d1**. The distance **d1** simply must be large enough such that a wafer **W** may be vertically lifted off a storage shelf (*e.g.*, tines **106b1** and **106b2** in Fig. 4) to a height whereby the wafer **W** may be removed from the storage shelf, and the wafer does not contact the storage shelf located directly above (*e.g.*, tines **106a1** and **106a2** in Fig. 4).

Figs. 4-8 illustrate the support structure **102** in use with a bottom opening container. The base member **104** shown in Fig. 4 extends upward from the container door **12**. The base member **104** may comprise a structure separate from the container door **12** or may comprise a structure that is part of the container door **12**.

Any number of tines **106** may extend or project from a base member **104**, and the number of tines **106** simply determines how many wafers may be stored in a carrier if the support structure is located within a carrier (each pair of tines **106**, or storage shelf, supports a single wafer). For example, the wafer supports **102** shown in Fig. 4 each include a base member **104** and four tines **106**. Thus, the support structure **102** shown in Fig. 4 may store up to four wafers **W**. Each wafer **W** is supported by a pair of tines **106**, which may be referred to as a storage shelf. Fig. 4 illustrates that the uppermost pair of tines **106a1** and **106a2** are not occupied by a wafer; tines **106b1** and **106b2** are supporting wafer **W1**; tines **106c1** and **106c2** are supporting wafer **W2**; and tines **106d1** and **106d2**

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are supporting wafer **W3**. Each pair of tines **106** preferably support the wafer **W** in a substantially horizontal orientation so that the wafers **W** are substantially parallel to each other. Fig. 4 shows that the tines **106** are molded into the base member **104**. Each tine **106** may also comprise a separate component affixed or secured to the base member **104**.

5 Fig. 2A illustrates that a tine **106** includes a first end or proximal end **112**, a second end or distal end **114** and an outer edge **107**. If the support structure **102** is located within a FOUP, the outer edge **107** of each tine **106** faces the interior of the container shell **12** (e.g., surface **32** of a FOUP side wall **22** - as shown in Fig. 1). The tines **106** preferably support a wafer **W** with a minimum amount of contact with the wafer's bottom surface or
10 peripheral edge **P**. In this embodiment, each tine **106** contacts or supports the wafer **W** with only two surfaces - a first support **108** and a second support **110**. The first support **108** is located at or near the first end **112** of the tine **106**. The second support **110** is located at or near the second end **114** of the tine **106**. It is within the scope of the present invention for other portions of the tine **106** to contact the wafer **W**. In addition, the first
15 and second supports **108** and **110** may be located elsewhere along the tine **106**. It is also within the scope of the present invention for a tine **106** to have only one support while other supports are provided by the base member **104**. In a preferred embodiment, each storage shelf includes at least three supports shared between the base member(s) **104** and the two tines **106**.

20 Fig. 2A further illustrates that a tine **106** may also include an additional support **116**. In the Fig. 2A embodiment, a structure **118** extends from the tine **106** somewhere between the proximal end **112** and the distal end **114** of the tine **106**. The additional support **116** is preferably located at the distal end **119** of the structure **118**, but may, of course, be located anywhere along the structure **118**. The additional support **116** provides
25 an additional support point, and may be desirable when, for example, the support structure **102** is storing thin wafers.

Unlike the storage shelves in a conventional container, the tine **106** supports a wafer, yet enables access to the wafer's perimeter **P** located between the two support pads **108** and **110**. Fig. 2A shows that the wafer's perimeter **P**, and an area **120** of the wafer **W**,
30 extend out beyond the tine **106** between the support pads **108** and **110**. The area **120** of the wafer **W** that extends beyond, or overhangs, the tine **106** is referred to as a "grip zone." The grip zone **120** provides an access area for an end effector or other mechanical

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apparatus to contact or grip the wafer **W** while the wafer **W** is seated on the pair of tines **106**. The grip zone **120** is created because the distance **d1** between the pair of tines (*e.g.*, tines **106a1** and **106a2**) is less than the diameter **D** of the wafer **W**. Thus, each tine **106** passes under the wafer **W**.

5 Accessing wafers stored in a FOUP or SMIF pod with a conventional end effector requires many complicated, precise movements. First, the end effector is inserted into the FOUP storage area to a predetermined position that aligns the end effector with the wafer it is going to remove from the FOUP. To get to this predetermined position, the end effector travels between adjacent wafers (*e.g.*, wafers **W1** and **W2** in Fig. 2B) towards the
10 back of the FOUP. The entire time, the end effector is within millimeters of the wafer surface. The end effector then rises up; contacting the bottom surface of the wafer, and proceeds to raise up until the wafer is lifted completely from the shelf. The end effector, with a wafer seated upon it, is then removed from the container without contacting either of two adjacent shelves or the adjacent wafer. The end effector operates within this
15 narrow area (*e.g.*, between the two adjacent shelves) the entire time, and must not damage the wafer (*e.g.*, contacting either shelf).

A conventional end effector must travel within this narrow area between adjacent wafers twice when the end effector drops off a wafer in the FOUP and then immediately travels to another wafer within the FOUP. For example, to drop off a wafer within the
20 FOUP, the end effector travels into the FOUP and lowers the wafer onto a storage shelf. The end effector then retracts out of the FOUP; traveling out of the FOUP between two adjacent wafers. Once the end effector clears the wafers, the end effector shifts in a vertical direction and is inserted between two different adjacent wafers. The end effector then repeats the same movements to remove the new wafer from the FOUP. The end
25 effector may accidentally strike or contact a wafer and damage the wafer while traveling between the wafers.

If the support structures **102** are located in a container (*e.g.*, a FOUP), the present invention eliminates the need for an end effector to travel across the entire face of the wafer simply to position its support pads under the wafer. At the very least, the end
30 effector has to travel across only a very small portion of each wafer to position its support pads. By creating the "grip zones" **120**, an end effector may travel vertically within the FOUP enclosure along the outside of the wafer's perimeter or peripheral edge. When, for

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example, an end effector reaches the appropriate height to engage a wafer, the end effector arms only have to move a small distance towards the wafer until the end effector's support pads are positioned to support the wafer and lift the wafer off the storage shelf. The end effector does not have to travel across the entire face of the wafer to lift the wafer off the support shelf.

Figs. 2A and 4 illustrate one embodiment of an end effector **200**. An end effector may comprise any structure that acquires, supports and transports a wafer or any other article (*e.g.*, reticle, FPD, etc.), and is conventionally driven by, or attached to, a robotic mechanism (*e.g.*, robotic arm). An end effector may passively acquire a wafer (*e.g.*, end effector include tines) or actively acquire a wafer (*e.g.*, end effector includes a gripper mechanism that moves between a wafer loading position and a wafer contact position). In this embodiment, the end effector **200** includes a first arm **202** and a second arm **204**. The first arm **202** includes a first support pad **210** and second support pad **212**. The second arm **204** includes a first support pad **214** and second support pad **216**. In a preferred embodiment, three or more support pads support a wafer. For example, the first arm **202** may have two supports pads and the second arm **204** may have one support pad, or vice versa. The first and second support pads **210** and **212** on the first arm **202**, and the first and second support pads **214** and **216** on the second arm **204**, are spaced apart from each other. It is within the scope of the present invention for the end effector **200** to include two or more support pads shared between the two arms **202** and **204**.

The first and second support pads **210** and **212** on the first arm **202**, and the first and second support pads **214** and **216** on the second arm **204**, may be passive supports or active supports. If the supports are passive, the support pads **210-216** remain in the position shown in Fig. 4 at all times. In this case, a wafer **W** remains on the support pads **210-216** by gravitational forces. If the support pads **210-216** are active supports, at least one support, and preferably each support, moves between a wafer loading position and a wafer gripping position. The wafer loading position allows the wafer to be seated on the end effector. After the wafer is seated on the end effector, the support pads moves towards the center of the wafer until the support pads contact the peripheral edge of the wafer.

