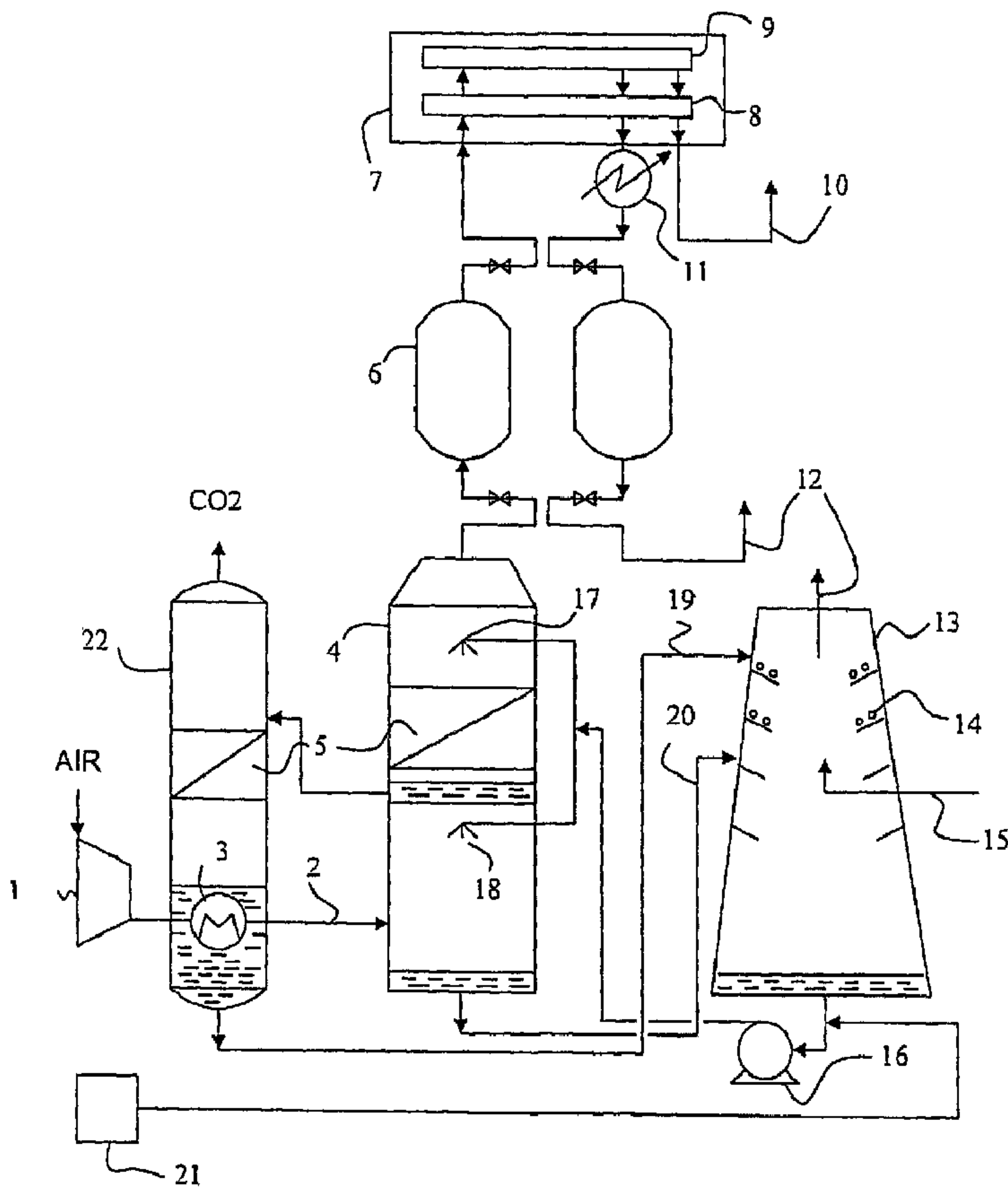




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(54) Titre : PROCÉDE ET INSTALLATION POUR LE FRACTIONNEMENT DE L'AIR EN GAZ SEPARES  
 (54) Title: PROCESS AND INSTALLATION FOR THE FRACTIONATION OF AIR INTO SPECIFIC GASES



(57) Abrégé/Abstract:

In order to reduce incoming atmospheric carbon dioxide levels in compressed air prior to cryogenic distillation, a water spray cooling tower equipped with biocatalytic packing, or fed with absorptive reagents, is used to convert gaseous carbon dioxide into



(57) **Abrégé(suite)/Abstract(continued):**

bicarbonate ions which dissolve in the cooling water. The hydration reaction and refrigeration occur synergistically. The bicarbonate ions are subsequently removed from the solution using the heat from the compressed air in a regenerator re-boiler unit, and then fed to a percolation cooling tower for releasing CO<sub>2</sub> and cooling.

## ABSTRACT

In order to reduce incoming atmospheric carbon dioxide levels in compressed air prior to cryogenic distillation, a water spray cooling tower equipped with biocatalytic packing, or fed with absorptive reagents, is used to convert gaseous carbon dioxide into bicarbonate ions which dissolve in the cooling water. The hydration reaction and refrigeration occur synergistically. The bicarbonate ions are subsequently removed from the solution using the heat from the compressed air in a regenerator re-boiler unit, and then fed to a percolation cooling tower for releasing CO<sub>2</sub> and cooling.

## PROCESS AND INSTALLATION FOR THE FRACTIONATION OF AIR INTO SPECIFIC GASES

### FIELD OF THE INVENTION

5 The present invention generally relates to processes and installations for the fractionation of air into specific gas such as nitrogen and oxygen. More particularly, it concerns a process for the combined cooling and removal of carbon dioxide from compressed air prior to its cryogenic distillation.

10

### BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Installations for the production of large quantities of oxygen and/or nitrogen by air distillation often comprise a spray refrigeration tower for cooling the compressed air so as to lower its temperature prior to its entry into adsorbent chambers for the removal of carbon dioxide and water, which are otherwise detrimental to the  
15 operation of the distillation cold box.

