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1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave Blan	k) 2. REPORT DATE 11/2/99		3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED FINAL REPORT 1/95-6/99		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Smart Materials by Extrusion Solid Freeform Fabrication			5. FUNDING NUMBERS DAAH04-95-1-0416		
6. AUTHOR(S) Paul Calvert					
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Department of Materials Science and Engineering, University of Arizona Tucson AZ 85721			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U. S. Army Research Office			10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER		
P.O. Box 12211 Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-2211			ARO 34377.6-MS		
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The views, opinions and/o an official Department of the	or findings contained in this re Army position, policy or decisi	port are those of the on, unless so desig	author(s) anated by oth	nd should not be construed as er documentation.	
12 a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT			12 b. DISTRIBUTION CODE		
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.					
13. ABSTRACT (Maximum 200 words	5)				
Extrusion freeform fabri possible to attain new combinatio biological structures are built lay hydrogels and then mineralize th strong.	ons of properties and to design the er by layer and show excellent ac	ne response of a mate laption of structure to	rial for the loc function. Thi	s method has been used to form	
The approach has also been upolyacrylic acid and crosslinked reservoir which takes up the extra an electrically-driven reversible g then returns to the original state that it provides a large, reversible	uded water without limiting contra el "jack". When a field is appliec when the field is reversed. This i	l contracts in the appli action of the active lay I the sample changes s close to what would	ed field, the o er. This syst thickness by	ther layer acts as a passive, soft em has been adapted to make 10% in about 60 seconds and	
14. SUBJECT TERMS Intelligent Materials, Freeforming, Hydrogels, Artificial Muscle, Bone-like composites				15. NUMBER OF PAGES 5	
				16. PRICE CODE	
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OR REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION ON THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED	19. SECURITY CLAS OF ABSTRACT UNCLASSIF		20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	
NSN 7540-01-280-5500 89) Std. 239-18				Standard Form 298 (Rev.2- Prescribed by ANSI 298-102	
	10	001215	0/2		

19991212 042

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE (SF298) (Continuation Sheet)

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Honors/awards:

Invited speaker: Workshops: BASF, Ludwigshafen; Army Research Office (2), Nashville & Research Triangle; ONR/DARPA, Oxford. Gordon Conference on Biomineralization; MRS Fall invited speaker. Dept. Colloquia: Univ. Kentucky, ORNL, Univ. S. Missisippi, Univ. Cincinnati Visiting Prof.: Sandia Natl Lab. 1995-9

Personnel

P. Calvert (P.I.) Z. Gardlund, Research Prof. Zhengshe Liu, Postdoctoral Fellow S. Boggavarapu, Grad. Student Chad Souvignier, Grad. Student L. Raymond, Grad. Student Jiong Peng, Grad. Student MS 1999 J. Frechette, Christian Harjanto, Haripin Chandra, S. Larkin, J. Amdahl, F. Ma; Undergrads.

Inventions

Patents awarded: U.S. 5,906,863 (25 May 1999), U.S. Patent 5,932,290 (3 August 1999). (concerns related work on freeforming composites with ACR Co.). Patent on robocasting applied for with Sandia Natl. Labs.

Progress and Accomplishments

The last interim report covered the final experimental work, which effectively ceased during the extension period in January 1999. The experimental details of the work are published as listed above. This final report will therefore address the overall accomplishments and what we now see to be the opportunities for further development and application.

Over the last few years, freeform fabrication methods have become a standard part of the design process. The main methods are stereolithography, a laser polymerization of liquid monomer, selective laser sintering of polymer powders and fused deposition modeling using a thermoplastic filament. Each method has drawbacks in terms of speed, precision and mechanical strength of the final product but there is every reason to expect continued improvements. Our own work on freeforming of composite materials has shown how excellent mechanical properties can be obtained from a variant of fused deposition modeling. Under development are methods for ceramics and metals which could have significant impacts respectively on the applicability of ceramics in engine parts and on mold making.

Separate from these issues of freeforming current materials is the question of whether materials can be freeformed that cannot be made in other ways. Functional gradient materials are one obvious example. Another example is materials with embedded sensors and electrical connections. Sandia National Lab. has a strong interest in metal-ceramic parts, for instance. We are currently exploring methods to build fine-scale electrical components in to freeformed parts.

