

Bistable Microlens Array Using Ferroelectric Liquid Crystals

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ABSTRACT

Fast switching ferroelectric liquid crystal microlens arrays have been fabricated using the process of anisotropic phase separation of liquid crystal from its solution in an ultra-violet curable prepolymer. The microlenses can be electrically controlled to modulate the transmitted light and change their focal length within few microseconds, i.e., ~ 1000 times faster than the nematic liquid crystal based microlenses. These microlenses also exhibit the memory effect.

INTRODUCTION

A number of attempts have been made to construct liquid crystal (LC) based real-time reconfigurable microlens array^{1,2} to perform real-time optical interconnection in optical computing and photonic switching circuit. The technology required to realize such active microlens is fundamentally different from that used in passive devices built using surface relief structures³⁻⁵. Methods employed in the previous studies to build electrically controllable microlens array include (i) a combination of passive solid state lens array and a LC modulator⁶ and (ii) gradient refractive index (GRI) profile of liquid crystal (LC) produced with axially symmetric electric field generated by specially designed electrode patterns for each microlens^{1,2}.

Recently, a new type of switchable microlens array using nematic LC (NLC) has been fabricated using the phase separation method⁷. The microlenses in these arrays are switchable on command and have variable focal length which depends on the applied field. The switching time,

however, is of the order of 100 ms due to the intrinsic speed of nematic LCs. These speeds are slow in the range of the speeds required for application in optical communication or wavefront shaping devices.

In this report, we report construction of a switchable microlens arrays which use ferroelectric liquid crystal (FLC). The microlenses can be switched bistably with speeds of a few microseconds, i.e., nearly 1000 times faster than that of microlens incorporating NLCs.

EXPERIMENTAL

The materials used in this study are commercial FLC Felix 15-100 from Clariant and photocurable prepolymer NOA65 from Norland. The ordinary n_o and extraordinary n_e refractive indices of the Felix 15-100 at room temperature are 1.490 and 1.664, respectively, at 590 nm. The refractive index of the cured NOA 65 n_p is 1.524 lies in the middle of the values of FLC's indices of refraction. To align the FLC, cells are made using substrates coated with rubbed films of Nylon 6 (N6). The N6 film was unidirectionally rubbed after drying to achieve homogeneous LC alignment. Cell spacing is controlled with the use of glass spacers of 3 μm diameter. A solution of the LC and prepolymer with weight ratio of 60:40, respectively, is introduced in to the cell by capillary action at a temperature higher than the clearing point of the FLC. The cells are exposed to UV light of $\lambda = 350$ nm to initiate polymerization. The source of UV light is a Xenon lamp operated at 300 W of electrical power.

As reported⁸ previously, when a cell filled with a mixture of LC and prepolymer is exposed to normally incident UV light, an intensity gradient in the (z-) direction perpendicular to the cell is

