

printing on sheet material and is particularly useful for printing signs and
5 other artistic designs in accordance with a printing program.

U.S. Patent Application No. 08/007,662, filed January 22, 1993
describes, among other things, thermal printing apparatus that can be used
to generate signs, designs, characters and other graphic images on a strip of
sheet material in accordance with a stored printing program. The program is
10 read and translated into machine commands by a microprocessor-based
controller and causes the stored image to be generated on the strip of sheet
material by the printer. The printer is preferably a thermal printer having a
thermal printhead mounted in stationary relationship with respect to the strip
of sheet material during a printing operation, and the strip of sheet material is
15 fed under the printhead by a mechanical drive mechanism. The controller
coordinates the operation of the printhead and the mechanical drive
mechanism in order to place the printed image at a desired location on the
strip of material. In one form, the strip of material is a strip of vinyl secured to
a backing material by a pressure sensitive adhesive so that after printing the
20 vinyl bearing a printed image can be cut and stripped from the backing
material and thereafter placed on an appropriate sign board.

The thermal printer in the referenced application utilizes a web
of thermally releasable inking material to produce images in color. Multi-
colored images can be produced by the printer simply by passing the strip of
25 sheet material through the printer relative to the printhead two or more times
and substituting a web bearing an inking material of a different color on each

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destroy the resulting product. Many printed products such as commercial
5 signs or artwork require high quality printing without notable distortion or
registration errors. Such errors can arise at the beginning of each printed
image simply because of backlash in the drive mechanism that moves the
printhead and sheet material relative to one another.

It is accordingly a general object of the present invention to
10 provide a method and apparatus by which the distortion and error associated
with backlash are eliminated from images that are prepared by a printing
apparatus having a drive mechanism for moving the printhead and sheet
material relative to one another during a printing operation.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

15 The present invention resides in a method and apparatus for
printing on sheet material in response to a printing program that defines
images to be prepared during a printing operation. The apparatus which
performs the method includes a printhead for placing printing on the sheet
material, and drive means coupled with the printhead and the sheet material
20 for moving the printhead and material relative to one another during a
printing operation. Such movement spreads the printed image generated by
the head over various locations on the sheet material.

Controller means connected with the printhead and the drive
means responds to the printing program and coordinates the operation of the
25 printhead and the drive means to place the print at the various locations on
the sheet material. For example, in one embodiment of the invention the

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generally has an origin point where the printing starts and all portions of the
5 image are generally located relative to the origin point.

In accordance with the present invention, the controller means
includes backlash elimination means actuating the drive means and
displacing the printhead and sheet material relative to one another by an
incremental amount prior to the start of a printing operation at the origin point
10 of the program. The incremental displacement by the drive means insures
the accurate positioning of the sheet material relative to the printhead
precisely as intended by the printing program. Accordingly, the printed
image is not distorted or displaced.

The invention has particular utility in printing apparatus in which
15 multiple passes of the sheet material relative to the printhead are used to
create multi-color images. Generally each color image requires a separate
pass of the sheet material under the printhead, and the sheet material must
be returned to the origin point at the beginning of each pass. In one
embodiment of the present invention, the backlash elimination means
20 includes backspacing means to insure that the sheet material and printhead
can be moved relative to one another by an incremental amount at the
beginning of the printing operation to bring the printhead to the origin point of
the image and thereby start to print the image precisely at the origin point as
intended by the printing program.

25 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

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and shows the drive mechanism for a strip of sheet material on which the
5 apparatus prints.

Fig. 3 is a fragmentary sectional view of the printer showing the
drive mechanism as viewed along the sectioning lines 3-3 of Fig. 2.

Fig. 4 is an enlarged sectional view of the printing apparatus
showing the printhead and the roller platen for the sheet material.

10 Fig. 5 is a printed two dimensional image of the letters AR with
three-dimensional features and shows the dimensional parameters that are
employed by the present invention.

Fig. 6 is flow chart detailing the operation of the printer
controller including the backlash eliminator.

15 DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Fig. 1 illustrates a printing apparatus, generally designated at
10, which embodies the present invention and responds to a printing
program stored in a memory 12 to generate printed images on a strip S of
sheet material. The strip is supplied in a roll which is supported on a platform
20 14 on the backside of the machine and is pulled over a guide roller 16 into
the machine. The strip exits at the front side of the machine with the printed
images. For example, the printer 10 in one embodiment is a thermal printer,
and the strip S of sheet material is a vinyl strip secured to a releasable
backing material by a pressure sensitive adhesive. After an image such as
25 the letters "AR" is printed on the material, the material can be placed in a
cutting machine where the letters are cutout, lifted from the backing material

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The information printed on the strip S of sheet material is held
5 in digital form in the memory 12 and when the operator of the printer calls for
a printing program to be carried out through the control panel 18, a
microprocessor-based controller 20 downloads the program from memory
and generates machine commands that are fed to the printhead and drive
mechanism for moving the strip S of sheet material through the printer.

10 The printer includes a cover 22 which is pivotally mounted to
the base or frame 24 in order to open the printer and initially load the strip S
of sheet material in the printer.

Figs. 2-4 illustrate the interior of the printer 10 in detail with the
cover 22 removed. The drive mechanism for moving the strip S of sheet
15 material through the printer during printing as indicated by the arrows in Fig.
2 includes a pair of drive sprockets 30,32 which are secured to a drive shaft
34 rotatably mounted within the base 24. A drive motor 36 mounted within
the base in Fig. 2 is rotatably connected to the drive shaft 34 through a series
of drive gears 38,40, toothed drive pulleys 42,44 and a toothed drive belt 46.
20 The sprockets 30,32 engage a series of feed holes extending longitudinally
along the lateral edges of the elongated strip of sheet material as shown in
Fig. 1.

In order to keep the strip engaged with the sprockets, a pair of
liftable bail arms 48 in Fig. 2 and 49 in Fig. 4 rest on the sprockets at each
15 end of the drive shaft 34 and support holddown rollers 50,52 to keep the strip
engaged with approximately 180° of the sprocket circumferences.

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one embodiment of the invention, the strip of sheet material is 15 inches wide
5 and the roller platen is approximately 12 inches wide so that the longitudinal
edge portions of the strip overlap the platen 54 and the feed holes engage
the sprockets. The platen can, if desired, be rotatably driven by pulleys 56,58
secured to the drive shaft 34 and elastomeric drive belts 60,62 that extend
between the pulleys and grooves at the end of the roller platen. The platen is
10 preferably formed with a hard rubber sleeve 64 that defines a friction drive
surface engaging the strip of sheet material and supporting the material
directly under a printhead 70 as shown most clearly in Fig. 4.

As shown in Figs. 2 and 4, the printhead 70 is resiliently
supported in a support frame 72 by a suspension plate 74 and a series of
15 slidable bolts 76 and springs 78. The printhead 70 extends transversely
across the strip S of sheet material and has a width approximately equal to
the width of the roller platen. The printhead 70 is a thermal printhead having
a plurality of heating elements distributed evenly along the head from one
end to the other, and the heating elements are densely packed, for example
20 at a density of 300 elements per inch, along a line or zone of contact with the
strip S on the roller platen. One such head is manufactured by Kyocera
Industrial Ceramics, Inc. of Kyoto, Japan.

To control the printing pressure applied by the head 70 during a
printing operation, the bolts 76 and springs 78 are distributed at various
5 locations between the mounting plate 74 and the support frame 72 and the
bolts slide freely relative to the support frame 72 while the springs 78 apply

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To raise and lower the printhead and to regulate the printing pressure, one end of the support frame 72 is pivotally mounted to the base 24 on a shaft 80 as shown in Fig. 2, and the other end of the frame is moved up and down by a pressure actuator 82 in response to commands from the controller 20 in Fig. 1. By this means the springs 78 transmit regulated pressure to the printhead 70 and the strip S of the sheet material on the roller platen 54.

In order to print images on the strip S with the thermal printhead 70, a donor web W bearing a thermally releasable printing ink is fed between the printhead 70 and the strip S as shown in Figs. 2 and 4. The web W extends between two spools 84,86 of a replaceable cassette 88 mounted in the support frame 72. The web extends from the supply spool 84 past a static reduction brush 90 shown in Fig. 4, and then under a dancer rod 92 to the printhead. When the printhead is lowered into a printing position, the web W is sandwiched between the printhead and the strip S of sheet material along the line or zone of contact established by the curvature of the platen 54. The web extends further from the head over another dancer rod 94 past another static brush 96 to the take-up spool 86 shown in Fig. 2.

During a printing operation, the drive sprockets 30,32 and the roller platen 54, if driven, pull the strip S of the sheet material over the roller platen relative to the printhead 54 in the direction of the arrows in Fig. 2 while the heating elements of the printhead are selectively excited in order to release the printing ink from the web W onto the sheet material. Friction

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The thermally releasable printing ink that is released from the web W during a printing operation may be red, yellow or any other color, and prints an image of a corresponding color on the sheet material. If the image is a multi-color image, the web W must contain segments of different colors, or alternatively, the cassette 88 must be exchanged for other cassettes containing webs W bearing different color inks. During the indexing of a web or exchange of a cassette, the strip of sheet material is drawn back in the direction opposite the arrows in Fig. 2 to the beginning of the printed image which corresponds to an origin point in the image and the stored printing program. With another cassette or web segment installed the printing operation is continued in a second color by again advancing the web in the forward direction indicated by the arrows relative to the roller platen.

OPERATION

Fig. 5 is provided in order to explain more clearly the process of printing a multi-colored image with the printer 10. It is assumed that the two dimensional image of the letters "AR" with three dimensional features would be printed with the front face of the letters in one color, such as red, and the "third dimension" of the letters in another color, such as black. The profiles 100,102,104, of each color are separately defined in the printing program stored in the memory 12, each profile being referenced to a common origin point X_0 such as the left-most point 106 of the bullseye 108. The bullseye, for example, may be used subsequently in a numerically controlled cutting machine in order register the image of the letters "AR" with respect to the

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represents the motion of the head relative to the vinyl sheet material S, and
5 the coordinates X_0 , X_1 , X_2 represent different positions on the vinyl sheet
material as measured in the X coordinate direction. For example, the
coordinate X_0 represents the coordinate of the origin point 106. The
coordinate X_1 represents the limit or first print point for the black portion of
the image, and the coordinate X_2 represents the limit or first print point for the
10 red portion of the image. During a printing operation the bullseye 108 would
be printed first in one of the two colors by the printhead and then the other
portion of the image in the same color, that is for example the portion
beginning at X_1 , would be printed progressively from left to right as viewed in
Fig. 5 as the strip S of vinyl sheet material moves relative to the printhead.
15 Thereafter, the vinyl sheet material S is moved back under the
printing head in the -X direction until the origin point 106 is located under the
printhead. Then the material is backspaced or moved further in the -X
direction by the incremental amount ΔX . At this point the printer 10 would be
opened by the operator by lifting the cover 22 and pivoted support frame 72,
20 the cassette 88 containing a web W of ink material would be removed and
replaced with a cassette of the second color and the printer would be closed
and again energized to continue the printing operation. The printer then
advances by an amount ΔX to eliminate all backlash in the drive mechanism
for the vinyl sheet material which places the origin point 106 precisely under
25 the printhead as it was at the start of printing of the first color. The printer
proceeds from the origin point by moving to the coordinate of the second

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may be continuous or discontinuous with the preceding or subsequent
5 motions of the strip.

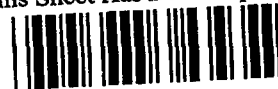
At the end of the printing operation, the strip of sheet material could be automatically or manually advanced in order to totally remove the image from the printer. The portion of the strip bearing the finished image is then removed from the rest of the strip.

10 The flow chart of Fig. 6 illustrates the basic steps of an operating program utilized by the controller 20 to carry out printing operations such as the printing of the letters "AR" as described in connection with Fig 5.

It is assumed at the outset that a strip of vinyl on a backing
15 material is loaded into the printer 10 so as to be fully engaged with 180 degrees of the drive sprockets 30,32. A strip sensor of a type described in greater detailed in the above-referenced Application Serial No. 08/007,662 is used to confirm this condition to the printer operator through the control panel 18. The operator then starts the print program through the panel, and
20 the subroutine for printing is entered at block 110 in Fig. 6. The program defining the letters "AR" which is stored in the memory 12 is read and downloaded into the controller 20 of Fig. 1 as indicated at instruction 112 and the controller locates the origin point 106 in the program data as indicated at instruction 114.

25 At branch 116, the controller determines whether the correct cassette containing the web W with a colored printing ink has been loaded

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the program then advances directly from branch 116 to instruction 118. If the
5 wrong cassette had been loaded in the machine, the program would branch
to the reload instruction 120 and a warning signal on the control panel 18
would advise the operator that the wrong cassette had been loaded. After
the correct cassette was loaded, the program would proceed again through
branch 116 to instruction 118.

3 The printhead having initially been in an elevated position is
lowered into contact with the web W and strip S of sheet material overlying
the roller platen 54. With the printhead lowered and prepared to actually
begin printing, the program causes the drive mechanism including the drive
motor 36 and the sprockets 30,32 to move the strip of vinyl and releasable
backing material by the incremental amount ΔX in the positive direction as
indicated at instruction 122. The incremental amount of movement, which
may for example be .150 inch, causes the vinyl to be moved to precisely
locate the origin point under the printing head, and at the same time
eliminates all of the backlash through the gears 38,40, pulleys and drive belt
42,44,46 and between the sprockets 30,32 and the feed holes in the strip S
of vinyl material. Thus, the next drive pulse which feeds the strip of vinyl
precisely advances the strip relative to the printhead as intended by the
printing program, and the printed image thus corresponds precisely with the
data in the printing program. If backlash had not been eliminated, then
distortion of the image could occur in the initial portion of the image. For
example, Fig. 5 shows the initial increment of movement ΔX in the X

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therefore be relied upon as an accurate reference for all other data points in
5 the printed image.

Once the vinyl has been moved incrementally by the amount ΔX
as shown at instruction 122, the printing program continues by printing a
single color image defined by the printing program as indicated by instruction
124. At the end of the single color image, the printhead is lifted as indicated
10 at instruction 126 and the controller determines if there are additional colors
to be printed at branch 128. If not, the program is exited at 130. However, in
the scenario described here, it will be assumed that a second color is to be
printed in the image in conjunction with the previously printed color and,
therefore, the drive mechanism reverses the motion of the strip S of sheet
5 material and returns the strip to the origin point 106 as indicated by
instruction 132. When the strip has returned to the origin point, the drive
mechanism continues the backward movement of the strip or backspaces the
strip by the amount ΔX as indicated at instruction 134 to bring the strip
generally into the same position that it occupied at the beginning of the
0 printing operation.

At this point in the printing operation, backlash in the drive
mechanism including any backlash between the sprocket teeth and the feed
holes of the vinyl strip may result in slight positioning errors between the strip
and the head.

The program then advances to instruction 136 which visually
signals the printer operator that the cassette needs to be changed to print

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again starts the printer through the control panel 18 (Fig. 1), and the program
5 advances to the branch 116. Again the program determines whether the
correct cassette has been loaded and if not a reload command is given at
instruction 120. With the correct cassette in the machine, the program
advances to instruction 118 to cause the printhead to be lowered into
engagement with the strip of vinyl. The vinyl is then fed by the incremental
10 amount ΔX by the instruction 122 which eliminates any positional errors that
arise due to the backlash in the drive system. Accordingly, by the time the
program has advanced to the instruction 124 to print the second color of the
image, backlash has been removed from the drive mechanism and the strip
and printhead are in proper registration with one another at the origin point
15 106. Printing then continues as described above for the first color without
distortion of the image and with assurance that both colored portions of the
image will be in proper registration with one another throughout the image.

