

Description

This invention relates generally to a method and apparatus for forming three-dimensional objects from a fluid medium that is capable of being solidified by application thereto of a solidifying medium. Such a solidifying medium is variously referred to hereinafter as synergistic stimulation, reactive stimulation, activation and stimulation. For the production of a three-dimensional object, the solidifying medium is selectively applied to a surface layer of the fluid medium to form a lamina of a desired shape. The object is built of successive superposed laminae. The term "stereolithography" may be generally applied to this object-building technique.

It is common practice in the production of plastic parts and the like to first design such a part and then painstakingly produce a prototype of the part, all involving considerable time, effort and expense. The design is then reviewed and, often-times, the laborious process is again and again repeated until the design has been optimized. After design optimization, the next step is production. Most production plastic parts are injection molded. Since the design time and tooling costs are very high, plastic parts are usually only practical in high volume production. While other processes are available for the production of plastic parts, including direct machine work, vacuum-forming and direct forming, such methods are typically only cost effective for short run production, and the parts produced are usually inferior in quality to molded parts.

In recent years, very sophisticated techniques have been developed for generating three-dimensional objects within a fluid medium which is selectively cured by beams of radiation brought to selective focus at prescribed intersection points within the three-dimensional volume of the fluid medium. Typical of such three-dimensional systems are those described in U.S. Patent Nos. 4,041,476, 4,078,229, 4,238,840 and 4,288,861. All of these systems rely upon the buildup of synergistic energization at selected points deep within the fluid volume, to the exclusion of all other points in the fluid volume, using a variety of elaborate multibeam techniques. In this regard, the various approaches described in the prior art include the use of a pair of electromagnetic radiation beams directed to intersect at specified coordinates, wherein the various beams may be of the same or differing wavelengths, or where beams are used sequentially to intersect the same points rather than simultaneously, but in all cases only the beam intersection points are stimulated to sufficient energy levels to accomplish the necessary curing process for forming a three-dimensional object within the

volume of the fluid medium. Unfortunately, however, such three-dimensional forming systems face a number of problems with regard to resolution and exposure control. The loss of radiation intensity and image forming resolution of the focused spots as the intersections move deeper into the fluid medium create rather obvious complex control situations. Absorption, diffusion, dispersion and defraction all contribute to the difficulties of working deep within the fluid medium on any economical and reliable basis.

Yet there continues to be a long existing need in the design and production arts for the capability of rapidly and reliably moving from the design stage to the prototype stage and to ultimate production, particularly moving directly from computer designs for such plastic parts to virtually immediate prototypes and the facility for large scale production on an economical and automatic basis.

Accordingly, those concerned with the development and production of three-dimensional plastic objects and the like have long recognized the desirability for further improvement in more rapid, reliable, economical and automatic means which would facilitate quickly moving from a design stage to the prototype stage and to production, while avoiding the complicated focusing, alignment and exposure problems of the three dimensional production systems of the kind disclosed in the prior art referred to above.

Another approach to the building of objects from a solidifiable fluid medium, is what we have termed "stereolithography". A basic stereolithographic system is disclosed in an article by Hideo Kodama entitled "Automatic method for fabricating a three-dimensional plastic model with photo-hardening polymer" in the Review of Scientific Instruments Vol. 52, No. 11 (November, 1981). Kodama discloses an apparatus for producing a three-dimensional object by selectively solidifying a surface layer of a fluid medium solidifiable by irradiation with ultraviolet (UV) light in order to build the object from superposed solidified laminae. The Kodama apparatus comprises a container for the fluid medium, means for selectively irradiating the fluid medium at a designated surface to form a solidified lamina, a support means mounted for movement with respect to the designated surface to support an object being built, and means to control the movement of the support means to move it in progressive steps away from the designated surface to enable a surface layer of fresh fluid medium to be introduced for solidification following each step of movement.

According to one aspect of the present invention there is provided a method of producing a three-dimensional object by selectively solidifying a surface layer of a fluid medium solidifiable by a

solidifying medium in order to build the object from superimposed solidified laminae, the method comprising the steps of:

providing a body of the fluid medium,
selectively applying a solidifying medium at a designated surface of the fluid medium to form a solidified lamina on previously solidified laminae forming the object being built,
and moving the object being built in progressive steps away from said designated surface to enable fresh fluid medium to be introduced for selective solidification following each stepwise movement, characterized in that:

in each stepwise movement of the object being built to the level required for selective solidification of the surface layer of introduced fresh fluid medium there is included an initial increment of movement of the last formed lamina away from said designated surface to a level beyond said required level.

According to another aspect of the invention there is provided apparatus for producing a three-dimensional object by selectively solidifying a surface layer of a fluid medium solidifiable by a solidifying medium in order to build the object from superimposed solidified laminae, the apparatus including:

a container for the fluid medium,
means for selectively applying a solidifying medium at a designated surface of the fluid medium to form a solidified lamina,

a support means mounted for movement with respect to said designated surface to support an object being built,

and control means to move said support means in progressive steps away from said surface to enable fresh fluid medium to be introduced for selective solidification following each stepwise movement, characterised in that:

said control means is programmed to include in each stepwise movement of said support means, to the level required for selective solidification of the introduced fresh fluid medium, an initial increment of movement away from said designated surface to a level beyond said required level.

It will be shown hereinafter how the present invention can be implemented to provide an improved method and apparatus for generating a three-dimensional object by forming successive, adjacent, cross-sectional laminae of that object at the surface of a fluid medium capable of solidifying in response to appropriate activation, the successive laminae being automatically integrated as they are formed to define the desired three-dimensional object.

In a presently preferred embodiment, by way of example the principles of computer generated graphics are harnessed in combination with

stereolithography, i.e., the application of lithographic techniques to the production of three dimensional objects, to simultaneously execute computer aided design (CAD) and computer aided manufacturing (CAM) in producing three dimensional objects directly from computer instructions. The invention can be applied for the purposes of sculpturing models and prototypes in a design phase of product development, or as a manufacturing system, or even as a pure art form.

"Stereolithography" is a method and apparatus for making solid objects by successively "printing" thin layers of a curable material, e.g., a UV curable material, one on top of the other. A programmed movable spot beam of UV light shining on a surface or layer of UV curable liquid is used to form a solid cross-section of the object at the surface of the liquid. The object is then moved, in a programmed manner, away from the liquid surface by the thickness of one layer, and the next cross-section is then formed and adhered to the immediately preceding layer defining the object. This process is continued until the entire object is formed. The programmed manner of movement includes at each step, the initial increment of movement beyond the level of the eventual level at which the UV irradiation, or other activation, is to be effected.

Essentially all types of object forms can be created with the technique of the present invention. Complex forms are more easily created by using the functions of a computer to help generate the programme commands and to then send program signals defining the shape of the next lamina to the stereolithographic object forming apparatus.

Of course, it will be appreciated that other forms of appropriate synergistic stimulation for curable fluid medium, such as particle bombardment (electron beams and the like), chemical reactions by spraying materials through a mask or by ink jets, or impinging radiation other than ultraviolet light, may be used in the practice of the invention.