The configuration of the end effector **200** and the arms **202** and **204** shown in Figs. 2A and 4 are only for illustration purposes. The end effector **200** may have other

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configurations and the arms **202** and **204** may, for example, include only one support pad each or incorporate a break-the-beam sensor system **230**. A break-the-beam sensor is known within the semiconductor manufacturing art and is often used to accurately map the true position of each wafer stored in the container to provide error-free, scrape-free placement and retrieval of wafers at random access positions. Such a sensor system is well known within the art and therefore does not require further disclosure herein.

In effect, the conventional end effector blade is eliminated; the end effector does not travel within the interstitial spaces between wafers. The arms **202** and **204** of the end effector structure may have any reasonable thickness as required for minimizing deflection and controlling vibration. The support pads **210** and **212** on the first arm **202** and the support pads **214** and **216** on the second arm **204** may be passive retention/support surfaces or activated retention surfaces with motion in the direction **232**. If the end effector arms **202** and **204** cannot move in the direction **232**, the end effector **200** first travels in the direction **234** beneath the wafer until the support pads **210**, **212**, **214** and **216** are located substantially underneath the wafer's "grip zone" **120**. The end effector **200** then moves vertically (*e.g.*, direction **236** in Fig. 2B) to engage the bottom surface **20** of the wafer **W** and lift the wafer **W** a controlled amount off the storage shelf. The end effector **200** can then withdraw the wafer **W** from the container.

If the end effector **200** has arms **202** and **204** that move in the direction **232**, the end effector **200** can freely travel in the vertical direction **236** unimpeded by the presence or absence of wafers stored in the container. In this case, the distance between the arms **202** and **204**, while each are located in a retracted position, must be greater than the diameter **D** of each wafer stored in the container. In operation, the end effector **200** travels first in the direction **234** until the supports of each arm **202** and **204** are substantially vertically aligned with the "grip zone" **120** of a wafer stored in the container. The end effector **200** travels in the vertical direction **236** until the arms **202** and **204** are located at a desired wafer level. The arms **202** and **204** extend towards the wafer until the support pads **210**, **212**, **214** and **216** are located substantially in the positions shown in Fig. 1A. The end effector **200** moves upward in the vertical direction **236**, lifting the wafer **W** off the tines **106** prior to removing the wafer **W** from the container in the direction **234**.

Fig. 3 illustrates the end effector **200** shown in Fig. 2A in operation with a wafer chuck **50**. The wafer chuck **50** illustrates that other semiconductor devices may

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accommodate the end effector **200**. In particular, the wafer chuck **50** includes four relief channels **52**, **54**, **56** and **58**. Each relief channel is aligned such that the end effector **200** may lower the wafer **W** onto the chuck **50** and no contact the wafer chuck **50**. Once the wafer **W** is seated on the chuck **50**, the end effector arms **202** and **204** move laterally away from the chuck **50** in the direction **232** and then retracts from the chuck **50** in the direction **234**.

Figs. 4-8 illustrate various embodiments of an end effector. Fig. 4 illustrates one embodiment of an end effector **200** with passive fingers. The end effector **200** includes a body **201** having a first arm **202** and a second arm **204**. The first and second arms **202** and **204** are shown in Fig. 4 as curved structures. The body **201** and arms **202** and **204** may have different shapes. The support pads **210**, **212**, **214** and **216** are each shown having a flat contact surface **218** for contacting the bottom surface of the wafer and a backstop surface **220** that, in effect, prevents the wafer from sliding off the contact surface **218**. Each support pad may have different shaped contact surfaces that minimize the amount of contact between the contact surface **218** and the wafer. The end effector **200** is shown having an optional third finger **220** to provide additional support. The third finger **222** includes a wafer contact surface **224**.

In operation, the end effector **200** is positioned such that, when the end effector **200** moves towards the wafer in direction **234**, the fingers **202** and **204** move under the grip zone **120** of the wafer to be removed from the container. The end effector **200** moves forward until the contact surfaces **218** of the support pads **210**, **212**, **214** and **216** are located in substantially the position shown in Fig. 2A. At this point, the end effector **200** moves upward until the wafer is initially seated on the contact surfaces **218**, and continues to move upward until the wafer is raised off the storage shelf (*e.g.*, pair of tines **106**). The end effector **200** then retracts in the direction **234** until the wafer is removed from the container.

Fig. 5 illustrates another embodiment of an end effector **300**. The end effector **300** includes a first arm **302** and a second arm **304**. The first arm **302** has a first support pad **310** and a second support pad **312**. The second arm **304** has a first support pad **314** and a second support pad **316**. The end effector **300** may also include a third arm **314** having a support pad **315**, which provides additional support.

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Fig. 5 illustrates that each arm is pinned to the end effector body **301**. The first arm **302** pivots with respect to the end effector body **301** about a pivot pin **320**. The second arm **304** pivots with respect to the end effector body **301** about a pivot pin **322**. Each arm may be affixed to the body **310** by other mechanical devices that allow the arms to rotate with respect the end effector body **301**. In this embodiment, the first arm **302** is rotated about pivot pin **320** by an actuator **324**, while the second arm **304** is rotated about the pivot pin **322** by an actuator **326**. Fig. 4 illustrates that the first arm **302** moves between a retracted position **A** and a workpiece support position **B**. The second arm **304** also moves between a retracted and workpiece support position.

With the first and second arms **302** and **304** each in a retracted position (e.g., position **A**), the end effector **300** may travel vertically within the container enclosure between wafers because the arms **320** and **304** move between the outer edge **107** of each tine **106** and the interior of the container wall. Thus, the end effector **300** moves vertically between wafers in the direction **236** without having to move in the direction **234** at all – reducing the travel time between wafers. In operation, the end effector **300** stops at a wafer “pick” location. The arms **302** and **304** move to position **B**, which places the support pads **310**, **312**, **314** and **316** underneath the wafer. The end effector **300** rises until the wafer is seated on the support pads, and continues to rise to lift the wafer off the storage shelf. The end effector **300** then retracts and removes the wafer out of the container enclosure **28**.

Fig. 6 illustrates another embodiment of an end effector **400**. The end effector **400** includes a body **401** having a first arm **402** and a second arm **404**. The first and second arms **402** and **404** are shown in Fig. 6 as curved structures. The arms **402** and **404** may have different shapes. The support pads **410**, **412**, **414** and **416** are each shown as a cylindrical actuator having a slot **415**. The support pads **410** - **416** may have other shapes. The end effector **400** is shown having an optional third finger **420** with a support pad **424** for additional support.

In operation, the end effector **400** moves along directions **434** and **436** until the support pads **410-416** are positioned adjacent a wafer **W**. At this point, the support **410-416** move in the direction **R1** towards the wafer **W** until each support pad contacts the peripheral edge of the wafer **W** and effectively grips the wafer. In this embodiment, the wafer’s peripheral edge **P** fits into the slot **415** of each support pad. The end effector **400**

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then moves upward along direction **436** to raise the wafer **W** off the storage shelf. The end effector **400** then retracts in the direction **434** until the wafer is removed from the container enclosure.

Fig. 7 illustrates another embodiment of an end effector **500**. The end effector **500** includes a first arm **502** and a second arm **504**. The first arm **502** has a first support pad **510** and a second support pad **512**. The second arm **504** has a first support pad **514** and a second support pad **516**.

