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Jiang et al.

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(54) **VARIABLE-FOCUS LENS ASSEMBLY**

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This patent is subject to a terminal disclaimer.

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G02B 1/06 (2006.01)
(52) **U.S. Cl.** **359/666; 359/665**
(58) **Field of Classification Search** 359/665-667
See application file for complete search history.

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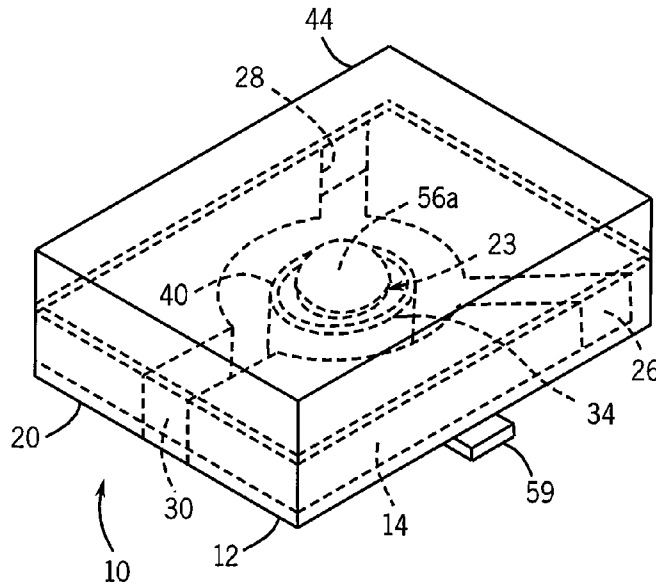
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A variable-focus lens assembly is provided. The lens assembly includes a microfluidic device that defines a chamber for receiving a fluid therein. A slip having an aperture there-through is disposed in the chamber. A first fluid is disposed on the first side of the slip and a second fluid is disposed on the second side of the slip. A lens is formed from the interface of the first and second fluids. The outer periphery is pinned to the slip about the aperture. A turning structure fabricated from a hydrogel material engages the slip and tunes the focal length of the lens in response to a predetermined stimulus.

