

# Characterization of fluidic microassembly for immobilization and positioning of *Drosophila* embryos in 2-D arrays

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## Abstract

A technique for the positioning and immobilization of *Drosophila* embryos in 2-D arrays for use in high throughput microinjection experiments has been characterized. The method is based on fluidic microassembly, and immobilization yield, the number of misplaced embryos, alignment properties, and adhesion force of the embryos have been measured for samples with four different pad geometries. For samples with  $250\ \mu\text{m} \times 400\ \mu\text{m}$  sized rectangular pads, an immobilization yield of 85% was achieved. The adhesion force of the embryos was estimated at  $36 \pm 22\ \mu\text{N}$ . A substantial amount of clustering was, however, observed. By reducing the pad size to  $200\ \mu\text{m} \times 200\ \mu\text{m}$  and changing the pad pitch and shape, the number of misplaced embryos was reduced to less than 5%. The adhesion force of embryos immobilized at the smaller pads was estimated at  $14 \pm 5.5\ \mu\text{N}$ , resulting in lower immobilization yield for these samples. The self-assembly process facilitates rotational alignment to some degree, and an average of 40% of the immobilized embryos align within  $\pm 9^\circ$  of the symmetry axis of the immobilization sites.

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## 1. Introduction

The results from the genome projects open new opportunities for determination of gene functions important for development and disease. The *Drosophila* (fruit-fly) genome sequence has been particularly valuable, since 90 years of studies of this organism can be combined with the new molecular data to determine gene functions. To investigate the functions of the genes or the effect of drugs a rapid screening method is required. One powerful method is to inject embryos with double-stranded RNA, DNA or other biologically active materials [1,2]. Today such microinjection is carried out at single embryos; a very tedious process. The main goal of the presented work is to develop tools that enable reliable and precise injection of biological material into a large number of embryos within a short time-frame. In order to achieve this, new technology for handling, positioning, and microinjection of embryos has to be developed.

A critical part of the injection procedure is to position the embryos in well-ordered arrays so that they can be injected in parallel by matching linear or 2-D array of micromachined injectors [3–5]. A technique for immobilization and positioning of *Drosophila* embryos in 2-D arrays has recently been demonstrated [3]. Here we show that this method is capable of filling arrays with high yield and relatively few misplaced embryos. In this paper we focus on characterization of the immobilized embryos and report measurements of parameters important in injection experiments. These include immobilization yield, number of misplaced embryos, degree of self-alignment, and adhesion force.

## 2. Experimental

The applied immobilization scheme is based on a fluidic microassembly technique adopted from [6]. Cr/Au layers were deposited onto oxidized silicon wafers and arrays of Au pads with different geometries were patterned using photolithography and wet etching. Hydrophobic sites were established by formation of self-assembled monolayers

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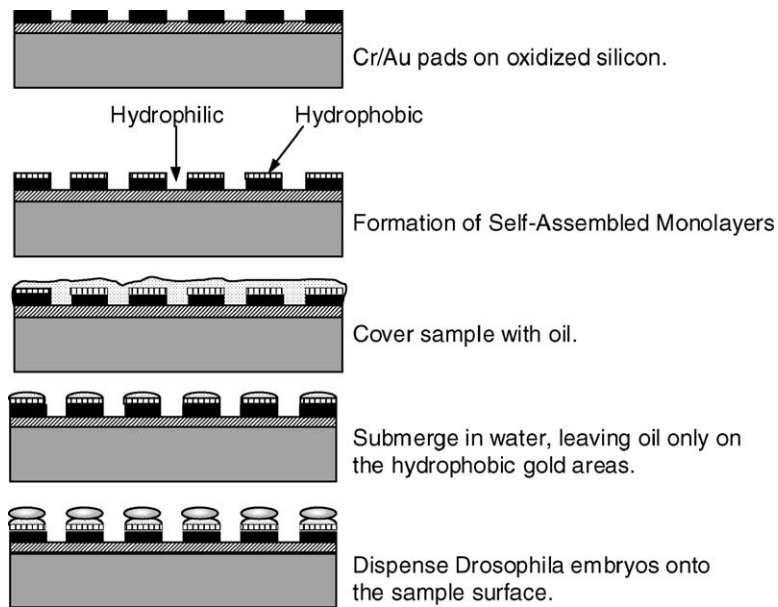


Fig. 1. Schematic process flow for the described fluidic microassembly immobilization technique.

selectively at the gold pads. Samples were immersed in a solution of 1 mM octadecanethiol in ethanol. This treatment renders the gold surfaces hydrophobic, while the oxidized silicon is kept hydrophilic [3,6]. After a rinse in ethanol the samples were covered with a film of polychlorotrifluoro-ethylene based oil. This oil is known to have low toxicity and it is regularly used to protect *Drosophila* embryos from dehydration during injection experiments and hatching.