Fig. 7 illustrates that each arm is pinned to the end effector body **501**. The first arm **502** pivots with respect to the end effector body **501** about a pivot pin **520**. The second arm **504** pivots with respect to the end effector body **501** about a pivot pin **522**. Each arm may be affixed to the body **501** by other mechanical devices that allow the arms to rotate with respect the end effector body **501**. The first arm **502** moves between a retracted position **A** and a workpiece support position **B**. The second arm **504** also moves between a retracted position **A** and workpiece support position **B** (not shown).

Fig. 8 illustrates an end effector **600**. In this embodiment, the end effector **600** is capable of rotating a wafer seated on the end effector **600** about the wafer's center. The end effector **600** includes a first arm **602** and a second arm **604**. The first arm **602** includes a first support pad **610** and a second support pad **612**. The second arm **604** includes a first support pad **614** and a second support pad **616**. Each support pad, in this embodiment, comprises a rotatable support mechanism for rotating a wafer seated on the end effector **600**.

In this embodiment, the first arm **602** is rotatably attached to the end effector body **601** by a pin **620**. The second arm **604** is rotatably attached to the end effector body **601** by a pin **622**. A first actuator **624** rotates the first arm **602** about the pin **620**. A second actuator **626** rotates the second arm **604** about the second pin **622**. Thus, the first and second arms **602** and **604** rotate between position **A** and position **B**. The arms **602** and **604** may be rotatably secured to the body **601** in other manners.

It is often necessary to rotate the wafer **W** about its vertical centerline axis to read, for example, identification codes or to align the geometrical fiducials, including notches, in the wafer perimeter **P**. The end effector **600** shown in Fig. 8 is only an exemplary embodiment of an end effector with rotatable support pads **610**, **612**, **614** and **616** for

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rotating the wafer **W** on the end effector **600**. Likewise, the mechanism used for reading identifying marks on the top or bottom surfaces of the wafer perimeter can be enabled by utilizing an imaging device (camera) or other reading means mounted on the end effector. Accomplishing this “in-situ” saves time and floor space, and reduces cost and mechanism
5 complexity.

The various embodiments of the end effectors described herein allow the arms of the end effector to move vertically external to the wafer’s peripheral edge **P**. Thus, almost all of the wafer support surface of a process or metrology tool chuck may be used to support the wafer and does not need, in large part, to accommodate the end effector blade
10 (e.g., arms and body). Fig. 3 illustrates one embodiment of a metrology or process tool chuck **50** in operation with the end effector **200**. In this embodiment, the chuck **50** includes a body **62** having a wafer support surface **51**, four indentations or channels to accommodate each support pad, a first slot **60** and a second slot **63**. Fig. 3 illustrates a wafer **W** seated directly on the surface **51**. It is also within the scope of the invention to
15 have lift pins, or other support structures, extending from the surface **51** for supporting the wafer **W** above the surface **51**. The wafer **W** may be secured on the support surface **51** (or other support structure) by any method known in the art including, but not limited to, vacuum, gravity or electrostatic attraction.

To accommodate the arms **202** and **204** of the end effector **200**, the chuck body **62**
20 includes a recessed area or channel to allow each arm to pass through the chuck body **62** after the end effector **200** places the wafer on the surface **51**. For example, the chuck body **62** includes a recessed surface **52** to allow the support pad **214** pass through the chuck body **62**, a recessed surface **54** to allow the support pad **216** pass through the chuck body **62**, a recessed surface **56** to allow the support pad **212** pass through the chuck body **62**,
25 and a recessed surface **58** to allow the support pad **210** pass through the chuck body **62**. In operation, the end effector **200** places the wafer **W** on the surface **51** and keeps traveling vertically downward into the chuck body **62**. The end effector must retract from the chuck **50** to allow the chuck to spin the wafer **W**. If the arms **202** and **204** cannot move away from the chuck body **62** in the direction **232**, the end effector would not be able to retract
30 from the chuck **50** in the direction **234**. In one embodiment, each recessed surface travels completely through the chuck body **62** such that the end effector may effectively pass

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through the bottom surface of the chuck body **62** and then retract in the direction **234** away from the chuck **50**.

Alternately, the chuck body **62** includes a first horizontal slot **60** and a second horizontal slot **63** each located at a predetermined elevation below the surface **51**. The slots allow the end effector to lower the arms **202** and **204** to an elevation aligned with the slots **60** and **63**, and subsequently retract in the direction **234** away from the chuck **50** through the slots **60** and **63**. Arm **202** passes through the chuck body **62** within the slot **60** and the arm **204** passes through the chuck body **62** within the slot **63**. If the end effector **200** includes a third arm **222** (as shown in Fig. 3), the chuck body **62** includes a fifth recessed surface **65** to accommodate the third arm **222**. In operation after the end effector **200** places the wafer **W** on the surface **51** the end effector continues to travel vertical downward and the arm **222** will pass through the body **62** within the recessed surface **65**. Each recessed surface in the chuck body **62** takes away a small amount of the support surface **51**. However, the reduction in the support surface **51** due to the recessed surfaces is minimal.

In semiconductor processing, wafers often have a starting thickness of 0.7mm - 1.0mm. The wafers are then thinned to a thickness of less than 0.3mm at some intermediate stage of the total manufacturing process sequence. The thinned wafer is very flexible and fragile, and the historical methods of wafer edge support in a container as well as the conventional edge gripping methods, are not adequate.

Each storage shelf supports a wafer at multiple points. In particular, each storage shelf preferably supports a wafer by at least three contact points or support pads. In one embodiment, a storage shelf, which comprises two tines **106**, includes a single support pad on each tine **106** (e.g., support pad **110**) and a support pad located on each base member **104** (e.g., support pad **108**) - all at substantially the same elevation in order to support a wafer in a horizontal orientation. In another embodiment, each tine **106** includes an additional support pad (e.g., support pad **116**) to provide additional support. Of course, each tine **106** and/or base member **104** may include additional support pads. The number and geometry of additional support pads for both the end effector and the storage shelves is limited only by the requirement for the end effector to interact with each tine **106**.

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Fig. 9 illustrates one embodiment of a wafer support structure **202** within a conventional FOUP **10**. The FOUP **10** includes a housing or shell **12** and a FOUP door **14** that mechanically couples with the FOUP shell **12**. The housing **12**, which includes a top **18**, a back **20**, a first side **22**, a second side **24** and a bottom **26**, defines an enclosure **28**.

5 In this embodiment, the support structures **202** are affixed to the top **18** and bottom **26** of the FOUP shell **12**. For example, the top end **203** of each support structure **202** is affixed to the top **18** of the FOUP shell **12** by three fixtures **205**. The bottom end (not shown) of the support structure **202** is fixed to the bottom **26** of the FOUP shell **12**. It is also within the scope of the present invention for the support structures **202** to be affixed
10 to either the top **18** or the bottom **26** of the FOUP shell **12**, or be affixed to the FOUP shell **12** by other methods. Each support structure **202** may also be molded with the FOUP shell **12**. For example, each base member **204** may be molded into the back **20** of the FOUP shell **12**, or any of the other surfaces of the FOUP shell **12** (e.g., top **18**, bottom **26**, first side **22**, second side **24**, etc.). In another embodiment, the support structure **202** may not
15 include a base member **204**. Instead, each storage shelf comprises one or more tines **206**; each affixed or molded into the FOUP shell **12**. For example, the proximal end **214** of each tine **206** may include a pair of tabs that lock into a pair of slots located in the back **20** of the FOUP shell **12**. Fig. 9 illustrates that the two support structures **202** comprise two separate structures. However, any portion of the support structures **202**, such as the base
20 members **204** and/or tines **206**, may comprise a single piece of material.