Bone-like composites

The current work included a study of the freeforming of hydrogels followed by their mineralization with apatite or carbonate in analogy with bone and shell formation. The goal was to shed light on the biomineralization process and thereby to develop a route to highly reinforced synthetic composite materials. The chief insight was that very high levels of inorganic material could be produced if a gel were formed containing 95% water, the mineral phase grown in by a diffusion process and then the whole part allowed to dry out. In this way, mineral contents were produced up to 80 vol% and could be taken higher. The resulting materials were tough, strong (up to 90 MPa) and stiff (up to 6 GPa). This is in contrast to conventional short glass-fiber/polymer composite or clay/polymer composite where volume fractions above 40 vol% lead to a crumbly product. Quite why the mineralization approach works so well, is less clear. Blending fibers into gel and then drying it, does not work and we have had no success with formation of silica-polymer hybrids in a swollen state, followed by deswelling. We believe that diffusion-controlled particle growth in polymer is essential to produce a regular spacing of particles that will then allow shrinkage of the intervening gel to make a hard part. These studies of mineralization do shed light on mineralization of synthetic materials in vivo, which is a serious problem, and on newer biomimetic approaches to implant coatings.

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What would the material be good for? A biocompatible implant material is an obvious target. The gelling polymer would need to be biocompatible. The agarose that we have used so far would probably not be suitable. Collagen gels could be used but would be very expensive in the bulk needed for this process. A suitable gelling protein could almost certainly be designed. The aim would be for an implant that was as strong as the woven bone which first forms at a fracture site. If this could be inserted with strong bonding and a good match of properties, the material would be subject to remodeling by osteoclasts and osteoblasts in the normal way that occurs in natural woven bone. The limitation on this application is that many possible bone implants are under development, at this point a novel approach would have to be really compelling to justify the massive investment in animal tests and certification.

Hard composites, with properties intermediate between polymer and glass could be made in this way. So far, we have demonstrated high strength and a high mineral content but the modulus is not as high as we would expect. The material would need to be formed in an inorganic oxide and a synthetic polymer, we now know enough to realize that this will require careful design since simple combinations of acrylates and silica or titania do not work. To build precision parts, a cycle of build, mineralize and deswell would lead to unacceptable distortion during shrinkage. An approach based on building plates which are then machined would be viable. Hard coats for polymers are of great interest. Transparent coats are needed to permit the development of plastic windshields and other plastic optics would currently benefit from better hardcoats. Our materials are not transparent and would need to be nanoscaled to become so. On the other hand, hard coats for plastic gears and other wear parts are also desirable. Some form of dipping process would be necessary.

Muscles

A second aspect of this project was the development of a multilayer gel system which acts like an artificial muscle. Anionic gels will expand in base and shrink in acid. When a field is applied, by electrodes attached to the gel, it bends. The source of the effect is complex but probably results from acid release at the positive electrode and base at the negative electrode. Artificial muscles can be made in this way but a bending action is hard to use with a robotic arm. A simple, electrically driven, contraction of expansion would be more desirable. We showed that this can be achieved by combining two gels. The swollen anionic gel at the positive electrode contracts and the soft neutral gel at the negative electrode responds by taking up the water expelled from the positive side. The combination of stiff anionic gel and soft neutral gel results in an overall expansion in the thickness direction and contraction in the lateral directions. Hence the system will rise and fall under electrical stimulation. This shows that an artificial electrical muscle will be based on a combination of polymers designed to give the desired response, it is a system not a material. The current system is slow because the layers are thick, about 1 cm total when swollen. It is also soft and will not develop much force in this current format. The big advantage over other actuators is that the expansion is large, 10% or more. Compared to other gel approaches, it has the advantage of depending on internal water displacement

How could this material be applied? For speed of response, the scale should be finer and this requires a different chemical system for our deposition approach. The acrylate polymerizations are very air-sensitive and so cannot be done well in thin layers except under nitrogen. We envisage a plate with, for instance alternating stripes of neutral and acid-sensitive gel. The stripes would have individual electrodes. By applying field, the acid stripes would shrink and the neutral stripes swell, generating a series of ridges that would raise the upper surface. Many other geometries are possible. The force will be increased by increasing the density of the gel. Swelling and deswelling may be driven by exchanges of divalent ions rather than by pH. The system in fact has many of the aspects of a battery so that any detailed analysis of the response to applied field must take into account the electrochemical reactions, the ion diffusion processes, binding to the polymer and the establishment of concentration gradients through the system.

The key facts about artificial muscles at the moment are that they are badly needed for robotics and that no suitable system exists. A fine scale combination of at least two polymers and electrodes will be needed to achieve something truly muscle-like.

Technology Transfer

Our extrusion freeforming method is being actively pursued by Advanced Ceramics Research Corp. of Tucson (ACR). We have two joint patents. They have sold a number of extrusion heads as an upgrade to customer's existing Fused Deposition Modelers. They are also offering a service for making ceramic, thermoplastic and composite parts from 3D CAD designs. The method originated from a series of joint projects between the University and ACR and this collaboration continues. The collaboration with Sandia National Labs. continues. Their "Robocasting" variant on our method is being used to make metal-ceramic graded structures.