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Burcher(10) **Pub. No.: US 2009/0187099 A1**(43) **Pub. Date: Jul. 23, 2009**(54) **TIMING CONTROLLER FOR COMBINED
PHOTOACOUSTIC AND ULTRASOUND
IMAGER****Related U.S. Application Data**

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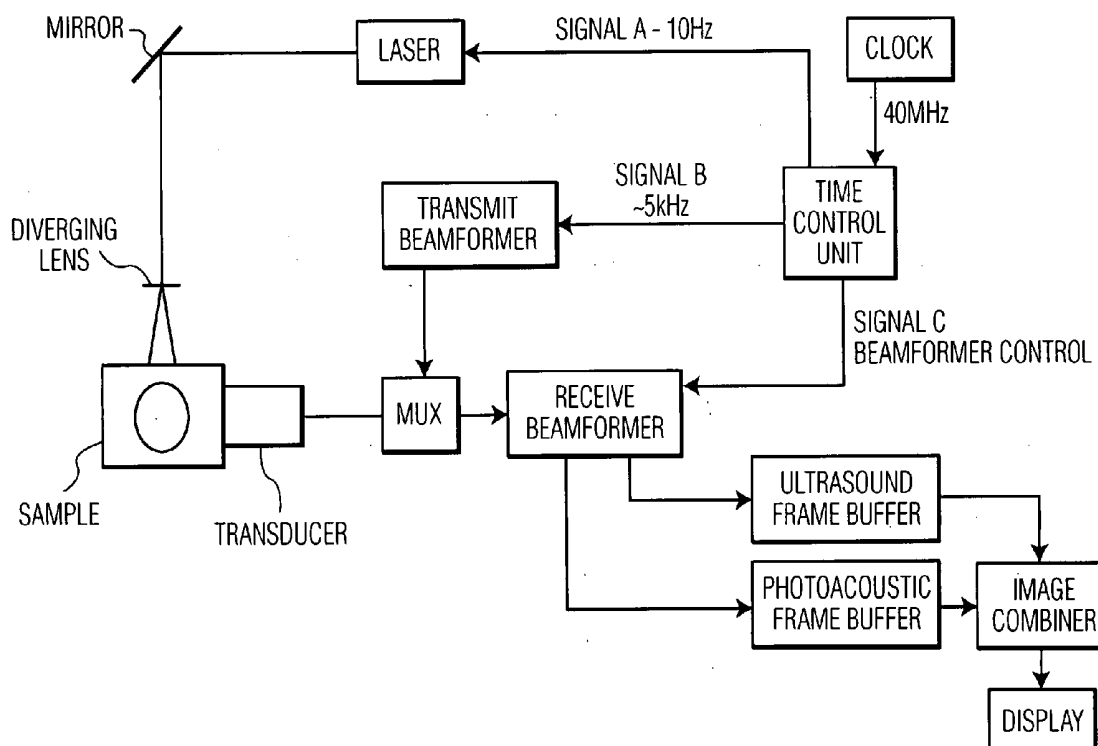
The present disclosure is directed to a combined photoacoustic (PA) and ultrasound imaging system capable of generating PA and ultrasound images simultaneously. These images can be combined and displayed in real-time. The PA images are acquired by firing a illumination system into a sample being imaged and beamforming the received photoacoustic signals. Ultrasound images are formed by transmitting ultrasound energy into the object and beamforming the reflected signals. The present disclosure describes a timing controller to allow the illumination system and ultrasound transmissions to be timed relative to one another. This allows both modalities to operate at close to their maximum frame rates while preventing signal interference.