Fig. 9 illustrates one embodiment of a storage shelf, comprising a pair of tines **206**, for exemplary purposes. Each tine **206** extends or projects from the base member **204**. The tine **206** includes a first end or proximal end **214** and a second end or distal end **216**. The combination of the two tines **206** and the base members **204** support a single wafer **W**
25 with six support pads - two support pads **208**, two support pads **210** and two support pads **212**. The support pad **210** is located at or near the distal end **216** of each tine **206**. The other four support pads **208** and **212** may be located on either the proximal end **214** of the tine **206** or the base members **204**, or a combination of the two. It is within the scope of the present invention for other portions of the tine **206** to contact the wafer **W** or for the
30 support pads to be located in other positions.

Fig. 9 illustrates that the wafer's peripheral edge **P**, and a portion of the wafer **W**, overhangs or extends beyond the outer edge **207** of each tine **206** between the support pads

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208 and 212 - while the wafer **W** is seated on the storage shelf. As discussed above, this overhanging portion of the wafer **W** is referred to as the “grip” or “access” area that may be engaged by an end effector while the wafer **W** is seated in the FOUP **10**.

Fig. 10 illustrates an end effector **700** inserted into the FOUP **10**. The end effector **700** includes a body **701**, a first arm **702** and a second arm **704**. The body **701** may be connected to, by way of example only, a robotic arm for moving the end effector body **701** through any number of movements (e.g., six degrees of freedom motion). The first arm **702** has a proximal end **706** and a distal end **708**. The second arm **704** includes a proximal end **707** and a distal end **709**.

The Fig. 10 embodiment of the end effector **700** includes two support pads on each arm. The first arm **702** includes a support pad **710** located at the proximal end **706** and a second support pad **712** located at the distal end **708**. The second arm **704** includes a support pad **714** located at the proximal end **707** and a support pad **716** located at the distal end **709**. Each arm may include any number of support pads, and each support pad may be located anywhere along the end effector's arms. It is preferable that the support pads do not interfere with the support structure **202**. Fig. 10 illustrates each support pad **710-716** as a passive pad. Alternately, each support pad **710-716** may comprise an active pad similar to the end effector embodiments shown in Figs. 4-8.

When the end effector **700** is placed into the FOUP enclosure **28**, the arms **702** and **704** contour around the wafer's peripheral edge **P** - as shown in Fig. 10. In a preferred embodiment, the distance between the wafer's peripheral edge **P** and each side of the FOUP shell **12**, such as the first side **22** and the second side **24**, is large enough so that the arms **702** and **704** of the end effector **700** may travel vertically within the enclosure **28** without contacting any part of the support structure **202** or the wafer **W** or the FOUP shell **12**. It is also within the scope of the present invention for this distance to be minimal (as shown in Fig. 10) such that arms **702** and **704** of the end effector **700** may not travel vertically within the enclosure **28** without contacting any part of the support structure **202** or the wafer **W**. Thus, after setting a wafer on a storage shelf, the end effector **700** would have to travel out of the enclosure, and raise/lower to another elevation before the end effector **700** can be inserted back into the enclosure **28**.

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Unlike a conventional end effector, the arms 702 and 704 preferably do not travel under a wafer in order to place the contact pads 710-716 under a wafer or lift a wafer from a storage shelf. Maintaining the arms 702 and 704 on the outside of the wafer W eliminates the possibility that either of the arms 702 or 704 will contact and/or damage the surface of a wafer seated in the FOUP 10. The shape of the arms 702 and 704 shown in Fig. 10 is for exemplary purposes only. The arms 702 and 704 may comprise other shapes and/or configurations.

The arms 702 and 704 of the end effector 700 also preferably contour around each tine 206. If the support pads 710-716 are active pads (e.g., able to move towards/away from the wafer's peripheral edge P), the end effector 700 may be placed into the FOUP enclosure 28 at any height and subsequently move vertically to another elevation within the FOUP 10 without having to first withdraw from the FOUP enclosure 28. With the support pads retracted, the end effector 700 may travel to its desired position. Once the end effector 700 reaches a desired location, the support pads 710-716 extend towards the wafer until a portion of each support pad 710-716 is located below the wafer W. This way, the wafer W will be supported (preferably in a horizontal orientation) when the end effector 700 lifts the wafer W off the tines 206 or storage shelf and removes the wafer W from the FOUP 10.

It should be appreciated that the above-described tine systems and end effectors are for explanatory purposes only and that the invention is not limited thereby. Having thus described a preferred embodiment of a tine system and end effector, it should be apparent to those skilled in the art that certain advantages of the within system have been achieved. It should also be appreciated that various modifications, adaptations, and alternative embodiments thereof may be made within the scope and spirit of the present invention. For example, the storage shelves and end effector have been illustrated in a semiconductor fabrication facility, but it should be apparent that many of the inventive concepts described above would be equally applicable to be used in connection with other non-semiconductor manufacturing applications. It should be apparent that the storage shelves are also not limited to workpiece carriers.

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Claims:

1. A workpiece container for storing at least one workpiece having a bottom surface and a peripheral edge, comprising:

an enclosure defined by a container shell and a container door;

5 a workpiece support structure located within said enclosure, said workpiece support structure forming a plurality of vertically stacked storage shelves within said enclosure, each vertically stacked storage shelf for supporting a workpiece in a substantially horizontal orientation and comprising:

a base member;

10 a first tine having an outer edge facing said container shell; and

a second tine having an outer edge facing said container shell;

wherein, when a workpiece is seated on one of said plurality of vertically stacked storage shelves, a portion of the workpiece's peripheral edge extends beyond said outer edges of said first and second tines.

15 2. The workpiece container as recited in claim 1, wherein said workpiece support structure is molded as part of said container door.

3. The workpiece container as recited in claim 1, wherein said workpiece support structure is molded as part of said container shell.

4. The workpiece container as recited in claim 1, wherein said workpiece support
20 structure is affixed to said container shell.

5. The workpiece container as recited in claim 1, wherein said workpiece support structure is affixed to said container door.

6. The workpiece container as recited in claim 1, wherein said first and second tines extend horizontally from said base member.

25 7. The workpiece container as recited in claim 6, wherein said first and second tines each include a proximal end affixed to said base member.

8. The workpiece container as recited in claim 6, wherein said first and second tines each have a proximal end molded with said base member.

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9. The workpiece container as recited in claim 6, wherein said base member comprises a single structure.

10. The workpiece container as recited in claim 1, wherein said base member comprises:

- 5 a first base member; and
 a second base member.

11. The workpiece container as recited in claim 1, wherein each said vertically stacked storage shelf includes at least two support pads for supporting a workpiece.

12. The workpiece container as recited in claim 10, wherein said first tine extends
10 horizontally from said first base member and said second tine extends horizontally from said second base member.

13. The workpiece container as recited in claim 12, wherein said first and second base members are molded into said container shell.

14. The workpiece container as recited in claim 12, wherein said first and second base
15 members are molded into said container door.

15. A workpiece container for storing at least one workpiece having a bottom surface and a peripheral edge, comprising:

an enclosure defined by a container shell;

a workpiece support structure located within said enclosure, said workpiece
20 support structure forming a plurality of vertically stacked storage shelves within said enclosure, each one of said plurality of vertically stacked storage shelves for supporting a workpiece and comprising:

a base member;

a first tine having an outer edge facing said container shell; and

25 a second tine having an outer edge facing said container shell;

wherein, when a workpiece is seated on one of said plurality of vertically stacked storage shelves, a portion of the workpiece's peripheral edge extends beyond said outer edges of said first and second tines.