In the usual technique, all of the steam water (usually at saturation conditions) and carbon dioxide in the range of 270 to 350 ppmV are removed in a system of two or more adsorbent chambers loaded with special activated alumina and/or a molecular  
20 sieve. This technique has the drawback of necessitating large and expensive pressure vessels, costly adsorbents and high energy input for removing the carbon dioxide present in the air to the very low concentration levels required for the correct operation of the distillation cold box. Also, due to the general increase of carbon dioxide concentration in atmospheric air, especially in industrial areas, many existing  
25 installed units may face operation problems due to capacity limitations of their adsorbent chambers which may necessitate large revamping investments.

Certain techniques also exist for removing CO<sub>2</sub> from a CO<sub>2</sub> containing gas. For example, United States patent No. 6,524,843 (BLAIS et al.) discloses a bioreactor  
30 using immobilized carbonic anhydrase to capture CO<sub>2</sub> from a gaseous effluent. This patent teaches that the bioreactor is a packed tower reactor to which a CO<sub>2</sub>-containing gas stream is fed. The solvent enters the packed tower and flows downwards while absorbing the dissolved CO<sub>2</sub>.

There is thus presently a need for a more efficient and less costly process and apparatus for the production of oxygen and/or nitrogen by air distillation.

### SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

5 The present invention provides a process and an installation that satisfy the above-mentioned need.

In accordance with the present invention, there is provided a process for fractionating air, including the steps of:

- 10 a) providing compressed air;
- b) simultaneously cooling the compressed air and reducing CO<sub>2</sub> contained therein, by
- providing a spray tower;
  - providing the spray tower with catalyzing means for promoting the
- 15 hydration reaction of dissolved CO<sub>2</sub> into at least bicarbonate ions and hydrogen ions, thereby producing treated air with a reduced amount of CO<sub>2</sub> and an ion rich solution containing at least bicarbonate ions and hydrogen ions; and
- feeding the compressed air into the spray tower while spraying a
- 20 cooling solvent therein; and
- c) feeding the treated air to a cold distillation apparatus for fractionating the treated air into at least one gas selected from the group consisting of nitrogen and oxygen.

25 In accordance with a preferred aspect of the invention, the catalyzing means are selected from biocatalysts such as carbonic anhydrase, and absorptive chemical reagents such as amine-based absorbents.

30 In accordance with another preferred aspect of the invention, the ion rich solution is regenerated into CO<sub>2</sub>. The regeneration of the ion rich solution is preferably performed in a regenerator and/or a percolation cooling tower, which are preferably equipped with an immobilized biocatalyst in order to enhance their conversion performance.

In accordance with another preferred embodiment, the spray tower further includes a bottom stage and a top stage as well as a first spray inlet and a second spray inlet for spraying the cooling solvent into the respective stages. The top stage is provided with the catalyzing means. In this embodiment, step b) of the process  
5 includes the sub-steps of:

- initially cooling the compressed air with the cooling solvent of the first spray inlet in the bottom stage, thereby producing a pre-treated air and a weak ion solution at a first liquid outlet, and
- cooling the pre-treated air while removing CO<sub>2</sub> therefrom with the cooling solvent of the second spray inlet in the top stage, the catalyzing means catalyzing  
10 the hydration reaction of CO<sub>2</sub>, thereby producing the treated air with a reduced amount of CO<sub>2</sub> and the ion rich solution at a second liquid outlet.

In accordance with the present invention, there is also provided an installation for  
15 fractioning air, comprising:

- a compressor for compressing the air to produce compressed air;
- a spray tower for simultaneously cooling the compressed air and reducing CO<sub>2</sub> contained therein, the spray tower having an air inlet for receiving the compressed air, at least one liquid spray inlet for receiving and spraying a cooling solvent to  
20 contact and cool the compressed air; the spray tower also comprising catalyzing means for promoting the hydration reaction of dissolved CO<sub>2</sub> into at least bicarbonate ions and hydrogen ions, thereby producing treated air having a reduced amount of CO<sub>2</sub> at a gas outlet, and an ion rich solution at at least one liquid outlet;
- a cold distillation apparatus for receiving the treated air, the cold  
25 distillation apparatus fractioning the treated air into at least one gas selected from the group consisting of nitrogen and oxygen.

The installation may also include a percolation tower and/or other means of  
30 regenerating the ion rich solution such as a regenerator or a heat exchanger.

### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The process and installation of the combined cooling and CO<sub>2</sub> removal, according to the present invention are represented in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1 shows an installation for the distillation of air according to a first preferred embodiment of the invention.

Figure 2 shows a second preferred embodiment of the invention, including a  
5 regenerator column and its re-boiler for CO<sub>2</sub> removal.

### DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Preferred embodiments of the installation and process will be described hereafter.

10 The invention provides an installation and a process that enable air containing CO<sub>2</sub> to be treated in order to reduce the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> contained therein while substantially improving the efficiency of fractioning the air into various sub-components, more namely into nitrogen and oxygen.

#### 15 The installation

The installation shown in **Figure 1** is preferably used in a variety of production facilities, for producing oxygen and/or nitrogen by fractioning air and/or another gas containing CO<sub>2</sub>.

#### 20 **Equipment for producing the air to be treated**

The installation shown in **Figure 1** includes a principal air compressor **1** in the discharge **2** of which is mounted a heat exchanger **3**. The compressed air is often hot when fed to the spray tower, and in preferred embodiments has a temperature of about 80°C. However, the compressed air may also be provided at numerous other  
25 temperatures.

#### **Spray tower**

There is also provided a spray tower **4**, which receives the hot compressed air from the compressor **1**, the air having been optionally pre-cooled in the heat exchanger **3**.  
30 Preferably, the spray tower **4** is in fluid communication with the discharge of the heat exchanger **3**. The spray tower **4** is preferably a dual stage spray **17 + 18** refrigeration tower **4**, but alternatively, is provided with a multitude of stages and/or inlet spray nozzles at various locations throughout the tower. The spray tower may also be designed as a packed tower or another type of tower known in the art. The  
35 spray tower **4** both refrigerates and treats the incoming compressed air.