12 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets



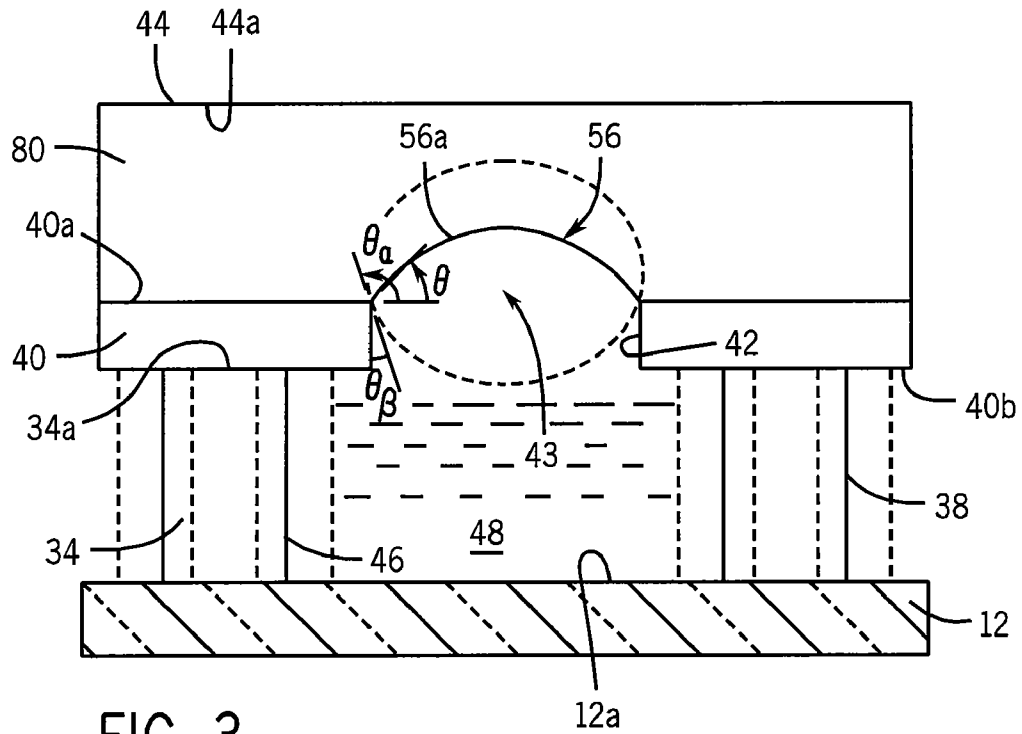


FIG. 3

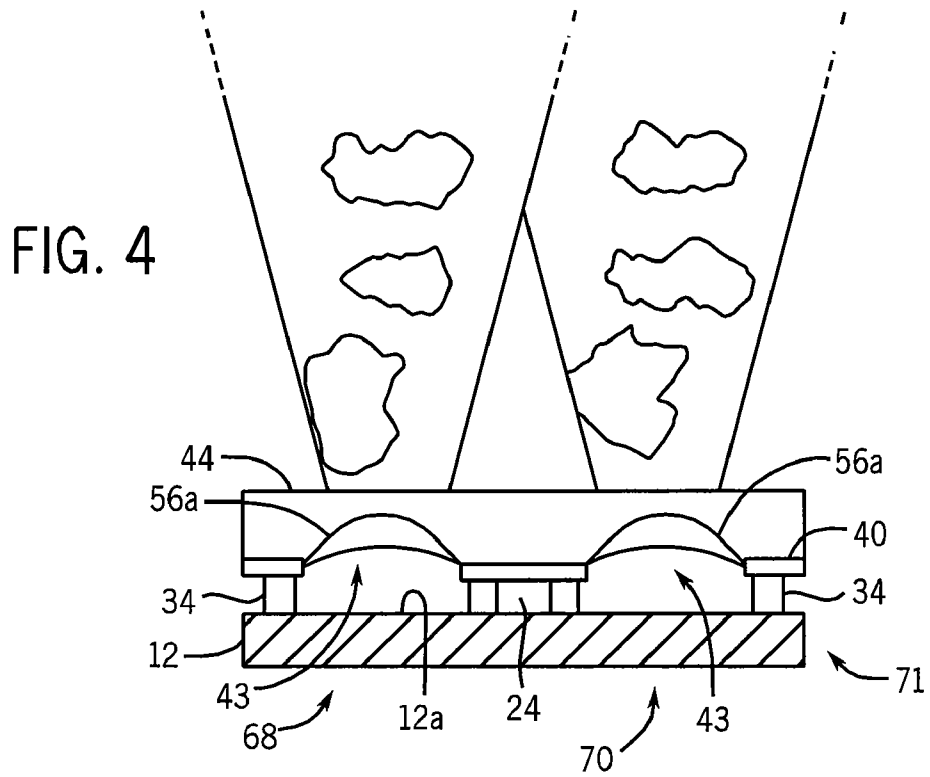
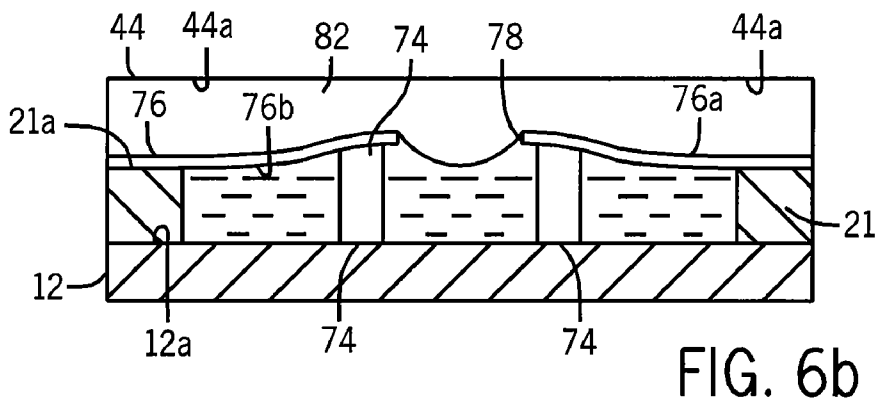