The *Drosophila* embryo array assembly took place as described in [3]: Samples with hydrophobic sites, covered with oil were immersed in water, leaving oil only at the sites. The oil film acts as a lubricant and adhesive in the immobilization process. *Drosophila* embryos were dispensed onto the sample surface keeping the sample submerged in water. As a result embryos were immobilized only at the oil-covered pads. Excessive embryos were removed by a gentle rinse. The process flow is shown schematically in Fig. 1. Immobilization yield and alignment properties for the different array designs were evaluated by inspection of micrographs acquired from the assembly experiments.

The feasibility of using fluidic assembly to prepare arrays of embryos for use in injection applications strongly relies on the adhesion between the embryos and oil-covered pads. In order to assess the adhesion force, a water flow was directed at immobilized embryos by a micropipette (Fig. 2). By measuring the flow rate at which the embryo detaches from the pad, an estimate of the adhesion force was obtained. The flow rate was calibrated and measured by a SOTP60D pressure transducer from SensorOne.

### 3. Results and discussion

We report results from immobilization experiments carried out on samples with four different pad geometries. In the initial experiments rectangular pads measuring  $250\ \mu\text{m} \times 400\ \mu\text{m}$  were chosen to roughly correspond to the size of *Drosophila* embryos. In order to investigate the effect of pad geometry on rotational alignment in the self-assembly process, arrays of cross-shaped, truncated cross-shaped (boat), and circular-shaped adhesion sites were evaluated.

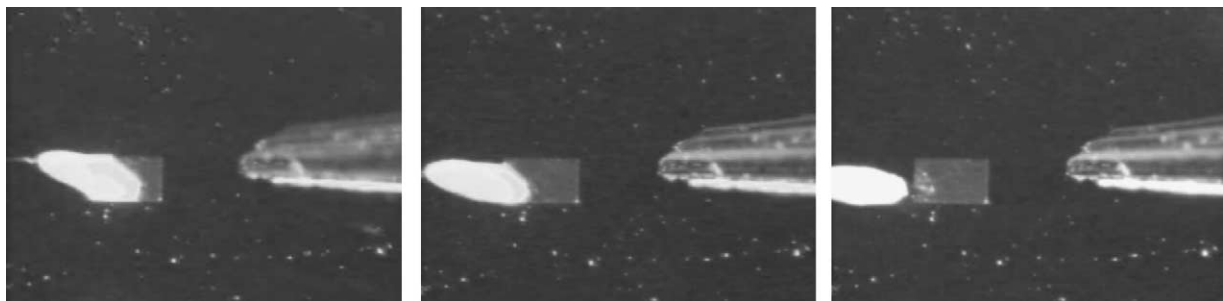


Fig. 2. A picture series illustrating the method used for measuring the adhesion force of the immobilized embryos. A water flow was imposed at an immobilized embryo by a micropipette. The flow rate at which detachment of the embryo took place was measured and a rough estimate of the drag force can be calculated using Eq. (1).



Fig. 3. Embryos immobilized at a sample patterned with an array of rectangular  $250\ \mu\text{m} \times 400\ \mu\text{m}$  sized immobilization sites. A substantial amount of clustering is observed.

In the initial experiments oxidized silicon chips patterned with rectangular  $250\ \mu\text{m} \times 400\ \mu\text{m}$  Cr/Au pads with a pitch of  $500\ \mu\text{m} \times 1000\ \mu\text{m}$  were used as a starting point for the assembly process. An image of a sample from the first immobilization experiments is shown in Fig. 3. A substantial amount of clustering was observed. With the chosen pad size and pitch, more than one embryo can immobilize at one pad, and a single embryo can “bridge” between two pads. In addition embryos tend to stick to each other. As a result, close to 25% of the embryos were misplaced and would not be injected by a matching microneedle array.

In order to reduce the clustering and investigate possible rotational alignment of the embryos new samples with  $200\ \mu\text{m} \times 200\ \mu\text{m}$  cross-shaped and  $200\ \mu\text{m} \times 100\ \mu\text{m}$  truncated cross-shaped pads with a pitch of  $800\ \mu\text{m} \times 800\ \mu\text{m}$  were fabricated. An image of embryos immobilized at one

of these samples is shown in Fig. 4. This figure shows that the clustering is reduced substantially. The immobilization yield is, however, somewhat lower since the contact area between the embryo and the pad is reduced. The experimental results are summarized in Table 1.