Accordingly, spray inlets 17 + 18 are provided for spraying a cooling solvent therein. The cooling solvent contacts the compressed air in order to both cool the air and to provide a medium into which the CO<sub>2</sub> contained in the air may dissolve.

- 5 The spray tower 4 is also equipped with catalyzing means for catalyzing the hydration reaction of CO<sub>2</sub> into at least bicarbonate and hydrogen ions. Preferably, the catalyzing means include a biocatalytic packing 5. The biocatalyst immobilized on a packing promotes the conversion of CO<sub>2</sub> and water into bicarbonate and hydrogen ions (carbonic acid). Passing through the biocatalytic packing, the CO<sub>2</sub> contained in the compressed air is dissolved at the compressed air high pressure in the form of bicarbonate ions in the sprayed cooling water. The spray tower 4 may also be provided with catalyzing means chosen from absorptive chemical reagents, such as amine-based liquids provided in the aqueous cooling solvent or solid sorbents fixed on a packing or an interior surface of the spray tower 4. The catalyzing means cooperate with the cooling solvent and the CO<sub>2</sub>-containing hot compressed air to synergistically provide treated air that contains a reduced amount of CO<sub>2</sub> and has been cooled. This double preparation (cooling and reduction of CO<sub>2</sub>) is advantageous for the fractionation of the treated air.
- 10
- 15
- 20 Referring to **Figure 1**, when the hot compressed air first enters the bottom of the spray tower 4, the cooling solvent sprayed from the lower spray nozzle 18 initially contacts and quenches it. The bottom of the spray tower is hotter than the top. Preferably, the spray tower 4 is provided with a top stage and a bottom stage. The bottom stage is preferably not provided with a biocatalyst, especially if the temperature therein would hinder or destroy the biocatalyst. However, if the air is pre-cooled to an adequately low temperature, then the bottom stage may be provided with biocatalyst. Moreover, the bottom stage may be provided with catalyzing means, such as an absorptive chemical reagent, that presents adequate heat resistance while enabling the hydration reaction of CO<sub>2</sub>. In any case, as the compressed air rises through the spray tower 4, being cooled by the cooling solvent, the CO<sub>2</sub> therein becomes more soluble in the cooling solvent. The cooling solvent that collects in the bottom of the dual stage spray tower 4 is a weak ion solution, as it was principally used to cool the incoming hot compressed air, and the dissolution of CO<sub>2</sub> was not as favoured as in the top of the spray tower 4. It is preferable that this weak ion solution is directly fed to the percolation cooling tower. Depending on
- 25
- 30
- 35

its temperature and concentration, the weak ion solution is fed into an appropriate stage and/or height of the percolation cooling tower, which will be further discussed herebelow.

5 The substantially cooled compressed air enters the top stage and contacts the cooling solvent sprayed from the top nozzle **17**. Preferably, the top stage is provided with a biocatalytic or enzymatic packing, but may also be provided with other catalyzing means to catalyze the hydration of CO<sub>2</sub>. The cooling solvent sprayed from the top nozzle **17** continues to cool the incoming air and also enables  
10 the substantial dissolution of CO<sub>2</sub> therein. Accordingly, an ion rich solution collects at the base of the top stage. Preferably, this ion rich solution is removed from the spray tower **4** at the top stage level and is fed into a regenerator **22**, as shown in **Figure 2**.

15 A particularly preferred embodiment of the spray tower is a dual stage spray cooling tower, as shown in **Figures 1 and 2**. The dual stage spray tower presents some notable advantages, among which are the following:

- (a) quenching of the hot air or gas to temperatures below 65°C, as higher temperatures can otherwise be detrimental to the biocatalyst;
- 20 (b) an improved efficiency of the biocatalyst at lower temperatures; and
- (c) separating the ion rich solution from the bulk of the cooling solvent (i.e. cooling water), enabling very efficient regeneration of the ion rich solution through a regenerator unit, as shown in **Figure 2**.

25 The spray tower **4** may also be designed to have more than two stages, each stage being designed so that the entire tower may efficiently remove CO<sub>2</sub> from the incoming compressed air. Accordingly, each stage may be provided with specific features chosen from the following: catalyzing means (biocatalyst, chemical, etc.), cooling solvent (temperature, flow rate, chemical composition, etc.), physical  
30 characteristics (packing, height, etc.) and outlet or recycle streams.

The spray tower **4** is preferably a water spray cooling tower, featuring an immobilized biocatalyst or a biocatalytic packing **5**, for both decreasing the  
35 content.

### **Adsorption equipment**

In a preferred embodiment, two adsorption chambers **6**, which operate alternatively, are also provided. Other adsorption equipment known to a person skilled in the art  
5 may also be used. The treated air exiting the spray tower preferably enters the adsorption chambers **6** to have the residual amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> removed therefrom.

One of the important advantages of the present invention is that it allows for substantial size reduction of molecular sieve/activated alumina adsorbent vessels in  
10 new grass-root units as well as reduced energy consumption, or allows for improved performance of downstream existing adsorbent vessels with minimized capital investment in existing units.

### **Fractionation equipment**

15 In order to fraction the treated air into desired components, a distillation apparatus **7** (also called a distillation cold box) is provided. It preferably contains a principal heat exchange line **8** and an apparatus **9** for the distillation of air, which can be a double distillation column producing particularly oxygen, or else a simple distillation column producing nitrogen. There is also provided a conduit and a heater, which can be  
20 electrical or fired for the heating of residual gas from the distillation apparatus, leaving the warm end of the heat exchange line **8** and connecting, through a heater **11** into one of the chambers **6**, which is in the regeneration phase.

A production line **10** leaving the warm end of the heat exchange line is also  
25 provided, along with exhaust lines to the atmosphere **12**.