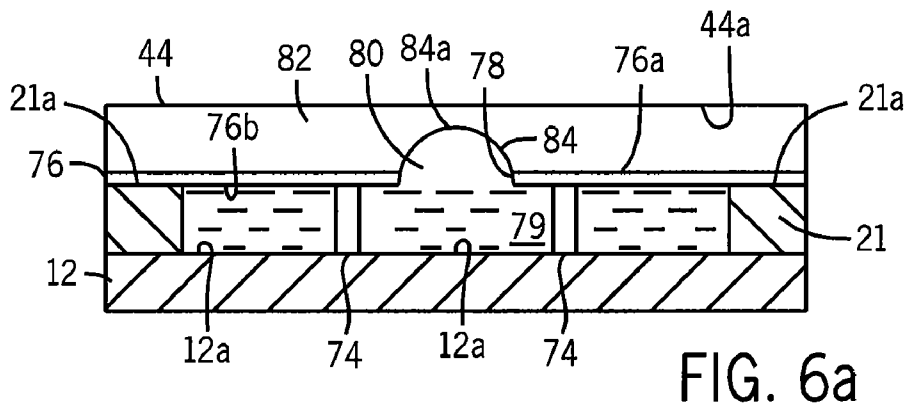
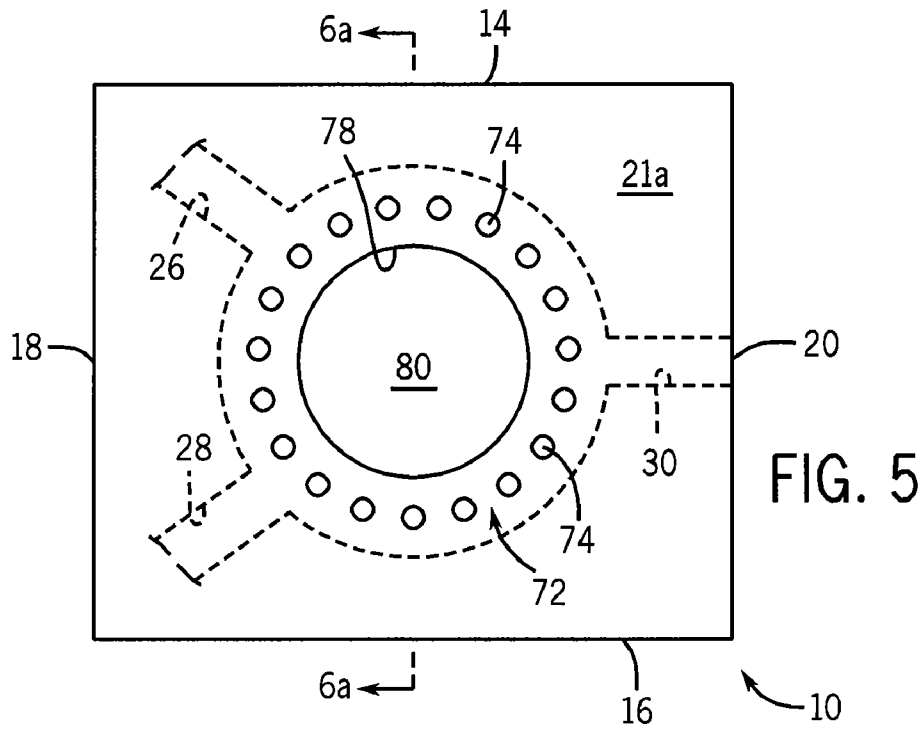
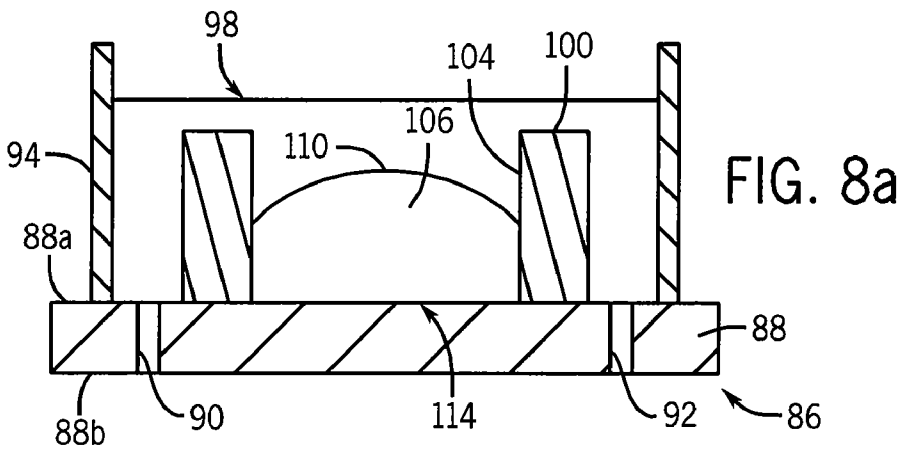
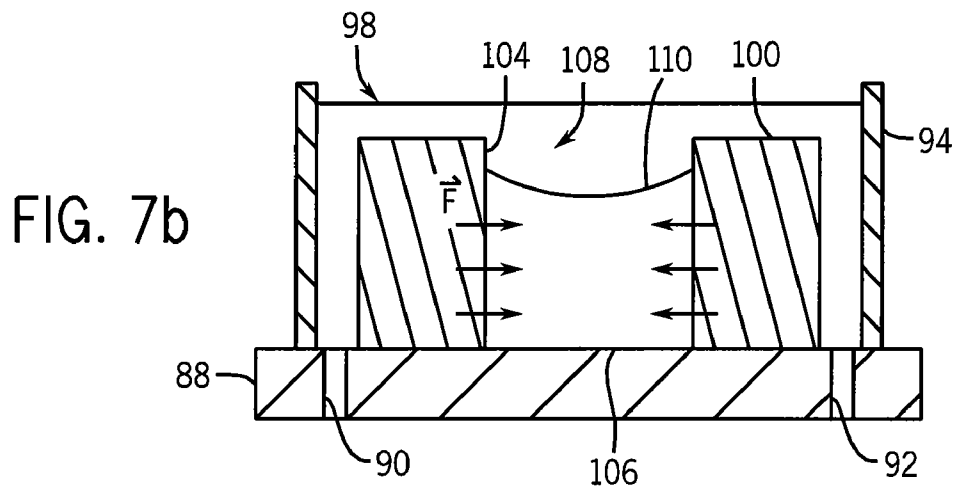
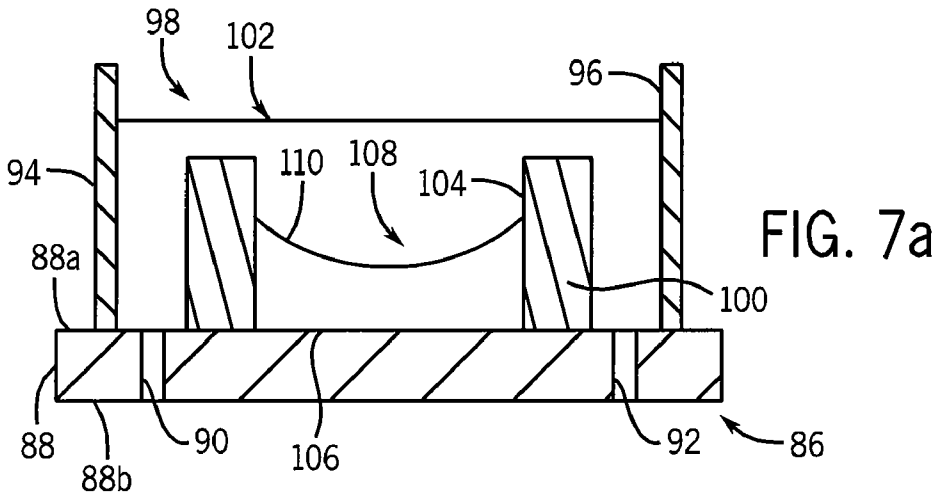