By way of example, in the practice of the present invention, a body of a fluid medium capable of solidification in response to prescribed stimulation is first appropriately contained in any suitable vessel to define a designated working surface of the fluid medium at which successive cross-sectional laminae can be generated. Thereafter, an appropriate form of synergistic stimulation, such as a spot of UV light or the like, is applied as a graphic pattern at the specified working surface of the fluid medium to form thin, solid, individual layers at that surface, each layer representing an adjacent cross-section of the three-dimensional object to be produced. Superposition of successive adjacent layers on each other is automatically accomplished, as they are formed, to integrate the

layers and define the desired three-dimensional object. In this regard, as the fluid medium cures and solid material forms as a thin lamina at the working surface, a suitable platform to which the first lamina is secured is moved away from the working surface in a programmed manner by any appropriate actuator, typically all under the control of a micro-computer or the like. In this way, the solid material that was initially formed at the working surface is moved away from that surface and new liquid flows into the working surface position. A portion of this new liquid is, in turn, converted to solid material by the programmed UV light spot to define a new lamina, and this new lamina adhesively connects to the material adjacent to it, i.e., the immediately preceding lamina. This process continues until the entire three-dimensional object has been formed. The formed object is then removed from the container and the apparatus is ready to produce another object, either identical to the first object or an entirely new object generated by a computer or the like.

The stereolithographic method and apparatus described above has many advantages over currently used methods for producing plastic objects. The method of the present invention avoids the need of producing design layouts and drawings, and of producing tooling drawings and tooling. The designer can work directly with the computer and a stereolithographic device, and when he is satisfied with the design as displayed on the output screen of the computer, he can fabricate a part for direct examination. If the design has to be modified, it can be easily done through the computer, and then another part can be made to verify that the change was correct. If the design calls for several parts with interacting design parameters, the method of the invention becomes even more useful because all of the part designs can be quickly changed and made again so that the total assembly can be made and examined, repeatedly if necessary.

After the design is complete, part production can begin immediately, so that the weeks and months between design and production are avoided. Ultimate production rates and parts costs should be similar to current injection molding costs for short run production, with even lower labor costs than those associated with injection molding. Injection molding is economical only when large numbers of identical parts are required. Stereolithography is useful for short run production because the need for tooling is eliminated and production set-up time is minimal. Likewise, design changes and custom parts are easily provided using the technique. Because of the ease of making parts, stereolithography can allow plastic parts to be used in many places where metal or other material parts are now used. Moreover, it allows

plastic models of objects to be quickly and economically provided, prior to the decision to make more expensive metal or other material parts.

Hence, the stereolithographic method and apparatus of the present invention can be implemented to satisfy a long existing need for a CAD and CAM system capable of rapidly, reliably, accurately and economically designing and fabricating three-dimensional plastic parts and the like.

The invention and its practice will now be further described with reference to embodiment, shown in the accompanying drawings, in which:

FIG. 1 and FIG. 2 are flow charts illustrating the basic concepts employed in practicing a method of stereolithography to which the present invention is applied;

FIG. 3 is a combined block diagram, schematic and elevational sectional view of a presently preferred embodiment of a system for practicing the invention;

FIG. 4 is an elevational sectional view of a second embodiment of a stereolithography system for the practice of the invention;

FIG. 5 is an elevational sectional view, illustrating a third embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 6 is an elevational sectional view illustrating still another embodiment of the present invention; and

FIGS. 7 and 8 are partial, elevational sectional views, illustrating a modification of the stereolithographic system of FIG. 3 to incorporate a support platform with multiple degrees of freedom.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

Referring now to the drawings, FIGS. 1 and 2 are flow charts illustrating the basic method and system to which the present invention is applied for generating three-dimensional objects by means of stereolithography.

Many liquid state chemicals are known which can be induced to change to solid state polymer plastic by irradiation with ultraviolet light (UV) or other forms of synergistic stimulation such as electron beams, visible or invisible light, reactive chemicals applied by ink jet or via a suitable mask. UV curable chemicals are currently used as ink for high speed printing, in processes of coating of paper and other materials, as adhesives, and in other specialty areas.

Lithography is the art of reproducing graphic objects, using various techniques. Modern examples include photographic reproduction, xerography, and microlithography, as is used in the production of micro-electronics. Computer generated graphics displayed on a plotter or a cathode ray

tube are also forms of lithography, where the image is a picture of a computer coded object.

Computer aided design (CAD) and computer aided manufacturing (CAM) are techniques that apply the abilities of computers to the processes of designing and manufacturing. A typical example of CAD is in the area of electronic printed circuit design, where a computer and plotter draw the design of a printed circuit board, given the design parameters as computer data input. A typical example of CAM is a numerically controlled milling machine, where a computer and a milling machine produce metal parts, given the proper programming instructions. Both CAD and CAM are important and are rapidly growing technologies.

The systems to be described harness the principles of computer generated graphics, combined with UV curable plastic and the like, to simultaneously execute CAD and CAM, and to produce three-dimensional objects directly from computer instructions. These systems can be used to sculpture models and prototypes in a design phase of product development, or as a manufacturing device, or even as an art form.

Referring now to FIG. 1, the stereolithographic method is broadly outlined. Step 10 in FIG. 1 calls for the generation of individual solid laminae representing cross-sections of a three-dimensional object to be formed. Step 11, which inherently occurs if Step 10 is performed properly, combines the successively formed adjacent laminae to form the desired three-dimensional object which has been programmed into the system for selective curing. Hence, the stereolithographic system generates three-dimensional objects by creating a cross-sectional pattern of the object to be formed at a selected surface of a fluid medium, e.g., a UV curable liquid or the like, capable of solidifying in response to appropriate synergistic stimulation such as impinging radiation, electron beam or other particle bombardment, or applied chemicals (as by ink jet or spraying over a mask adjacent the fluid surface), successive adjacent laminae, representing corresponding successive adjacent cross-sections of the object, being automatically formed and integrated together to provide a step-wise laminar or thin layer buildup of the object, whereby a three-dimensional object is formed and drawn from a substantially planar or sheet-like surface of the fluid medium during the forming process.

The aforescribed technique is more specifically outlined in the flowchart of FIG. 2, wherein Step 12 calls for containing a fluid medium capable of solidification in response to prescribed reactive stimulation. Step 13 calls for application of that stimulation as a graphic pattern at a designated fluid surface to form thin, solid, individual layers at that surface, each layer representing an adjacent

cross-section of a three-dimensional object to be produced. It is desirable to make each such layer as thin as possible during the practice of the invention in order to maximize resolution and the accurate reproduction of the three-dimensional object being formed. Hence, the ideal theoretical state would be an object produced only at the designated working surface of the fluid medium to provide an infinite number of laminae, each lamina having a cured depth of approximately only slightly more than zero thickness. Of course, in the practical application of the invention, each lamina will be a thin lamina, but thick enough to be adequately cohesive in forming the cross-section and adhering to the adjacent laminae defining other cross-sections of the object being formed.

Step 14 in FIG. 2 calls for superimposing successive adjacent layers or laminae on each other as they are formed, to integrate the various layers and define the desired three-dimensional object. As the fluid medium cures and solid material forms to define one lamina, that lamina is moved away from the working surface of the fluid medium and the next lamina is formed in the new liquid which replaces the previously formed lamina, so that each successive lamina is superimposed and integral with (by virtue of the natural adhesive properties of the cured fluid medium) all of the other cross-sectional laminae. Hence, the process of producing such cross-sectional laminae is repeated over and over again until the entire three-dimensional object has been formed. The object is then removed and the system is ready to produce another object which may be identical to the previous object or may be an entirely new object formed by changing the program controlling the stereolithographic system.