### **Regeneration equipment**

Numerous regeneration units may be used to regenerate the cooling solvent. According to preferred embodiments, a percolation cooling tower and a regenerator  
30 are used to regenerate the solvent. Alternatively the ion rich solution may be employed directly or subjected to an ion-exchange resin or any method to immobilize or precipitate the bicarbonate ions.

In one embodiment, as shown in **Figure 1**, the rich ion solution flow exiting the spray  
35 tower **4** is directed to a heat exchanger **3** at the outlet of the air compressor in order

to increase its temperature and promote the conversion, at atmospheric pressure of the bicarbonate back to water and CO<sub>2</sub>.

5 Preferably, a percolation cooling tower **13** is provided and is preferably equipped with biocatalytic or enzymatic packing **14** and cooled by natural atmospheric air convection **15**. The ion rich solution, which has been heated to promote ion conversion at atmospheric pressure back into CO<sub>2</sub> and water, is fed to the percolation tower **13** through a discharge line **19** and brought to atmospheric pressure and a high temperature. When in contact with the biocatalytic packing **14**,  
10 the ions contained in the solution are released in the form of gaseous CO<sub>2</sub>, which exits the system into the atmosphere through the exhaust **12**. The ion lean water cooling solution continues its cooling to ambient temperature through the percolation tower by contact with atmospheric air circulating counter-currently by natural convection, to produce the regenerated cooling solvent. The ions are converted  
15 back to CO<sub>2</sub> and water at lower pressure and higher temperature and released to the atmosphere.

A water circulation pump **16** (also called a recycle pump) capable of recycling the cooled water at system pressure to the dual spray nozzles **17** and **18** is preferably  
20 provided at the base of the percolation tower. Also, a hot ion rich solution discharge line **19**, feeds the percolation tower **13** with ion rich solution. Preferably, a hot ion lean solution discharge line **20**, feeds the percolation tower at a lower entry level. The ion rich solution and the ion lean solution (also called weak ion solution) are withdrawn from different stages of the spray tower, and fed to a stage of the  
25 percolation cooling tower according to its concentration and temperature. The regenerated cooling solvent (which is preferably a cold ion lean water solution) is then recycled through the circulation pump **16** above system pressure to the spray cooling tower **4**. Fresh water **21** is added upstream of the water circulation pump in order to compensate for the natural evaporation losses in the percolation tower **13**.

30

There is thus provided a fresh water make-up source **21**, tapping into the recycle line containing the regenerated cooling solvent, upstream of the recycle pump **16**.

The installation shown in **Figure 2** preferably includes the same equipment, with the  
35 addition of a regenerator tower **22** in lieu of simply a heat exchanger **3**, for efficient

regeneration of the ion rich solution, using the heat of the compressed gas through a re-boiler **22**, which can be mounted either inside the column as shown on **Figure 2** or externally. This embodiment allows for a much improved CO<sub>2</sub> recovery from the ion rich solution. Re-boiling is insured through the heat exchanger **3**, which can be  
5 fitted either inside the regenerator **22** or externally. The regenerator is preferably in the form of a column and may be provided with a plurality of stages and liquid inlets. The regenerator **22** is preferably equipped with the same biocatalytic packing which catalyses the reverse reaction from bicarbonate ions to gaseous CO<sub>2</sub>, at lower pressure and higher temperature. The lean solution exiting the regenerator is still  
10 sent to the percolation tower **13** for further cooling and CO<sub>2</sub> release to atmosphere. This preferred embodiment is particularly appropriate for bigger units and installations.

By using the compressed air to heat the heat exchanger **3** or reboiler, the installation  
15 may capitalize on the otherwise lost compression heat in order to release the CO<sub>2</sub> to the atmosphere and regenerate the cooling solvent.

### **The process**

The process for fractioning air containing CO<sub>2</sub> includes certain steps which will be  
20 described herebelow. It should be noted that a variety of preferred steps may be incorporated within the process, in order to further heat, cool, regenerate or purify the various liquid and gas streams. Some of these preferred steps will be discussed herebelow.

#### **25 Step a)**

The first step of the process according to the present invention is providing compressed air. Referring to **Figure 1**, this step may be performed by means of an air compressor **1**. The compressor also has an outlet **2**. Depending on design and operating parameters, the air may be compressed to a variety of pressures.  
30 Preferably, the compressed air has a pressure between about 5 and about 30 absolute bars. Alternatively the compressed air may have a different pressure, especially if the subsequent units are operated at corresponding high or low pressures.

The air fed to the compressor 1 is preferably atmospheric air, containing standard amounts of oxygen, nitrogen, CO<sub>2</sub> and other minor components. Alternatively, the air fed to the compressor includes, for example, effluent gas having an elevated concentration of CO<sub>2</sub>. This alternative is particularly suited when the process for  
5 fractioning air is coupled with another process that has a gaseous product containing oxygen and/or nitrogen with an undesirable quantity of CO<sub>2</sub>.

#### **Preferred pre-cooling step**

In a preferred embodiment of the process, the compressed air containing CO<sub>2</sub> is  
10 subjected to a pre-cooling step. The compressed air is hot upon exiting the compressor 1 and may be pre-cooled before entering subsequent processing units. The means for pre-cooling the compressed air may take on a variety of embodiments, as for example, a heat exchanger 3. The cooling fluid of the heat exchanger 3 preferably includes a stream that requires heating. Preferably, the  
15 compressed air is pre-cooled from a temperature in the range of about 80 °C to 150°C, to a temperature below 80°C.

#### **Step b)**

This step of the process includes simultaneously cooling the compressed air and  
20 reducing the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> contained therein. This step is performed, first of all, by providing a spray tower 4. The compressed air is fed from the outlet 2 of the compressor to the spray tower 4. The spray tower 4 may have a variety of preferred features and embodiments. The spray tower 4 is provided downstream from the compressor 1, and as the case may be, downstream from the pre-cooling means.