FIG. 4





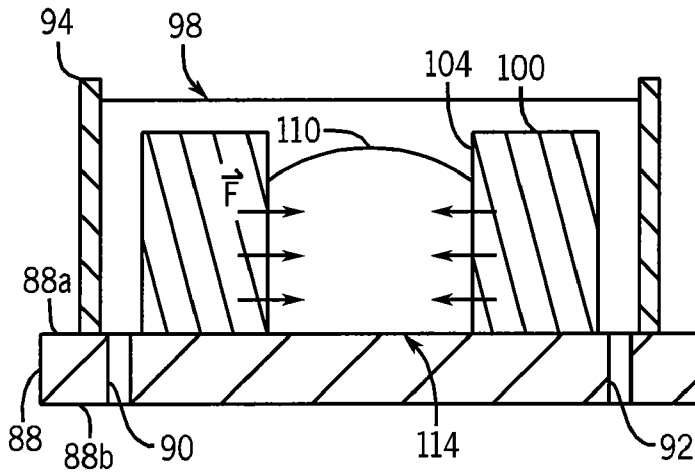


FIG. 8b

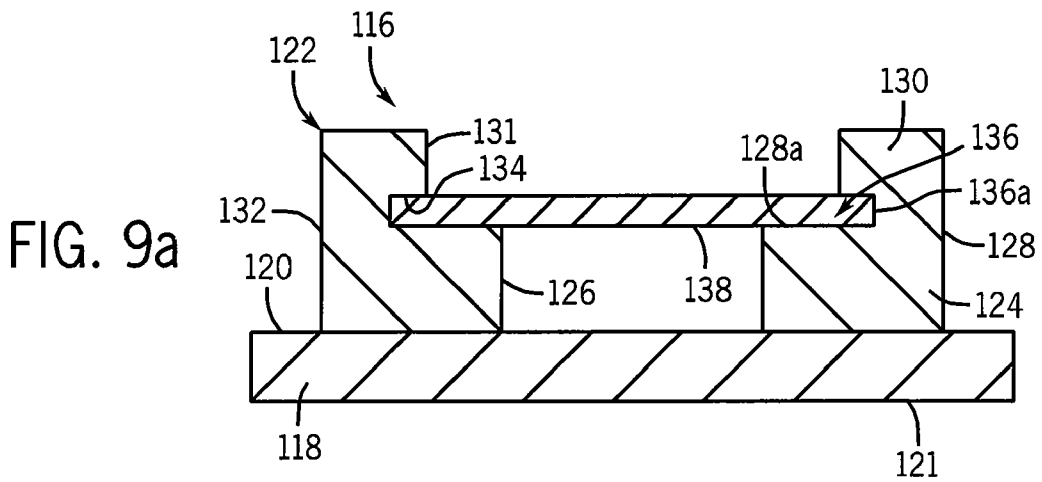


FIG. 9a

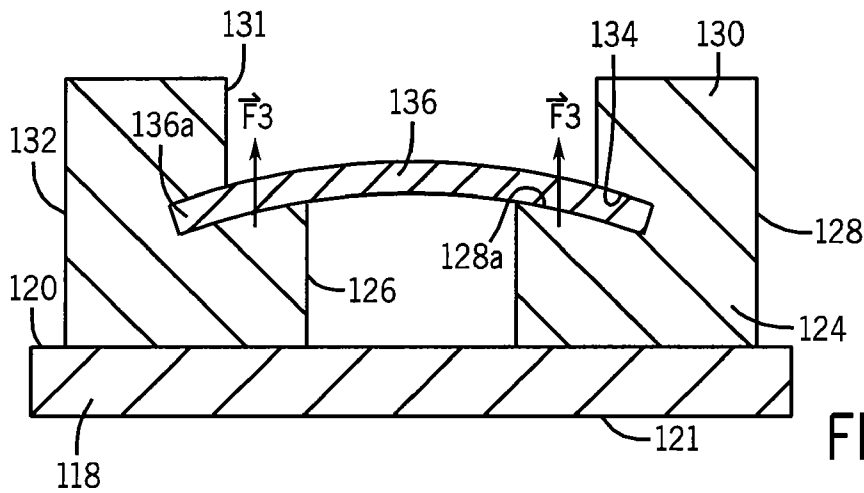


FIG. 9b

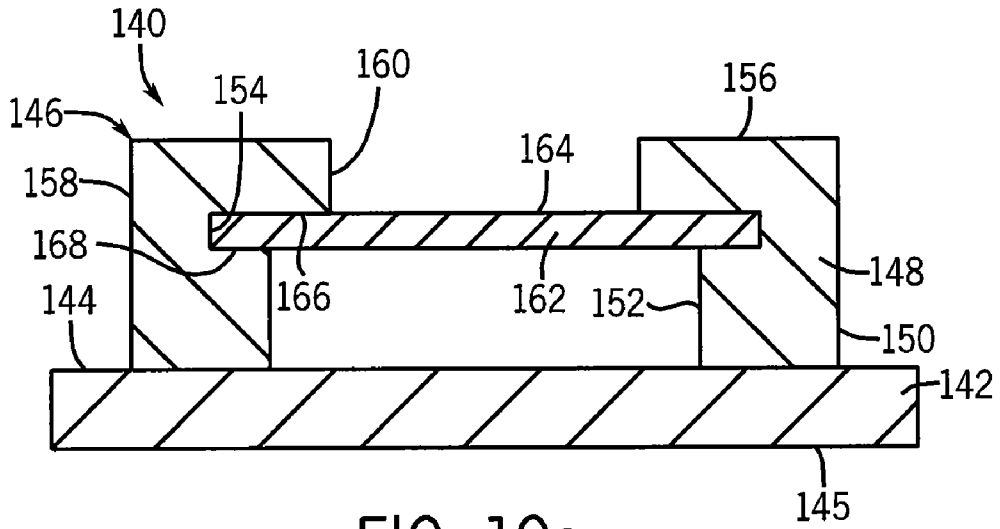


FIG. 10a

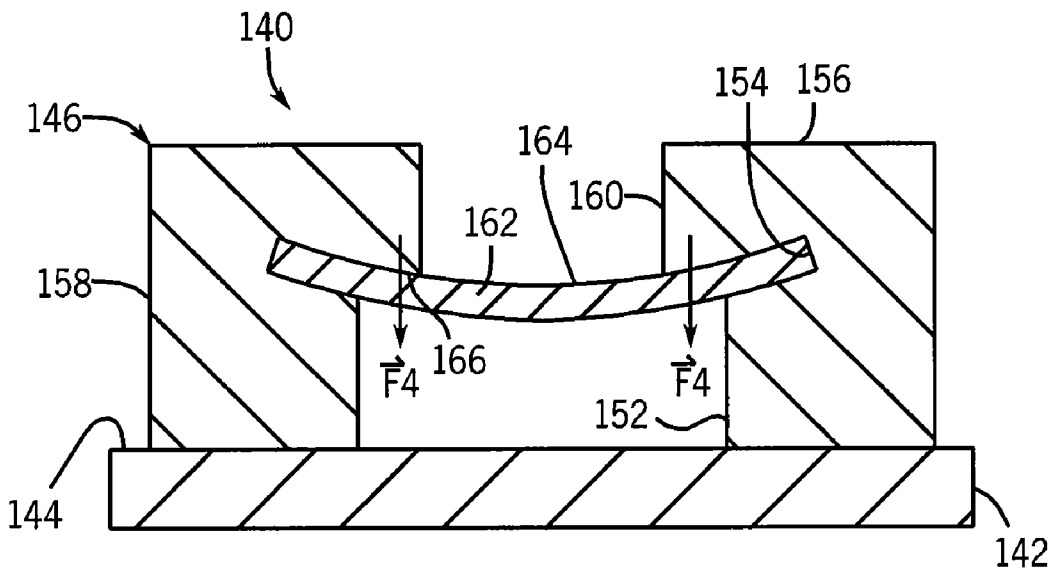


FIG. 10b

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VARIABLE-FOCUS LENS ASSEMBLY**CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION**

This application is a continuation of application Ser. No. 11/442,927 filed May 30, 2006 now U.S. Pat. No. 7,554,743.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates generally to microfluidic devices, and in particular, to a variable-focus optical microlens that is self-regulating and allows for the tuning of the microlens without any external control or power consumption.

BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Traditional man-made optical systems are comprised of multiple lenses wherein one or more of the lenses are physically displaced to realize variable-focus. Nature, however, accomplishes this same function much more elegantly with an individual lens. For example, in the human eye, ciliary muscles are controlled by the body's nervous system, thereby relaxing and contracting the shape of a human eye lens to enable the eye to focus on different distances. Although advancements in miniaturization technologies have led to single microlens embodiments that are widely used in photonics, displays, and biomedical systems, these microlens technologies rely on either fixed focal length or externally-controlled variable-focus microlenses.

By way of example, Berge et. al., U.S. Pat. No. 6,369,953 discloses a variable-focus lens that utilizes a voltage potential to vary the focal length. More specifically, the lens includes a dielectric chamber having a drop of a transparent, insulating liquid deposited on an inner surface thereof. The dielectric chamber is filled with a transparent, conductor liquid. The insulating liquid and the dielectric liquid have different optical indexes and have substantially the same density. A first electrode is placed on the external surface of the wall of the dielectric chamber on which is situated the insulating drop. A second electrode is electrically coupled to the conductor liquid. When a voltage is established between the first and second electrodes, an electric field is created which causes the conductor liquid to move and deform the insulating liquid. This, in turn, results in a variation in the focus of the intersection of the insulating liquid and the conducting liquid, or in other words, the lens.