While the present invention has been described in a preferred
embodiment, it should be understood that numerous modifications and
20 substitutions can be made without departing from the spirit of the invention.
Basic to the invention is the movement of the sheet material and printhead
relative to one another by an incremental amount at the beginning of each
portion of the printing operation so that the strip and printhead are always in
correct positional relationship with one another at the origin point.
25 Preferably, but not necessarily, the printhead is raised out of contact with the
vinyl sheet material during the period in which it is backed up to return to the

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certain amounts of backlash or hysteresis. Although the invention has been
5 described in conjunction with a thermal printer that utilizes a web of inking
material, it may be used with other types of printers with equal success. The
origin point to which the printhead and material are incrementally moved to
eliminate backlash is the point where the printing program as stored in
memory begins the printing operation. That point may be part of the primary
10 image, an auxiliary portion of the image as in the case of the bullseye 108 or
may not be a visible portion of the image at all.

Accordingly, the present invention has been described in
several embodiments by way of illustration rather than limitation.

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for placing a printed image on a sheet material (S), a drive mechanism
5 (36,30,32) coupled with the printhead and the sheet material for moving the
printhead and the sheet material relative to one another during a printing
operation to place the printed image on the sheet material, and a controller
(20) connected with the printhead (70) and the drive mechanism and
responsive to the printing program for coordinating the operation of the
10 printhead and the drive mechanism to place the printed image on the sheet
material (S) relative to an origin point which is also defined in the program,
characterized in that the controller (20) also includes a backlash eliminator
(122,134) actuating the drive mechanism (36,30,32) and displacing the
printhead (70) and sheet material (S) relative to one another by an
15 incremental amount prior to beginning a printing operation at the origin point.

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permit printing in different colors, structure (88) supporting the donor web
5 bearing printing ink between the printhead (70) and the sheet material (S) to
enable the head to transfer the ink selectively from the web to the sheet
material, and characterized in that the backlash eliminator further includes
controls (128,136) actuating the drive mechanism and displacing the
printhead and sheet material relative to one another by at least an
10 incremental amount to bring the head and material to the origin point with
each replacement of a donor web.

3. A printing apparatus for printing as defined in claim 1 or 2 wherein:
the drive mechanism (30,32) engages and moves the sheet material back
15 and forth relative to the printhead (70), the controller controls the back and
forth movement of the sheet material (s) to cause the material to make
multiple passes by the printhead in response to the printing program, and
characterized in that the backlash eliminator (122,134) causes the drive
mechanism to advance the sheet material incrementally relative to the
20 printhead in the printing direction prior to the beginning of each pass by the
printhead.

4. A printing apparatus for printing as defined in claim 1, 2 or 3
characterized in that the backlash eliminator includes a backspacer (134) for
5 returning the sheet material after a pass by the printhead to a position in
advance of the starting point for the printed information.

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5 contact with the sheet material and characterized in that the controller
(20,118,126) causes the printhead (70) to move into contact with the
sheet material before the material is incrementally advanced prior to the
start of printing, and causes the printhead to move out of contact with
the strip of sheet material prior to returning the sheet material.

10 6. A method of printing images defined in a printing program on
sheet material in a machine controlled by the program and having a
printhead and drive means for moving the printhead and sheet material
relative to one another during a printing operation characterized by
energizing the drive means to move the printhead (70) and sheet material
15 (S) relative to one another by at least an incremental amount to remove
backlash in the drive means before energizing the printhead to print images
on the sheet material.

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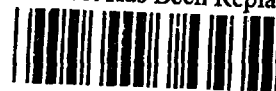
direction relative to the printhead (70) while generating images with the
5 printhead on the sheet material in accordance with the printing program, and
then moving the sheet material (S) longitudinally of itself in the direction
opposite to the one direction without generating images on the sheet
material until the previously generated images have completely passed by
the printhead (70), and then again energizing the drive means to move the
10 sheet material longitudinally of itself by an incremental amount in the one
direction to remove backlash before re-energizing the printhead.

8. A method of printing as defined in claim 7 characterized in that
the step of moving the sheet material in the direction opposite the one
15 direction allows the subsequent energizing and movement of the sheet
material by at least an incremental amount in the one direction to place the
printhead (70) in the same position with respect to the sheet material as
when the printhead was originally energized to print images.

20 9. A method of printing images as defined in claim 7 or 8 characterized
by placing the printhead (70) in contact with the sheet material during the
movement of the material in the one direction, and holding the printhead out
of contact with the sheet material during the movement of the material in the
direction opposite to the one direction.

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and characterized in that after again energizing the drive means a further
5 step includes generating images with the printhead (70) in another color
during movement of the material in the one direction.

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eliminate distortions and to insure registration of colors in the printed image,
5 a printer controller (20) eliminates backlash in the drive mechanism at the
beginning of each printing operation.

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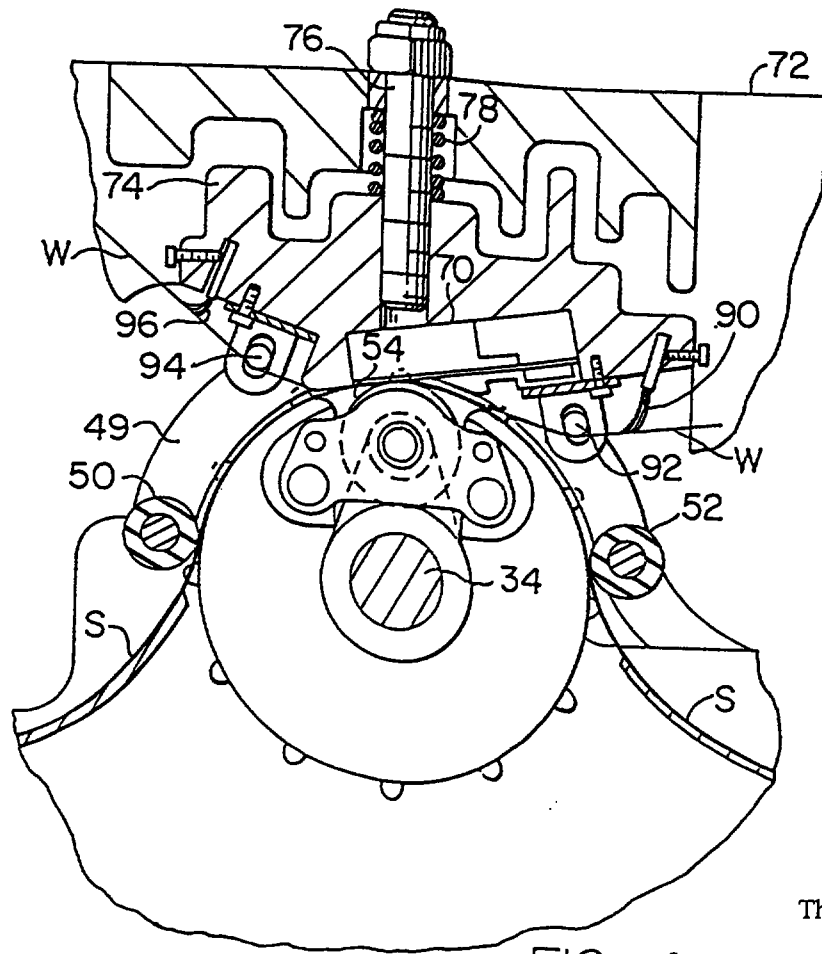
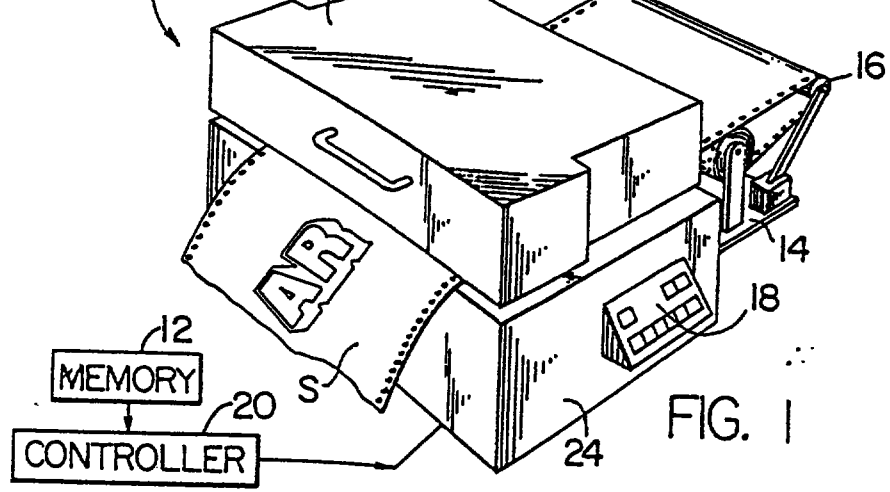
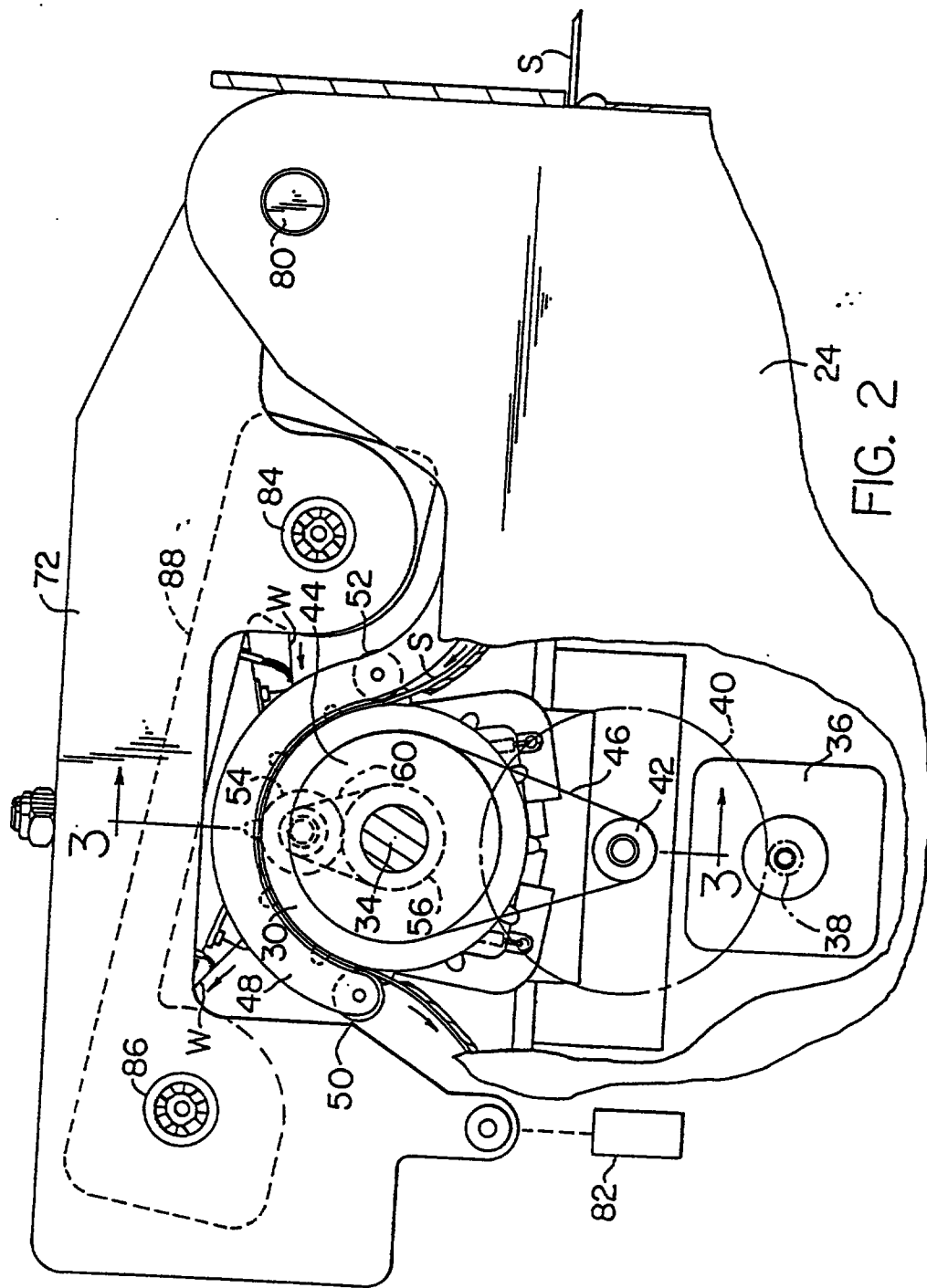


FIG. 4

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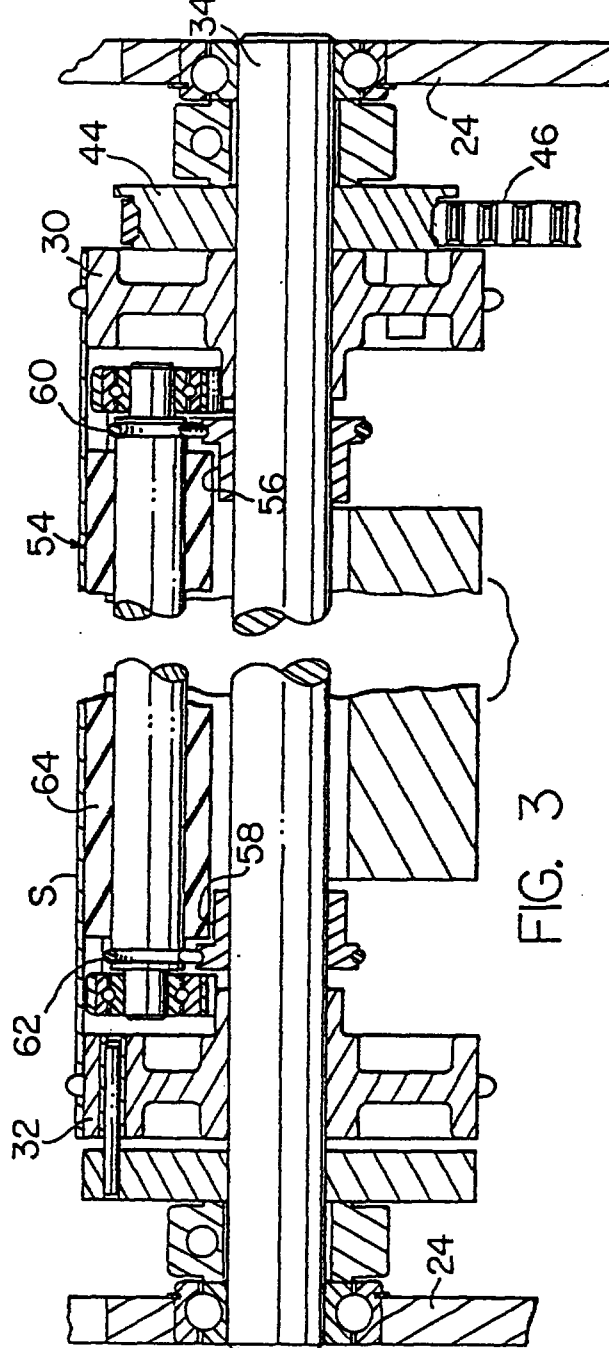