25 The spray tower 4 is provided with catalyzing means 5 for chemically promoting the hydration reaction of dissolved CO<sub>2</sub> into at least bicarbonate ions and hydrogen ions, thereby producing treated air with a reduced amount of CO<sub>2</sub> and an ion rich solution containing at least bicarbonate ions and hydrogen ions. The hydration  
30 reaction occurs substantially within the spray tower 4.

Preferably, the catalyzing means 5 are selected from a biocatalyst and absorptive  
chemical reagents. The catalyzing means promote the hydration reaction of CO<sub>2</sub>  
and water into ions. On one hand, the catalyzing means may be a biocatalyst or a  
35 combination of one or several chemical components that do not enter into the

reaction equation. On the other hand, the catalyzing means may be a reagent that chemically promotes the absorption of CO<sub>2</sub> by entering into the reaction equation, often by stripping water of a hydrogen ion.

5 In a preferred aspect of the process, the biocatalyst is provided and is immobilized on a packing **5**, the packing preferably being mounted within the spray tower **4**. A variety of packings may be suitable, and may have porous or non-porous surfaces as well as a variety of forms (rings, saddles, etc.). Also preferably, the biocatalyst includes carbonic anhydrase, which catalyses the hydration reaction of CO<sub>2</sub> into  
10 bicarbonate and hydrogen ions. The design of the spray cooling tower **4** is preferably such that the contact temperature of the entering compressed air and the biocatalyst is at 65°C or lower.

In another preferred aspect of the process, one or more absorptive chemical  
15 reagents are used either in conjunction with the biocatalyst or alone to catalyze the hydration of CO<sub>2</sub> into ions.

This process step also includes feeding the compressed air into the spray tower **4** while spraying a cooling solvent therein. Preferably the spray tower **4** is provided  
20 with two stages, namely a top and a bottom stage. Preferably, the compressed air is fed into the bottom of the spray tower and the liquid solvent is fed into at least one spray nozzle **17 + 18** at the top of the spray tower or at the top of each stage. Alternatively, the solvent may be sprayed into the spray tower by other techniques known in the art. For example, the solvent may be sprayed at any location along the  
25 top and/or sides of the spray tower **4**. Furthermore, the spray nozzle may produce a fine spray, a spray including large droplets and/or a spray having substantial streams, depending on design and operating conditions. Preferably, the flow rate of the sprayed solvent may be controlled with valves or other mechanical or electrical means.

30

The compressed air is preferably fed into the bottom of the spray tower **4** in order enable a controlled distribution of the gas within the spray tower **4** and in relation to the flow of the cooling solvent. Thus the air and cooling solvent preferably flow counter-currently. The counter-current flow, on one hand, improves the mass  
35 transfer of dissolved CO<sub>2</sub> from the air into the cooling solvent, and on the other

hand, promotes the heat transfer from the warm air to the cold solvent. Furthermore, as will be discussed herebelow, the invention provides mass transfer and heat transfer within the spray tower 4 that give rise to synergistic effects.

5 The hot compressed air is fed into the spray tower 4, while a cooling solvent is sprayed therein. The cooling solvent is provided at a temperature to cool the hot compressed air. The cooling solvent is fed into the spray tower 4 and contacts the compressed air, thereby simultaneously cooling the air and enabling CO<sub>2</sub> to be dissolved. Of course, the temperature difference between the compressed air and  
10 the solvent may be adjusted by other sub-steps, such as pre-cooling steps, preheating steps and/or other temperature control techniques. Also, depending on the catalyzing means, different optimum temperatures (among other conditions) may be desired to promote hydration reactions.

15 As the ions are dissolved into the cooling solvent, an ion rich solution is produced. The ion rich solution includes at least bicarbonate and hydrogen ions, but may also include a variety of other ions resulting from the hydration reactions.

The absorptive chemical reagents are preferably added to the cooling solvent and  
20 are sprayed into the spray tower 4. Alternatively, the reagents may be sprayed separately into the spray tower or may be provided as solid sorbents bonded to a packing or an interior surface of the spray tower. Accordingly, a variety of absorptive chemical reagents may be employed in a variety of ways. For example, when mono-, di- or tri-amines are used, they are preferably dissolved in the aqueous  
25 solvent in order to circulate with the solvent throughout the process and thus are not restricted to the internal cavity of the spray tower 4. Alternatively, when the reagents are solid sorbents such as amine enriched solids (for example, amines surface-bonded to silica gel or a porous support) the reagents may remain substantially within the spray tower 4. Furthermore, when removing the CO<sub>2</sub> from  
30 the air by hydration reactions, these absorptive chemical reagents may yield a variety of ionic compounds. For example, when using monoethanol amine, the following preferred reversible reaction occurs:



Likewise, if other absorptive chemical reagents are used to react with water and CO<sub>2</sub>, their corresponding ions may be produced and thus be dissolved in the ion rich solution.

5 The cooperation between the cooling solvent, the catalyzing means and the compressed air, yields treated air. The treated air, on one hand, contains a significantly lower concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> and, on the other hand, has been cooled in preparation for subsequent processing steps, such as cold distillation. It should also be noted that the simultaneous cooling and hydration reactions cooperate in a synergistic fashion, as low temperatures both pre-cool the compressed air and  
10 cause the equilibrium of the hydration reaction to favour the conversion of CO<sub>2</sub> into at least bicarbonate and hydrogen ions. The mass transfer, heat transfer and reactions occurring in the inventive process thus enable synergistic, efficient and economical results.

15

The contact at high pressure between the cooling solvent and the air, at working pressure, in the presence of a biocatalyst and/or the additives present in the solvent causes the bulk transfer of the CO<sub>2</sub> present in the air into the cooling water solution mainly in the form of bicarbonate and hydrogen ions. A removal efficiency  
20 comprised between 30% and 95% in volume of the incoming CO<sub>2</sub> is achieved, typically from 400-500 ppmV to less than 100 ppmV, depending on the operating conditions of the spray tower 4.