While functional for their intended purpose, these prior microlenses have certain inherent limitations. For example, prior variable-focus lenses generally have a small tuning range of focal lengths. Further, in order to increase the flexibility in the design and operation of the microlens in various applications, it is highly desirable for the microlens to be responsive to various environmental parameters presented in such applications. However, since the prior microlenses utilize external controls, such self-regulation is not feasible. It must also be noted when the prior microlenses are used to observe a biological sample, the voltage used to manipulate the focal length of the microlens may have an adverse effect on the sample. Consequently, it is highly desirable to provide a variable-focus microlens that is self-regulating and that allows for the tuning of the microlens without any external control or power consumption.

Therefore, it is a primary object and feature of the present invention to provide a variable-focus optical microlens that is autonomously tuned by local environmental parameters.

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It is a further object and feature of the present invention to provide a variable-focus optical microlens that automatically adjusts the focal length thereof without the need for external control systems.

5 It is a still further object and feature of the present invention to provide a variable-focus optical microlens that is compact and easily fabricated.

In accordance with the present invention, a variable-focus lens assembly is provided. The lens assembly includes a slip having first and second sides and an inner wall defining an aperture therethrough. A lens is disposed across the aperture. A hydrogel structure engages the slip. The hydrogel structure is movable between a first configuration wherein the lens has a first focal length and a second configuration wherein the lens has a second focal length in response to a predetermined stimulus.

The variable-focus lens assembly also includes a base and the hydrogel structure is generally ring-shaped and defines a cavity therethrough. The hydrogel structure is disposed between the base and the second side of the slip such that the cavity communicates with the aperture through the slip. Alternatively, the hydrogel structure may include a plurality of circumferentially spaced posts disposed between the base and the second side of the slip about the aperture through the slip.

15 The lens may be fabricated from a transparent film or from first and second layers having an interface. The interface has an outer periphery that is pinned to the inner wall of microfluidic device. It is contemplated for the first layer to be formed from an oil-based fluid and the second layer to be formed from a water-based fluid.

In accordance with a further aspect with the present invention, a variable-focus lens assembly is provided. The lens assembly includes a microfluidic device defining a chamber for receiving a fluid therein. A lens is disposed in the chamber and has a tunable focal length. A tuning structure is provided for tuning the focal length of the lens in response to a predetermined stimulus.

The lens assembly also includes a base and a slip spaced from the base. The slip has an aperture therethrough. The tuning structure includes a hydrogel disposed between the slip and the base. The hydrogel has a configuration alterable between a first configuration wherein the lens has a first focal length and a second configuration wherein the lens has a second focal length in response to the predetermined stimulus. Alternatively, the tuning structure may include a plurality of circumferentially spaced posts disposed between the base and the second side of the slip about the aperture through the slip. Each post has a configuration alterable between a first configuration and a second configuration in response to the predetermined stimulus.

The lens may be fabricated from a transparent film or from first and second layers having an interface. The interface has an outer periphery that is pinned to an inner wall of the slip. It is contemplated for the first layer to be formed from an oil-based fluid and the second layer to be formed from a water-based fluid.

In accordance with a still further aspect of the present invention, a variable-focus lens assembly is provided. The lens assembly includes a microfluidic device defining a chamber for receiving a fluid therein. A slip is disposed in the chamber. The slip has first and second sides and an inner wall defining an aperture therethrough. A first fluid is disposed on the first side of the slip and a second fluid is disposed on the second side of the slip. A lens having a focal length is positioned at the boundary of the first and second fluids. A tuning structure tunes the focal length of the lens in response to a predetermined stimulus.

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The variable-focus lens assembly includes a base spaced from the slip and the tuning structure includes a hydrogel ring disposed between the slip and the base. The ring has a configuration alterable between a first configuration wherein the lens has a first focal length and a second configuration wherein the lens has a second focal length in response to the predetermined stimulus. Alternatively, the tuning structure may include a plurality of circumferentially spaced posts disposed between the base and the second side of the slip about the aperture through the slip. Each post has a configuration alterable between a first configuration and a second configuration in response to the predetermined stimulus.

The lens may be fabricated from a transparent film or from first and second layers having an interface. The interface has an outer periphery that is pinned to the inner wall of the slip. It is contemplated for the first layer to be formed from an oil-based fluid and the second layer to be formed from a water-based fluid.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The drawings furnished herewith illustrate a preferred methodology of the present invention in which the above advantages and features are clearly disclosed as well as others which will be readily understood from the following description of the illustrated embodiment.

In the drawings:

FIG. 1 is an isometric view of a microfluidic device incorporating a microlens in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 2 is a top plan view, partially in section, showing the microfluidic device of FIG. 1;

FIG. 3 is a cross-sectional view of the microfluidic device incorporating the microlens of the present invention taken along line 3-3 of FIG. 2

FIG. 4 is an alternate embodiment of a microfluidic device incorporating multiple microlenses in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 5 is a top plan view, partially in section, showing a microfluidic device incorporating a second embodiment of the microlens in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 6a is a cross-sectional view of the microfluidic device taken along line 6a-6a of FIG. 5 wherein the microlens has a first configuration;

FIG. 6b is a cross-sectional view, similar to FIG. 6a, wherein the microlens has a second configuration;

FIG. 7a is a side elevational view of a third embodiment of a microlens in accordance with the present invention having a first configuration;

FIG. 7b is a side elevational view of the microlens of FIG. 7a having a second configuration;

FIG. 8a is a side elevational view of a fourth embodiment of a microlens in accordance with the present invention having a first configuration;

FIG. 8b is a side elevational view of the microlens of FIG. 8a having a second configuration;

FIG. 9a is a side elevational view of a fifth embodiment of a microlens in accordance with the present invention having a first configuration;

FIG. 9b is a side elevational view of the microlens of FIG. 9a having a second configuration;

FIG. 10a is a side elevational view of a sixth embodiment of a microfluidic device of the present invention having a first configuration; and

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FIG. 10b is a cross-sectional view of the microlens of FIG. 10a having a second configuration.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Referring to FIGS. 1-3, a microfluidic device incorporating a first embodiment of a microlens in accordance with the present invention is generally designated by reference numeral 10. Microfluidic device 10 includes substrate 12 and is defined by first and second sides 14 and 16, respectively, and first and second ends 18 and 20, respectively. As described, microfluidic device 10 has a generally rectangular, box-like configuration. However, it can be appreciated that microfluidic device 10 may have other configurations without deviating from the scope of the present invention.