Although their orientation varies, the embryos tend to position and align themselves to the shape of the gold pads. Images of embryos immobilized at cross-shaped pads (a), and truncated cross-shaped pads (b) are shown in Fig. 5. In order to evaluate the degree of self-alignment an “alignment factor” was defined as  $(N(\pm 9^\circ) - N_{\text{random}})/(N_{\text{total}} - N_{\text{random}})$ , where  $N(\pm 9^\circ)$  is the actual number of embryos aligned within  $\pm 9^\circ$  of the symmetry axes of the immobilization sites,  $N_{\text{random}}$  is the number of embryos that would align within  $\pm 9^\circ$  in a situation of completely random rotational positioning, and  $N_{\text{total}}$  is the total number of immobilized embryos. An alignment factor of 0 represents random rotational alignment, whereas a factor of 1 corresponds to a situation with 100% of the embryos aligned within  $\pm 9^\circ$  of the symmetry axes of the immobilization sites. Alignment factors were calculated by inspection of three samples containing arrays of both cross-shaped and truncated cross-shaped pads. One sample with circular-shaped immobilization sites was used for control purposes. In total the evaluation included 760 immobilized embryos.

The average alignment factors of the embryos immobilized at cross-shaped pads were approximately 0.24 for both axis directions. The fact that the alignment factor is nearly equal in both axis directions is expected since the immobilization sites are four-fold symmetric. In the case of the truncated cross-shaped pads the total alignment factor is measured at 0.26. As expected for these asymmetric pad shapes the alignment factor for the longer axis direction is more than twice the one along the shorter axis. For one sample an alignment factor as high as 0.48 was observed. Immobilization on a sample with circular-shaped pads



Fig. 4. An image of embryos immobilized at a sample patterned array with  $200\ \mu\text{m} \times 200\ \mu\text{m}$  cross-shaped and  $200\ \mu\text{m} \times 100\ \mu\text{m}$  truncated cross-shaped sites with  $800\ \mu\text{m} \times 800\ \mu\text{m}$  pitch. The clustering is reduced substantially.

Table 1  
Measurements results for immobilization of *Drosophila* embryos onto samples with different pad geometries

Pad geometry	Immobilization yield (%)	Misplaced embryos (%)	Adhesion force ( $\mu\text{N}$ ) estimated by Eq. (1)
Rectangles: $250\ \mu\text{m} \times 400\ \mu\text{m}$ Pitch: $500\ \mu\text{m} \times 1000\ \mu\text{m}$	85	25	$36 \pm 22$
Cross: $200\ \mu\text{m} \times 200\ \mu\text{m}$ and truncated cross: $200\ \mu\text{m} \times 100\ \mu\text{m}$ Pitch: $800\ \mu\text{m} \times 800\ \mu\text{m}$	72	<5	$14 \pm 5.5$
Non immobilized embryos Penetration force [8]			Max.: $6 \pm 3$ $52.5 \pm 7$

Immobilization yield: number occupied of sites/number of possible sites; misplaced embryos: number of additional embryos in clusters/number of immobilized embryos.

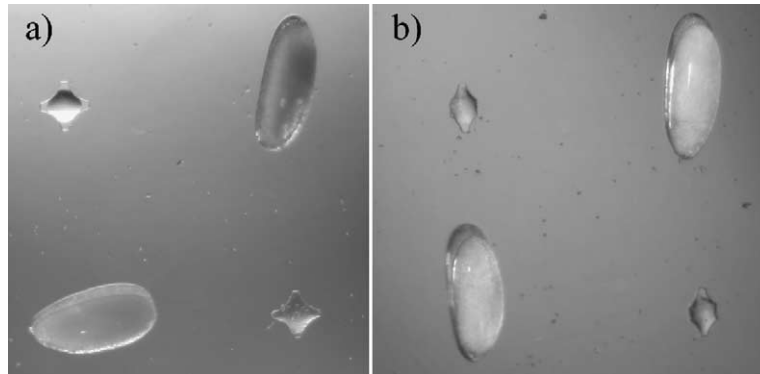


Fig. 5. Close-up images of (a) oil-covered  $200\ \mu\text{m} \times 200\ \mu\text{m}$  cross-shaped; and (b)  $200\ \mu\text{m} \times 100\ \mu\text{m}$  truncated cross-shaped pads with and without immobilized embryos. An example of an immobilization site only partly covered by the oil film can be discerned in the upper left corner of (a).

exhibits an alignment factor of 0.07. For completely random positioning, which would be likely with circular immobilization sites, the alignment factor is expected to be 0.

The results show that the fluidic microassembly facilitates positioning, and that the pad shape influences the rotational self-alignment of the embryos. In average around 40% of the immobilized embryos were aligned within  $\pm 9^\circ$  of the symmetry axis of the immobilization sites. This corresponds to a preferential self-alignment of only  $\sim 20\%$ , since 20% of the embryos would already be aligned within  $\pm 9^\circ$  of the symmetry axes of the immobilization sites in the case of entirely random positioning.