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16. The workpiece container as recited in claim 15, wherein said base member is molded as part of said container shell.

17. The workpiece container as recited in claim 15, wherein said base member is affixed to said container shell.

5 18. The workpiece container as recited in claim 15, wherein said first tine includes a distal end having a support pad.

19. The workpiece container as recited in claim 15, wherein said second tine includes a distal end having a support pad.

10 20. The workpiece container as recited in claim 15, wherein each one of said plurality of storage shelves includes at least two support pads.

21. The workpiece container as recited in claim 15, wherein said first tine and said second tine extend horizontally from said base member.

15 22. The workpiece container as recited in claim 15, wherein said base member comprises a first base member and a second base member, and said first tine extends horizontally from said first base member and said second tine extends horizontally from said second base member.

23. A workpiece container for storing at least one workpiece having a bottom surface and a peripheral edge, comprising:

20 an enclosure defined by a container shell having a top interior surface, a rear interior surface, a first side interior surface, a second side interior surface and a bottom interior surface;

25 a workpiece support structure located within said enclosure, said workpiece support structure forming a plurality of vertically stacked storage shelves within said enclosure, each one of said plurality of vertically stacked storage shelves for supporting a workpiece and comprising:

a first tine having an edge facing said first interior surface of said container shell; and

a second tine having an edge facing said second interior surface of said container shell;

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wherein, when a workpiece is seated on one of said plurality of vertically stacked storage shelves, a portion of the workpiece's peripheral edge extends beyond said edge of said first tine facing said first interior surface and said edge of said second tine facing said second interior surface.

5 24. The workpiece container as recited in claim 23, wherein said first and second tines include a proximal end molded into said rear interior surface of said container shell.

25. The workpiece container as recited in claim 23, wherein said first and second tines include a proximal end affixed to said rear interior surface of said container shell.

10 26. The workpiece container as recited in claim 23, wherein said first tine includes a proximal end molded into said first interior surface of said container shell and said second tine includes a proximal end molded into said second interior surface of said container shell.

15 27. The workpiece container as recited in claim 23, wherein said first tine includes a proximal end affixed to said first interior surface of said container shell and said second tine includes a proximal end affixed to said second interior surface of said container shell.

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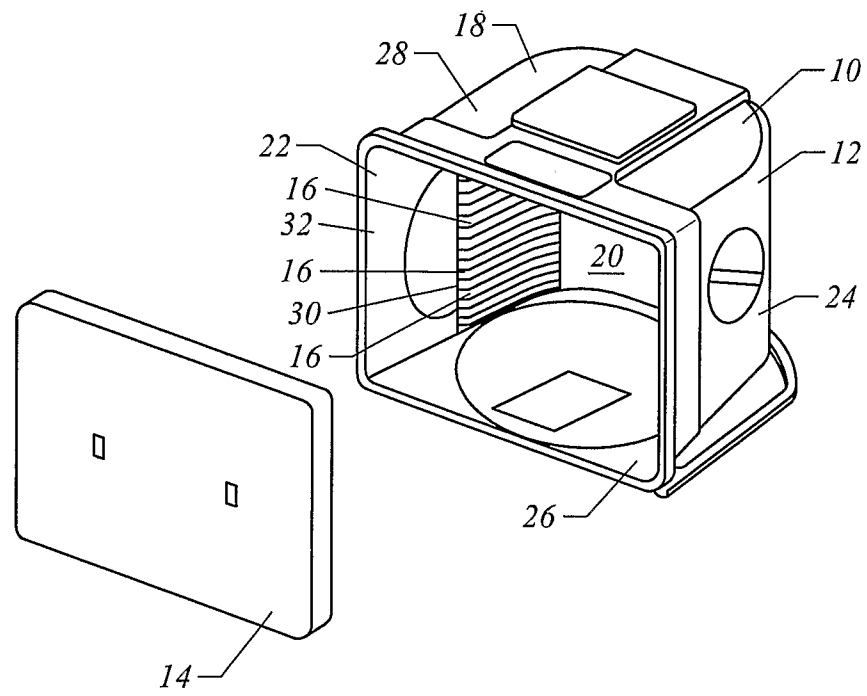


FIG. 1

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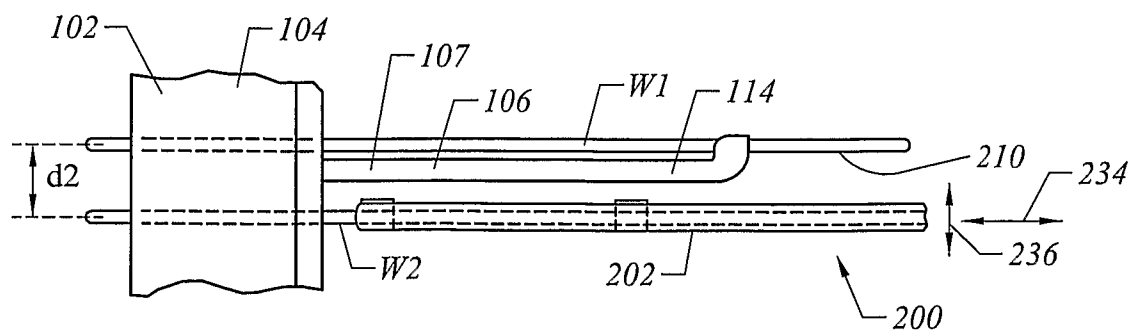
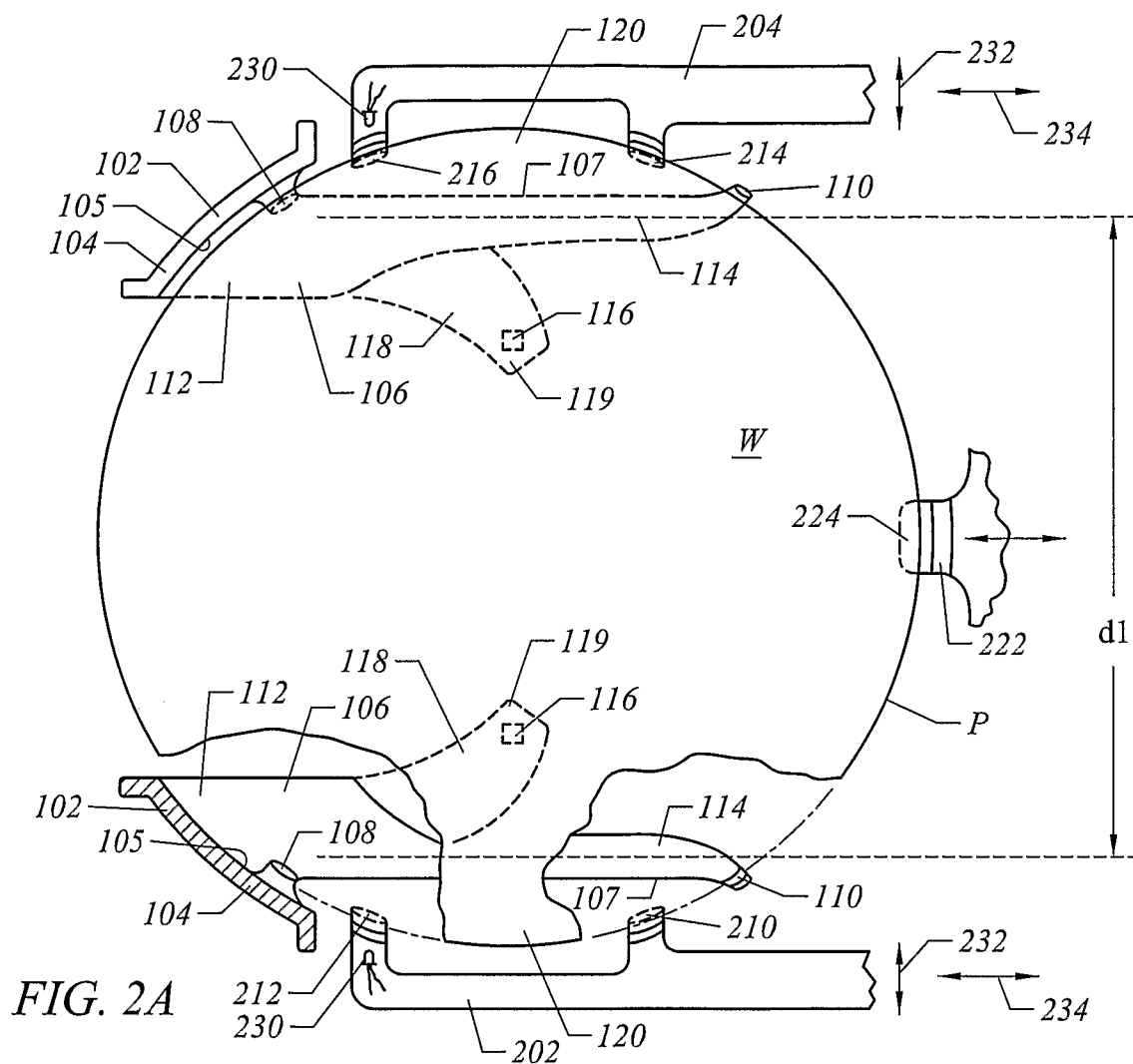