Microfluidic device 10 further includes cartridge 21, FIGS. 5-6b, is deposited on substrate 12 and filled with a liquid photopolymer. A mask, corresponding in size and shape to a desired channel network 22, is positioned between cartridge 21 and an ultraviolet light source. Ultraviolet light is directed toward the liquid photopolymer such that a portion of the liquid photopolymer exposed to the ultraviolet light solidifies. Thereafter, the portion of the photopolymer that remains in a liquid state is flushed from the cartridge leaving channel network 22 within microfluidic device 10.

As best seen in FIGS. 1-2, channel network 22 includes central cavity 24 having a plurality of spokes 26, 28, and 30 extending radially therefrom. Spokes 26, 28 and 30 allow for fluid to enter into and flow through the central cavity 24 of channel network 22. It is contemplated for microlens 23 to be fabricated in central cavity 24, as hereinafter described. Microlens 23 includes hydrogel ring 34 photopatterned, as heretofore described, on upper surface 12a of substrate 12 within central cavity 24 of channel network 22. As is known, stimuli-responsive hydrogels expand and contract in response to predetermined environmental parameters such as pH, temperature, light, electric fields and antigens.

In a first embodiment, polymer jacket 36 may be polymerized about the outer periphery 38 of hydrogel ring 34, FIG. 2, for reasons hereinafter described. Slip 40 is positioned on upper end 34a of hydrogel ring 34 and upper surface 21a of cartridge 21. Slip 40 includes inner surface 42 defining aperture 43 therethrough. Glass cover 44 is positioned over cartridge 21 so as to isolate channel network 22 from the environment external of microfluidic device 10. As described, inner surface 46 of hydrogel ring 34 defines water receiving cavity 48 within microfluidic device 10. Inner surface 44a of glass cover 44 partially defines oil receiving cavity 50 within microfluidic device 10. Water receiving cavity 48 and oil receiving cavity 50 communicate through aperture 43 in slip 40.

Inner surface 42 of slip 40 is patterned so as to utilize surface chemistry to render inner surface 42 and bottom surface 40b of slip 40 hydrophilic, and to render upper surface 40a of slip 40 hydrophobic, FIG. 3. As hereinafter described, liquid microlens 23 of the present invention is formed via a pinned water-oil interface 56 defining a liquid meniscus generally designated by the reference numeral 56a along the hydrophobic-hydrophilic contact line. While not depicted, it is also contemplated as within the scope of the present invention to provide a transparent film at water-oil interface 56 to act as the microlens. The outer periphery of the film may be pinned to inner wall 42 of slip 40. As such, as the shape of water-oil interface 56 changes, the shape, and hence the focal length, of the film is changed accordingly.

When hydrogel ring 34 is exposed to a predetermined stimulus, ring 34 expands or contracts by absorbing and

releasing water, respectively, via the hydrogel network interstitials. The expansion and contraction of hydrogel ring **34** is depicted in phantom in FIG. **3**. This, in turn, results in a volume change in the water deposited in water receiving cavity **48** defined by inner surface **42** of hydrogel ring **34**. The net physical volume change in both the inside periphery of hydrogel ring **34** and the water received in cavity **48** causes a change in the pressure difference across the water-oil interface (P), which directly determines the shape of liquid meniscus **56a**, shown in phantom in FIG. **3**. The stationary pinned contact line translates a change in the water volume in water receiving cavity **48** into a change in the contact angle of the liquid meniscus (θ), and thus, the focal length of the microlens. Contact angle θ of liquid meniscus **56a** may attain any value in the interval $-(90^\circ - \theta_\beta) \leq \theta \leq \theta_\alpha$ by varying the pressure difference P across water-oil interface **56**, wherein θ_α is the water contact angle with upper surface **44** of slip **40** and θ_β is the water contact angles on upper and lower surfaces **40a** and **40b**, respectively, of slip **40**.

In order to fabricate a temperature-sensitive smart liquid microlens, it is contemplated for hydrogel ring **34** to be made from a hydrogel that expands at low temperatures and contracts at high temperatures with a volume transition at a predetermined temperature, e.g. approximately 32° C. The expansion and contraction of hydrogel ring **34** only occurs within the inner periphery of the ring because of the physical restraint provided by the polymer jacket **36**, FIG. **2**. At low temperatures, liquid meniscus **56a** grows because the added physical volume of hydrogel ring **34** is larger than the volume of the water in the middle of ring **34** lost to absorption by the hydrogel. At high temperatures, liquid meniscus **56a** retreats because the water released from physical shrinking of the hydrogel is unable to compensate for the decrease in the physical volume of hydrogel ring **34**. The difference between the physical volume changes of the hydrogel and the volume changes in water outside of the hydrogel is due to the different amount and structure of bound and free water within a swollen and a collapsed hydrogel.

As the temperature increases, microlens **23** changes from a divergent to a convergent lens, and the focal length is tuned from several millimeters to infinity in both positive and negative focal lengths. It is contemplated to use external heater **59** positioned against the lower surface **12b** of substrate **12** to change the local environmental temperature. However, other types of heating units may be used to change the environmental temperature within microfluidic device **10** without deviating from the scope of the present invention.

Alternatively, it can be appreciated that hydrogel ring **34** may be fabricated from a hydrogel that is sensitive to the local environmental parameter such as pH. As such, by eliminating polymer jacket **36**, FIG. **3**, outside periphery **38** of hydrogel ring **34** can be exposed to various pH buffers provided in central cavity **24** through spokes **26**, **28** and **30** such that the volume of the inner periphery of hydrogel ring **34** may be controlled.

Referring to FIG. **4**, it is contemplated to extend the single liquid microlens concept shown in FIGS. **1-3**, supra., to a microlens array, wherein each microlens is responsible for a predetermined area of a visual field across which an object is moving. By way of example, first and second microlenses **68** and **70**, respectively, are fabricated in a single central cavity of a microfluidic device **71** to dynamically monitor two areas of the visual field. Except as hereinafter provided, first and second microlenses **68** and **70**, respectively, are identical in structure to microlens **23**. More specifically, first and second microlenses **68** and **70**, respectively, are fabricated from hydrogels that exhibit opposite responses to the same pH

environment. For example, hydrogel ring **34** of microlens **68** expands at low pH and contracts at high pH with a predetermined volume transition point, e.g., pH 7.5. Hydrogel ring **34** of second microlens **70** expands at high pH and contracts at low pH with a predetermined volume transition point, e.g. 7.5.