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EINDHOVEN (NL)**(21) Appl. No.: **12/305,676**(22) PCT Filed: **Apr. 11, 2007**(86) PCT No.: **PCT/IB2007/051309**

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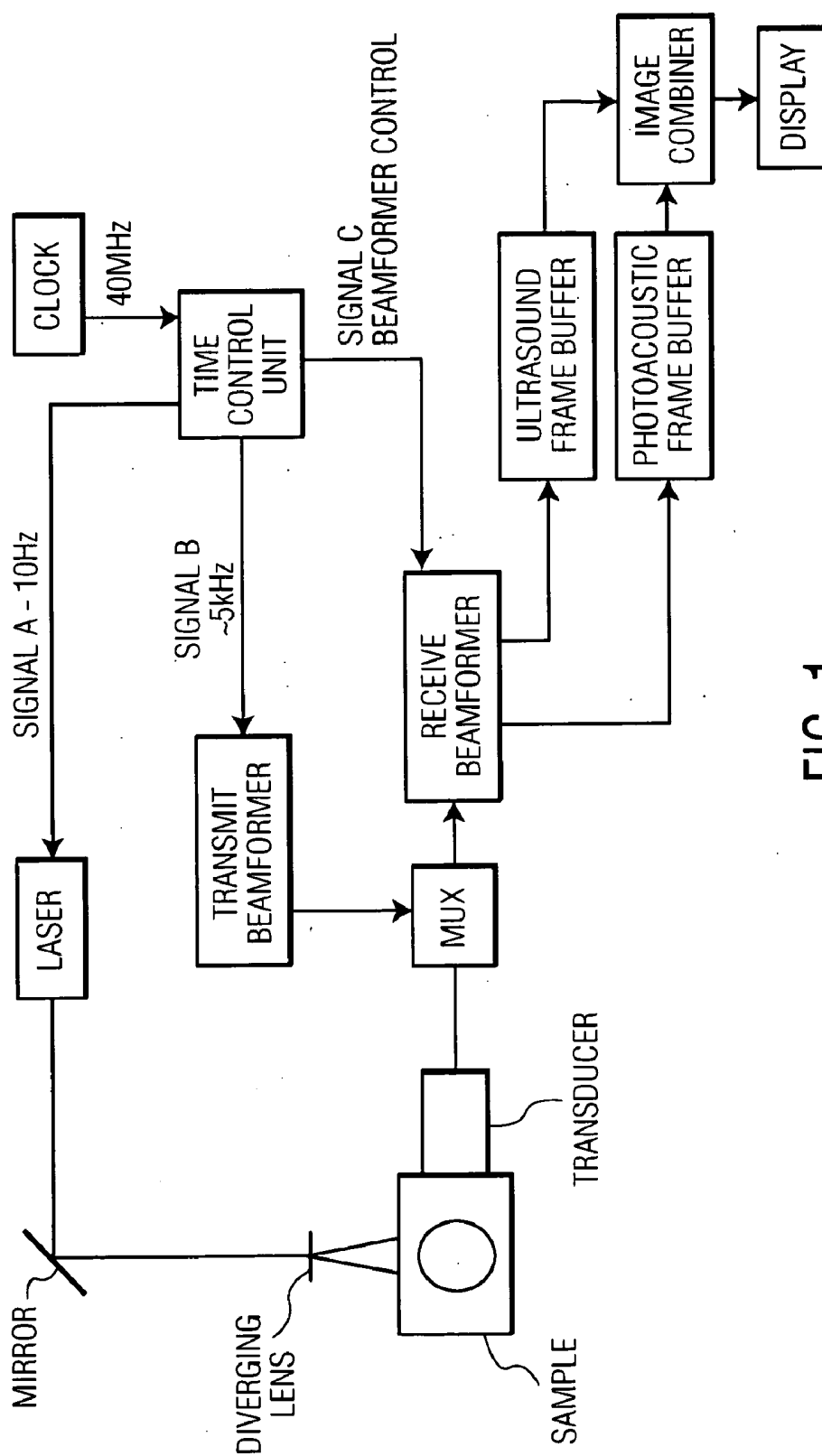