FIG. 2B

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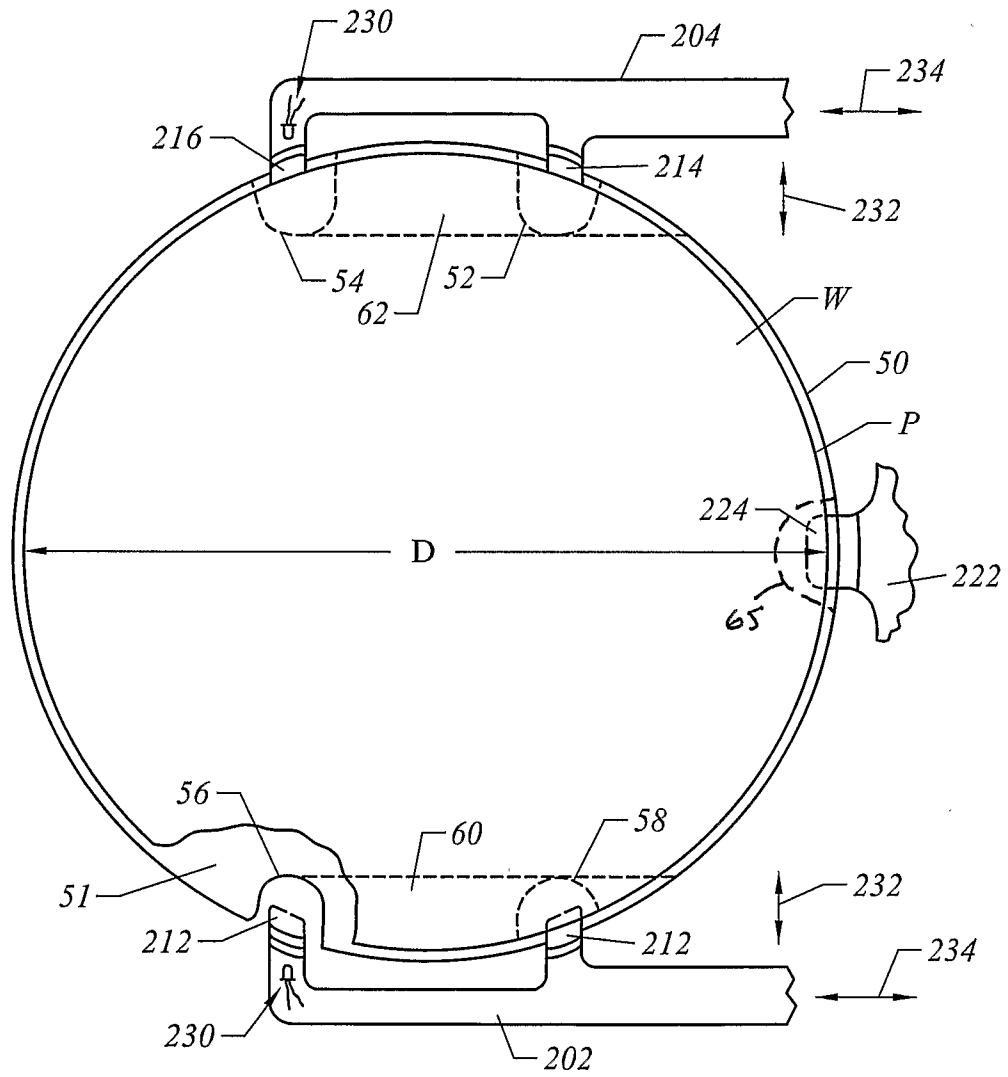