FIGS. 3-8 of the drawings illustrate various apparatus suitable for implementing the stereolithographic methods illustrated and described by the flow charts of FIGS. 1 and 2.

A presently preferred embodiment of the stereolithographic system is shown in elevational cross-section in FIG. 3. A container 21 is filled with a UV curable liquid 22 or the like, to provide a designated working surface 23. A programmable source of ultraviolet light 26 or the like produces a spot of ultraviolet light 27 in the plane of surface 23. The spot 27 is movable across the surface 23 by the motion of mirrors or other optical or mechanical elements (not shown) that are a part of light source 26. The position of the spot 27 on surface 23 is controlled by a computer or other programming device 28. A movable support or elevator platform 29 inside container 21 can be moved up and down selectively, the position of the platform being controlled by the computer 28. As the device operates, it produces a three-dimen-

sional object 30 by step-wise buildup of integrated laminae such as 30a, 30b, 30c.

The surface of the UV curable liquid 22 is maintained at a constant level in the container 21, and, the spot of UV light 27, or other suitable form of reactive stimulation, of sufficient intensity to cure the liquid and convert it to a solid material is moved across the working surface 23 in a programmed manner. As the liquid 22 cures and solid material forms, the elevator platform 29 that was initially just below surface 23 is moved down from the surface in a programmed manner by any suitable actuator. In this way, the solid material that was initially formed is taken below surface 23 and new liquid 22 flows across the surface 23. A portion of this new liquid is, in turn, converted to solid material by the programmed UV light spot 27, and the new material adhesively connects to the material below it. This process is continued until the entire three-dimensional object 30 is formed. The object 30 is then removed from the container 21, and the apparatus is ready to produce another object. Another object can then be produced, or some new object can be made by changing the program in the computer 28.

The curable liquid 22, e.g., UV curable liquid, must have several important properties. A) It must cure fast enough with the available UV light source to allow practical object formation times. B) It must be adhesive, so that successive layers will adhere to each other. C) Its viscosity must be low enough so that fresh liquid material will quickly flow across the surface when the elevator moves the object. D) It should absorb UV so that the film formed will be reasonably thin. E) It must be reasonably soluble in some solvent in the liquid state, and reasonably insoluble in that same solvent in the solid state, so that the object can be washed free of the UV cure liquid and partially cured liquid after the object has been formed. F) It should be as non-toxic and non-irritating as possible.

The cured material must also have desirable properties once it is in the solid state. These properties depend on the application involved, as in the conventional use of other plastic materials. Such parameters as color, texture, strength, electrical properties, flammability, and flexibility are among the properties to be considered. In addition, the cost of the material will be important in many cases.

The UV curable material used in the presently preferred embodiment of a working stereolithograph (e.g., FIG. 3) is Potting Compound 363, a modified acrylate, made by Loctite Corporation of Newington, CT. A process to make a typical UV curable material is described in U.S. Patent No. 4,100,141, entitled Stabilized Adhesive and Curing Compositions.

The light source 26 produces the spot 27 of UV light small enough to allow the desired object detail to be formed, and intense enough to cure the UV curable liquid being used quickly enough to be practical. The source 26 is arranged so it can be programmed to be turned off and on, and to move, such that the focused spot 27 moves across the surface 23 of the liquid 22. Thus, as the spot 27 moves, it cures the liquid 22 into a solid, and "draws" a solid pattern on the surface in much the same way a chart recorder or plotter uses a pen to draw a pattern on paper.

The light source 26 for the presently preferred embodiment of a stereolithograph is made using a 350 watt mercury short arc lamp in a housing, with the light output of the housing focused on the end of a 1 mm diameter UV transmitting fiber optic bundle (not shown). The end of the bundle next to the lamp is water cooled, and there is an electronically controlled shutter blade between the lamp and the end of the bundle, which can turn the light through the bundle on and off. The bundle is 1 meter long, and the optical output is fitted into a lens tube that has a quartz lens to focus the UV to a spot. The light source 26 is capable of producing a spot somewhat less than 1 mm in diameter, with a long wave UV intensity of about 1 watt/cm².

In the system of FIG. 3, means may be provided to keep the surface 23 at a constant level and to replenish this material after an object has been removed, so that the focus spot 27 will remain sharply in focus on a fixed focus plane, thus insuring maximum resolution in forming a thin layer along the working surface. In this regard, it is desired to shape the focal point to provide a region of high intensity right at the working surface 23, rapidly diverging to low intensity and thereby limiting the depth of the curing process to provide the thinnest appropriate cross-sectional laminae for the object being formed. This is best accomplished by using a short focal length lens and bringing the source 26 as close as possible to the working surface, so that maximum divergence occurs in the cone of focus entering the fluid medium. The result is substantially enhanced resolution.

An H-P Model 9872 Digital Plotter (not shown) manufactured by Hewlett-Packard, of Palo Alto, California, is used to move the light source 26. The lens tube is attached to the pen carriage of the plotter, and the plotter is driven by a computer 28 using normal graphic commands. The shutter is controlled by an H-P 3497A Data Acquisition/Control Unit, using computer commands.

Other physical forms of the light source 26 or its equivalent are feasible. Scanning could be done with optical scanners, and this would eliminate the fiber optic bundle and the digital plotter. A UV laser

might ultimately be a better light source than a short arc lamp. The speed of the stereolithographic process is mainly limited by the intensity of the light source and the response of the UV curable liquid.

The elevator platform 29 is used to support and hold the object 30 being formed, and to move it up and down as required. Typically, after a layer is formed, the object 30 is moved beyond the level of the next layer to allow the liquid 22 to flow into the momentary void at surface 23 left where the solid was formed, and then it is moved back to the correct level for the next layer. The requirements for the elevator platform 29 are that it can be moved in a programmed fashion at appropriate speeds, with adequate precision, and that it is powerful enough to handle the weight of the object 30 being formed. In addition, a manual fine adjustment of the elevator platform position is useful during the set-up phase and when the object is being removed.

The elevator platform 29 for the embodiment of FIG. 3 is a platform attached to an analog plotter (not shown). This plotter is driven by the H-P 3497A Data Acquisition/Control Unit with its internal digital to analog converter, under program control of the computer 28.

The computer 28 in the stereolithographic apparatus of the present invention has two basic functions. The first is to help the operator design the three-dimensional object in a way that it can be made. The second is to translate the design into commands that are appropriate for the other stereolithographic components, and to deliver these commands in a way so that the object is formed. In some applications, the object design will exist, and the only function of the computer will be to deliver the appropriate commands.

In an ideal situation, the operator will be able to design the object and view it three-dimensionally on the CRT screen of the computer 28. When he is finished with the design, he will instruct the computer 28 to make the object, and the computer will issue the appropriate instructions to the stereolithographic components.

In a present working embodiment of the invention, the computer 28 is an H-P 9816, using a Basic Operating System. In this system, the operator programs using H-P Graphic Language, the command structure for the 3497A, plus the Basic Language commands. The operator also must set the appropriate exposure times and rates for the UV curable material. To operate the system an image of the object is created and a program is written to drive the stereolithograph to make that object.