FIG. 3

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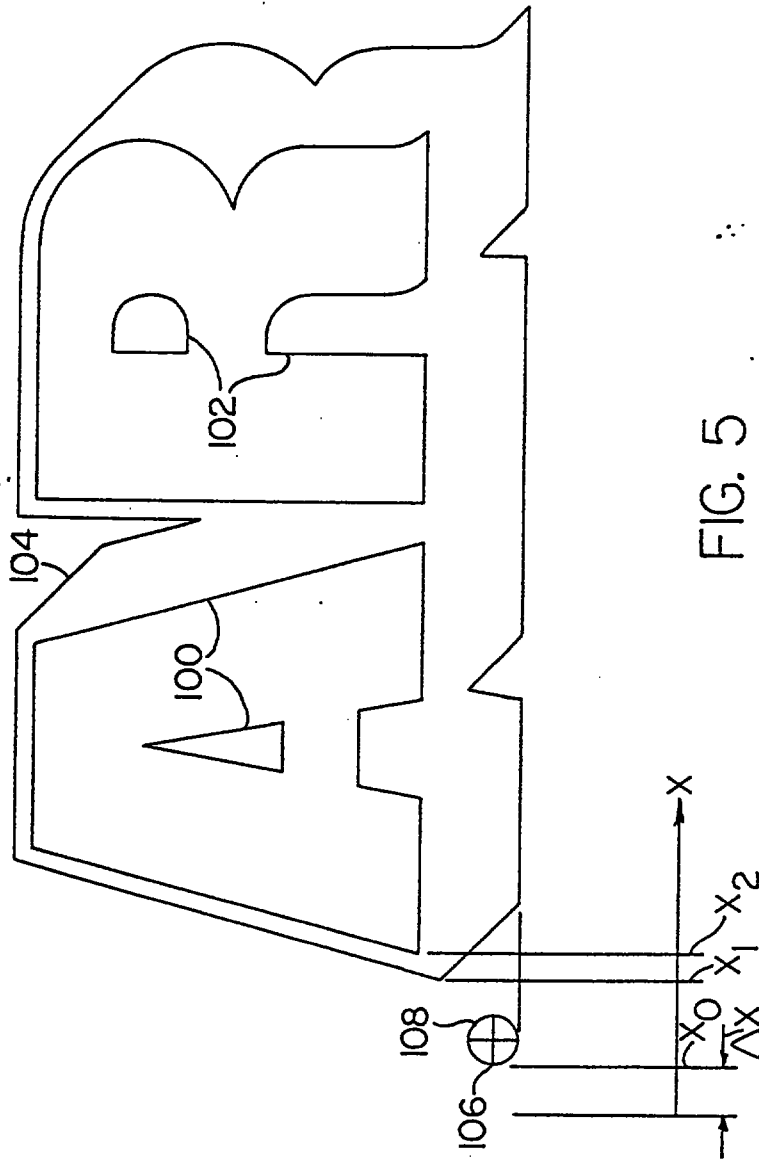
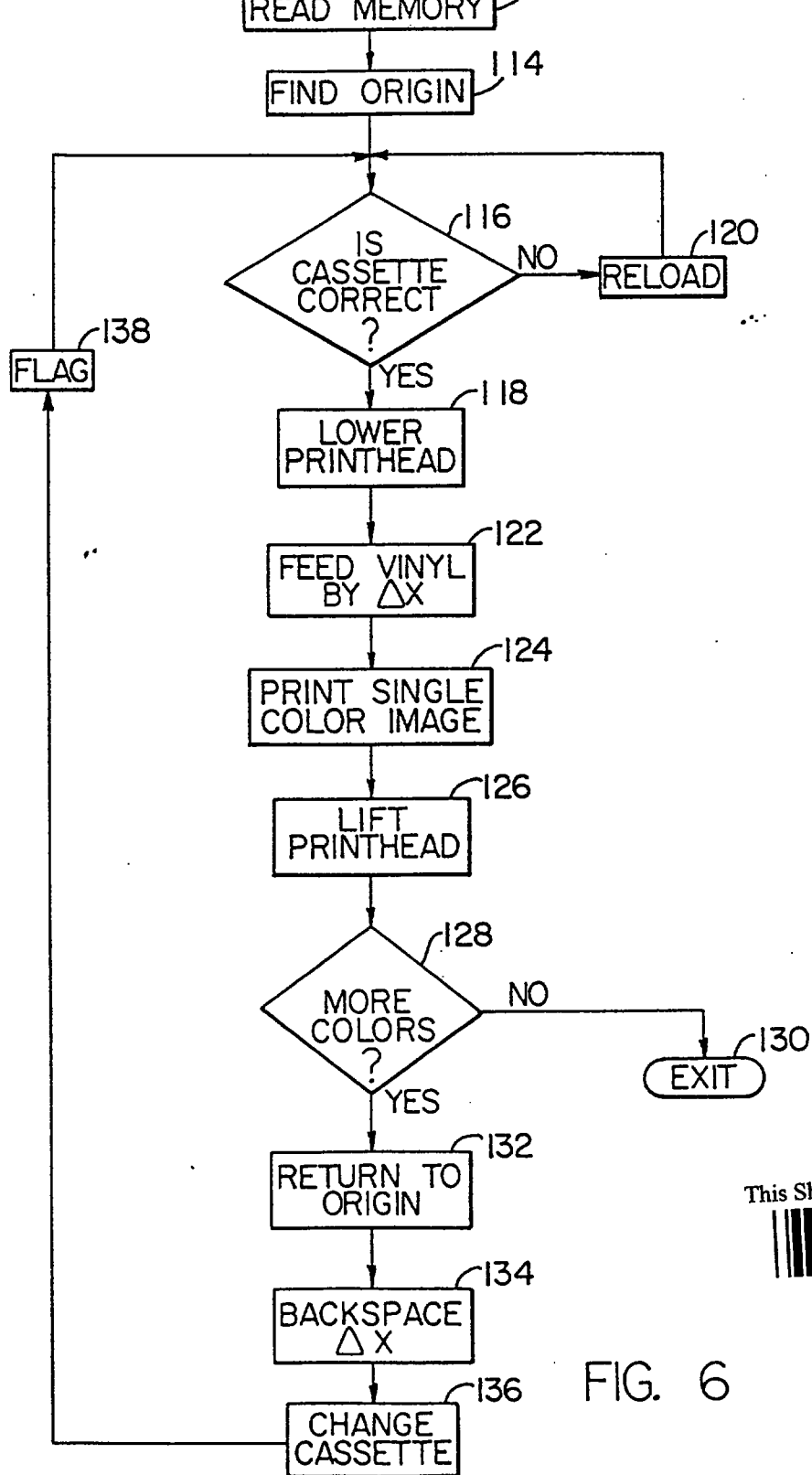


FIG. 5

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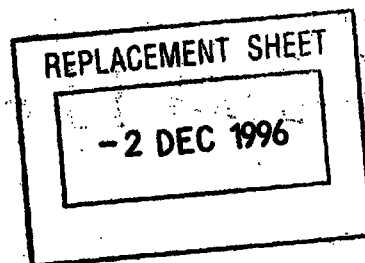


FIG. 6

printing on sheet material and is particularly useful for printing signs and other artistic designs in accordance with a printing program.

U.S. Patent Application No. 08/007,662, filed January 22, 1993 describes, among other things, thermal printing apparatus that can be used to generate signs, designs, characters and other graphic images on a strip of sheet material in accordance with a stored printing program. The program is read and translated into machine commands by a microprocessor-based controller and causes the stored image to be generated on the strip of sheet material by the printer. The printer is preferably a thermal printer having a thermal printhead mounted in stationary relationship with respect to the strip of sheet material during a printing operation, and the strip of sheet material is fed under the printhead by a mechanical drive mechanism. The controller coordinates the operation of the printhead and the mechanical drive mechanism in order to place the printed image at a desired location on the strip of material. In one form, the strip of material is a strip of vinyl secured to a backing material by a pressure sensitive adhesive so that after printing the vinyl bearing a printed image can be cut and stripped from the backing material and thereafter placed on an appropriate sign board.

The thermal printer in the referenced application utilizes a web of thermally releasable inking material to produce images in color. Multi-colored images can be produced by the printer simply by passing the strip of sheet material through the printer relative to the printhead two or more times and substituting a web bearing an inking material of a different color on each



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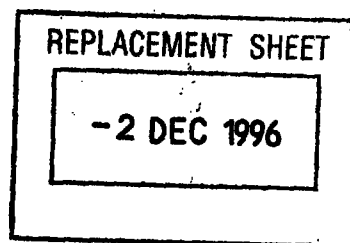
destroy the resulting product. Many printed products such as commercial signs or artwork require high quality printing without notable distortion or registration errors. Such errors can arise at the beginning of each printed image simply because of backlash in the drive mechanism that moves the printhead and sheet material relative to one another.

It is accordingly a general object of the present invention to provide a method and apparatus by which the distortion and error associated with backlash are eliminated from images that are prepared by a printing apparatus having a drive mechanism for moving the printhead and sheet material relative to one another during a printing operation.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention resides in a method and apparatus for printing on sheet material in response to a printing program that defines images to be prepared during a printing operation. The apparatus which performs the method includes a printhead for placing printing on the sheet material, and drive means coupled with the printhead and the sheet material for moving the printhead and material relative to one another during a printing operation. Such movement spreads the printed image generated by the head over various locations on the sheet material.

Controller means connected with the printhead and the drive means responds to the printing program and coordinates the operation of the printhead and the drive means to place the print at the various locations on the sheet material. For example, in one embodiment of the invention the



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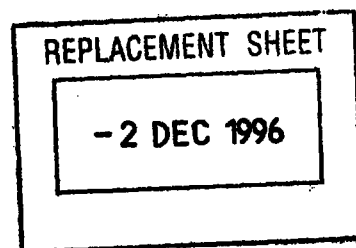


generally has an origin point where the printing starts and all portions of the image are generally located relative to the origin point.

In accordance with the present invention, the controller means includes backlash elimination means actuating the drive means and displacing the printhead and sheet material relative to one another by an incremental amount prior to the start of a printing operation at the origin point of the program. The incremental displacement by the drive means insures the accurate positioning of the sheet material relative to the printhead precisely as intended by the printing program. Accordingly, the printed image is not distorted or displaced.

The invention has particular utility in printing apparatus in which multiple passes of the sheet material relative to the printhead are used to create multi-color images. Generally each color image requires a separate pass of the sheet material under the printhead, and the sheet material must be returned to the origin point at the beginning of each pass. In one embodiment of the present invention, the backlash elimination means includes backspacing means to insure that the sheet material and printhead can be moved relative to one another by an incremental amount at the beginning of the printing operation to bring the printhead to the origin point of the image and thereby start to print the image precisely at the origin point as intended by the printing program.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS



and shows the drive mechanism for a strip of sheet material on which the apparatus prints.

Fig. 3 is a fragmentary sectional view of the printer showing the drive mechanism as viewed along the sectioning lines 3-3 of Fig. 2.

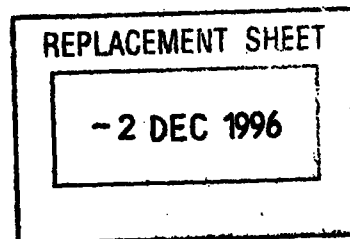
Fig. 4 is an enlarged sectional view of the printing apparatus showing the printhead and the roller platen for the sheet material.

Fig. 5 is a printed two dimensional image of the letters AR with three-dimensional features and shows the dimensional parameters that are employed by the present invention.

Fig. 6 is flow chart detailing the operation of the printer controller including the backlash eliminator.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Fig. 1 illustrates a printing apparatus, generally designated at 10, which embodies the present invention and responds to a printing program stored in a memory 12 to generate printed images on a strip S of sheet material. The strip is supplied in a roll which is supported on a platform 14 on the backside of the machine and is pulled over a guide roller 16 into the machine. The strip exits at the front side of the machine with the printed images. For example, the printer 10 in one embodiment is a thermal printer, and the strip S of sheet material is a vinyl strip secured to a releasable backing material by a pressure sensitive adhesive. After an image such as the letters "AR" is printed on the material, the material can be placed in a cutting machine where the letters are cutout, lifted from the backing material



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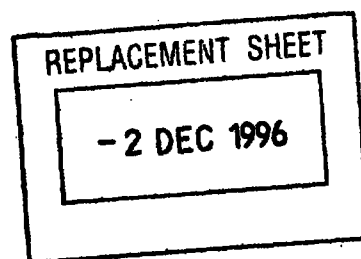


The information printed on the strip S of sheet material is held in digital form in the memory 12 and when the operator of the printer calls for a printing program to be carried out through the control panel 18, a microprocessor-based controller 20 downloads the program from memory and generates machine commands that are fed to the printhead and drive mechanism for moving the strip S of sheet material through the printer.

The printer includes a cover 22 which is pivotally mounted to the base or frame 24 in order to open the printer and initially load the strip S of sheet material in the printer.

Figs. 2-4 illustrate the interior of the printer 10 in detail with the cover 22 removed. The drive mechanism for moving the strip S of sheet material through the printer during printing as indicated by the arrows in Fig. 2 includes a pair of drive sprockets 30,32 which are secured to a drive shaft 34 rotatably mounted within the base 24. A drive motor 36 mounted within the base in Fig. 2 is rotatably connected to the drive shaft 34 through a series of drive gears 38,40, toothed drive pulleys 42,44 and a toothed drive belt 46. The sprockets 30,32 engage a series of feed holes extending longitudinally along the lateral edges of the elongated strip of sheet material as shown in Fig. 1.

In order to keep the strip engaged with the sprockets, a pair of liftable bail arms 48 in Fig. 2 and 49 in Fig. 4 rest on the sprockets at each end of the drive shaft 34 and support holddown rollers 50,52 to keep the strip engaged with approximately 180° of the sprocket circumferences.



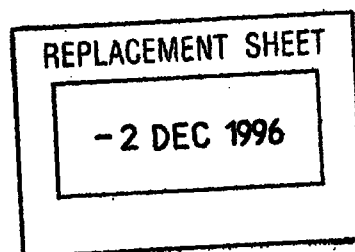
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one embodiment of the invention, the strip of sheet material is 15 inches wide and the roller platen is approximately 12 inches wide so that the longitudinal edge portions of the strip overlap the platen 54 and the feed holes engage the sprockets. The platen can, if desired, be rotatably driven by pulleys 56,58 secured to the drive shaft 34 and elastomeric drive belts 60,62 that extend between the pulleys and grooves at the end of the roller platen. The platen is preferably formed with a hard rubber sleeve 64 that defines a friction drive surface engaging the strip of sheet material and supporting the material directly under a printhead 70 as shown most clearly in Fig. 4.

As shown in Figs. 2 and 4, the printhead 70 is resiliently supported in a support frame 72 by a suspension plate 74 and a series of slidable bolts 76 and springs 78. The printhead 70 extends transversely across the strip S of sheet material and has a width approximately equal to the width of the roller platen. The printhead 70 is a thermal printhead having a plurality of heating elements distributed evenly along the head from one end to the other, and the heating elements are densely packed, for example at a density of 300 elements per inch, along a line or zone of contact with the strip S on the roller platen. One such head is manufactured by Kyocera Industrial Ceramics, Inc. of Kyoto, Japan.

To control the printing pressure applied by the head 70 during a printing operation, the bolts 76 and springs 78 are distributed at various locations between the mounting plate 74 and the support frame 72 and the bolts slide freely relative to the support frame 72 while the springs 78 apply



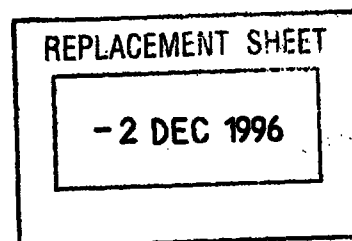
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To raise and lower the printhead and to regulate the printing pressure, one end of the support frame 72 is pivotally mounted to the base 24 on a shaft 80 as shown in Fig. 2, and the other end of the frame is moved up and down by a pressure actuator 82 in response to commands from the controller 20 in Fig. 1. By this means the springs 78 transmit regulated pressure to the printhead 70 and the strip S of the sheet material on the roller platen 54.