FIG. 1

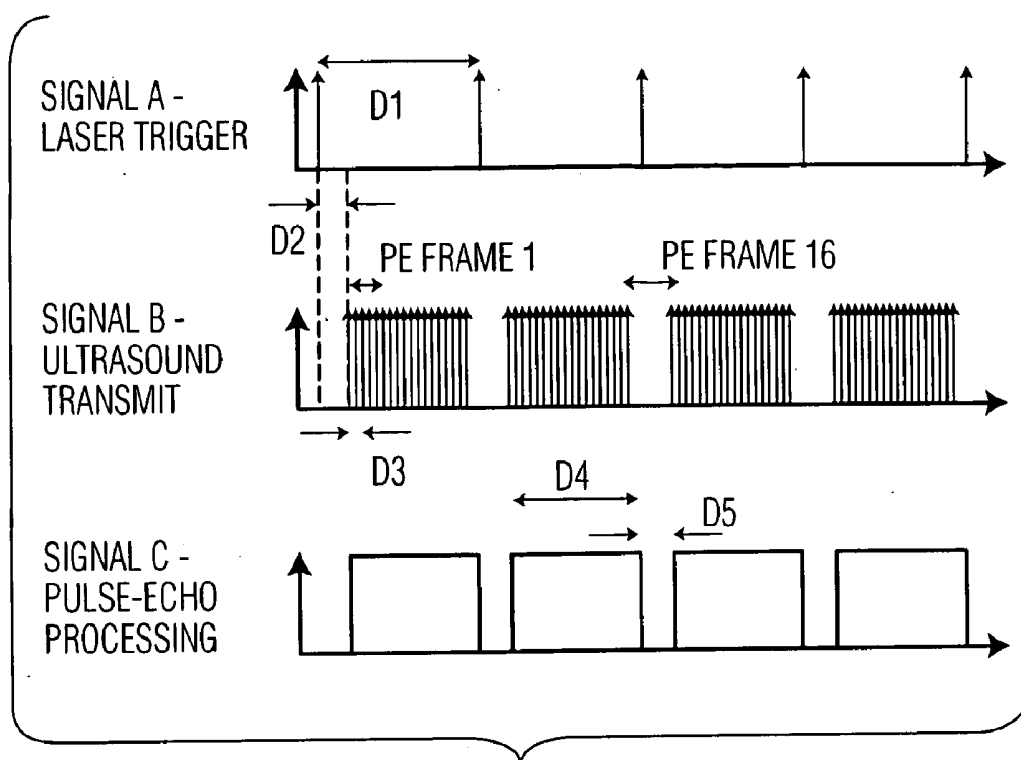


FIG. 2

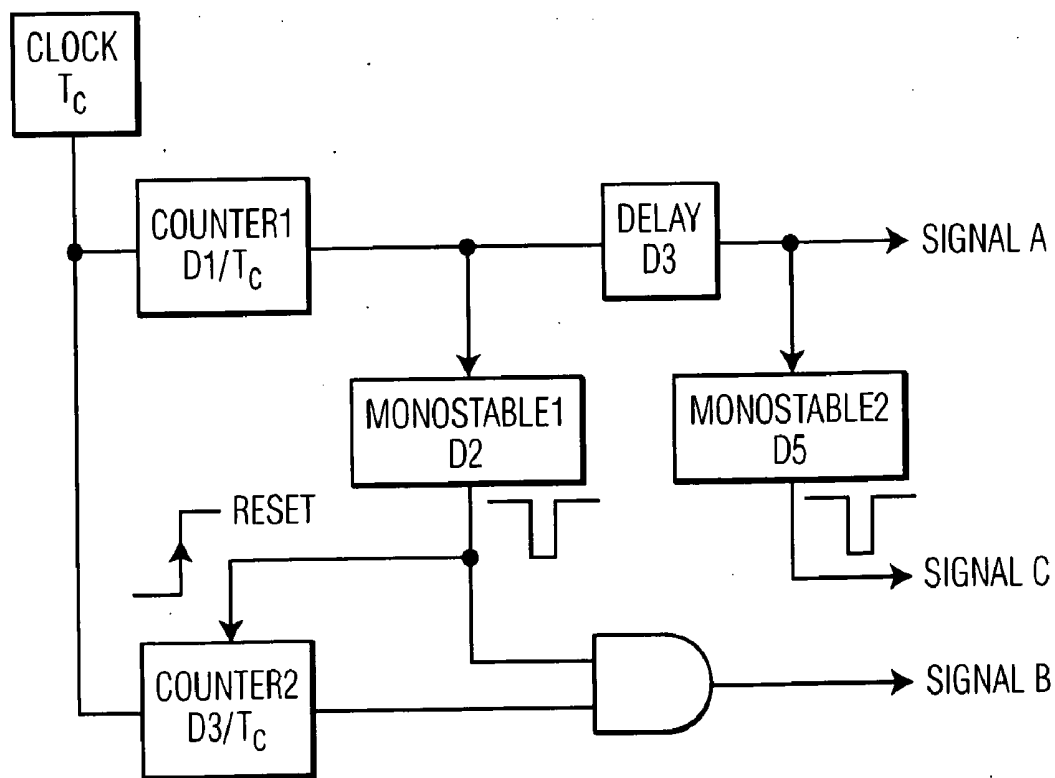


FIG. 3

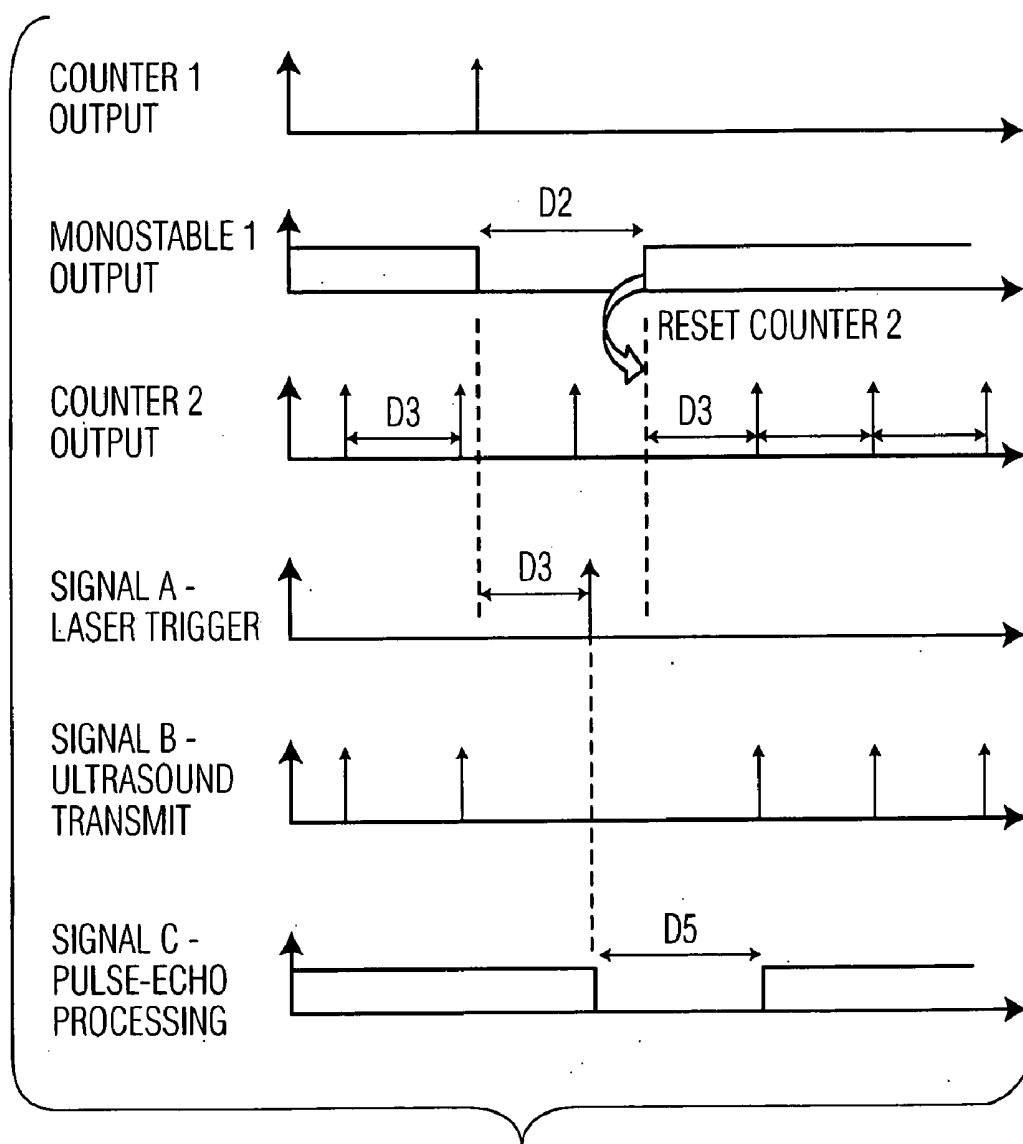


FIG. 4

TIMING CONTROLLER FOR COMBINED PHOTOACOUSTIC AND ULTRASOUND IMAGER

[0001] The present disclosure relates to systems and methods related to photoacoustic and ultrasound imaging.

[0002] Photoacoustic (PA) tomography is an emerging medical imaging modality. (see e.g. S. Manohar, A. Kharine, J. C. G. van Hespén, W. Steenbergen, and T. G. van Leeuwen, "The Twente Photoacoustic Mammoscope: system overview and performance," *Physics in Medicine and Biology*, vol. 50, no. 11, pp. 2543-2557, June 2005; and M. Xu and L. Wang, "Universal back-projection algorithm for photoacoustic computer tomography," *Physical Review E*, vol. 71, no. 1, pp. 16706, 2005). A short laser pulse is fired at the object of interest (for example human or animal tissue). The laser energy is absorbed by structures within the object, causing a rapid temperature increase and thermal expansion. This thermal expansion causes ultrasound waves to propagate through the object, where they are received by ultrasound transducers placed on the surface