The elevator platform 29 can be mechanical, pneumatic, hydraulic, or electrical and may also

use optical or electronic feedback to precisely control its position. The elevator platform 29 is typically fabricated of either glass or aluminum, but any material to which the cured plastic material will adhere is suitable.

In some cases, the computer 28 becomes unnecessary and simpler dedicated programming devices can be used, particularly where only simply shaped objects are to be formed. Alternatively, the computer control system 28 can be simply executing instructions that were generated by another, more complex, computer. This might be the case where several stereolithography units are used to produce objects, and another device is used to initially design the objects to be formed.

A computer controlled pump (not shown) may be used to maintain a constant level of the liquid 22 at the working surface 23. Appropriate level detection system and feedback networks, well known in the art, can be used to drive a fluid pump or a liquid displacement device, such as a solid rod (not shown) which is moved out of the fluid medium as the elevator platform is moved further into the fluid medium, to offset changes in fluid volume and maintain constant fluid level at the surface 23. Alternatively, the source 26 can be moved relative to the sensed level 23 and automatically maintain sharp focus at the working surface 23. All of these alternatives can be readily achieved by conventional software operating in conjunction with the computer control system 28.

After the three-dimensional object 30 has been formed, the elevator platform 29 is raised and the object is removed from the platform. Typically, the object is then ultrasonically rinsed in a solvent, such as acetone, that dissolves the liquid state of the uncured fluid medium and not the cured solid state medium. The object 30 is then placed under an intense ultraviolet floodlight, typically a 200 watt per inch UV cure lamp, to complete the curing process.

In addition, there may be several containers 21 used in the practice of the invention, each container having a different type of curable material that can be automatically selected by the stereolithographic apparatus. In this regard, the various materials might provide plastics of different colors, or have both insulating and conducting material available for the various layers of electronic products.

Referring now more particularly to the remaining drawings, in connection with various alternative embodiments of the invention, like reference numerals throughout the various figures of the drawings denote like or corresponding parts as those previously discussed in connection with the preferred embodiment of the invention shown in FIG. 3.

As will be apparent from FIG. 4 of the drawings, there is shown an alternate configuration for a stereolithograph wherein the UV curable liquid 22 or the like floats on a heavier UV transparent liquid 32 which is non-miscible and non-wetting with the curable liquid 22. By way of example, ethylene glycol or heavy water are suitable for the intermediate liquid layer 32. In the system of FIG. 4, the three-dimensional object 30 is pulled up from the liquid 22, rather than down and further into the liquid medium, as shown in the system of FIG. 3.

The UV light source 26 in FIG. 4 focuses the spot 27 at the interface between the liquid 22 and the non-miscible intermediate liquid layer 32, the UV radiation passing through a suitable UV transparent window 33, of quartz or the like, supported at the bottom of the container 21. The curable liquid 22 is provided in a very thin layer over the non-miscible layer 32 and thereby has the advantage of limiting layer thickness directly, rather than relying solely upon absorption and the like to limit the depth of curing, since ideally an ultrathin lamina is to be provided. Hence, the region of formation will be more sharply defined and some surfaces will be formed smoother with the system of FIG. 4 than with that of FIG. 3. In addition, a smaller volume of UV curable liquid 22 is required, and the substitution of one curable material for another is easier.

The apparatus of FIG. 5 is similar to that of FIG. 3, but the movable UV light source 26 is eliminated and a collimated, broad UV light source 35 and suitable apertured mask 36 is substituted for the programmed source 26 and focused spot 27. The apertured mask 36 is placed as close as possible to the working surface 23, and collimated light from the UV source 35 passes through the mask 36 to expose the working surface 23, thereby creating successive adjacent laminae, as in the embodiments of FIGS. 3 and 4. However, the use of a fixed mask 36 provides three-dimensional objects with a constant cross-sectional shape. Whenever that cross-sectional shape is to be changed, a new mask 36 for that particular cross-sectional shape must be substituted and properly aligned. Of course, the masks can be automatically changed by providing a web of masks (not shown) which are successively moved into alignment with the surface 23.

FIG. 6 of the drawings again provides a stereolithographic apparatus configuration similar to that previously described in connection with FIG. 3. However, a cathode ray tube (CRT) 38, fiber optic faceplate 39 and water (or other) release layer 40 are provided as a substitute for the light source 26 and focus spot 27. Hence, the graphic image provided by a computer 28 to the CRT 38 produces the forming image upon the UV emitting phosphor

face of the tube where it passes through the fiber optic layer 39 and release layer 40 to the working surface 23 of the fluid medium 22. In all other respects, the system of FIG. 6 forms successive cross-sectional laminae defining the desired three-dimensional object to be formed, in exactly the same way as the embodiments of the invention previously discussed.

FIGS. 7 and 8 illustrate an embodiment of a stereolithographic apparatus wherein the elevator platform 29 has additional degrees of freedom, so that different faces of the object 30 may be exposed for alternate methods of construction. Similarly, the stereolithography process may be utilized as an "add on" process where the elevator platform 29 will be used to pick up and locate another part for supplementary stereolithographic processing. In this regard, the systems shown in FIGS. 7 and 8 are identical to that of FIG. 3 with the exception of the elevator platform 29 which, in the systems of FIGS. 7 and 8 have a second degree of freedom via manual or automatically controlled rotation about a pivot pin or hinge member 42. In this regard, FIG. 7 illustrates an adjustable elevator platform 29a in the conventional position, while FIG. 8 shows the platform 29a rotated 90° so that a supplementary, stereolithographically formed structure 41 can be selectively formed as an addition to one side of the three-dimensional object 30.

A commercial stereolithography apparatus will have additional components and subsystems besides those previously shown in connection with the schematically depicted systems of FIGS. 3-8. For example, the commercial system would also have a frame and housing, and a control panel. It should have means to shield the operator from excess UV and visible light, and it may also have means to allow viewing of the object 30 while it is being formed. Commercial units will provide safety means for controlling ozone and noxious fumes, as well as conventional high voltage safety protection and interlocks. Such commercial units will also have means to effectively shield the sensitive electronics from electronic noise sources.

As previously mentioned, a number of other possible apparatus may be utilized to practice the stereolithographic method of the present invention. For example, an electron source, a visible light source, or an x-ray source or other radiation source could be substituted for the UV light source 26, along with appropriate fluid media which are cured in response to these particular forms of reactive stimulation. For example, alphaoctadecylacrylic acid that has been slightly prepolymerized with UV light can be polymerized with an electron beam. Similarly, poly(2,3-dichloro-1-propyl acrylate) can be polymerized with an x-ray beam.

The stereolithographic method and apparatus described above has many advantages over currently used methods for producing plastic objects. The method described avoids the need of producing design layouts and drawings, and of producing tooling drawings and tooling. The designer can work directly with the computer and a stereolithographic device, and when he is satisfied with the design as displayed on the output screen of the computer, he can fabricate a part for direct examination. If the design has to be modified, it can be easily done through the computer, and then another part can be made to verify that the change was correct. If the design calls for several parts with interacting design parameters, the method of the invention becomes even more useful because all of the part designs can be quickly changed and made again so that the total assembly can be made and examined, repeatedly if necessary.