Initially, an initial high pH buffer is flowed into central cavity **24** of channel network **22**. Thereafter, by replacing the initial high pH buffer with a low pH buffer, liquid meniscus **56a** of first microlens **68** gradually bows up so as to move the focal plane closer to aperture **43** in slip **40** of first microlens **68**, while second microlens **70** exhibits the opposite effect such that liquid meniscus **56a** of second microlens **70** moves the focal plane further away from aperture **43** in slip **40** of second microlens **70**. The object planes of first and second microlens **68** and **70**, respectively, correspondingly move in space following the change of the focal lengths. As described, the liquid microlens array not only mimics the function of the compound eye to monitor different areas of a visual field, but is superior to the compound eye due to the variable-focus ability of first and second microlens **68** and **70**, respectively.

It can be appreciated that the variety of multiple stimuli-responsive hydrogels can be used to engineer and implement functionally complex and smart microlens arrays to act as biological and chemical sensors (i.e., sensing of multi-environmental parameters), and subsequently generate optical outputs or visible images. These imaging-type microlenses can be fabricated across substrate **12** and each microlens or a group of microlenses can be assigned to a predetermined stimulus or environmental parameter. In addition, the hydrophobic-hydrophilic boundary interface can be realized with a variety of substrates (e.g., glass, polymer) with no strict geometrical substrate requirements. Therefore, distributed 3-D microlens arrays can be fabricated on flexible polymer substrates, thereby allowing microlens arrays with larger field of views.

Referring to FIGS. **5-6b**, a still further embodiment of a microlens is generally designated by reference numeral **72**. It is contemplated to fabricate microlens **72** within central cavity **24** of channel network **22** of microfluidic device **10**. Microlens **72** includes a plurality of hydrogel posts **74** circumferentially spaced from each other and extending vertically from upper surface **12a** of substrate **12**. When exposed to a predetermined stimulus, hydrogel posts **74** expand and contract, for reasons hereinafter described. Slip **76** is positioned on the upper ends of hydrogel posts **74** and on upper face **21a** of cartridge **21**. Slip **76** includes inner surface **78** defining aperture **80** therethrough. Lower surface **76b** of slip **76** and upper surface **12a** of substrate **12** define a cavity for receiving a water-based fluid therein. Upper surface **76a** of slip **76** and lower surface **44a** of glass cover **44** define an oil receiving cavity **82** for receiving oil therein. It can be appreciated that water receiving cavity **79** and oil receiving cavity **82** communicate with each other through aperture **80** in slip **76**.

Inner surface **78** of slip **76** is patterned so as to utilize surface cavity chemistry to render inner surface **78** and bottom surface **76b** of slip **76** hydrophilic, and to render upper surface **76a** of slip **76** hydrophobic. As a result, oil-water interface **84** defining meniscus **84a** is pinned along the hydrophobic-hydrophilic contact line of slip **76**.

When hydrogel posts **74** are exposed to a predetermined stimulus, posts **74** expand and/or contract, as heretofore described. As hydrogel posts **74** expand, slip **76** bends upwardly thereby causing oil-water interface **84** pinned at the hydrophilic-hydrophobic boundary to bow downward. Alternatively, as hydrogel post **74** contracts, slip **76** bends down-

wardly such that oil-water interface **84** pinned at the hydrophilic-hydrophobic boundary of slip **76** bulges upward. In such manner, the focal length of microlens **72** is varied.

Referring to FIG. **7a**, a microfluidic device incorporating a still further embodiment of a microlens in accordance with the present invention is generally designated by the reference numeral **86**. Microfluidic device **86** includes substrate **88** having upper surface **88a** and lower surface **88b**. Inlet and outlet passageways **90** and **92**, respectively, extend through substrate **88**, for reasons hereinafter described. Cartridge **94** is deposited on upper surface **88a** of substrate **88** and includes inner surface **96** defining cavity **98** therein. Microlens **102** includes a hydrogel ring **100** photopatterned, as heretofore described, on upper surface **88a** of substrate **88** within cavity **98**. Hydrogel ring **100** expands and contracts in response to a predetermined stimulus or environmental parameter such that inner surface **104** of hydrogel ring **100** is treated to be hydrophilic. Oil droplet **106** is deposited on upper surface **88a** of substrate **88** within the interior of hydrogel ring **100**. Water-based fluid **108** is provided in cavity **98** such that water-oil interface **110** is formed. Since inner surface **104** of hydrogel **100** is hydrophilic, water-oil interface **110** defines a concave lens.

Referring to FIG. **7b**, it is contemplated to a flow water-based fluid into cavity **98** through inlet passageway **90** in substrate **88** and drawing fluid from cavity **98** through outlet passageway **92** in substrate **88**. By exposing hydrogel ring **100** to a predetermined stimuli provided in water-based fluid **108**, hydrogel ring **100** expands such that the diameter of the interior of hydrogel **100** is reduced. Due to volume change within the interior, hydrogel ring **100** exerts a force **F** on the oil droplet thereby varying the shape of the water-oil interface **110**, and hence, changing the focal length of the lens.

Referring to FIGS. **8a-8b**, a still further embodiment of a microlens in accordance with the present invention is generally designated by the reference numeral **114**. The microlens **114** is identical in structure to microlens **102** except as hereinafter provided. More specifically, it is contemplated to treat inner surface **104** of hydrogel ring **100** to be hydrophobic. As a result, a convex lens is formed by oil-water interface **110**. As heretofore described, when hydrogel ring **100** is exposed to a predetermined stimulus, ring **100** expands, FIG. **8b**, or contracts, FIG. **8a**. This, in turn, changes the shape of oil-water interface **110**, and hence, the focal length of the lens defined thereby.

Referring to FIGS. **9a-9b**, a still further embodiment of a microlens in accordance with the present invention is generally designated by the reference numeral **116**. Microlens **116** includes substrate **118** having upper surface **120** and lower surface **121**. Hydrogel ring **122** is deposited on upper surface **120** to substrate **118**. Hydrogel ring **122** includes a generally cylindrical base portion **124** having inner surface **126** and outer periphery **128**. Upper portion **130** of hydrogel ring **122** projects from base **124** and includes inner surface **131** and outer periphery **132**. Inner surface **131** of upper portion **130** of hydrogel ring **122** includes notch **134** formed therein. Transparent film **136** is positioned within the interior of hydrogel ring **122** such that lower surface **138** of film **136** is received on upper surface **128a** of base **128** of hydrogel ring **122** and such that outer periphery **136a** of film **136** is received within notch **134** in inner surface **131** of upper portion **130** of hydrogel ring **122**.