In order to print images on the strip S with the thermal printhead 70, a donor web W bearing a thermally releasable printing ink is fed between the printhead 70 and the strip S as shown in Figs. 2 and 4. The web W extends between two spools 84,86 of a replaceable cassette 88 mounted in the support frame 72. The web extends from the supply spool 84 past a static reduction brush 90 shown in Fig. 4, and then under a dancer rod 92 to the printhead. When the printhead is lowered into a printing position, the web W is sandwiched between the printhead and the strip S of sheet material along the line or zone of contact established by the curvature of the platen 54. The web extends further from the head over another dancer rod 94 past another static brush 96 to the take-up spool 86 shown in Fig. 2.

During a printing operation, the drive sprockets 30,32 and the roller platen 54, if driven, pull the strip S of the sheet material over the roller platen relative to the printhead 54 in the direction of the arrows in Fig. 2 while the heating elements of the printhead are selectively excited in order to release the printing ink from the web W onto the sheet material. Friction



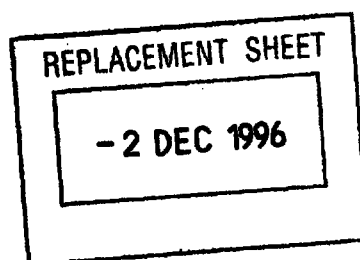
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The thermally releasable printing ink that is released from the web W during a printing operation may be red, yellow or any other color, and prints an image of a corresponding color on the sheet material. If the image is a multi-color image, the web W must contain segments of different colors, or alternatively, the cassette 88 must be exchanged for other cassettes containing webs W bearing different color inks. During the indexing of a web or exchange of a cassette, the strip of sheet material is drawn back in the direction opposite the arrows in Fig. 2 to the beginning of the printed image which corresponds to an origin point in the image and the stored printing program. With another cassette or web segment installed the printing operation is continued in a second color by again advancing the web in the forward direction indicated by the arrows relative to the roller platen.

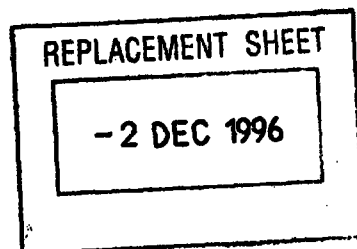
OPERATION

Fig. 5 is provided in order to explain more clearly the process of printing a multi-colored image with the printer 10. It is assumed that the two dimensional image of the letters "AR" with three dimensional features would be printed with the front face of the letters in one color, such as red, and the "third dimension" of the letters in another color, such as black. The profiles 100,102,104, of each color are separately defined in the printing program stored in the memory 12, each profile being referenced to a common origin point X_0 such as the left-most point 106 of the bullseye 108. The bullseye, for example, may be used subsequently in a numerically controlled cutting machine in order register the image of the letters "AR" with respect to the



represents the motion of the head relative to the vinyl sheet material S, and the coordinates X_0 , X_1 , X_2 represent different positions on the vinyl sheet material as measured in the X coordinate direction. For example, the coordinate X_0 represents the coordinate of the origin point 106. The coordinate X_1 represents the limit or first print point for the black portion of the image, and the coordinate X_2 represents the limit or first print point for the red portion of the image. During a printing operation the bullseye 108 would be printed first in one of the two colors by the printhead and then the other portion of the image in the same color, that is for example the portion beginning at X_1 , would be printed progressively from left to right as viewed in Fig. 5 as the strip S of vinyl sheet material moves relative to the printhead.

Thereafter, the vinyl sheet material S is moved back under the printing head in the -X direction until the origin point 106 is located under the printhead. Then the material is backspaced or moved further in the -X direction by the incremental amount ΔX . At this point the printer 10 would be opened by the operator by lifting the cover 22 and pivoted support frame 72, the cassette 88 containing a web W of ink material would be removed and replaced with a cassette of the second color and the printer would be closed and again energized to continue the printing operation. The printer then advances by an amount ΔX to eliminate all backlash in the drive mechanism for the vinyl sheet material which places the origin point 106 precisely under the printhead as it was at the start of printing of the first color. The printer proceeds from the origin point by moving to the coordinate of the second



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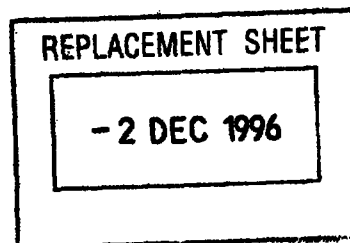
may be continuous or discontinuous with the preceding or subsequent motions of the strip.

At the end of the printing operation, the strip of sheet material could be automatically or manually advanced in order to totally remove the image from the printer. The portion of the strip bearing the finished image is then removed from the rest of the strip.

The flow chart of Fig. 6 illustrates the basic steps of an operating program utilized by the controller 20 to carry out printing operations such as the printing of the letters "AR" as described in connection with Fig 5.

It is assumed at the outset that a strip of vinyl on a backing material is loaded into the printer 10 so as to be fully engaged with 180 degrees of the drive sprockets 30,32. A strip sensor of a type described in greater detail in the above-referenced Application Serial No. 08/007,662 is used to confirm this condition to the printer operator through the control panel 18. The operator then starts the print program through the panel, and the subroutine for printing is entered at block 110 in Fig. 6. The program defining the letters "AR" which is stored in the memory 12 is read and downloaded into the controller 20 of Fig. 1 as indicated at instruction 112 and the controller locates the origin point 106 in the program data as indicated at instruction 114.

At branch 116, the controller determines whether the correct cassette containing the web W with a colored printing ink has been loaded

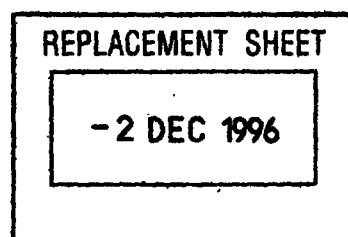


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the program then advances directly from branch 116 to instruction 118. If the wrong cassette had been loaded in the machine, the program would branch to the reload instruction 120 and a warning signal on the control panel 18 would advise the operator that the wrong cassette had been loaded. After the correct cassette was loaded, the program would proceed again through branch 116 to instruction 118.

The printhead having initially been in an elevated position is lowered into contact with the web W and strip S of sheet material overlying the roller platen 54. With the printhead lowered and prepared to actually begin printing, the program causes the drive mechanism including the drive motor 36 and the sprockets 30,32 to move the strip of vinyl and releasable backing material by the incremental amount ΔX in the positive direction as indicated at instruction 122. The incremental amount of movement, which may for example be .150 inch, causes the vinyl to be moved to precisely locate the origin point under the printing head, and at the same time eliminates all of the backlash through the gears 38,40, pulleys and drive belt 42,44,46 and between the sprockets 30,32 and the feed holes in the strip S of vinyl material. Thus, the next drive pulse which feeds the strip of vinyl precisely advances the strip relative to the printhead as intended by the printing program, and the printed image thus corresponds precisely with the data in the printing program. If backlash had not been eliminated, then distortion of the image could occur in the initial portion of the image. For example, Fig. 5 shows the initial increment of movement ΔX in the X

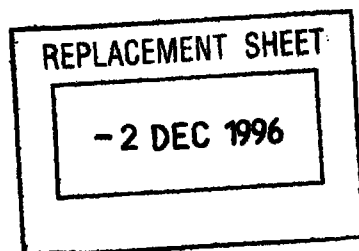


therefore be relied upon as an accurate reference for all other data points in the printed image.

Once the vinyl has been moved incrementally by the amount ΔX as shown at instruction 122, the printing program continues by printing a single color image defined by the printing program as indicated by instruction 124. At the end of the single color image, the printhead is lifted as indicated at instruction 126 and the controller determines if there are additional colors to be printed at branch 128. If not, the program is exited at 130. However, in the scenario described here, it will be assumed that a second color is to be printed in the image in conjunction with the previously printed color and, therefore, the drive mechanism reverses the motion of the strip S of sheet material and returns the strip to the origin point 106 as indicated by instruction 132. When the strip has returned to the origin point, the drive mechanism continues the backward movement of the strip or backspaces the strip by the amount ΔX as indicated at instruction 134 to bring the strip generally into the same position that it occupied at the beginning of the printing operation.

At this point in the printing operation, backlash in the drive mechanism including any backlash between the sprocket teeth and the feed holes of the vinyl strip may result in slight positioning errors between the strip and the head.

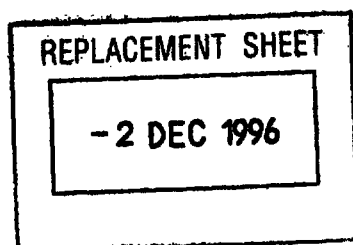
The program then advances to instruction 136 which visually signals the printer operator that the cassette needs to be changed to print



again starts the printer through the control panel 18 (Fig. 1), and the program advances to the branch 116. Again the program determines whether the correct cassette has been loaded and if not a reload command is given at instruction 120. With the correct cassette in the machine, the program advances to instruction 118 to cause the printhead to be lowered into engagement with the strip of vinyl. The vinyl is then fed by the incremental amount ΔX by the instruction 122 which eliminates any positional errors that arise due to the backlash in the drive system. Accordingly, by the time the program has advanced to the instruction 124 to print the second color of the image, backlash has been removed from the drive mechanism and the strip and printhead are in proper registration with one another at the origin point 106. Printing then continues as described above for the first color without distortion of the image and with assurance that both colored portions of the image will be in proper registration with one another throughout the image.

While the present invention has been described in a preferred embodiment, it should be understood that numerous modifications and substitutions can be made without departing from the spirit of the invention. Basic to the invention is the movement of the sheet material and printhead relative to one another by an incremental amount at the beginning of each portion of the printing operation so that the strip and printhead are always in correct positional relationship with one another at the origin point.

Preferably, but not necessarily, the printhead is raised out of contact with the vinyl sheet material during the period in which it is backed up to return to the

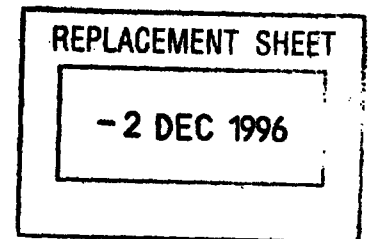


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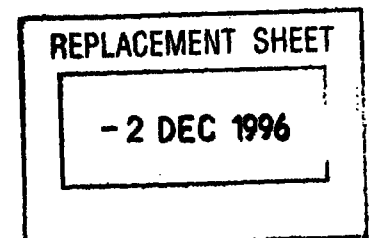


certain amounts of backlash or hysteresis. Although the invention has been described in conjunction with a thermal printer that utilizes a web of inking material, it may be used with other types of printers with equal success. The origin point to which the printhead and material are incrementally moved to eliminate backlash is the point where the printing program as stored in memory begins the printing operation. That point may be part of the primary image, an auxiliary portion of the image as in the case of the bullseye 108 or may not be a visible portion of the image at all.

Accordingly, the present invention has been described in several embodiments by way of illustration rather than limitation.



for placing a printed image on a sheet material (S), a drive mechanism (36,30,32) coupled with the printhead and the sheet material for moving the printhead and the sheet material relative to one another during a printing operation to place the printed image on the sheet material, and a controller (20) connected with the printhead (70) and the drive mechanism and responsive to the printing program for coordinating the operation of the printhead and the drive mechanism to place the printed image on the sheet material (S) relative to an origin point which is also defined in the program, characterized in that the controller (20) also includes a backlash eliminator (122,134) actuating the drive mechanism (36,30,32) and displacing the printhead (70) and sheet material (S) relative to one another by an incremental amount prior to beginning a printing operation at the origin point.



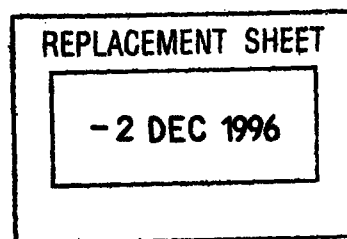
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permit printing in different colors, structure (88) supporting the donor web bearing printing ink between the printhead (70) and the sheet material (S) to enable the head to transfer the ink selectively from the web to the sheet material, and characterized in that the backlash eliminator further includes controls (128,136) actuating the drive mechanism and displacing the printhead and sheet material relative to one another by at least an incremental amount to bring the head and material to the origin point with each replacement of a donor web.

3. A printing apparatus for printing as defined in claim 1 or 2 wherein: the drive mechanism (30,32) engages and moves the sheet material back and forth relative to the printhead (70), the controller controls the back and forth movement of the sheet material (s) to cause the material to make multiple passes by the printhead in response to the printing program, and characterized in that the backlash eliminator (122,134) causes the drive mechanism to advance the sheet material incrementally relative to the printhead in the printing direction prior to the beginning of each pass by the printhead.

4. A printing apparatus for printing as defined in claim 1, 2 or 3, characterized in that the backlash eliminator includes a backspacer (134) for returning the sheet material after a pass by the printhead to a position in advance of the starting point for the printed information.

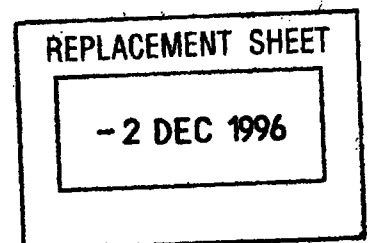


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contact with the sheet material and characterized in that the controller (20,118,126) causes the printhead (70) to move into contact with the sheet material before the material is incrementally advanced prior to the start of printing, and causes the printhead to move out of contact with the strip of sheet material prior to returning the sheet material.

6. A method of printing images defined in a printing program on sheet material in a machine controlled by the program and having a printhead and drive means for moving the printhead and sheet material relative to one another during a printing operation characterized by energizing the drive means to move the printhead (70) and sheet material (S) relative to one another by at least an incremental amount to remove backlash in the drive means before energizing the printhead to print images on the sheet material.



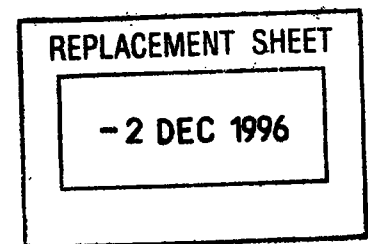
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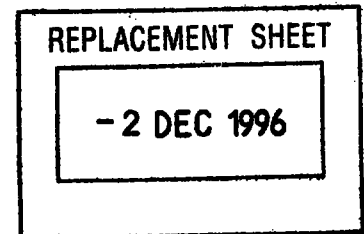
direction relative to the printhead (70) while generating images with the printhead on the sheet material in accordance with the printing program, and then moving the sheet material (S) longitudinally of itself in the direction opposite to the one direction without generating images on the sheet material until the previously generated images have completely passed by the printhead (70), and then again energizing the drive means to move the sheet material longitudinally of itself by an incremental amount in the one direction to remove backlash before re-energizing the printhead.

8. A method of printing as defined in claim 7 characterized in that the step of moving the sheet material in the direction opposite the one direction allows the subsequent energizing and movement of the sheet material by at least an incremental amount in the one direction to place the printhead (70) in the same position with respect to the sheet material as when the printhead was originally energized to print images.

9. A method of printing images as defined in claim 7 or 8 characterized by placing the printhead (70) in contact with the sheet material during the movement of the material in the one direction, and holding the printhead out of contact with the sheet material during the movement of the material in the direction opposite to the one direction.



and characterized in that after again energizing the drive means a further step includes generating images with the printhead (70) in another color during movement of the material in the one direction.