After the design is complete, part production can begin immediately, so that the weeks and months between design and production are avoided. Ultimate production rates and parts costs should be similar to current injection molding costs for short run production, with even lower labor costs than those associated with injection molding. Injection molding is economical only when large numbers of identical parts are required. Stereolithography is useful for short run production because the need for tooling is eliminated and production set-up time is minimal. Likewise, design changes and custom parts are easily provided using the technique. Because of the ease of making parts, stereolithography can allow plastic parts to be used in many places where metal or other material parts are now used. Moreover, it allows plastic models of objects to be quickly and economically provided, prior to the decision to make more expensive metal or other material parts.

It will be apparent from the foregoing that, while a variety of stereolithographic apparatus have been disclosed for the practice of the present invention, they all have in common the concept of drawing upon a substantially two-dimensional surface and extracting a three-dimensional object from that surface.

The apparatus described above can be realised as part of a CAD and CAM system capable of rapidly, reliably, accurately and economically designing and fabricating three-dimensional plastic parts and the like.

Claims

1. A method of producing a three-dimensional object (30) by selectively solidifying a surface layer of a fluid medium (22) solidifiable by a solidifying medium in order to build the object

(30) from superimposed solidified laminae (30a, 30b, 30c), the method comprising the steps of:

providing a body of the fluid medium (22), selectively applying a solidifying medium (26) at a designated surface (23) of the fluid medium (22) to form a solidified lamina on previously solidified laminae forming the object (30) being built,

and moving the object (30) being built in progressive steps away from said designated surface (23) to enable fresh fluid medium to be introduced for selective solidification following each stepwise movement, characterized in that:

in each stepwise movement of the object (30) being built to the level required for selective solidification of the surface layer of introduced fresh fluid medium there is included an initial increment of movement of the last formed lamina away from said designated surface (23) to a level beyond said required level.

2. A method as claimed in Claim 1 in which the selective application of the solidifying medium comprises directing a beam of the solidifying medium onto said designated surface according to a selected graphic pattern.
3. A method as claimed in Claim 1 in which the selective application of the solidifying medium comprises directing the solidifying medium at said designated surface and masking said designated surface with a mask defining a selected graphic pattern to selectively control the impingement of the solidifying medium onto said designated surface.
4. A method as claimed in Claim 2 in which said beam is a light beam.
5. A method as claimed in Claim 4 in which the light is ultra-violet light.
6. A method as claimed in Claim 2 in which said beam is a high energy particle beam.
7. A method as claimed in Claim 2 in which said beam is an electron beam.
8. A method as claimed in Claim 2 in which said beam is an X-ray beam.
9. A method as claimed in Claim 2 in which said beam is a jet of a material that chemically reacts with said solidifiable fluid medium.

The stereolithographic method and apparatus described above has many advantages over currently used methods for producing plastic objects. The method described avoids the need of producing design layouts and drawings, and of producing tooling drawings and tooling. The designer can work directly with the computer and a stereolithographic device, and when he is satisfied with the design as displayed on the output screen of the computer, he can fabricate a part for direct examination. If the design has to be modified, it can be easily done through the computer, and then another part can be made to verify that the change was correct. If the design calls for several parts with interacting design parameters, the method of the invention becomes even more useful because all of the part designs can be quickly changed and made again so that the total assembly can be made and examined, repeatedly if necessary.

After the design is complete, part production can begin immediately, so that the weeks and months between design and production are avoided. Ultimate production rates and parts costs should be similar to current injection molding costs for short run production, with even lower labor costs than those associated with injection molding. Injection molding is economical only when large numbers of identical parts are required. Stereolithography is useful for short run production because the need for tooling is eliminated and production set-up time is minimal. Likewise, design changes and custom parts are easily provided using the technique. Because of the ease of making parts, stereolithography can allow plastic parts to be used in many places where metal or other material parts are now used. Moreover, it allows plastic models of objects to be quickly and economically provided, prior to the decision to make more expensive metal or other material parts.

It will be apparent from the foregoing that, while a variety of stereolithographic apparatus have been disclosed for the practice of the present invention, they all have in common the concept of drawing upon a substantially two-dimensional surface and extracting a three-dimensional object from that surface.

The apparatus described above can be realised as part of a CAD and CAM system capable of rapidly, reliably, accurately and economically designing and fabricating three-dimensional plastic parts and the like.

Claims

1. A method of producing a three-dimensional object (30) by selectively solidifying a surface layer of a fluid medium (22) solidifiable by a solidifying medium in order to build the object

(30) from superimposed solidified laminae (30a, 30b, 30c), the method comprising the steps of:

providing a body of the fluid medium (22), selectively applying a solidifying medium (26) at a designated surface (23) of the fluid medium (22) to form a solidified lamina on previously solidified laminae forming the object (30) being built,

and moving the object (30) being built in progressive steps away from said designated surface (23) to enable fresh fluid medium to be introduced for selective solidification following each stepwise movement, characterized in that:

in each stepwise movement of the object (30) being built to the level required for selective solidification of the surface layer of introduced fresh fluid medium there is included an initial increment of movement of the last formed lamina away from said designated surface (23) to a level beyond said required level.

2. A method as claimed in Claim 1 in which the selective application of the solidifying medium comprises directing a beam of the solidifying medium onto said designated surface according to a selected graphic pattern.
3. A method as claimed in Claim 1 in which the selective application of the solidifying medium comprises directing the solidifying medium at said designated surface and masking said designated surface with a mask defining a selected graphic pattern to selectively control the impingement of the solidifying medium onto said designated surface.
4. A method as claimed in Claim 2 in which said beam is a light beam.
5. A method as claimed in Claim 4 in which the light is ultra-violet light.
6. A method as claimed in Claim 2 in which said beam is a high energy particle beam.
7. A method as claimed in Claim 2 in which said beam is an electron beam.
8. A method as claimed in Claim 2 in which said beam is an X-ray beam.
9. A method as claimed in Claim 2 in which said beam is a jet of a material that chemically reacts with said solidifiable fluid medium.



10. A method as claimed in Claim 1 or 3 in which said solidifying medium is light.

11. A method as claimed in Claim 10 in which the light is ultra-violet light.

12. A method as claimed in Claim 1 or 3 in which said solidifying medium comprises high energy particles that bombard the fluid medium.

13. A method as claimed in Claim 1 or 3 in which said solidifying medium comprises X-rays.

14. A method as claimed in Claim 1 or 3 in which said solidifying medium comprises a material that chemically reacts with said solidifiable fluid medium.

15. A method as claimed in Claim 1 in which the selective application of the solidifying medium includes displaying a selected graphic pattern on a cathode ray tube for transfer to said designated surface.

16. A method as claimed in any preceding claim, further comprising displacing a volume of the fluid medium to maintain the designated surface at a predetermined level.

17. A method as claimed in Claim 16 comprising sensing the level of the surface of the fluid medium to control the displacement of said volume.

18. A method as claimed in any one of Claims 1 to 15 in which said designated surface is a lower surface of the solidifiable fluid medium and said progressive steps are in an upward direction.

19. A method as claimed in Claim 18 in which said container contains a fluid which is non-reactive with said fluid medium, which is immiscible with said fluid medium and on which said fluid medium floats.

20. A method as claimed in Claim 19 in which said fluid immiscible with said fluid medium is heavy water or ethylene glycol.