When hydrogel ring **122** is exposed to a predetermined stimulus, hydrogel ring **122** contracts, FIG. **9a**, or expands, FIG. **9b**, in response thereto. When expanding, base **124** and upper portion **130** of hydrogel ring **122** exert outward force **F3** on film **136** thereby forming a convex lens from film **136**.

It can be appreciated that focal length of the lens formed by film **136** may be changed or tuned in response the expansion and contraction of hydrogel ring **122**.

Referring to FIGS. **10a** and **10b**, a still further embodiment of a microlens in accordance with the present invention is generally designated by the reference numeral **140**. Microlens **140** includes substrate **142** having upper surface **144** and lower surface **145**. Hydrogel ring **146** is deposited on upper surface **144** of substrate **142**. Hydrogel ring **146** includes base **148** having outer periphery **150** and inner wall **152**. Inner wall **152** includes notch **154** formed therein, for reasons hereinafter described. An enlarged upper portion **156** extends from base **148** and includes outer periphery **158** and inner surface **160**. Transparent film **162** is positioned within the interior of hydrogel ring **146** such that upper surface **164** of film **162** engages lower surface **166** of base **156** and such that outer periphery **168** of film **162** is received within notch **154** in base **148**.

When hydrogel ring **146** is exposed to a predetermined stimulus, hydrogel ring **146** contracts, FIG. **10a**, or expands, FIG. **10b**, in response thereto. When expanding, lower surface **146** of upper portion **156** of hydrogel ring **146** exerts downward force **F4** on film **162** such that film **162** forms a concave lens. As such, focal length of the lens formed by film **162** may be tuned by the expansion and contraction of hydrogel ring **146**.

Alternatively, it is contemplated for film **162** to separate two fluids with different refractive indices on opposites sides thereof. The fluids and film **162** can act to form a tunable microlens as heretofore described. As described, film **162** is thin and only serves as a spacer between the fluids.

As described, the aforementioned liquid microlenses can smartly focus on objects at different distances. By working in the scale range of tens to thousands of micrometers where surface tension plays a key role in liquid behavior, these smart liquid microlenses bridge a local environmental input parameter with an optical output (i.e., variable-focus lens) through the use of stimuli-responsive hydrogels and stable pinned fluid-fluid interfaces. Also, other available hydrogels can further diversify the variable-focus mechanisms and their applications. Since the hydrogels function both as sensors and actuators without the need for complicated controlling systems and external power supplies, the microlenses of the present invention may be integrated with other microfluidic components to realize functionally complex, microfluidic systems.

Various modes of carrying out the invention are contemplated as being within the scope of the following claims particularly pointing out and distinctly claiming the subject matter that is regarded as the invention.

We claim:

1. A variable-focus lens assembly, comprising:
 - a sheet having first and second sides and an inner wall defining an aperture therethrough;
 - a first fluid engaging at least a portion of the first side of the sheet;
 - a second fluid engaging at least a portion of the second side of the sheet and engaging the first fluid through the aperture at an interface, the interface defining a lens having a shape disposed across the aperture; and
 - a hydrogel structure engaging the sheet and in contact with the first fluid, the hydrogel structure absorbing and releasing the first fluid in response to a predetermined stimulus such that the hydrogel structure is movable between a first configuration wherein the lens has a first focal length in response to the predetermined stimulus being at a first level and a second and differing configu-

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ration wherein the lens has a second and differing focal length in response to the predetermined stimulus being at a second and differing level.

2. The variable-focus lens assembly of claim 1 wherein the outer periphery of the interface is pinned to the inner wall of the sheet.

3. The variable-focus lens assembly of claim 1 wherein the first fluid is a water-based fluid and the second fluid is an oil-based fluid.

4. A variable-focus lens assembly, comprising:

a microfluidic device defining a chamber for receiving a fluid therein;

a base and a sheet spaced from the base and having an aperture therethrough;

a lens disposed in the chamber having a tunable focal length, the lens including first and second differing fluidic layers; and

a tuning structure for tuning the focal length of the lens in response to a predetermined stimulus, the tuning structure including a hydrogel disposed between the sheet and the base and in contact with the first fluidic layer, the hydrogel absorbing and releasing at least a portion of the first fluidic layer in response to a predetermined stimulus such that the hydrogel has an expandable and contractable configuration alterable between a first contracted configuration wherein the lens has a first focal length in response to the predetermined stimulus being at a first level and a second expanded configuration wherein the lens has a second and differing focal length in response to the predetermined stimulus being at a second and differing level.

5. The variable-focus lens assembly of claim 4 wherein the tuning structure includes a second hydrogel disposed between the base and the second side of the sheet about the aperture in contact with the first fluidic layer, the second hydrogel absorbing and releasing at least a portion of the first fluidic layer in response to the predetermined stimulus such that, the second hydrogel has an expandable and contractable configuration alterable between a first contracted configuration in response to the predetermined stimulus being at the first level and a second expanded configuration in response to the predetermined stimulus being at the second level.

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6. The variable-focus lens assembly of claim 4 wherein the lens includes a transparent film.

7. The variable-focus lens assembly of claim 4 wherein the first and second fluidic layers have an interface, the interface having an outer periphery.

8. The variable-focus lens assembly of claim 7 wherein the outer periphery of the interface is pinned to the sheet.

9. The variable-focus lens assembly of claim 7 wherein the first fluidic layer is formed from a water-based fluid and the second fluidic layer is formed from an oil-based fluid.

10. A variable-focus lens assembly, comprising:

a microfluidic device defining a chamber for receiving a fluid therein;

a sheet disposed in the chamber, the sheet having first and second sides and an inner wall defining an aperture therethrough;

a first fluid disposed on the first side of the sheet;

a second fluid disposed on the second side of the sheet and engaging the first fluid through the aperture at an interface, the interface defining a lens having a focal length; and

a tuning structure for tuning the focal length of the lens in response to a predetermined stimulus, the tuning structure including a hydrogel absorbing and releasing at least a portion of the first fluid in response to the predetermined stimulus such that the hydrogel has an expandable and contractable configuration alterable between a first contracted configuration wherein the lens has a first focal length in response to the predetermined stimulus being at a first level and a second expanded configuration wherein the lens has a second and differing focal length in response to the predetermined stimulus being at a second and differing level.

11. The variable-focus lens assembly of claim 10 wherein the outer periphery of the interface is pinned to the inner wall of the sheet.

12. The variable-focus lens assembly of claim 10 wherein the first fluid is a water-based fluid and the second fluid is an oil-based fluid.

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