switching times of FLC microlenses are about 1000 times faster than the NLC microlenses. We believe that these devices will find applications in optical communications technology in near future.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To summarize, two-dimensional FLC microlens arrays have been fabricated using the method of 3-dimensional anisotropic phase separation of FLC from its solution in a UV curable prepolymer. The switching time is found to be three orders of magnitude faster than for similar devices built using nematic liquid crystals. Furthermore, the FLCs exhibit the memory effect.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported from Information Display R&D Center, one of the 21st Century Frontier R&D Program funded by the Ministry of Science and Technology of Korean government.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<p>LCTp1 - 5 Optical Compensation of an MVA-LCD with Circular Polarizers 121 <i>T. Houryu, Y. Iwamoto*, Y. Iimura</i> <i>Tokyo Univ. of A&T, Japan</i> <i>*Stanley Elec., Japan</i></p>	<p>LCTp3 - 2 Resolution Improvement of Projection Images in Vertically Aligned Ferroelectric Liquid Crystal Devices with Surface Relief Gratings 161 <i>C.-J. Yu, Y. Choi, S.-D. Lee</i> <i>Seoul Nat. Univ., Korea</i></p>
<p>LCTp1 - 6 Optical Compensation Method of In-Plane Switching Twisted Nematic Mode 125 <i>S. Oka, K. Kobayashi, Y. Iwamoto*, Y. Toko*, M. Kimura, T. Akahane</i> <i>Nagaoka Univ. of Tech., Japan</i> <i>*Stanley Elec., Japan</i></p>	<p>LCTp3 - 3 Bistable Microlens Array Using Ferroelectric Liquid Crystals 165 <i>H.-G. Lee, J.-W. Jung, J.-H. Kim</i> <i>Hallym Univ., Korea</i></p>
<p>LCTp1 - 7 Influence of Inter-Data Line Crosstalk on Viewing Characteristics for LCDs 129 <i>S.-I. Yoon, S.-H. Yoon*, M.-W. Choi, J.-H. Lee, C.-S. Lee*, J.-W. Kim, H.-J. Yoon, T. Won</i> <i>Inha Univ., Korea</i> <i>*Sanayi Sys., Korea</i></p>	<p>LCTp3 - 4 Study on the Pretransition Effect of Antiferroelectric LCD 169 <i>S. M. An, C. G. Jhun, S. O. Moon, G.-D. Lee, T.-H. Yoon, J. C. Kim</i> <i>Pusan Nat. Univ., Korea</i></p>
<p>LCTp1 - 8 Analysis of Diffraction Efficiency of Holographic Polymer Dispersed Liquid Crystal for Polarization Converting Device 133 <i>A. Ogiwara, K. Sogou, M. Takeda</i> <i>Takamatsu Nat. College of Tech., Japan</i></p>	<p>9:30 - 12:00 Poster/Al Room (Room 203+204) Poster LCTp4: LC Alignment</p>
<p>LCTp1 - 9 Fabrication of Transmission Holographic Polymer Dispersed Liquid Crystal Based on Noncrosslinked Polymers 137 <i>E. H. Kim, J. Y. Woo, B. K. Kim</i> <i>Pusan Nat. Univ., Korea</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>See Late News (p. 1645)</i></p>	<p>LCTp4 - 1 Novel Phase Transition from Vertical Alignment to Optically Compensated Splay 173 <i>S. J. Kim*, H. Y. Kim**, S. H. Hong**, S. Y. Kim**, Y. J. Lim**, S. H. Lee*</i> <i>*Chonbuk Nat. Univ., Korea</i> <i>**BOE-HYDIS Tech., Korea</i></p>
<p>9:30 - 12:00 Poster/Al Room (Room 203+204) Poster LCTp2: Reflective LCDs</p>	<p>LCTp4 - 2 Sensitizing Effect and Dichroic Ratio of Fluorescent Nematic Liquid Crystals 177 <i>R. Yamaguchi, D. Hiroshima, S. Sato</i> <i>Akita Univ., Japan</i></p>
<p>LCTp2 - 1 Reduced Power Consumption in a Single-Polarizer Reflective TN-LCD with Two Retardation Films 141 <i>S. Yunoki, H. Hando, Y. Sakamoto, I. Fukuda</i> <i>Kanazawa Inst. of Tech., Japan</i></p>	<p>LCTp4 - 3 Anchoring Properties of Photoaligned Azo Dye Materials 181 <i>V. Chigrinov, A. Muravski, H. S. Kwok, H. Takada*, H. Akiyama*, H. Takatsu*</i> <i>Hong Kong Univ. of Sci. & Tech., Hong Kong</i> <i>*Dainippon Ink & Chems., Japan</i></p>
<p>LCTp2 - 2 Optical Characteristics of Reflective HAN Mode TFT-LCDs 145 <i>Y.-I. Park, D.-H. Suh, J.-D. Noh, W.-G. Lee, G. Son, J.-Y. Lee</i> <i>BOE-HYDIS Tech., Korea</i></p>	<p>LCTp4 - 4 Application of Infrared Ellipsometry to Characterize Molecular Orientation of Rubbed Polyimide Films 185 <i>I. Hirosawa</i> <i>Japan Synchrotron Radiation Res. Inst., Japan</i></p>
<p>LCTp2 - 3 Optical Characteristics of Transflective TN Mode TFT-LCDs 149 <i>D.-H. Suh, Y.-I. Park, J.-D. Noh, G. Son, J.-Y. Lee</i> <i>BOE-HYDIS Tech., Korea</i></p>	<p>LCTp4 - 5 New Alignment Method by Imprinting of LC Alignment on Polymer Layers 189 <i>J.-W. Jung, J.-H. Kim</i> <i>Hallym Univ., Korea</i></p>
<p>LCTp2 - 4 Vertically-Aligned Transflective LCD with Patterned Electrodes 153 <i>H. W. Do, S. J. Park, S. H. Lee, G.-D. Lee, T.-H. Yoon, J. C. Kim</i> <i>Pusan Nat. Univ., Korea</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>See Late News (p. 1645)</i></p>	<p>LCTp4 - 6 Dependence of Threshold Behavior upon Surface Distribution of Polymer Chains in a TN-LC Cell 193 <i>J. S. Gwag, T.-M. Kim, G.-D. Lee, J. C. Kim, T.-H. Yoon</i> <i>Pusan Nat. Univ., Korea</i></p>
<p>9:30 - 12:00 Poster/Al Room (Room 203+204) Poster LCTp3: FLC/AFLC</p>	<p>LCTp4 - 7 Azimuthal Anchoring Properties Related to Distribution of Polyimide Chains in a TN-LC Cell 197 <i>J. S. Gwag, J. W. Lee, G.-D. Lee, T.-H. Yoon, J. C. Kim</i> <i>Pusan Nat. Univ., Korea</i></p>
<p>LCTp3 - 1 Pixel-Isolated Liquid Crystal Mode for Flexible Display Applications 157 <i>H.-G. Lee, J.-W. Jung, J.-H. Kim</i> <i>Hallym Univ., Korea</i></p>	