21. Apparatus for producing a three-dimensional object (30) by selectively solidifying a surface layer of a fluid medium (22) solidifiable by a solidifying medium in order to build the object (30) from superimposed solidified laminae (30a, 30b, 30c), the apparatus including:
a container (21) for the fluid medium (22),
means for selectively applying a solidifying

medium at a designated surface (23) of the fluid medium to form a solidified lamina,

a support means (29) mounted for movement with respect to said designated surface to support an object (30) being built,

and control means (28) to move said support means in progressive steps away from said surface to enable fresh fluid medium to be introduced for selective solidification following each stepwise movement, characterised in that:

said control means is programmed to include in each stepwise movement of said support means, to the level required for selective solidification of the introduced fresh fluid medium, an initial increment of movement away from said designated surface to a level beyond said required level.

22. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 21 in which said means for selectively applying a solidifying medium comprises means for directing a beam of the solidifying medium onto said designated surface according to a selected graphic pattern.

23. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 21 in which said means for selectively applying a solidifying medium comprises means to direct the solidifying medium at said designated surface and a mask defining a selected graphic pattern to selectively control the impingement of the solidifying medium onto said designated surface.

24. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 22 in which said beam directing means generates a light beam.

25. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 24 in which the light is ultra-violet light.

26. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 22 in which said beam directing means generates a high energy particle beam.

27. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 22 in which said beam directing means generates an electron beam.

28. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 22 in which said beam directing means generates an X-ray beam.

29. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 22 in which said beam generating means provides a jet of a material that chemically reacts with said solidifiable fluid medium.



30. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 21 or 23 in which said solidifying medium is light.
31. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 30 in which the light is ultra-violet light.
32. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 21 or 23 in which said solidifying medium comprises high energy particles that bombard the fluid medium.
33. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 21 or 23 in which said solidifying medium comprises X-rays.
34. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 21 or 23 in which said solidifying medium comprises a material that chemically reacts with said solidifiable fluid medium.
35. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 21 in which said means for selectively applying said solidifying medium includes a cathode ray tube on which a selected graphic pattern is displayed for transfer to said designated surface.
36. Apparatus as claimed in any one of claims 21 to 35, further comprising means actuable to displace a volume of the fluid medium in order to maintain the designated surface at a predetermined level.
37. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 36 further comprising means for sensing the level of the surface of the fluid medium and operable to control the volume displacement means.
38. Apparatus as claimed in any one of Claims 21 to 34 in which said container contains said solidifiable fluid medium and also a fluid which is non-reactive with said solidifying medium, which is immiscible with said fluid medium and on which said fluid medium floats, and said designated surface is the lower surface of the solidifiable fluid medium and said progressive steps are in an upward direction.
39. Apparatus as claimed in Claim 38 in which said fluid immiscible with said fluid medium is heavy water or ethylene glycol.
40. Apparatus as claimed in any one of Claims 21 to 39 in which said support means includes means providing an additional degree of freedom of movement of said support means to enable a change of orientation with respect to said designated surface of the object being built.

Patentansprüche

1. Verfahren zur Herstellung eines dreidimensionalen Objekts (30) durch selektives Verfestigen einer Oberflächenschicht eines flüssigen Mediums (22), das durch ein Verfestigungsmedium zu verfestigen ist, um das Objekt (30) aus überlagerten verfestigten Schichten (30a, 30b, 30c) aufzubauen, wobei das Verfahren die folgenden Schritte umfaßt:
 - Bereitstellen eines Körpers des flüssigen Mediums (22),
 - selektives Anwenden eines Verfestigungsmediums (26) an einer bestimmten Oberfläche (23) des flüssigen Mediums (22), um eine verfestigte Schicht auf zuvor verfestigten Schichten zu formen, die das aufzubauende Objekt (30) bilden,
 - und Bewegen des aufzubauenden Objekts (30) in aufeinanderfolgenden Schritten weg von der bestimmten Oberfläche (23), um den Zufluß von frischem flüssigem Medium zwecks selektiver Verfestigung nach jeder schrittweisen Bewegung zu erlauben,
 - dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß in jeder schrittweisen Bewegung des aufzubauenden Objekts (30) auf das Niveau, das für die selektive Verfestigung der Oberflächenschicht aus zugeflossenem frischem flüssigem Medium erforderlich ist, ein anfänglicher Zuwachs der Bewegung der zuletzt geformten Schicht enthalten ist, der von der bestimmten Oberfläche (23) weggeführt zu einem Niveau jenseits des erforderlichen Niveaus.
2. Verfahren nach Anspruch 1, in dem die selektive Anwendung des Verfestigungsmediums einen Vorgang umfaßt, bei dem ein Strahl des Verfestigungsmediums auf die bestimmte Oberfläche (23) gerichtet wird, entsprechend einem ausgewählten grafischen Muster.
3. Verfahren nach Anspruch 1, in dem die selektive Anwendung des Verfestigungsmediums einen Vorgang umfaßt, bei dem das Verfestigungsmedium auf die bestimmte Oberfläche (23) gerichtet ist und die bestimmte Oberfläche (23) mit einer Maske maskiert wird, die ein ausgewähltes grafisches Muster festlegt, um das Auftreffen des Verfestigungsmediums auf die bestimmte Oberfläche (23) selektiv zu steuern.
4. Verfahren nach Anspruch 2, in dem der Strahl ein Lichtstrahl ist.



5. Verfahren nach Anspruch 4, in dem das Licht ultraviolette Licht ist.

6. Verfahren nach Anspruch 2, in dem der Strahl ein hochenergetischer Teilchenstrahl ist.

7. Verfahren nach Anspruch 2, in dem der Strahl ein Elektronenstrahl ist.

8. Verfahren nach Anspruch 2, in dem der Strahl ein Röntgenstrahl ist.

9. Verfahren nach Anspruch 2, in dem der Strahl ein Materiestrom ist, der chemisch mit dem verfestigbaren flüssigen Medium reagiert.

10. Verfahren nach Anspruch 1 oder 3, in dem das Verfestigungsmedium Licht ist.

11. Verfahren nach Anspruch 10, in dem das Licht ultraviolette Licht ist.

12. Verfahren nach Anspruch 1 oder 3, in dem das Verfestigungsmedium hochenergetische Teilchen umfaßt, die auf das flüssige Medium auf treffen.

13. Verfahren nach Anspruch 1 oder 3, in dem das Verfestigungsmedium Röntgenstrahlen umfaßt.

14. Verfahren nach Anspruch 1 oder 3, in dem das Verfestigungsmedium ein Material umfaßt, das chemisch mit dem verfestigbaren flüssigen Medium reagiert.

15. Verfahren nach Anspruch 1, in dem die selektive Anwendung des Verfestigungsmediums einen Vorgang einschließt, bei dem ein ausgewähltes grafisches Muster auf einer Kathodenstrahlröhre dargestellt wird, um auf die bestimmte Oberfläche (23) überführt zu werden.

16. Verfahren nach einem der vorhergehenden Ansprüche, welches zusätzlich ein Entfernen eines Volumens des flüssigen Mediums einschließt, um die bestimmte Oberfläche (23) auf einem vorbestimmten Niveau zu halten.

17. Verfahren nach Anspruch 16, das ein Erfassen des Oberflächenniveaus des flüssigen Mediums umfaßt, um das Entfernen des Volumens zu steuern.

18. Verfahren nach einem der Ansprüche 1 bis 15, in dem die bestimmte Oberfläche (23) eine untere Fläche des verfestigbaren Mediums ist und die aufeinanderfolgenden Schritte in Aufwärtsrichtung erfolgen.