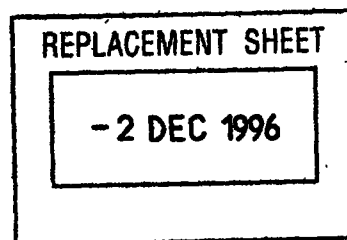


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A thermal printer (12) carries out printing operations to produce images in multiple colors in response to a printing program. In order to eliminate distortions and to insure registration of colors in the printed image, a printer controller (20) eliminates backlash in the drive mechanism at the beginning of each printing operation.

[Figure 6]



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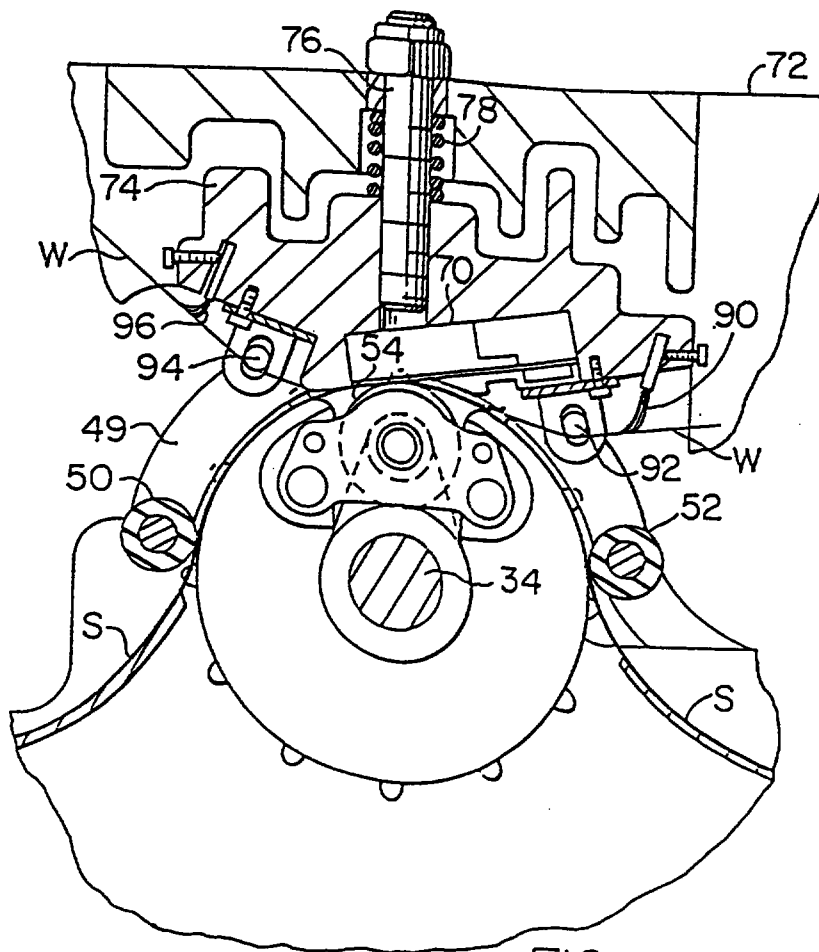
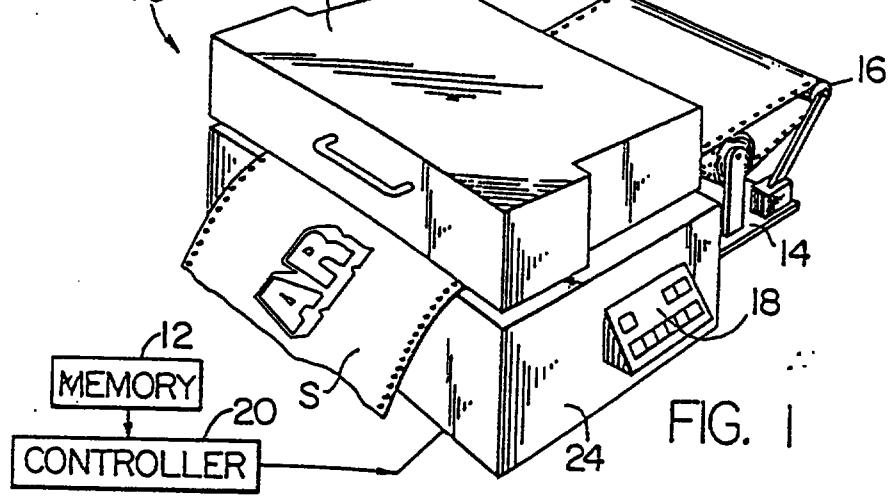


FIG. 4

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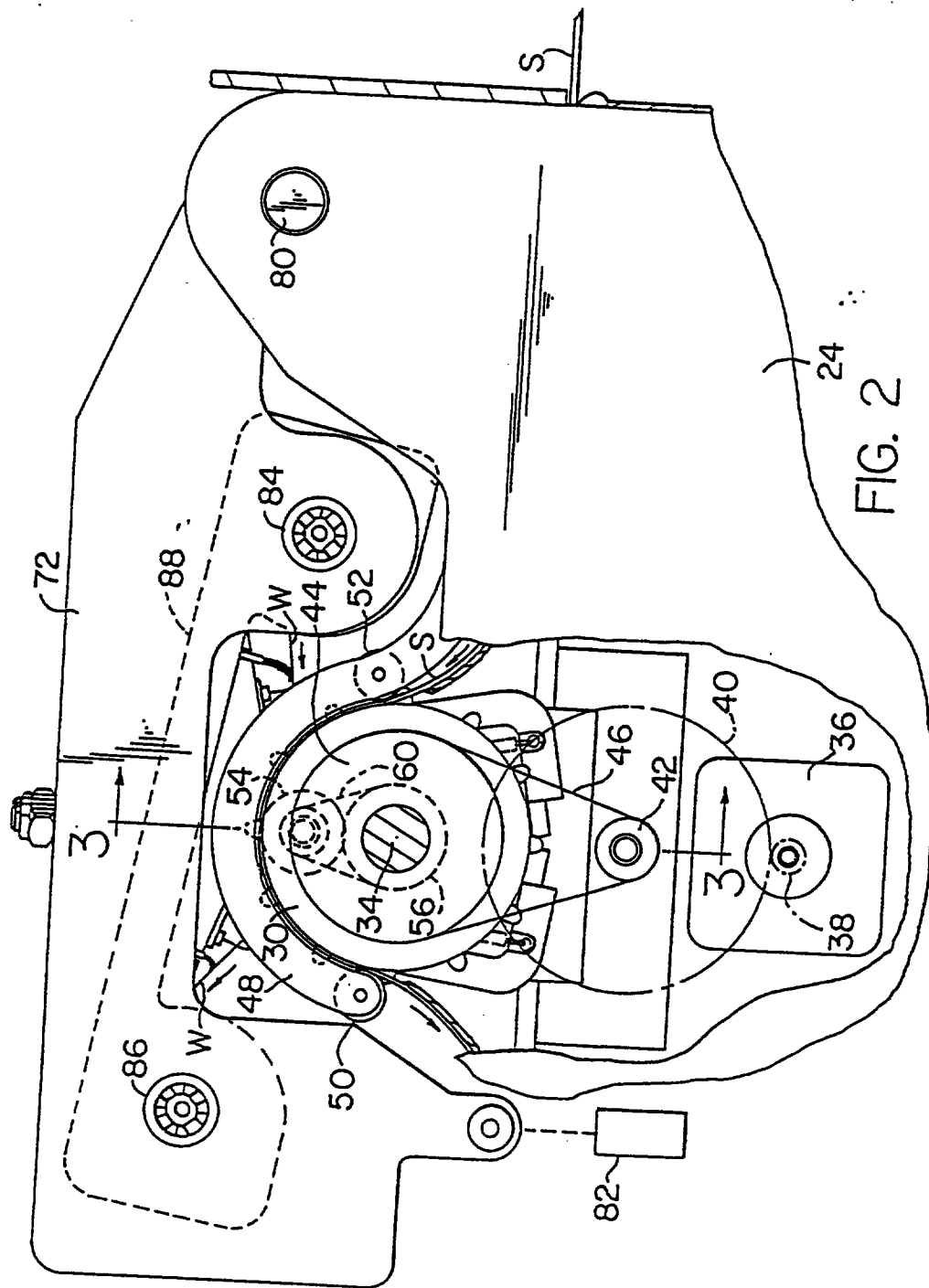
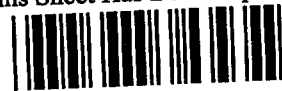


FIG. 2

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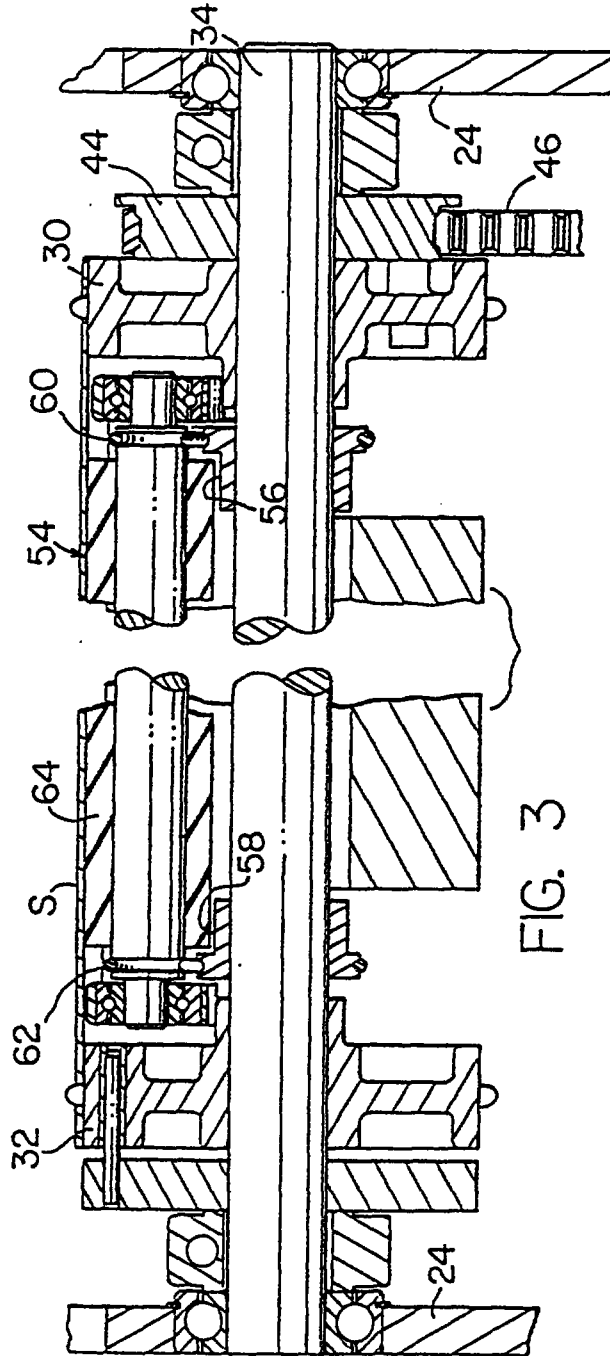
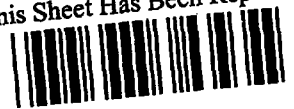


FIG. 3

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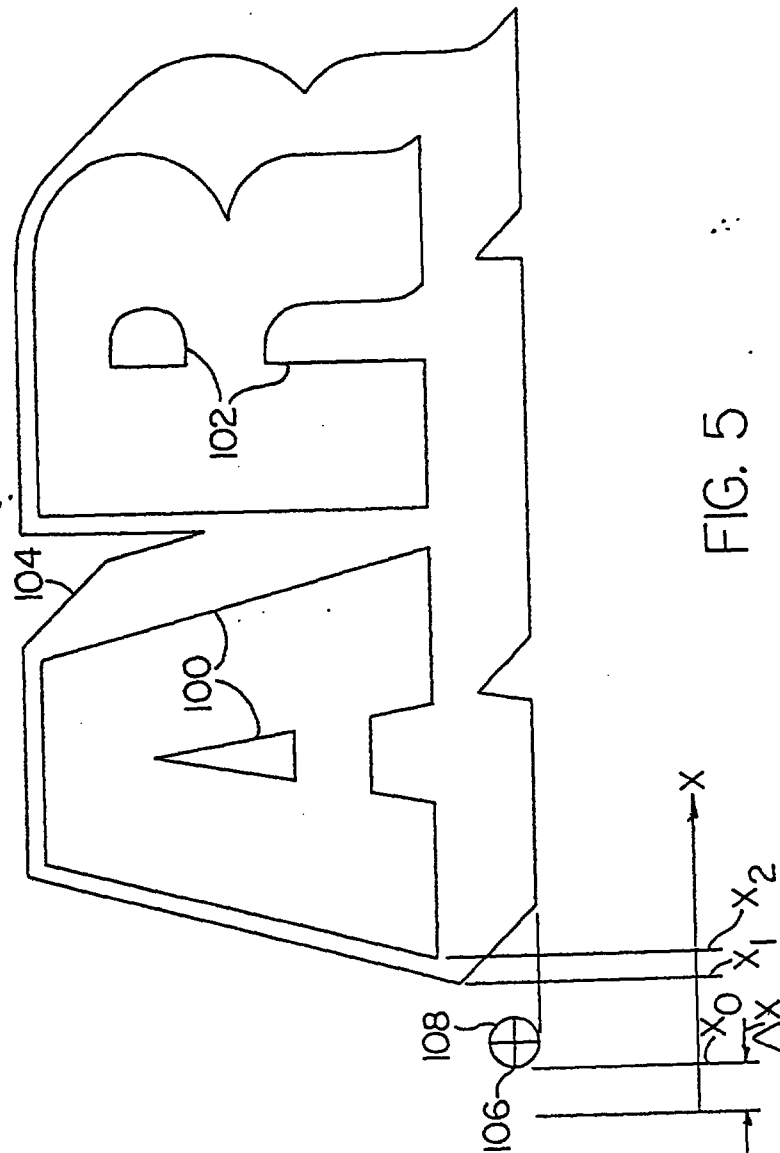