FIG. 3

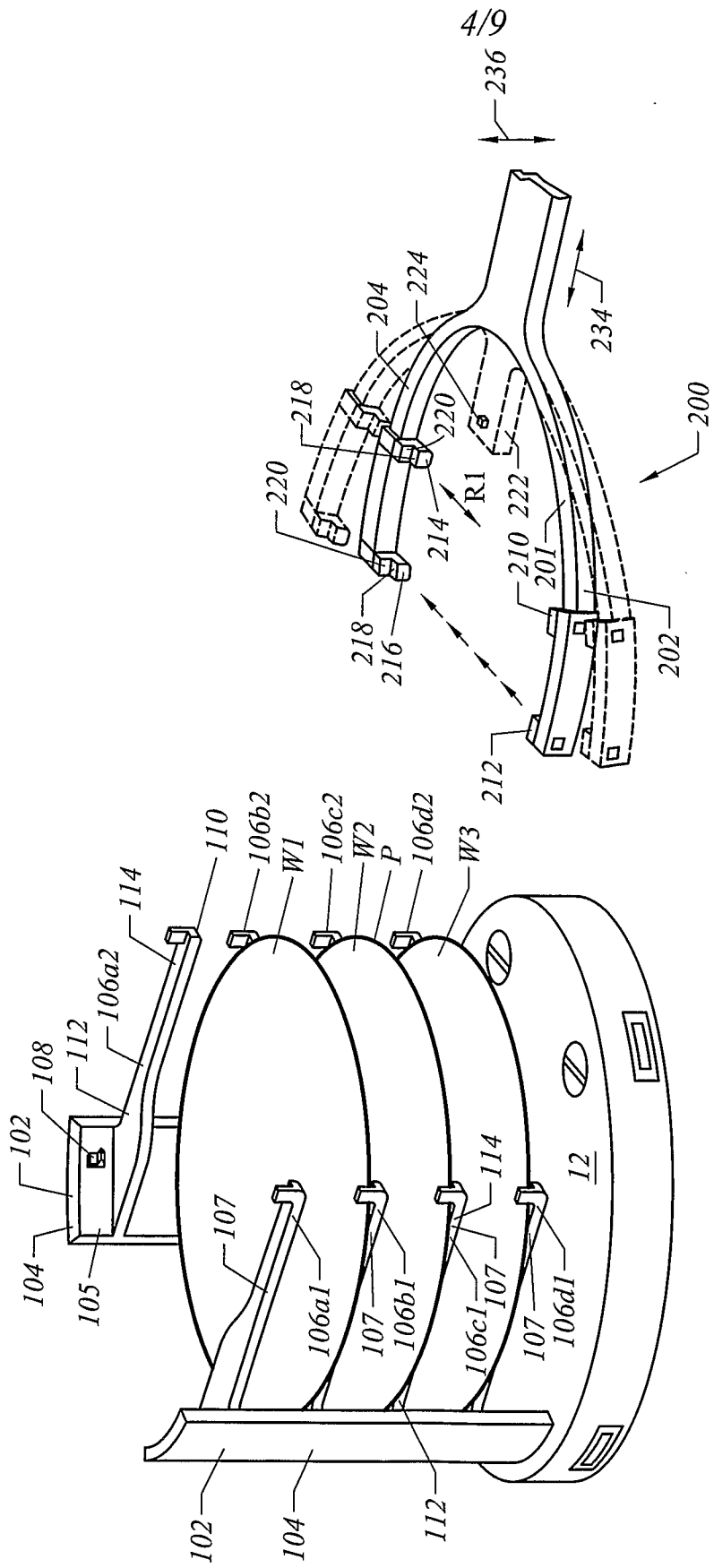


FIG. 4

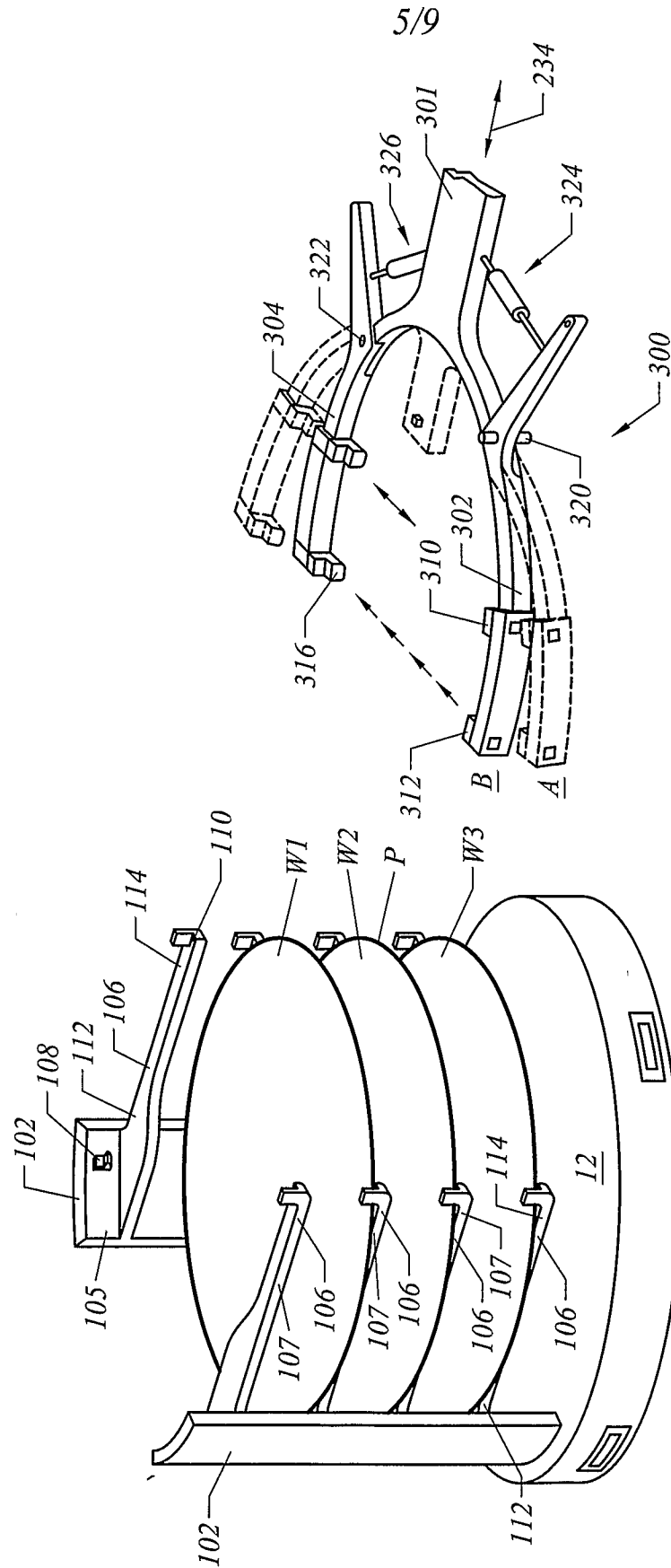


FIG. 5

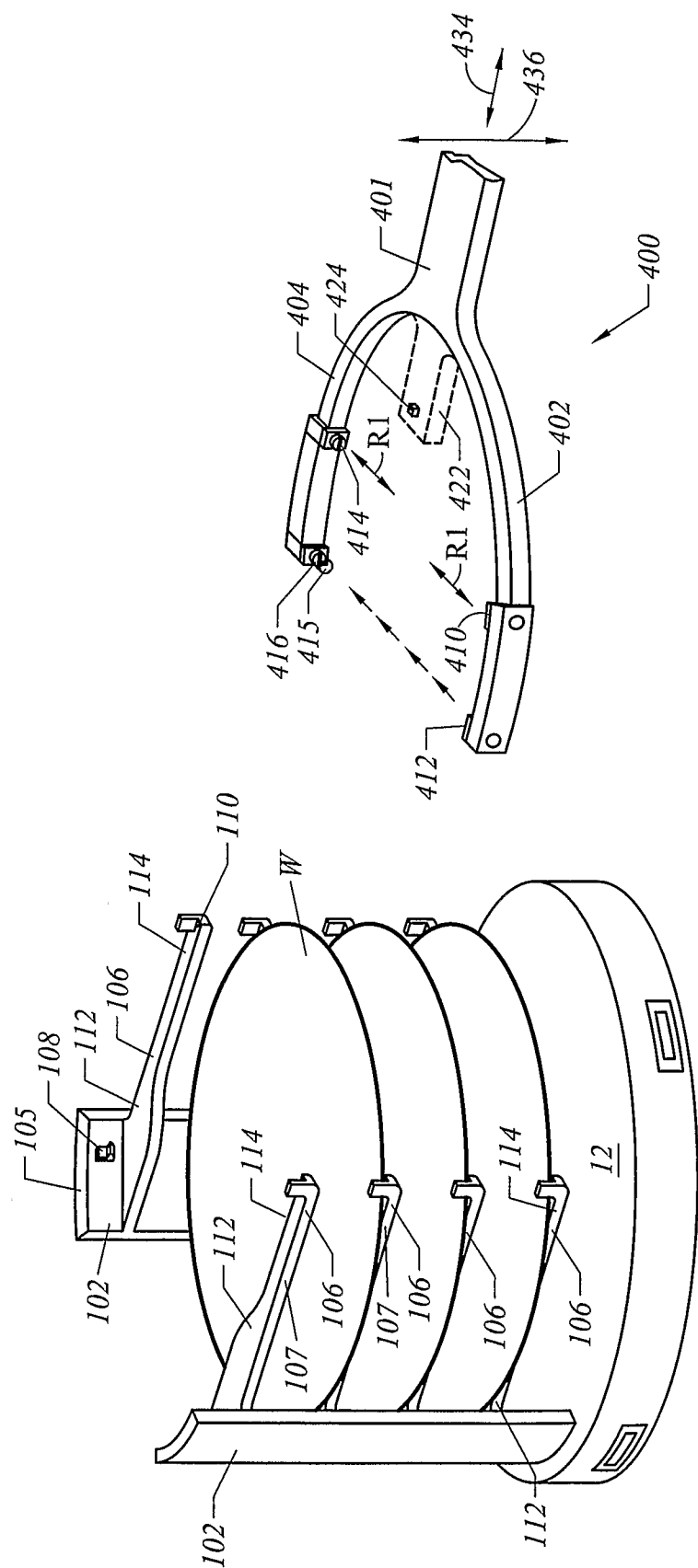


FIG. 6