19. Verfahren nach Anspruch 18, in dem der Behälter eine Flüssigkeit enthält, die mit dem flüssigen Medium nicht reagiert, die mit dem flüssigen Medium nicht vermischbar ist und auf der das flüssige Medium schwimmt.

20. Verfahren nach Anspruch 19, in dem die Flüssigkeit, die mit dem flüssigen Medium nicht vermischbar ist, schweres Wasser oder Ethylenglykol ist.

21. Vorrichtung zum Herstellen eines dreidimensionalen Objekts (30) durch selektives Verfestigen einer Oberflächenschicht eines flüssigen Mediums (22), das durch ein Verfestigungsmedium verfestigbar ist, um das Objekt (30) aus überlagerten verfestigten Schichten (30a, 30b, 30c) aufzubauen, wobei die Vorrichtung enthält:

- einen Behälter (21) für das flüssige Medium (22),
- eine Einrichtung zum selektiven Anwenden eines Verfestigungsmediums auf eine bestimmte Oberfläche (23) des flüssigen Mediums, um eine verfestigte Schicht zu formen,
- einen Träger (29), der für eine Bewegung relativ zu der bestimmten Oberfläche gebaut ist, um ein aufzubauendes Objekt (30) zu stützen,
- und eine Steuerung (28), um den Träger in aufeinanderfolgenden Schritten von der Oberfläche wegzubewegen, um den Zufluß frischen flüssigen Mediums zwecks selektiver Verfestigung nach jeder schrittweisen Bewegung zu erlauben,

dadurch gekennzeichnet, daß

die Steuerung (28) so programmiert ist, daß sie bei jeder schrittweisen Bewegung des Trägers (28) - auf das für selektive Verfestigung des zugeflossenen frischen flüssigen Mediums notwendige Niveau - einen anfänglichen Zuwachs der Bewegung einschließt, der von der bestimmten Oberfläche wegführt auf ein Niveau jenseits des erforderlichen Niveaus.

22. Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 21, in der die Einrichtung zum selektiven Anwenden eines Verfestigungsmediums eine Einrichtung umfaßt, die einen Strahl des Verfestigungsmediums auf die bestimmte Oberfläche richtet entsprechend einem ausgewählten grafischen Muster.

23. Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 21, in dem die Einrichtung zum selektiven Anwenden eines Verfestigungsmediums eine Einrichtung umfaßt, die das Verfestigungsmedium auf die bestimmte Oberfläche richtet, und eine Maske



umfaßt, die ein ausgewähltes grafisches Muster umfaßt, um das Auftreffen des Verfestigungsmediums auf die bestimmte Oberfläche selektiv zu steuern.

24. Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 22, in welcher die strahlrichtende Einrichtung einen Lichtstrahl erzeugt.
25. Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 24, in der das Licht ultraviolette Licht ist.
26. Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 22, in der die strahlrichtende Einrichtung einen hochenergetischen Teilchenstrahl erzeugt.
27. Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 22, in der die strahlrichtende Einrichtung einen Elektronenstrahl erzeugt.
28. Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 22, in der die strahlrichtende Einrichtung einen Röntgenstrahl erzeugt.
29. Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 22, in der die strahlerzeugende Einrichtung einen Materialstrom liefert, der chemisch mit dem verfestigbaren flüssigen Medium reagiert.
30. Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 21 oder 23, in der das Verfestigungsmedium Licht ist.
31. Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 30, in der das Licht ultraviolette Licht ist.
32. Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 21 oder 23, in der das Verfestigungsmedium hochenergetische Teilchen umfaßt, die auf das flüssige Medium auftreffen.
33. Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 21 oder 23, in der das Verfestigungsmedium Röntgenstrahlen umfaßt.
34. Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 21 oder 23, in der das Verfestigungsmedium ein Material umfaßt, das chemisch mit dem verfestigbaren flüssigen Medium reagiert.
35. Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 21, in der die Einrichtung zum selektiven Anwenden des Verfestigungsmediums eine Kathodenstrahlröhre einschließt, auf der ein ausgewähltes grafisches Muster dargestellt wird, um auf die bestimmte Oberfläche überführt zu werden.
36. Vorrichtung nach einem der Ansprüche 21 bis 35, die außerdem eine Einrichtung umfaßt, die

zum Entfernen eines Volumens des flüssigen Mediums betätigbar ist, um die bestimmte Oberfläche auf einem vorbestimmten Niveau zu halten.

37. Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 36, die ferner eine Einrichtung umfaßt, die das Niveau der Oberfläche des flüssigen Mediums feststellt und betätigbar ist, um die Volumenentfernungseinrichtung zu steuern.
38. Vorrichtung nach einem der Ansprüche 21 bis 34, in welcher der Behälter das verfestigbare flüssige Medium enthält und gleichfalls eine Flüssigkeit enthält, die mit dem Verfestigungsmedium nicht reagiert, die mit dem flüssigen Medium nicht vermischbar ist und auf der das flüssige Medium schwimmt, wobei die bestimmte Oberfläche die untere Fläche des verfestigbaren flüssigen Mediums ist und die aufeinanderfolgenden Schritte in Aufwärtsrichtung erfolgen.
39. Vorrichtung nach Anspruch 38, in der die Flüssigkeit, die mit dem flüssigen Medium nicht vermischbar ist, schweres Wasser oder Ethylenglykol ist.
40. Vorrichtung nach einem der Ansprüche 21 bis 39, in welcher der Träger eine Einrichtung einschließt, die einen zusätzlichen Freiheitsgrad der Bewegung des Trägers bereitstellt, um eine Änderung der Orientierung relativ zu der bestimmten Oberfläche des aufzubauen- den Objekts zu erlauben.

Revendications

1. Un procédé pour réaliser un objet tridimensionnel (30) par solidification sélective d'une couche de surface d'un agent fluide (22) solidifiable au moyen d'un agent de solidification de manière à former l'objet (30) à partir de strates solidifiées superposées (30a, 30b, 30c), ce procédé comprenant les étapes consistant à :
prendre une masse de l'agent fluide (22),
appliquer sélectivement un agent de solidification (26) en une surface désignée (23) de l'agent fluide (22) afin de former une strate solidifiée sur les strates précédemment solidifiées formant l'objet (30) en formation, et
déplacer l'objet (30) en formation par pas progressifs en éloignement de cette surface désignée (23) afin de permettre l'introduction d'agent fluide neuf pour solidification sélective après chaque déplacement pas à pas,
procédé caractérisé en ce que :
à chaque déplacement pas à pas de l'ob-