The cooling of the air has the additional effect of promoting the condensation of  
25 water out of the air, thereby decreasing the water contained in the air. This facilitates downstream fractioning steps, as the air should be dehydrated before being subjected to cold (also called "cryogenic") distillation.

Of course, the design of the spray tower 4 (for example, tower height, number of  
30 stages, type of packing, quantity and type of biocatalyst and/or absorptive chemical reagents, etc.) as well as the operating conditions (flow rates of air and solvent, temperature, pressure, etc.), may be adapted so that the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> in the treated air is minimized.

35 **Preferable adsorption step**

As is often the case, due to economic design and operation of the spray tower 4, small amounts of CO<sub>2</sub> remain in the treated air. It is often preferable to further remove CO<sub>2</sub> before fractioning the treated air. Therefore, in a preferred embodiment of the process, the treated air is fed into at least one adsorption chamber 6. Thus, the treated air is subjected to an adsorption step. The adsorption chamber 6 also enables further dehydration of the treated air, thereby removing unwanted water still present in the treated air.

#### **Step c)**

10 This step of the process includes feeding the treated air into a cold distillation apparatus 7 for fractioning the treated air into at least one gas selected from the group consisting of nitrogen and oxygen (as air is primarily composed of these two gases). Any cold distillation apparatuses known in the art may be used. The treated air provided at this step is preferably quite cold, as distillation of such gases  
15 occurs at cryogenic temperatures.

#### **Preferable post-fractioning steps**

The fractioned oxygen and/or nitrogen are preferably fed to containment units. Alternatively, when the inventive process is incorporated within other processes requiring nitrogen or oxygen, in liquid or gas form, the latter may be fed directly into  
20 other process steps.

#### **Preferable regeneration/recycling steps**

The ion solutions generated at at least one exit of the spray tower 4 are preferably  
25 regenerated to produce a regenerated cooling solvent.

Preferably the entirety of the ion rich solution is regenerated, but alternatively only a portion thereof is so treated. A variety of regeneration units may be employed, either in parallel or in series. For example, precipitating the bicarbonate ions in the  
30 form of at least one insoluble bicarbonate species or converting the ions back into CO<sub>2</sub> and water are preferable regeneration methods.

In a preferred embodiment, the regenerating step includes the sub-steps of:

(i) heating the solution to promote conversion of the ions back into at least CO<sub>2</sub> and  
35 water, to produce a weak ion solution; and,

(ii) cooling the weak ion solution, thereby producing a regenerated cooling solvent.

Referring to **Figure 1**, the heating step (i) is performed in a heat exchanger **3** and the cooling step (ii) is performed in a percolation cooling tower **13**. Preferably, the heating step (i) is performed in the heat exchanger **3** in which the hot compressed air is pre-cooled, in order to efficiently recycle the energy gained by the hot ion solution. In this embodiment, the ion rich solution is heated in the exchanger **3** and then fed into the top of the percolation cooling tower **13**. The hot ion rich solution releases a large quantity of CO<sub>2</sub> at the top of the percolation cooling tower **13**, and the CO<sub>2</sub> is purged into the atmosphere from the tower through a purge line **12**. Alternatively, the CO<sub>2</sub> may be sent to other processing steps such as for producing dry ice or other CO<sub>2</sub> products.

When certain absorptive chemical reagents are converted into ionic form and dissolve in the ion rich solution within the spray tower **4**, the above mentioned heating step may shift the equilibrium of the reaction to promote the conversion of the ions into the non-ionic reagent as well as CO<sub>2</sub> and water.

The percolation cooling tower **13** is preferably provided with a biocatalyst **14** to promote the conversion of the ions into CO<sub>2</sub> and water. The ion rich solution is fed into the percolation cooling tower while cooling air is also provided therein to cool the solution and produce a regenerated cooling solvent. This regenerating step may be enhanced by providing a biocatalytic or enzymatic packing **14** within the percolation cooling tower **13**.

Referring to **Figure 2**, which shows another preferred embodiment, at least a portion of the ion solution is fed to a regenerator **22** prior to the percolation cooling tower **13**. Alternatively, the regenerator **22** may be used alone to regenerate the solvent. The regenerator **22** and the percolation cooling tower **13** may be used in series to maximize the removal of the ions from the solution and improve the quality of the regenerated solvent, but may also be used in parallel or in an arrangement with other regeneration devices known to a person skilled in the art. It should be evident that a plurality of regeneration steps may be taken to precipitate ions, release CO<sub>2</sub> and/or provide a regenerated solvent to be recycled back into the process and thereby reduce costs and waste.

Preferably, the regenerator **22** receives an ion rich solution from the top stage of the spray tower **4**, while the ion solution at the bottom stage is fed directly to the percolation cooling tower **13**.

5

As mentioned above, the regenerated cooling solvent is preferably recycled back to the spray tower **4**. Additionally, the regenerated solvent may be supplemented with fresh solvent from a source **21**. Also, additional quantities of absorptive chemical reagents may be added prior to feeding the regenerated cooling solvent into the spray tower.

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As can be appreciated, the process according to the invention preferably comprises one or several of the following characteristics:

- the CO<sub>2</sub> is absorbed in a single or dual stage spray cooling tower;
- 15 - the spray cooling tower features a biocatalytic packing with immobilized carbonic anhydrase enzyme;
- the spray cooling water solution contains additives (amine or any other compound known to increase CO<sub>2</sub> absorption and/or pH buffering) for enhanced performance and pH buffering;
- 20 - the spray cooling water solution contains significant levels of either mono, di or tertiary amines or any other known compound known and commonly used for CO<sub>2</sub> absorption;
- the ion rich solution is fed to a heat exchanger, using the heat from the compressed air and then to a percolation tower for the release of the absorbed CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere;
- 25 - the ion rich solution is fed to a regenerator column, using the heat of compression of the process air to activate its re-boiling unit; and
- the ion rich solution is fed to precipitation unit for the recovery of CO<sub>2</sub> under the form of a carbonated species.