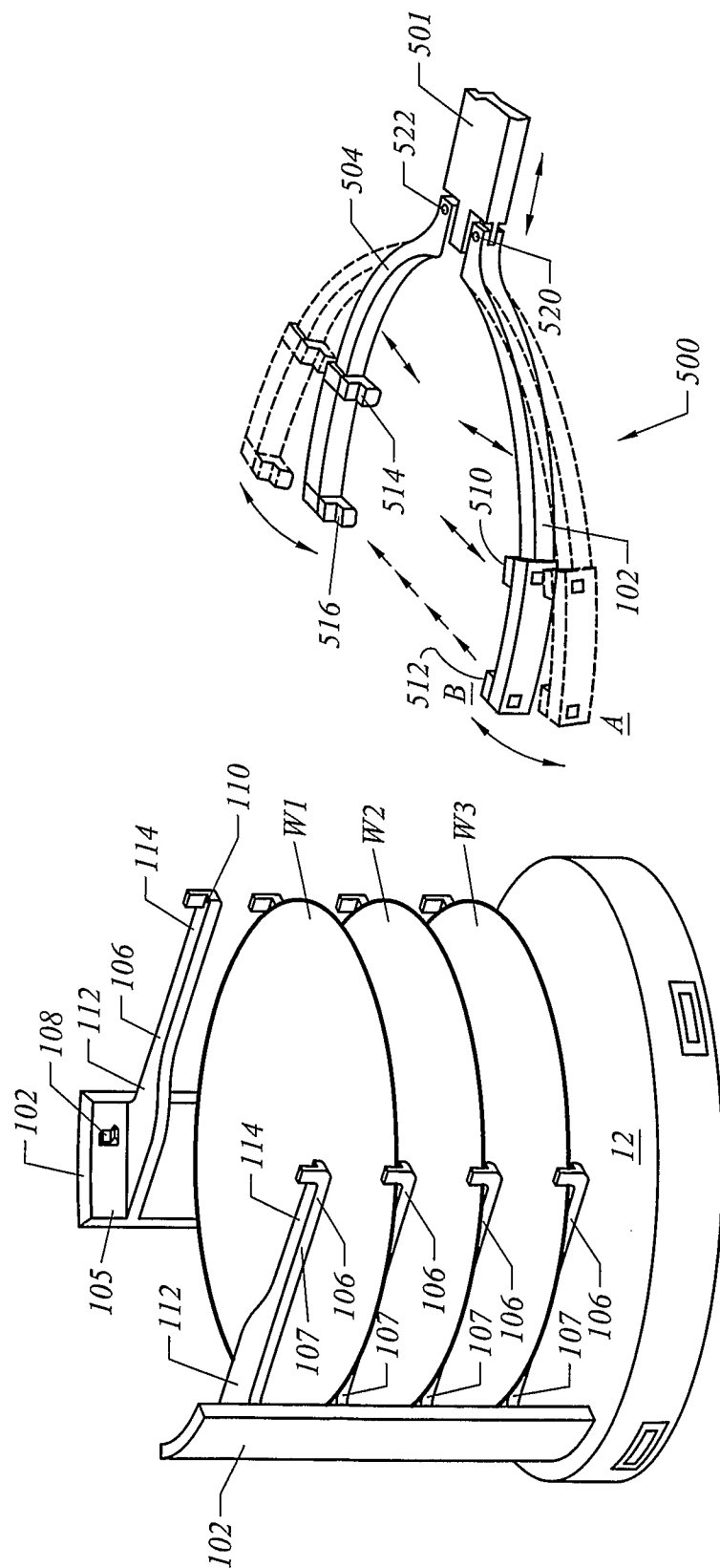


FIG. 7

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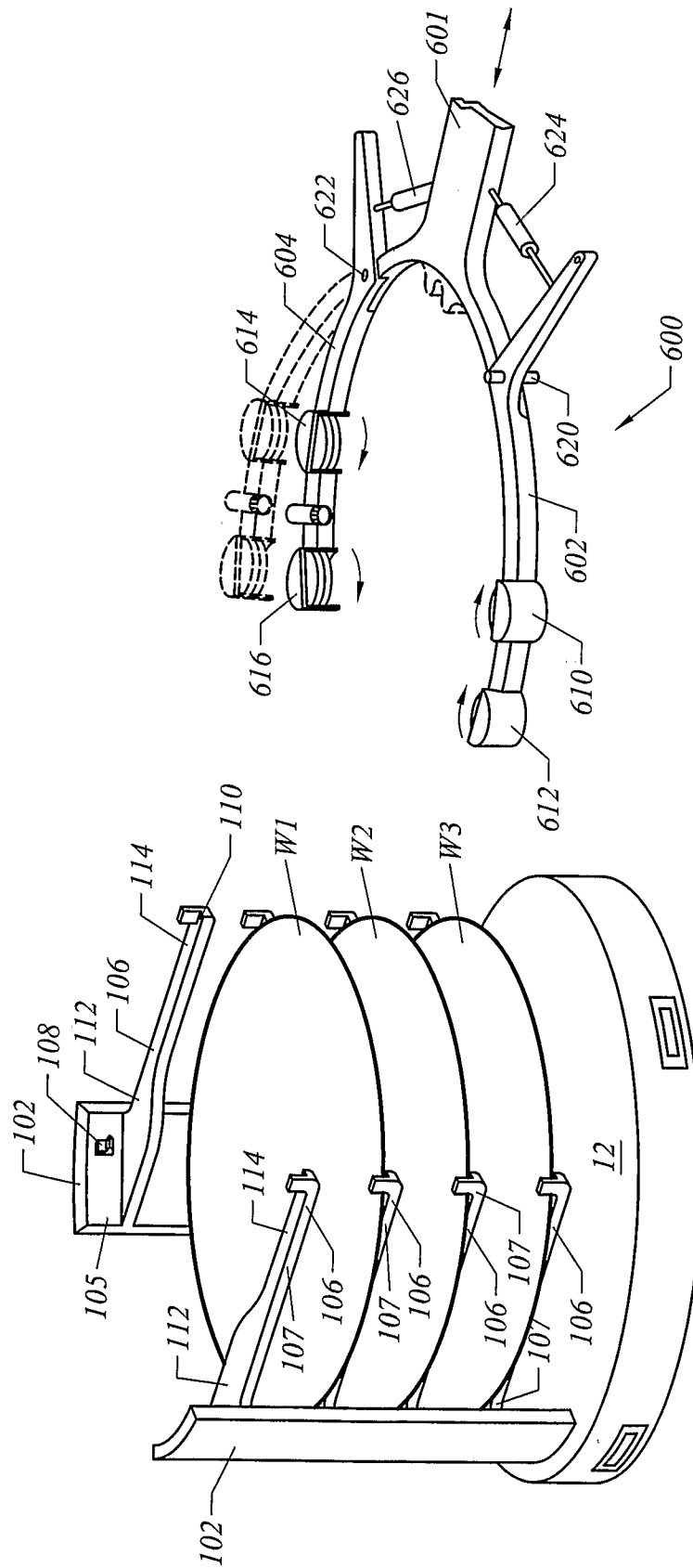


FIG. 8