FIG. 5

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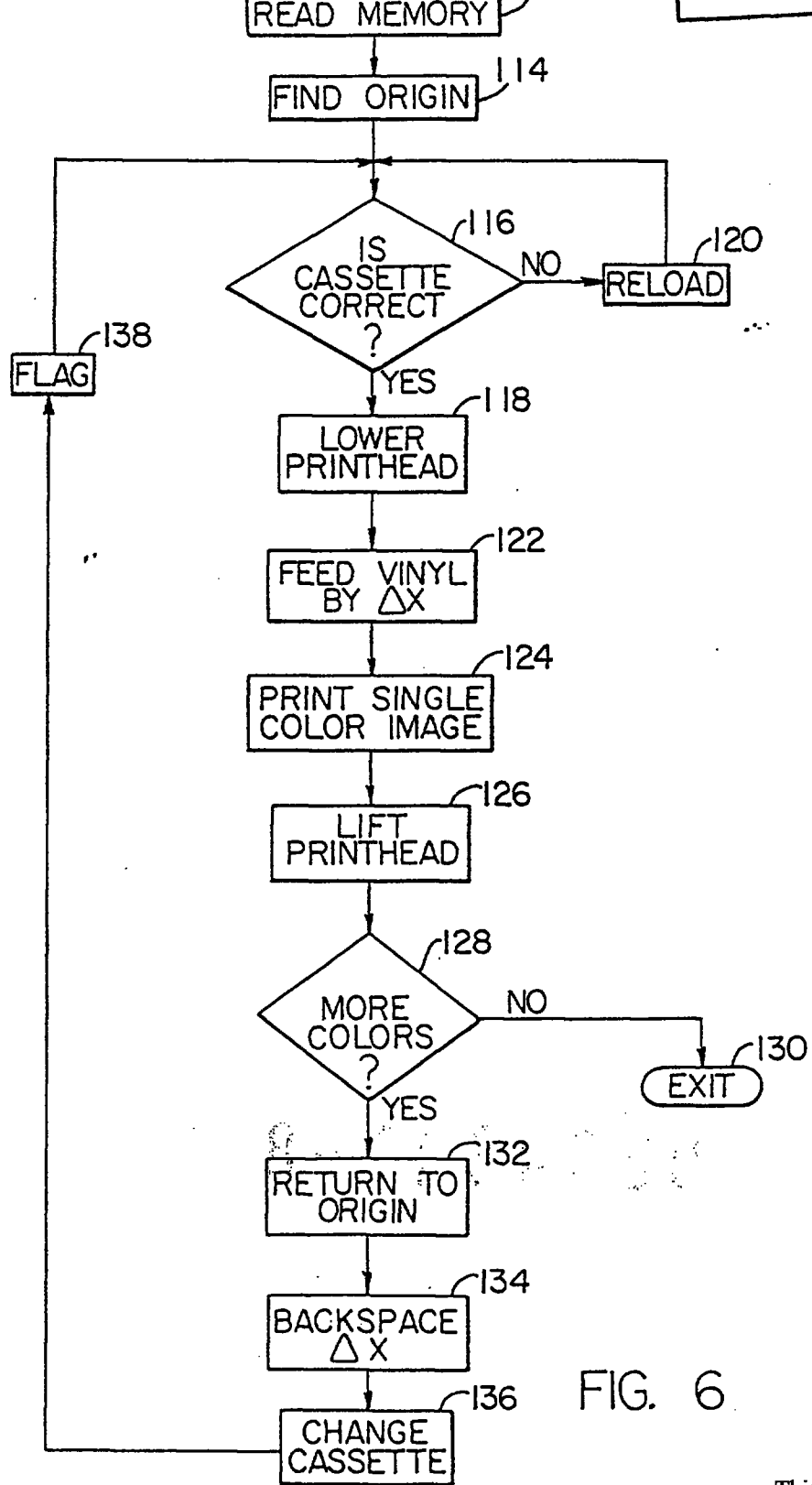


FIG. 6

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larly useful for printing signs and other artistic designs in accordance with a printing program. Relevant prior art is described in JP-A-63 286 378.

Thermal printing apparatus as described in EP-A-0 607 539 (prior art according to Art. 54(3)EPC) can be used to generate signs, designs, characters and other graphic images on a strip of sheet material in accordance with a stored printing program. The program is read and translated into machine commands by a microprocessor-based controller and causes the stored image to be generated on the strip of sheet material by the printer. The printer is a thermal printer having a thermal printhead mounted in stationary relationship with respect to the strip of sheet material during a printing operation, and the strip of sheet material is fed under the printhead by a mechanical drive mechanism. The controller coordinates the operation of the printhead and the mechanical drive mechanism in order to place the printed image at a desired location on the strip of material. In one form, the strip of material is a strip of vinyl secured to a backing material by a pressure sensitive adhesive so that after printing the vinyl bearing a printed image can be cut and stripped from the backing material and thereafter placed on an appropriate sign board.

The thermal printer may utilize a web of thermally releasable inking material to produce images in color. Multi-colored images can be produced by the printer simply by passing the strip of sheet material through the printer relative to the printhead two or more times and substituting a web bearing an inking material of a different color on each pass. When the images are produced in separate passes and, therefore at different times, small misalignments between the images or distortions

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notable distortion or registration errors. Such errors can arise at the beginning of each printed image simply because of backlash in the drive mechanism that moves the sheet material relative to the printhead.

It is accordingly the problem to be solved by the present invention to provide a method and apparatus by which the distortion and error associated with backlash are eliminated from images that are prepared by a printing apparatus having a drive mechanism for moving the sheet material relative to the printhead during a printing operation.

The present invention solves this problem by the features of independent claims 1 and 5. Advantageous further developments are described in respective sub-claims.

The present invention resides in a method and apparatus for printing on sheet material in response to a printing program that defines images to be prepared during a printing operation. The apparatus which performs the method includes a printhead for placing printing on the sheet material, and a drive mechanism coupled with the sheet material for moving the sheet material relative to the printhead during a printing operation in a printing direction. Such movement spreads the printed image generated by the head over various locations on the sheet material.

A controller connected with the printhead and the drive mechanism responds to the printing program and coordinates the operation of the printhead and the drive mechanism to place the print at the various locations on the sheet material. For example, in one embodiment of the invention the printhead is a thermal printhead mounted in stationary relationship within the apparatus, and a strip of the sheet material engaged by the drive

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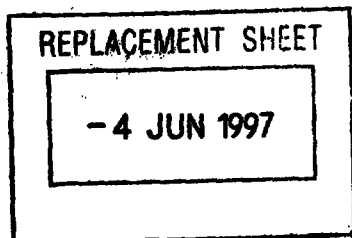
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In accordance with the present invention, the controller includes a backlash eliminator actuating the drive mechanism and displacing the sheet material relative to the printhead by an incremental amount opposite to and then in the printing direction with each replacement of the donor web prior to the start of a printing operation at the origin point of the program. The incremental displacement by the drive means insures the accurate positioning of the sheet material relative to the printhead precisely as intended by the printing program. Accordingly, the printed image is not distorted or displaced.

The invention provides multiple color printing in which multiple passes of the sheet material relative to the printhead are used to create multi-color images. For this purpose the apparatus includes a donor web bearing a printing ink of at least one selected color, the web being replaceable to permit printing in different colors. Generally each color image requires a separate pass of the sheet material under the printhead, and the sheet material must be returned to the origin point at the beginning of each pass. In one embodiment of the present invention, the backlash elimination means includes backspacing means to insure that the sheet material can be moved relative to the printhead by an incremental amount at the beginning of the printing operation to bring the printhead to the origin point of the image and thereby start to print the image precisely at the origin point as intended by the printing program.

The invention will now be further described with reference to the accompanying drawings in which

Fig. 1 is a perspective view illustrating a printing apparatus constructed in accordance with the present invention,



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prints.

Fig. 3 is a fragmentary sectional view of the printer showing the drive mechanism as viewed along the sectioning lines 3-3 of Fig. 2.

Fig. 4 is an enlarged sectional view of the printing apparatus showing the printhead and the roller platen for the sheet material.

Fig. 5 is a printed two dimensional image of the letters AR with three-dimensional features and shows the dimensional parameters that are employed by the present invention, and

Fig. 6 is flow chart detailing the operation of the printer controller including the backlash eliminator.

Fig. 1 illustrates a printing apparatus, generally designated at 10, which embodies the present invention and responds to a printing program stored in a memory 12 to generate printed images on a strip S of sheet material. The strip is supplied in a roll which is supported on a platform 14 on the backside of the machine and is pulled over a guide roller 16 into the machine. The strip exits at the front side of the machine with the printed images. For example, the printer 10 in one embodiment is a thermal printer, and the strip S of sheet material is a vinyl strip secured to a releasable backing material by a pressure sensitive adhesive. After an image such as the letters "AR" is printed on the material, the material can be placed in a cutting machine where the letters are cutout, lifted from the backing material and then placed on a sign board or other object.

The information printed on the strip S of sheet material is held in digital form in the memory 12 and when the operator of the printer calls for a printing pro-

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moving the strip S of sheet material through the printer.

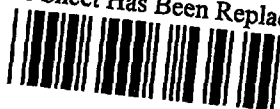
The printer includes a cover 22 which is pivotally mounted to the base or frame 24 in order to open the printer and initially load the strip S of sheet material in the printer.

Figs. 2-4 illustrate the interior of the printer 10 in detail with the cover 22 removed. The drive mechanism for moving the strip S of sheet material through the printer during printing as indicated by the arrows in Fig. 2 includes a pair of drive sprockets 30,32 which are secured to a drive shaft 34 rotatably mounted within the base 24. A drive motor 36 mounted within the base in Fig. 2 is rotatably connected to the drive shaft 34 through a series of drive gears 38,40, toothed drive pulleys 42,44 and a toothed drive belt 46. The sprockets 30,32 engage a series of feed holes extending longitudinally along the lateral edges of the elongated strip of sheet material as shown in Fig. 1.

In order to keep the strip engaged with the sprockets, a pair of liftable bail arms 48 in Fig. 2 and 49 in Fig. 4 rest on the sprockets at each end of the drive shaft 34 and support holddown rollers 50,52 to keep the strip engaged with approximately 180° of the sprocket circumferences.

In addition, a roller platen 54 extends between the sprockets 30,32 tangent to the cylindrical plane of the sprockets at their uppermost point and supports the strip S of sheet material between the sprockets. In one embodiment of the invention, the strip of sheet material is 15 inches wide and the roller platen is approximately 12 inches wide so that the longitudinal edge portions of the strip overlap the platen 54 and the feed holes engage the sprockets. The platen can, if desired, be rotatably driven by pulleys 56,58 secured to the drive

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ing the strip of sheet material and supporting the material directly under a printhead 70 as shown most clearly in Fig. 4.

As shown in Figs. 2 and 4, the printhead 70 is resiliently supported in a support frame 72 by a suspension plate 74 and a series of slidable bolts 76 and springs 78. The printhead 70 extends transversely across the strip S of sheet material and has a width approximately equal to the width of the roller platen. The printhead 70 is a thermal printhead having a plurality of heating elements distributed evenly along the head from one end to the other, and the heating elements are densely packed, for example at a density of 300 elements per inch, along a line or zone of contact with the strip S on the roller platen. One such head is manufactured by Kyocera Industrial Ceramics, Inc. of Kyoto, Japan.

To control the printing pressure applied by the head 70 during a printing operation, the bolts 76 and springs 78 are distributed at various locations between the mounting plate 74 and the support frame 72 and the bolts slide freely relative to the support frame 72 while the springs 78 apply pressure forces evenly to the suspension plate 74 and printhead 70 along its length. Although the bolts and springs are shown mounted coaxially in Fig. 4, it is equally feasible to position the bolts and springs separately.

To raise and lower the printhead and to regulate the printing pressure, one end of the support frame 72 is pivotally mounted to the base 24 on a shaft 80 as shown in Fig. 2, and the other end of the frame is moved up and down by a pressure actuator 82 in response to commands from the controller 20 in Fig. 1. By this means the springs 78 transmit regulated pressure to the printhead 70 and the strip S of the sheet material on the roller platen 54.

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extends between two spools 84,86 of a replaceable cassette 88 mounted in the support frame 72. The web extends from the supply spool 84 past a static reduction brush 90 shown in Fig. 4, and then under a dancer rod 92 to the printhead. When the printhead is lowered into a printing position, the web W is sandwiched between the printhead and the strip S of sheet material along the line or zone of contact established by the curvature of the platen 54. The web extends further from the head over another dancer rod 94 past another static brush 96 to the take-up spool 86 shown in Fig. 2.

During a printing operation, the drive sprockets 30,32 and the roller platen 54, if driven, pull the strip S of the sheet material over the roller platen relative to the printhead 54 in the direction of the arrows in Fig. 2 while the heating elements of the printhead are selectively excited in order to release the printing ink from the web W onto the sheet material. Friction between the web W and the strip S under pressure applied by the printhead causes the web W to advance synchronously with the sheet material so that a fresh segment of the web W is always present under the head.

The thermally releasable printing ink that is released from the web W during a printing operation may be red, yellow or any other color, and prints an image of a corresponding color on the sheet material. If the image is a multi-color image, the web W must contain segments of different colors, or alternatively, the cassette 88 must be exchanged for other cassettes containing webs W bearing different color inks. During the indexing of a web or exchange of a cassette, the strip of sheet material is drawn back in the direction opposite the arrows in Fig. 2 to the beginning of the printed image

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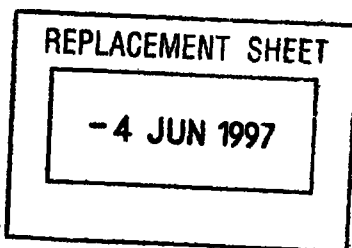
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forward direction indicated by the arrows relative to the roller platen.

OPERATION

Fig. 5 is provided in order to explain more clearly the process of printing a multi-colored image with the printer 10. It is assumed that the two dimensional image of the letters "AR" with three dimensional features would be printed with the front face of the letters in one color, such as red, and the "third dimension" of the letters in another color, such as black. The profiles 100, 102, 104, of each color are separately defined in the printing program stored in the memory 12, each profile being referenced to a common origin point X_0 such as the left-most point 106 of the bullseye 108. The bullseye, for example, may be used subsequently in a numerically controlled cutting machine in order register the image of the letters "AR" with respect to the machine.

It should be understood that in Fig. 5 the coordinate X represents the motion of the head relative to the vinyl sheet material S , and the coordinates X_0 , X_1 , X_2 represent different positions on the vinyl sheet material as measured in the X coordinate direction. For example, the coordinate X_0 represents the coordinate of the origin point 106. The coordinate X_1 represents the limit or first print point for the black portion of the image, and the coordinate X_2 represents the limit or first print point for the red portion of the image. During a printing operation the bullseye 108 would be printed first in one of the two colors by the printhead and then the other portion of the image in the same color, that is for example the portion



point 106 is located under the printhead. Then the material is backspaced or moved further in the -X direction by the incremental amount ΔX . At this point the printer 10 would be opened by the operator by lifting the cover 22 and pivoted support frame 72, the cassette 88 containing a web W of ink material would be removed and replaced with a cassette of the second color and the printer would be closed and again energized to continue the printing operation. The printer then advances by an amount ΔX to eliminate all backlash in the drive mechanism for the vinyl sheet material which places the origin point 106 precisely under the printhead as it was at the start of printing of the first color. The printer proceeds from the origin point by moving to the coordinate of the second color, for example X_2 , and continues the printing operation progressively from left to right as shown in Fig. 5. Naturally, the incremental motions ΔX in the forward or rearward direction from and to the origin point 106 respectively may be continuous or discontinuous with the preceding or subsequent motions of the strip.

At the end of the printing operation, the strip of sheet material could be automatically or manually advanced in order to totally remove the image from the printer. The portion of the strip bearing the finished image is then removed from the rest of the strip.

The flow chart of Fig. 6 illustrates the basic steps of an operating program utilized by the controller 20 to carry out printing operations such as the printing of the letters "AR" as described in connection with Fig 5.

It is assumed at the outset that a strip of vinyl on a backing material is loaded into the printer 10 so as to be fully engaged with 180 degrees of the drive sprockets 30,32. A strip sensor is used to confirm this condition to the printer operator through the control panel 18. The operator then starts the print program through the

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instruction 112 and the controller locates the origin point 106 in the program data as indicated at instruction 114.

At branch 116, the controller determines whether the correct cassette containing the web W with a colored printing ink has been loaded into the machine. For example, if the first color to be printed is the black, third dimension of the letters "AR" and the cassette bears a coding that is read by the printer and identified as a cassette having a donor web bearing black ink, the program then advances directly from branch 116 to instruction 118. If the wrong cassette had been loaded in the machine, the program would branch to the reload instruction 120 and a warning signal on the control panel 18 would advise the operator that the wrong cassette had been loaded. After the correct cassette was loaded, the program would proceed again through branch 116 to instruction 118.