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Some notable advantages of the invention result from the reduction in size and/or improved operation of the downstream adsorbent unit **6**, which is highly dependent on the incoming CO<sub>2</sub> concentration for its operation and performance. Higher than presupposed CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations causes a reduction in cycle time and increased regeneration power needs in systems designed for lower CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations.

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In the last fifteen years, a significant increase in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations has been noticed, especially in industrial areas. Absorbent units have usually been designed to remove around 300 ppmV, but in some areas, depending on weather  
5 conditions, actual peak concentrations have reached out to 500 ppmV or more, which strongly impact the performance of these units. The invention, especially in its simplest form, as presented in **Figure 1**, allows for the less troublesome revamping of such units at minimal capital cost and continued operation with reduced energy consumption.

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The process and installation, according to the present invention, enable the surprising and synergetic cooling off and reducing of the CO<sub>2</sub> in compressed air to be fractioned.

15 Of course, the present invention is not limited to the specific embodiments described hereabove and in the Figures, but extends to any process or installation having the inventive steps and/or components of the invention. Many modifications could be made without deviating from what has actually been invented.

**CLAIM**

1. A process for fractioning air, comprising the steps of:
- a) providing compressed air;
  - 5 b) simultaneously cooling the compressed air and reducing CO<sub>2</sub> contained therein, by
    - providing a spray tower;
    - providing the spray tower with catalyzing means for promoting the hydration reaction of dissolved CO<sub>2</sub> into at least bicarbonate ions and
    - 10 hydrogen ions, thereby producing treated air with a reduced amount of CO<sub>2</sub> and an ion rich solution containing at least bicarbonate ions and hydrogen ions; and
      - feeding the compressed air into the spray tower while spraying a cooling solvent therein;
  - 15 c) feeding the treated air to a cold distillation apparatus for fractioning the treated air into at least one gas selected from the group consisting of nitrogen and oxygen.
2. The process of claim 1, further comprising, after step b) and before step c), the
- 20 step of:
- feeding the treated air into at least one adsorption chamber for dehydrating and/or further removing CO<sub>2</sub> from said treated air.
3. The process of claim 1, further comprising, after step b), the step of:
- 25 - regenerating the ion rich solution by the sub-steps of:
- (i) heating the solution to promote conversion of the ions back into at least CO<sub>2</sub> and water, to produce a weak ion solution, and
  - (ii) cooling the weak ion solution, thereby producing a regenerated
  - 30 cooling solvent.
4. The process of claim 3, wherein step (i) is performed in a regenerator, wherein the CO<sub>2</sub> released from the ion rich solution is purged from the regenerator.

5. The process of claim 4, wherein the regenerator is heated with the hot compressed air containing CO<sub>2</sub>, thereby heating the ion rich solution and pre-cooling the hot compressed air before the latter is fed into the spray tower.
- 5 6. The process of claim 3, wherein step (ii) is performed in a percolation cooling tower, wherein cooling air is fed therein, to produce a regenerated cooling solvent.
7. The process of claim 6, wherein the regenerated cooling solvent is recycled back to the spray tower to be sprayed therein.
- 10 8. The process of claim 6, wherein the at least one of the regenerator and the percolation cooling tower is provided with at least one of an enzymatic packing and a biocatalytic packing to promote conversion of the ions back into CO<sub>2</sub> and water.
- 15 9. The process of claim 6, wherein the regenerator and the percolation cooling tower operate at pressures lower than a pressure of the compressed air.
- 20 10. The process of claim 1, wherein the catalysing means for promoting the hydration reaction of dissolved CO<sub>2</sub> are chosen from a biocatalyst immobilized within the spray tower and absorptive chemical agents.
11. The process of claim 1, wherein the spray tower further comprises a bottom stage and a top stage, a first spray inlet and a second spray inlet for spraying the cooling solvent into the respective stages, the top stage being provided with the catalyzing means, step b) of the process comprising the sub-step of:
- 25 - initially cooling the compressed air with the cooling solvent of the first spray inlet in the bottom stage, thereby producing a pre-treated air and a weak ion solution at a first liquid outlet, and
- cooling the pre-treated air while removing CO<sub>2</sub> therefrom with the cooling solvent of the second spray inlet in the top stage, the catalyzing means promoting the hydration reaction of CO<sub>2</sub>, thereby producing the treated air with a reduced amount of CO<sub>2</sub> and the ion rich solution at a second liquid outlet.
- 30 12. An installation for fractioning air, comprising:
- 35 - a compressor for compressing the air to produce compressed air;

- a spray tower for simultaneously cooling the compressed air and reducing CO<sub>2</sub> contained therein, the spray tower having an air inlet for receiving the compressed air, at least one liquid spray inlet for receiving and spraying a cooling solvent to contact and cool the compressed air; the spray tower also comprising catalyzing  
5 means for promoting the hydration reaction of dissolved CO<sub>2</sub> into at least bicarbonate ions and hydrogen ions, thereby producing treated air having a reduced amount of CO<sub>2</sub> at a gas outlet, and an ion rich solution at at least one liquid outlet;

- a cold distillation apparatus for receiving the treated air, the cold distillation apparatus fractionating the treated air into at least one gas selected from the group  
10 consisting of nitrogen and oxygen.

13. The installation of claim 12, further comprising:

- at least one adsorption chamber in fluid communication with the gas outlet of the spray tower, for receiving the treated air, the adsorption chamber dehydrating  
15 and/or further removing the CO<sub>2</sub> from the treated air.

14. The installation of claim 12, further comprising:

- a heat exchanger for receiving and heating the ion rich solution exiting the spray tower, while receiving and pre-cooling the compressed air exiting the  
20 compressor.

15. The installation of claim 12, further comprising:

- a percolation cooling tower for receiving and regenerating the ion rich solution, the percolation cooling tower having a gas outlet for purging the CO<sub>2</sub> released from  
25 the ion rich solution, an air inlet for receiving cooling air to cool the ion rich solution and a liquid outlet for removing the regenerated cooling solvent.

