CLAIMS

1. Process for dispensing a flowable material comprising a volatile solvent into a mold, in particular a material for forming an ophthalmic lens, e.g. a contact lens, the process comprising the steps of:

- providing a mold;

- providing a dispensing means (40,41,42);

- arranging the mold underneath the dispensing means (40,41,42);

- dispensing the flowable material comprising the volatile solvent into the mold, the step of dispensing being performed in a local gas atmosphere substantially preventing the solvent from evaporating from the flowable material,

characterized in that

- the local gas atmosphere is provided in the interior (10) of a housing (1) where the dispensing means (40) is arranged and where the step of dispensing the flowable material into the mold is performed

- means (12) are provided for measuring the oxygen content in the interior (10) of the housing (1), and means for venting the interior of the housing with an inert gas in case the measured oxygen content exceeds a predetermined threshold.

2. Process according to claim 1, wherein after dispensing the flowable material the mold is closed, and wherein during the step of dispensing until after the closing of the mold the flowable material is exposed only to the said local gas atmosphere.

3. Process according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the local gas atmosphere comprises an inert gas and an amount of the solvent which is chosen such that the local gas atmosphere is nonexplosive.

4. Process according to claim 3, wherein the local gas atmosphere comprises a relative solvent dampness which is more than 50%, preferably more than 70%, and even more preferably more than 90%.

5. Process according to claim 3 or claim 4, wherein the amount of the solvent contained in the local gas atmosphere is chosen such that it is at least 10% below the lower explosive limit, more preferably at least 30% below the lower explosive limit, and even more preferably at least 50% below the lower explosive limit.

6. Process according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the step of closing the mold is also performed in the interior (10) of the housing (1) where the local gas atmosphere is provided.

7. Process according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the solvent is propanol.

8. Process according to any one of claims 3 to 7, wherein the inert gas is nitrogen.

9. Apparatus for dispensing a flowable material comprising a volatile solvent into a mold, in particular a material for forming an ophthalmic lens, e.g. a contact lens, the apparatus comprising:

- dispensing means (40,41,42) for dispensing the flowable material into the mold
- means for arranging the mold underneath the dispensing means (40,41,42)
- means (100) for providing a local gas atmosphere substantially preventing the solvent from evaporating from the flowable material,

characterized in that the means for providing the local gas atmosphere comprises a housing (1) in the interior (10) of which at least the dispensing means (40,41,42) are arranged, and in that the apparatus comprises means (12) for measuring the oxygen content in the interior (10) of the housing (1), and means for venting the interior of the housing with an inert gas in case the measured oxygen content exceeds a predetermined threshold.

10. Apparatus according to claim 9, further comprising means (50, 60) for closing the mold, wherein the dispensing means (40,41,42), the mold and the means (50, 60) for closing the mold are arranged and/or designed such that the flowable material is exposed only to the said local gas atmosphere from the dispensing of the flowable material until after the closing of the mold.

11. Apparatus according to any one of claims 9 or 10, wherein the means (50, 60) for closing the mold are also arranged in the interior of the housing where the local gas atmosphere is provided.

12. Apparatus according to any one of claims 9 to 11, further comprising an inlet gate (2) and an outlet gate (3), the respective gate (2, 3) forming a border (21, 31) between an outer atmosphere and the local gas atmosphere provided in the interior of the housing.