The printhead having initially been in an elevated position is lowered into contact with the web W and strip S of sheet material overlying the roller platen 54. With the printhead lowered and prepared to actually begin printing, the program causes the drive mechanism including the drive motor 36 and the sprockets 30,32 to move the strip of vinyl and releasable backing material by the incremental amount ΔX in the positive direction as indicated at instruction 122. The incremental amount of movement, which may for example be 3.8 mm [0.150 inch], causes the vinyl to be moved to precisely locate the origin point under the printing head, and at the same time eliminates all of the backlash through the gears 38,40, pulleys and drive belt 42,44,46 and between the sprockets 30,32 and the feed holes in the strip S of vinyl material. Thus, the next drive pulse which feeds the strip of vinyl precisely advances the strip relative to the print-head as intended by the printing program, and the

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initial increment of movement ΔX in the X coordinate direction which brings the strip of vinyl to the origin point 106 at the left-hand limit of the bullseye 108. Printing can then begin with assurance that the bullseye will not be distorted and the bullseye can therefore be relied upon as an accurate reference for all other data points in the printed image.

Once the vinyl has been moved incrementally by the amount ΔX as shown at instruction 122, the printing program continues by printing a single color image defined by the printing program as indicated by instruction 124. At the end of the single color image, the print-head is lifted as indicated at instruction 126 and the controller determines if there are additional colors to be printed at branch 128. If not, the program is exited at 130. However, in the scenario described here, it will be assumed that a second color is to be printed in the image in conjunction with the previously printed color and, therefore, the drive mechanism reverses the motion of the strip S of sheet material and returns the strip to the origin point 106 as indicated by instruction 132. When the strip has returned to the origin point, the drive mechanism continues the backward movement of the strip or backspaces the strip by the amount ΔX as indicated at instruction 134 to bring the strip generally into the same position that it occupied at the beginning of the printing operation.

At this point in the printing operation, backlash in the drive mechanism including any backlash between the sprocket teeth and the feed holes of the vinyl strip may result in slight positioning errors between the strip and the head.

The program then advances to instruction 136 which visually signals the printer operator that the cassette needs to be changed to print another color. The program then advances to the interrupt flag 138 and stops in order to allow the operator to open the

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program determines whether the correct cassette has been loaded and if not a reload command is given at instruction 120. With the correct cassette in the machine, the program advances to instruction 118 to cause the printhead to be lowered into engagement with the strip of vinyl. The vinyl is then fed by the incremental amount ΔX by the instruction 122 which eliminates any positional errors that arise due to the backlash in the drive system. Accordingly, by the time the program has advanced to the instruction 124 to print the second color of the image, backlash has been removed from the drive mechanism and the strip and printhead are in proper registration with one another at the origin point 106. Printing then continues as described above for the first color without distortion of the image and with assurance that both colored portions of the image will be in proper registration with one another throughout the image.

While the present invention has been described in a preferred embodiment, it should be understood that numerous modifications and substitutions can be made without departing from the scope of the appended claims.

Accordingly, the present invention has been described in several embodiments by way of illustration rather than limitation.

Claims

1. A printing apparatus for printing in multiple colors on sheet material including: a printhead (70) responsive to a printing program defining a printing operation for placing a printed image on a sheet material (S), a donor web (W) bearing a printing ink of one selected color and being replaceable to permit printing in different colors, structure (88) for supporting the donor web bearing ink between the printhead (70) and the sheet material (S) to enable the print head to transfer the ink selectively from the web to the sheet material a drive mechanism

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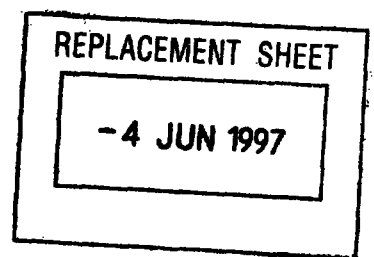
program determines whether the correct cassette has been loaded and if not a reload command is given at instruction 120. With the correct cassette in the machine, the program advances to instruction 118 to cause the printhead to be lowered into engagement with the strip of vinyl. The vinyl is then fed by the incremental amount ΔX by the instruction 122 which eliminates any positional errors that arise due to the backlash in the drive system. Accordingly, by the time the program has advanced to the instruction 124 to print the second color of the image, backlash has been removed from the drive mechanism and the strip and printhead are in proper registration with one another at the origin point 106. Printing then continues as described above for the first color without distortion of the image and with assurance that both colored portions of the image will be in proper registration with one another throughout the image.

While the present invention has been described in a preferred embodiment, it should be understood that numerous modifications and substitutions can be made without departing from the scope of the appended claims.

Accordingly, the present invention has been described in several embodiments by way of illustration rather than limitation.

Claims

1. A printing apparatus for printing in multiple colors on sheet material including: a printhead (70) responsive to a printing program defining a printing operation for placing a printed image on a sheet material (S), a donor web (W) bearing a printing ink of one selected color and being replaceable to permit printing in different colors, structure (88) for supporting the donor web bearing ink between the printhead (70) and the sheet material (S) to enable the print head to transfer the ink selectively from the web to the sheet material a drive mechanism



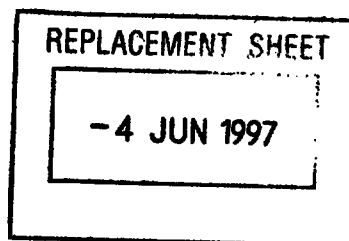
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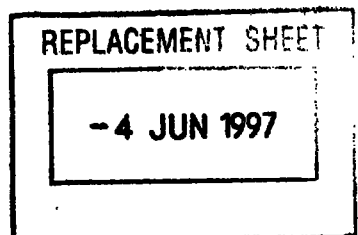
a controller (20) connected with the printhead (70) and the drive mechanism and responsive to the printing program for coordinating the operation of the printhead and the drive mechanism to place the printed image on the sheet material (S) relative to an origin point which is also defined in the program, the controller (20) also including a backlash eliminator (122,134) actuating the drive mechanism (36,30,32) and displacing the sheet material (S) relative to the printhead (70) by at least an incremental amount opposite to and then in the printing direction with each replacement of the donor web (W) prior to beginning a printing operation at the origin point.

2. A printing apparatus for printing as defined in claim 1 wherein: the drive mechanism (30,32) engages and moves the sheet material back and forth relative to the printhead (70), the controller controls the back and forth movement of the sheet material (S) to cause the material to make multiple passes by the printhead in response to the printing program, and characterized in that the backlash eliminator (122,134) causes the drive mechanism to advance the sheet material incrementally relative to the printhead in the printing direction prior to the beginning of each pass by the printhead.
3. A printing apparatus for printing as defined in claim 1 or 2 characterized in that the backlash eliminator includes a backspacer (134) for returning the sheet material after a pass by the printhead to a position in advance of the starting point for the printed information.



sheet material and characterized in that the printhead (70) moves into contact with the sheet material before the material is incrementally advanced prior to the start of printing, and causes the printhead to move out of contact with the strip of sheet material prior to returning the sheet material.

5. A method of printing images defined in a printing program in multiple colors on sheet material in a machine controlled by the program and having a printhead (70), a donor web (W) bearing a printing ink of one selected color and being replaceable to permit printing in different colors, structure (88) for supporting the donor web bearing ink between the printhead (70) and the sheet material (S) to enable the print head to transfer the ink selectively from the web to the sheet material and drive means (36,30,32) for moving the sheet material (S) relative to the printhead (70) in a printing direction during a printing operation, comprising the step of energizing the drive means to move the sheet material (S) relative to the printhead (70) by at least an incremental amount opposite to and then in the printing direction with each replacement of the donor web (W) to remove backlash in the drive means before energizing the printhead to print images on the sheet material.
6. A method of printing as defined in claim 5 characterized in that the step of moving the sheet material in the direction opposite to the printing direction allows the subsequent energizing and movement of the sheet material by at least an incremental amount in the printing direction to place the printhead (70) in the same position with respect to the sheet material as when the printhead was originally energized to print images.



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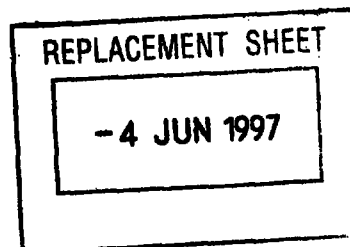


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with the sheet material during the movement of the sheet material in the printing direction, and holding the printhead out of contact with the sheet material during the movement of the sheet material in the direction opposite to the printing direction.

8. A method of printing as defined in claim 5, 6 or 7 characterized in that the step of generating images with the printhead (70) during movement of the sheet material in the printing direction includes generating images in one color and after again energizing the drive means a further step includes generating images with the printhead (70) in another color during movement of the sheet material in the printing direction.

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printing signs and other artistic designs in accordance with a printing program. Relevant prior art is described in JP-A-63286378.

Thermal printing apparatus as described in EP-A-0607539 (prior art according to Article 54(3) EPC) can be used to generate signs, designs, characters and other graphic images on a strip of sheet material in accordance with a stored printing program. The program is read and translated into machine commands by a microprocessor-based controller and causes the stored image to be generated on the strip of sheet material by the printer. The printer is a thermal printer having a thermal printhead mounted in stationary relationship with respect to the strip of sheet material during a printing operation, and the strip of sheet material is fed under the printhead by a mechanical drive mechanism. The controller coordinates the operation of the printhead and the mechanical drive mechanism in order to place the printed image at a desired location on the strip of material. In one form, the strip of material is a strip of vinyl secured to a backing material by a pressure sensitive adhesive so that after printing the vinyl bearing a printed image can be cut and stripped from the backing material and thereafter placed on an appropriate sign board.

The thermal printer may utilize a web of thermally releasable inking material to produce images in color. Multi-colored images can be produced by the printer simply by passing the strip of sheet material through the printer relative to the printhead two or more times and substituting a web bearing an inking material of a different color on each pass. When the images are produced in separate passes and, therefore at different times, small misalignments between the

signs or artwork require high quality printing without notable distortion or registration errors. Such errors can arise at the beginning of each printed image simply because of backlash in the drive mechanism that moves the sheet material relative to the printhead.

It is according the problem to be solved by the present invention to provide a method and apparatus by which the distortion and error associated with backlash are eliminated from images that are prepared by a printing apparatus having a drive mechanism for moving the sheet material relative to the printhead during a printing operation.

The present invention solves this problem by the features of independent claims 1 and 5. Advantageous further developments are described in respective subclaims.

The present invention resides in a method and apparatus for printing on sheet material in response to a printing program that defines images to be prepared during a printing operation. The apparatus which performs the method includes a printhead for placing printing on the sheet material, and a drive mechanism coupled with the sheet material for moving the sheet material relative to the printhead during a printing operation in a printing direction. Such movement spreads the printed image generated by the head over various locations on the sheet material.

A Controller connected with the printhead and the drive mechanism responds to the printing program and coordinates the operation of the printhead and the drive mechanism to place the print at the various locations on the sheet material. For example, in one embodiment of the invention the printhead is a thermal printhead mounted in stationary

generally has an origin point where the printing starts and all portions of the image are generally located relative to the origin point.

In accordance with the present invention, the controller includes a backlash eliminator actuating the drive mechanism and displacing the sheet material relative to the printhead by an incremental amount opposite to and then in the printing direction with each replacement of the donor web prior to the start of a printing operation at the origin point of the program. The incremental displacement by the drive means insures the accurate positioning of the sheet material relative to the printhead precisely as intended by the printing program. Accordingly, the printed image is not distorted or displaced.

The invention provides multiple color printing in which multiple passes of the sheet material relative to the printhead are used to create multi-color images. For this purposes the apparatus includes a donor web bearing a printing ink of at least one selected color, the web being replaceable to permit printing in different colors. Generally each color image requires a separate pass of the sheet material under the printhead, and the sheet material must be returned to the origin point at the beginning of each pass. In one embodiment of the present invention, the backlash elimination means includes backspacing means to insure that the sheet material can be moved relative to the printhead by an incremental amount at the beginning of the printing operation to bring the printhead to the origin point of the image and thereby start to print the image precisely at the origin point as intended by the printing program.

After the cassette is changed, the operator again starts the printer through the control panel 18 (Fig. 1), and the program advances to the branch 116. Again the program determines whether the correct cassette has been loaded and if not a reload command is given at instruction 120. With the correct cassette in the machine, the program advances to instruction 118 to cause the printhead to be lowered into engagement with the strip of vinyl. The vinyl is then fed by the incremental amount ΔX by the instruction 122 which eliminates any positional errors that arise due to the backlash in the drive system. Accordingly, by the time the program has advanced to the instruction 124 to print the second color of the image, backlash has been removed from the drive mechanism and the strip and printhead are in proper registration with one another at the origin point 106. Printing then continues as described above for the first color without distortion of the image and with assurance that both colored portions of the image will be in proper registration with one another throughout the image.

While the present invention has been described in a preferred embodiment, it should be understood that numerous modifications and substitutions can be made without departing from the scope of the appended claims.

Accordingly, the present invention has been described in several embodiments by way of illustration rather than limitation.

a printing program defining a printing operation for placing a printed image on a sheet material (S), a donor web (W) bearing a printing ink of one selected color and being replaceable to permit printing in different colors, structure (88) for supporting the donor web bearing ink between the printhead (70) and the sheet material (S) to enable the print head to transfer the ink selectively from the web to the sheet material. A drive mechanism (36,30,32) coupled with the sheet material for moving the sheet material relative to the printhead during a printing operation in a printing direction to place the printed image on the sheet material, and a controller (20) connected with the printhead (70) and the drive mechanism and responsive to the printing program for coordinating the operation of the printhead and the drive mechanism to place the printed image on the sheet material (S) relative to an origin point which is also defined in the program, the controller (20) also including a backlash eliminator (122, 134) actuating the drive mechanism (36,30,32) and displacing the sheet material (S) relative to the printhead (70) by at least an incremental amount opposite to and then in the printing direction with each replacement of the donor web (W) prior to beginning a printing operation at the origin point.

2. A printing apparatus for printing as defined in claim 1 wherein: the drive mechanism (30,32) engages and moves the sheet material back and forth relative to the printhead (70), the controller controls the back and forth movement of the sheet material (S) to cause the material to make multiple passes by the printhead in response to the printing program, and characterized in that the backlash

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the printhead.

3. A printing apparatus for printing as defined in claim 1 or 2 characterized in that the backlash eliminator includes a backspacer (134) for returning the sheet material after a pass by the printhead to a position in advance of the starting point for the printing information.

4. A printing apparatus for printing as defined in any one of the foregoing claims wherein the printhead (70) is moveable into and out of contact with the sheet material and characterized in that the controller (20,118,126) causes the printhead (70) to move into contact with the sheet material before the material is incrementally advanced prior to the start of printing, and causes the printhead to move out of contact with the strip of sheet material prior to returning the sheet material.

5. A method of printing images defined in a printing program on sheet material in a machine controlled by the program and having a printhead and drive means for moving the printhead and sheet material relative to one another during a printing operation characterized by energizing the drive means to move the printhead (70) and sheet material (S) relative to one another by at least an incremental amount to remove backlash in the drive means before energizing the printhead to print the images on the sheet material.

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A standard 1D barcode with vertical black bars of varying widths on a white background.

the subsequent energizing and movement of the sheet material by at least an incremental amount in the printing direction to place the printhead (70) in the same position with respect to the sheet material as when the printhead was originally energized to print images.

7. A method of printing images as defined in claim 5 or 6 characterized by placing the printhead (70) in contact with the sheet material during the movement of the sheet material in the printing direction, and holding the printhead out of contact with the sheet material during the movement of the sheet material in the direction opposite to the printing direction.