16. The installation of claim 15, further comprising:

- a regenerator having a liquid inlet in fluid communication with the liquid outlet  
30 of the spray tower, the regenerator comprising a reboiler for heating the ion rich solution to promote the conversion of the ions into CO<sub>2</sub> and water, thereby producing a weak ion solution, a gas outlet for purging the CO<sub>2</sub> gas from the regenerator, and a liquid outlet for releasing the weak ion solution to be treated in the percolation cooling tower.

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17. The installation of claim 16, wherein the at least one of the regenerator and the percolation cooling tower is provided with at least one of an enzymatic packing and a biocatalytic packing to promote conversion of the ions back into CO<sub>2</sub> and water.

5 18. The installation of claim 16, wherein the spray tower further comprises a bottom stage and a top stage, the bottom stage comprising:

- a gas inlet for receiving the compressed air;

- a first spray inlet for spraying the cooling solvent into the bottom stage to cool the compressed air and remove CO<sub>2</sub> therefrom, thereby producing a pre-treated air  
10 and a weak ion solution; and

- a first liquid outlet for removing the weak ion solution; and

the top stage comprising:

- a second spray inlet for spraying the cooling solvent into the top stage;

- the catalyzing means for promoting the hydration reaction of dissolved CO<sub>2</sub> into  
15 at least bicarbonate ions and hydrogen ions, thereby producing the treated air and the ion rich solution; and

- a second liquid outlet for removing the ion rich solution.

19. The installation of claim 18, wherein the first liquid outlet is in fluid  
20 communication with the percolation cooling tower for directly feeding the weak ion solution thereto, and the second liquid outlet is in fluid communication with the regenerator for feeding the ion rich solution thereto.

20. The installation of claim 12, wherein the catalyzing means for promoting the  
25 hydration reaction of dissolved CO<sub>2</sub> are chosen from a biocatalyst immobilized within the spray tower and absorptive chemical reagents.

FIG. 1

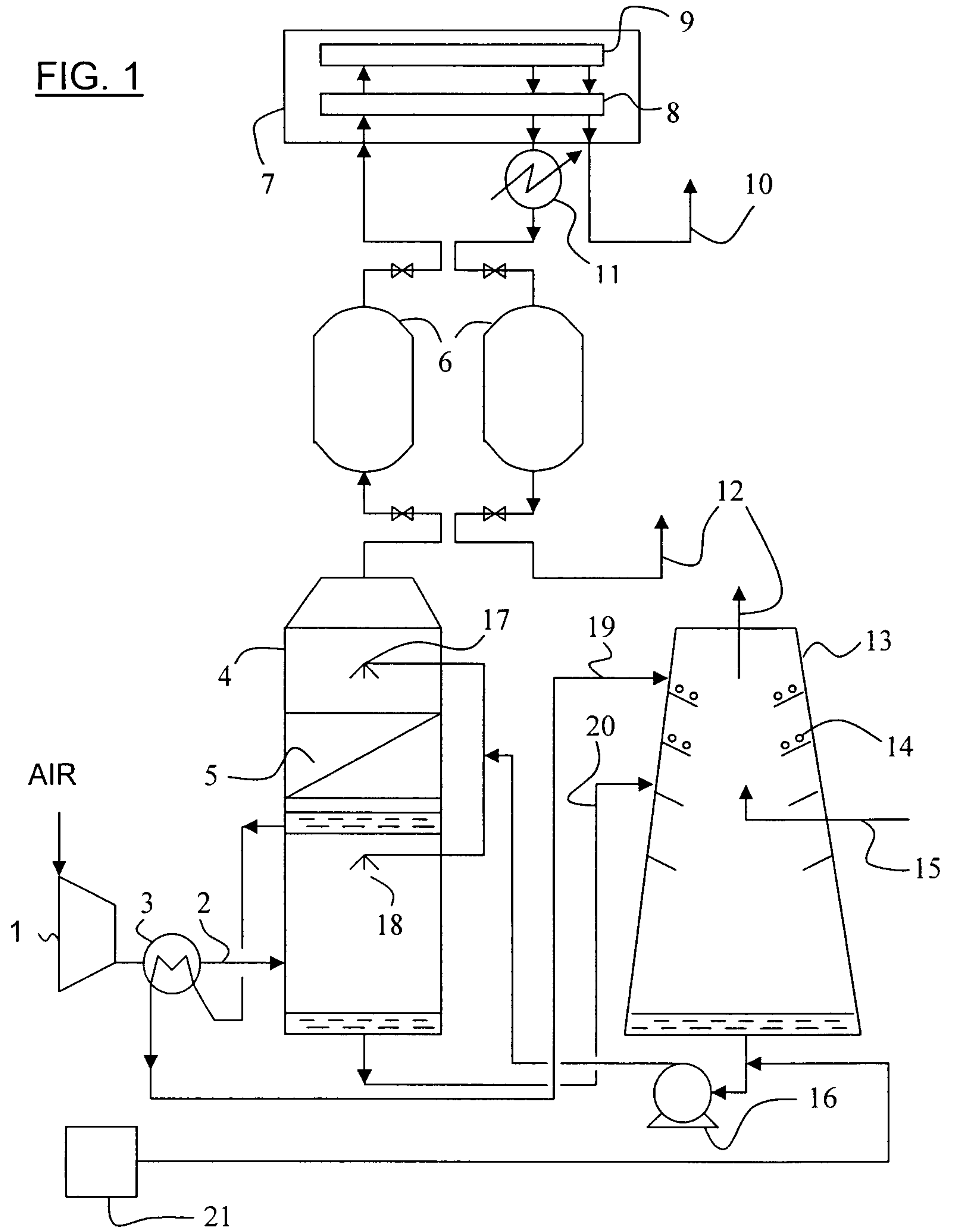


FIG. 2