There are several explanations for these results. In a number of cases it was observed that the oil film did not cover the pads completely. One example of such a situation can be discerned in the upper left corner of Fig. 5a. The shape of the oil film at this pad is close to circular symmetric, and an embryo immobilized at this site will not experience a deep local minimum of the potential energy when aligned along one of the symmetry axes of the pad. The fact that the both the oil films and the embryos are curved is also a possible explanation of the low alignment factors observed in the experiments. The observed alignment of embryos on circular pads indicates that the rinse process also influences the alignment of the embryos. This is not unexpected since the rinse includes vertical movement of the sample along

the symmetry axis while the sample is kept submerged in water.

The adhesion force is a key parameter in the tuning of the rinse step in the fluid assembly process and sets the limits of acceptable alignment errors during penetration and injection experiments. Estimates of the drag force,  $F_D$ , acting at the embryo were calculated using [7]:

$$F_D \approx \frac{1}{2} C_D A_D \rho_F v_A^2 \quad (1)$$

$$v_A = \left( \frac{Q}{A_T} \right) \quad (2)$$

where  $C_D$  is the drag coefficient,  $A_D$  is the cross-section of an embryo,  $\rho_F$  is the density of water,  $v_A$  is the average flow velocity,  $Q$  is the flow rate and,  $A_T$  is the cross-sectional area of the pipette measured by scanning electron microscopy (SEM). For one of the pipettes used in the experiments the diameter,  $140\ \mu\text{m}$ , is smaller than the diameter of an embryo which is typical  $250\ \mu\text{m}$ . In this case,  $A_D$  in Eq. (1) is assumed to be equal to  $A_T$ .  $C_D$  is usually determined experimentally. In the following calculations, we have adopted a statistical curve fit for the drag coefficient for spheres and disks [7].

According to [7], an estimate of  $C_D$  can be calculated using the empirical expression:

$$C_D = 18.5 Re e^{-0.6} \quad (3)$$

which is valid for Reynolds numbers,  $Re$ ,  $2 < Re < 500$ . The estimates for the adhesion forces are given in Table 1. The result for embryos left at sample surface between the immobilization sites is also included in Table 1. The calculated adhesion force for these “non immobilized” embryos is well below the value for the immobilized ones. Proper design of the rinse process will hence ensure that no excess embryos will reside at the surface.

The force required to penetrate *Drosophila* embryos has been reported to be of the order of  $50 \mu\text{N}$  [8]. The estimated adhesion force is smaller than this measured penetration force for all the pad geometries that were investigated. This indicates that lateral injection of immobilized embryos would be difficult to accomplish, but injection with microneedles oriented vertically to the silicon chip surface will be possible. In such injection experiments a certain amount of misalignment of the injectors and embryos is expected. This could cause movement of the embryos before injections takes place and in worst case reduce the injection yield.

#### 4. Conclusion

A technique for positioning and immobilization of *Drosophila* embryos in 2-D arrays for use in high throughput microinjection experiments has been characterized. Immobilization yield, fraction of misplaced embryos and adhesion force of the embryos has been measured for samples with two different pad geometries. For samples with  $250 \mu\text{m} \times 400 \mu\text{m}$  pads with a pitch of  $500 \mu\text{m} \times 1000 \mu\text{m}$ , a substantial amount of clustering is observed. By reducing the pad size and changing the pitch and shapes <5% of misplaced embryos was observed. The immobilization yield for embryos at these smaller pads is also somewhat lower than that for samples with larger pad sizes.

The assembly process facilitates rotational self-alignment, and only 30–60% of the immobilized embryos were aligned within  $\pm 9^\circ$  of the symmetry axis of the immobilization sites. We expect, however, that improved self-alignment could be achieved with proper design of the immobilization sites and by optimizing the sample preparation process. This could include more sophisticated pad patterns or etching of groves in the substrate in order to obtain a more pronounced minimum of the potential energy for the immobilized embryos.

The adhesion force of embryos immobilized at the smaller immobilization sites was estimated at  $14 \pm 5.5 \mu\text{N}$ , which is substantially lower than the required penetration force. Preliminary injection experiments indicate, however, that adhesion forces in the measured range are sufficiently high to allow injection with properly designed microinjectors. This demonstrates that the described immobilization technique is suitable for use in high throughput microinjector systems.

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#### Biographies

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*Olav Solgaard* received the B.S. degree in electrical engineering from the Norwegian Institute of Technology and his M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in electrical engineering from Stanford University, California. He held a postdoctoral position at the University of California at Berkeley, and an assistant professorship at the University of California at Davis, before joining the faculty of the Department of Electrical Engineering at Stanford University in 1999. His research interests are optical communication and measurements with an emphasis on semiconductor fabrication and MEMS technology applied to optical devices and systems. He has authored more than 100 technical publications, and holds 13 patents. He is a co-founder of Silicon Light Machines, Sunnyvale, CA, and an active consultant in the MEMS industry.