8. A method of printing images as defined in claim 5, 6 or 7 characterized in that the step of generating images with the printhead (70) during movement of the sheet material in the printing direction includes generating images in one color and after again energizing the drive means a further step includes generating images with the printhead (70) in another color during movement of the sheet material in the printing direction.

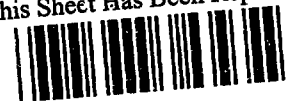
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A thermal printer (12) carries out printing operations to produce images in multiple colors in response to a printing program. In order to eliminate distortions and to insure registration of colors in the printed image, a printer controller (20) eliminates backlash in the drive mechanism at the beginning of each printing operation.

Figure 6

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on sheet material including: a printhead (70) responsive to a printing program defining a printing operation for placing a printed image on a sheet material (S), a donor web (W) bearing a printing ink of one selected color and being replaceable to permit printing in different colors, structure (88) for supporting the donor web bearing ink between the printhead (70) and the sheet material (S) to enable the print head to transfer the ink selectively from the web to the sheet material, a drive mechanism (36,30,32) coupled with the sheet material for moving the sheet material relative to the printhead during a printing operation in a printing direction to place the printed image on the sheet material, and a controller (20) connected with the printhead (70) and the drive mechanism and responsive to the printing program for coordinating the operation of the printhead and the drive mechanism to place the printed image on the sheet material (S) relative to an origin point which is also defined in the program, the controller (20) also including a backlash eliminator (122, 134) actuating the drive mechanism (36,30,32) and displacing the sheet material (S) relative to the printhead (70) by at least an incremental amount opposite to and then in the printing direction with each replacement of the donor web (W) prior to beginning a printing operation at the origin point.

2. A printing apparatus for printing as defined in claim 1 wherein: the drive mechanism (30,32) engages and moves the sheet material back and forth relative to the printhead (70), the controller controls the back and forth movement of the sheet material (S) to cause the material to make multiple passes by the printhead in response to the printing program, and characterized in that the backlash

the printhead.

3. A printing apparatus for printing as defined in claim 1 or 2 characterized in that the backlash eliminator includes a backspacer (134) for returning the sheet material after a pass by the printhead to a position in advance of the starting point for the printed information.

4. A printing apparatus for printing as defined in any one of the foregoing claims wherein the printhead (70) is moveable into and out of contact with the sheet material and characterized in that the controller (20,118,126) causes the printhead (70) to move into contact with the sheet material before the material is incrementally advanced prior to the start of printing, and causes the printhead to move out of contact with the strip of sheet material prior to returning the sheet material.

5. A method of printing images defined in a printing program in multiple colors on sheet material in a machine controlled by the program and having a printhead (70), a donor web (W) bearing a printing ink of one selected color and being replaceable to permit printing in different colors, structure (88) for supporting the donor web bearing ink between the printhead (70) and the sheet material (S) to enable the print head to transfer the ink selectively from the web to the sheet material and drive means (36, 30, 32) for moving the sheet material (S) relative to the printhead (70) in a printing direction during a printing operation, comprising the step of energizing the drive means to move the sheet material (S) relative to the printhead (70) by at least an incremental amount opposite to and then in the printing direction with each replacement of the donor web (W) to remove backlash in the drive means before energizing the printhead to print images on the sheet material.

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in the direction opposite to the printing direction allows the subsequent energizing and movement of the sheet material by at least an incremental amount in the printing direction to place the printhead (70) in the same position with respect to the sheet material as when the printhead was originally energized to print images.

7. A method of printing ~~images~~ as defined in claim 5 or 6 characterized by placing the printhead (70) in contact with the sheet material during the movement of the sheet material in the printing direction, and holding the printhead out of contact with the sheet material during the movement of the sheet material in the direction opposite to the printing direction.

8. A method of printing ~~images~~ as defined in claim 5, 6 or 7 characterized in that the step of generating images with the printhead (70) during movement of the sheet material in the printing direction includes generating images in one color and after again energizing the drive means a further step includes generating images with the printhead (70) in another color during movement of the sheet material in the printing direction.

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A thermal printer (12) carries out printing operations to produce images in multiple colors in response to a printing program. In order to eliminate distortions and to insure registration of colors in the printed image, a printer controller (20) eliminates backlash in the drive mechanism at the beginning of each printing operation.

[Figure 6]

and shows the drive mechanism for a strip of sheet material on which the apparatus prints.

Fig. 3 is a fragmentary sectional view of the printer showing the drive mechanism as viewed along the sectioning lines 3-3 of Fig. 2.

Fig. 4 is an enlarged sectional view of the printing apparatus showing the printhead and the roller platen for the sheet material.

Fig. 5 is a printed two dimensional image of the letters AR with three-dimensional features and shows the dimensional parameters that are employed by the present invention.

Fig. 6 is flow chart detailing the operation of the printer controller including the backlash eliminator.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Fig. 1 illustrates a printing apparatus, generally designated at 10, which embodies the present invention and responds to a printing program stored in a memory 12 to generate printed images on a strip S of sheet material. The strip is supplied in a roll which is supported on a platform 14 on the backside of the machine and is pulled over a guide roller 16 into the machine. The strip exits at the front side of the machine with the printed images. For example, the printer 10 in one embodiment is a thermal printer, and the strip S of sheet material is a vinyl strip secured to a releasable backing material by a pressure sensitive adhesive. After an image such as the letters "AR" is printed on the material, the material can be placed in a cutting machine where the letters are cutout, lifted from the backing material

The information printed on the strip S of sheet material is held in digital form in the memory 12 and when the operator of the printer calls for a printing program to be carried out through the control panel 18, a microprocessor-based controller 20 downloads the program from memory and generates machine commands that are fed to the printhead and drive mechanism for moving the strip S of sheet material through the printer.

The printer includes a cover 22 which is pivotally mounted to the base or frame 24 in order to open the printer and initially load the strip S of sheet material in the printer.

Figs. 2-4 illustrate the interior of the printer 10 in detail with the cover 22 removed. The drive mechanism for moving the strip S of sheet material through the printer during printing as indicated by the arrows in Fig. 2 includes a pair of drive sprockets 30,32 which are secured to a drive shaft 34 rotatably mounted within the base 24. A drive motor 36 mounted within the base in Fig. 2 is rotatably connected to the drive shaft 34 through a series of drive gears 38,40, toothed drive pulleys 42,44 and a toothed drive belt 46. The sprockets 30,32 engage a series of feed holes extending longitudinally along the lateral edges of the elongated strip of sheet material as shown in Fig. 1.

In order to keep the strip engaged with the sprockets, a pair of liftable bail arms 48 in Fig. 2 and 49 in Fig. 4 rest on the sprockets at each end of the drive shaft 34 and support holddown rollers 50,52 to keep the strip engaged with approximately 180° of the sprocket circumferences.

one embodiment of the invention, the strip of sheet material is 15 inches wide and the roller platen is approximately 12 inches wide so that the longitudinal edge portions of the strip overlap the platen 54 and the feed holes engage the sprockets. The platen can, if desired, be rotatably driven by pulleys 56,58 secured to the drive shaft 34 and elastomeric drive belts 60,62 that extend between the pulleys and grooves at the end of the roller platen. The platen is preferably formed with a hard rubber sleeve 64 that defines a friction drive surface engaging the strip of sheet material and supporting the material directly under a printhead 70 as shown most clearly in Fig. 4.

As shown in Figs. 2 and 4, the printhead 70 is resiliently supported in a support frame 72 by a suspension plate 74 and a series of slidable bolts 76 and springs 78. The printhead 70 extends transversely across the strip S of sheet material and has a width approximately equal to the width of the roller platen. The printhead 70 is a thermal printhead having a plurality of heating elements distributed evenly along the head from one end to the other, and the heating elements are densely packed, for example at a density of 300 elements per inch, along a line or zone of contact with the strip S on the roller platen. One such head is manufactured by Kyocera Industrial Ceramics, Inc. of Kyoto, Japan.

To control the printing pressure applied by the head 70 during a printing operation, the bolts 76 and springs 78 are distributed at various locations between the mounting plate 74 and the support frame 72 and the bolts slide freely relative to the support frame 72 while the springs 78 apply

To raise and lower the printhead and to regulate the printing pressure, one end of the support frame 72 is pivotally mounted to the base 24 on a shaft 80 as shown in Fig. 2, and the other end of the frame is moved up and down by a pressure actuator 82 in response to commands from the controller 20 in Fig. 1. By this means the springs 78 transmit regulated pressure to the printhead 70 and the strip S of the sheet material on the roller platen 54.

In order to print images on the strip S with the thermal printhead 70, a donor web W bearing a thermally releasable printing ink is fed between the printhead 70 and the strip S as shown in Figs. 2 and 4. The web W extends between two spools 84,86 of a replaceable cassette 88 mounted in the support frame 72. The web extends from the supply spool 84 past a static reduction brush 90 shown in Fig. 4, and then under a dancer rod 92 to the printhead. When the printhead is lowered into a printing position, the web W is sandwiched between the printhead and the strip S of sheet material along the line or zone of contact established by the curvature of the platen 54. The web extends further from the head over another dancer rod 94 past another static brush 96 to the take-up spool 86 shown in Fig. 2.

During a printing operation, the drive sprockets 30,32 and the roller platen 54, if driven, pull the strip S of the sheet material over the roller platen relative to the printhead 54 in the direction of the arrows in Fig. 2 while the heating elements of the printhead are selectively excited in order to release the printing ink from the web W onto the sheet material. Friction

a fresh segment of the web W is always present under the head.

The thermally releasable printing ink that is released from the web W during a printing operation may be red, yellow or any other color, and prints an image of a corresponding color on the sheet material. If the image is a multi-color image, the web W must contain segments of different colors, or alternatively, the cassette 88 must be exchanged for other cassettes containing webs W bearing different color inks. During the indexing of a web or exchange of a cassette, the strip of sheet material is drawn back in the direction opposite the arrows in Fig. 2 to the beginning of the printed image which corresponds to an origin point in the image and the stored printing program. With another cassette or web segment installed the printing operation is continued in a second color by again advancing the web in the forward direction indicated by the arrows relative to the roller platen.

OPERATION

Fig. 5 is provided in order to explain more clearly the process of printing a multi-colored image with the printer 10. It is assumed that the two dimensional image of the letters "AR" with three dimensional features would be printed with the front face of the letters in one color, such as red, and the "third dimension" of the letters in another color, such as black. The profiles 100,102,104, of each color are separately defined in the printing program stored in the memory 12, each profile being referenced to a common origin point X_0 such as the left-most point 106 of the bullseye 108. The bullseye, for example, may be used subsequently in a numerically controlled cutting machine in order register the image of the letters "AR" with respect to the

represents the motion of the head relative to the vinyl sheet material S, and the coordinates X_0 , X_1 , X_2 represent different positions on the vinyl sheet material as measured in the X coordinate direction. For example, the coordinate X_0 represents the coordinate of the origin point 106. The coordinate X_1 represents the limit or first print point for the black portion of the image, and the coordinate X_2 represents the limit or first print point for the red portion of the image. During a printing operation the bullseye 108 would be printed first in one of the two colors by the printhead and then the other portion of the image in the same color, that is for example the portion beginning at X_1 , would be printed progressively from left to right as viewed in Fig. 5 as the strip S of vinyl sheet material moves relative to the printhead.

Thereafter, the vinyl sheet material S is moved back under the printing head in the -X direction until the origin point 106 is located under the printhead. Then the material is backspaced or moved further in the -X direction by the incremental amount ΔX . At this point the printer 10 would be opened by the operator by lifting the cover 22 and pivoted support frame 72, the cassette 88 containing a web W of ink material would be removed and replaced with a cassette of the second color and the printer would be closed and again energized to continue the printing operation. The printer then advances by an amount ΔX to eliminate all backlash in the drive mechanism for the vinyl sheet material which places the origin point 106 precisely under the printhead as it was at the start of printing of the first color. The printer proceeds from the origin point by moving to the coordinate of the second

the forward or rearward direction from and to the origin point 106 respectively may be continuous or discontinuous with the preceding or subsequent motions of the strip.

At the end of the printing operation, the strip of sheet material could be automatically or manually advanced in order to totally remove the image from the printer. The portion of the strip bearing the finished image is then removed from the rest of the strip.

The flow chart of Fig. 6 illustrates the basic steps of an operating program utilized by the controller 20 to carry out printing operations such as the printing of the letters "AR" as described in connection with Fig 5.

It is assumed at the outset that a strip of vinyl on a backing material is loaded into the printer 10 so as to be fully engaged with 180 degrees of the drive sprockets 30,32. A strip sensor of a type described in greater detail in the above-referenced Application Serial No. 08/007,662 is used to confirm this condition to the printer operator through the control panel 18. The operator then starts the print program through the panel, and the subroutine for printing is entered at block 110 in Fig. 6. The program defining the letters "AR" which is stored in the memory 12 is read and downloaded into the controller 20 of Fig. 1 as indicated at instruction 112 and the controller locates the origin point 106 in the program data as indicated at instruction 114.

At branch 116, the controller determines whether the correct cassette containing the web W with a colored printing ink has been loaded

the printer and identified as a cassette having a donor web bearing black ink, the program then advances directly from branch 116 to instruction 118. If the wrong cassette had been loaded in the machine, the program would branch to the reload instruction 120 and a warning signal on the control panel 18 would advise the operator that the wrong cassette had been loaded. After the correct cassette was loaded, the program would proceed again through branch 116 to instruction 118.

The printhead having initially been in an elevated position is lowered into contact with the web W and strip S of sheet material overlying the roller platen 54. With the printhead lowered and prepared to actually begin printing, the program causes the drive mechanism including the drive motor 36 and the sprockets 30,32 to move the strip of vinyl and releasable backing material by the incremental amount ΔX in the positive direction as indicated at instruction 122. The incremental amount of movement, which may for example be .150 inch, causes the vinyl to be moved to precisely locate the origin point under the printing head, and at the same time eliminates all of the backlash through the gears 38,40, pulleys and drive belt 42,44,46 and between the sprockets 30,32 and the feed holes in the strip S of vinyl material. Thus, the next drive pulse which feeds the strip of vinyl precisely advances the strip relative to the printhead as intended by the printing program, and the printed image thus corresponds precisely with the data in the printing program. If backlash had not been eliminated, then distortion of the image could occur in the initial portion of the image. For example, Fig. 5 shows the initial increment of movement ΔX in the X

assurance that the bullseye will not be distorted and the bullseye can therefore be relied upon as an accurate reference for all other data points in the printed image.

Once the vinyl has been moved incrementally by the amount ΔX as shown at instruction 122, the printing program continues by printing a single color image defined by the printing program as indicated by instruction 124. At the end of the single color image, the printhead is lifted as indicated at instruction 126 and the controller determines if there are additional colors to be printed at branch 128. If not, the program is exited at 130. However, in the scenario described here, it will be assumed that a second color is to be printed in the image in conjunction with the previously printed color and, therefore, the drive mechanism reverses the motion of the strip S of sheet material and returns the strip to the origin point 106 as indicated by instruction 132. When the strip has returned to the origin point, the drive mechanism continues the backward movement of the strip or backspaces the strip by the amount ΔX as indicated at instruction 134 to bring the strip generally into the same position that it occupied at the beginning of the printing operation.

At this point in the printing operation, backlash in the drive mechanism including any backlash between the sprocket teeth and the feed holes of the vinyl strip may result in slight positioning errors between the strip and the head.

The program then advances to instruction 136 which visually signals the printer operator that the cassette needs to be changed to print