- jet (30) en formation jusqu'au niveau requis pour la solidification sélective de la couche de surface de l'agent fluide neuf introduit, on inclut un incrément initial de déplacement de la dernière strate formée en éloignement de ladite surface désignée (23) jusqu'à un niveau situé au-delà dudit niveau requis.
2. Un procédé selon la revendication 1, dans lequel l'application sélective de l'agent de solidification comprend l'étape consistant à diriger un faisceau de l'agent de solidification vers ladite surface désignée et sur celle-ci, en conformité avec un motif graphique choisi.
 3. Un procédé selon la revendication 1, dans lequel l'application sélective de l'agent de solidification comporte l'étape consistant à diriger l'agent de solidification en direction de ladite surface désignée et à masquer cette surface désignée avec un masque définissant un motif graphique choisi afin de contrôler sélectivement la manière dont l'agent de solidification frappe la surface désignée.
 4. Un procédé selon la revendication 2, dans lequel ledit faisceau est un faisceau de lumière.
 5. Un procédé selon la revendication 4, dans lequel ladite lumière est une lumière ultraviolette.
 6. Un procédé selon la revendication 2, dans lequel ledit faisceau est un faisceau de particules à haute énergie.
 7. Un procédé selon la revendication 2, dans lequel ledit faisceau est un faisceau d'électrons.
 8. Un procédé selon la revendication 2, dans lequel ledit faisceau est un faisceau de rayons X.
 9. Un procédé selon la revendication 2, dans lequel ledit faisceau est un jet d'une matière qui réagit chimiquement avec ledit agent fluide solidifiable.
 10. Un procédé selon la revendication 1 ou 3, dans lequel ledit agent de solidification est la lumière.
 11. Un procédé selon la revendication 10, dans lequel la lumière est une lumière ultraviolette.
 12. Un procédé selon la revendication 1 ou 3, dans lequel ledit agent de solidification comporte des particules à haute énergie qui bombardent l'agent fluide.
 13. Un procédé selon la revendication 1 ou 3, dans lequel ledit agent de solidification comporte des rayons X.
 14. Un procédé selon la revendication 1 ou 3, dans lequel l'agent de solidification comporte une matière qui réagit chimiquement avec ledit agent fluide solidifiable.
 15. Un procédé selon la revendication 1, dans lequel l'application sélective de l'agent de solidification comprend l'étape consistant à afficher un motif graphique choisi sur un tube cathodique pour transfert sur ladite surface désignée.
 16. Un procédé selon l'une des revendications précédentes, comprenant en outre l'étape consistant à déplacer un volume de l'agent fluide afin de maintenir la surface désignée à un niveau prédéterminé.
 17. Un procédé selon la revendication 16, comprenant l'étape consistant à détecter le niveau de la surface de l'agent fluide afin de contrôler le déplacement dudit volume.
 18. Un procédé selon l'une des revendications 1 à 15, dans lequel ladite surface désignée est une surface inférieure de l'agent fluide solidifiable et lesdits pas progressifs sont dirigés vers le haut.
 19. Un procédé selon la revendication 18, dans lequel ledit conteneur contient un fluide qui est non réactif avec ledit agent fluide, qui est non miscible avec cet agent fluide et sur lequel flotte cet agent fluide.
 20. Un procédé selon la revendication 19, dans lequel ledit fluide non miscible avec l'agent fluide est l'eau lourde ou l'éthylèneglycol.
 21. Un dispositif pour réaliser un objet tridimensionnel (30) par solidification sélective d'une couche de surface d'un agent fluide (22) solidifiable au moyen d'un agent de solidification de manière à former l'objet (30) à partir de strates solidifiées superposées (30a, 30b, 30c), ce dispositif comprenant :
un conteneur (21) recevant l'agent fluide (22),
des moyens pour appliquer sélectivement



un agent de solidification en une surface désignée (23) de l'agent fluide (22) afin de former une strate solidifiée,

des moyens de support (29), montés de manière à se déplacer par rapport à ladite surface désignée afin de supporter un objet (30) en formation, et

des moyens de commande (28) pour déplacer ces moyens de support par pas progressifs en éloignement de ladite surface afin de permettre l'introduction d'agent fluide neuf pour solidification sélective après chaque déplacement pas à pas,

dispositif caractérisé en ce que :

les moyens de commande sont programmés de manière à inclure, dans chaque mouvement pas à pas des moyens de support, jusqu'au niveau requis pour la solidification sélective de l'agent fluide neuf introduit, un incrément initial de déplacement en éloignement de ladite surface désignée jusqu'à un niveau situé au-delà dudit niveau requis.

22. Un dispositif selon la revendication 21, dans lequel les moyens pour appliquer sélectivement un agent de solidification comprennent des moyens pour diriger un faisceau de l'agent de solidification vers ladite surface désignée et sur celle-ci, en conformité avec un motif graphique choisi.
23. Un dispositif selon la revendication 21, dans lequel les moyens pour appliquer sélectivement un agent de solidification comprennent des moyens pour diriger l'agent de solidification en direction de la surface désignée et un masque définissant un motif graphique choisi afin de contrôler sélectivement la façon dont l'agent de solidification frappe ladite surface désignée.
24. Un dispositif selon la revendication 22, dans lequel les moyens pour diriger un faisceau produisent un faisceau de lumière.
25. Un dispositif selon la revendication 24, dans lequel la lumière est une lumière ultraviolette.
26. Un dispositif selon la revendication 22, dans lequel les moyens pour diriger un faisceau produisent un faisceau de particules à haute énergie.
27. Un dispositif selon la revendication 22, dans lequel les moyens pour diriger un faisceau produisent un faisceau d'électrons.

28. Un dispositif selon la revendication 22, selon lequel les moyens pour diriger un faisceau produisent un faisceau de rayons X.

29. Un dispositif selon la revendication 22, dans lequel les moyens pour produire un faisceau produisent un jet d'une matière qui réagit chimiquement avec ledit agent fluide solidifiable.
30. Un dispositif selon la revendication 21 ou 23, dans lequel ledit agent de solidification est la lumière.
31. Un dispositif selon la revendication 30, dans lequel la lumière est une lumière ultraviolette.
32. Un dispositif selon la revendication 21 ou 23, dans lequel l'agent de solidification comporte des particules à haute énergie qui bombardent l'agent fluide.
33. Un dispositif selon la revendication 21 ou 23, dans lequel l'agent de solidification comporte des rayons X.
34. Un dispositif selon la revendication 21 ou 23, dans lequel l'agent de solidification comporte une matière qui réagit chimiquement avec ledit agent fluide solidifiable.
35. Un dispositif selon la revendication 21, dans lequel les moyens pour appliquer sélectivement ledit agent de solidification comprennent un tube cathodique sur lequel un motif graphique choisi est affiché pour transfert sur ladite surface désignée.
36. Un dispositif selon l'une des revendications 21 à 35, comprenant en outre des moyens actionnables de manière à déplacer un volume de l'agent fluide afin de maintenir la surface désignée à un niveau prédéterminé.
37. Un dispositif selon la revendication 36, comprenant en outre des moyens pour détecter le niveau de la surface de l'agent fluide et actionnables de manière à commander les moyens de déplacement de volume.
38. Un dispositif selon l'une des revendications 21 à 34, dans lequel ledit récipient contient ledit agent fluide solidifiable ainsi qu'un fluide qui est non réactif avec ledit agent de solidification, qui est non miscible avec ledit agent fluide et sur lequel flotte cet agent fluide, et dans lequel ladite surface désignée est la surface inférieure de l'agent fluide solidifiable et lesdits pas progressifs sont dirigés vers le



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haut.

39. Un dispositif selon la revendication 38, dans lequel ledit fluide non miscible avec ledit agent fluide est l'eau lourde ou l'éthylèneglycol.

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40. Un dispositif selon l'une des revendications 21 à 39, dans lequel lesdits moyens de support comprennent des moyens procurant un degré supplémentaire de liberté de déplacement de ces moyens de support afin d'autoriser un changement d'orientation de l'objet en formation par rapport à ladite surface désignée.

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