of the object. These signals can be beamformed in order to produce an image of the absorptivity of the object at the wavelength of the laser. Since the laser radiation is scattered within the object, the illumination is not strongly focused, and an image can be formed from a single laser pulse. In order to increase the signal to noise ratio, several of these images may be averaged.

[0003] Ultrasound imaging is an established medical imaging modality. Images are formed by transmitting focused pulses of ultrasound energy into the body. The pulses are reflected by boundaries between structures within the body. The reflections propagate back to the ultrasound transducer and are then beamformed to create one A-line. Each transmission is used to form one line of the ultrasound image. An ultrasound image is therefore formed by multiple transmissions.

[0004] Recently there has been an interest in performing photoacoustic imaging combined with ultrasound imaging. (see e.g. J. Niederhauser, M. Jaeger, R. Lemor, P. Weber, and M. Frenz, "Combined Ultrasound and Optoacoustic System for Real-Time High-Contrast Vascular Imaging in Vivo," *Ieee Transactions on Medical Imaging*, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 436-440, April 2005). So far, these systems have operated in two modes: producing either photoacoustic or ultrasound images. Although much of the hardware and processing is common to both imaging types, no system is able to accomplish both simultaneously.

[0005] There remains a need in the industry for simultaneous use of the previously disclosed imaging systems. Existing systems operate in separate modes for photoacoustic and ultrasound imaging. Using such a system, it is possible to acquire an image in photoacoustic mode and then switch to ultrasound mode to acquire an ultrasound image of the same object.

[0006] The two modes, photoacoustic and ultrasound, operate at different frame rates. For photoacoustics, the frame rate is usually limited by the repetition rate of the laser. For typical laser systems, the repetition rate may be 10 Hz, thus allowing a frame rate of 10 Hz. For certain applications, the laser firing rate may also be limited by safety considerations. For ultrasound, typically, the frame rate depends upon the time it takes for the ultrasound pulse to propagate to the deepest tissues of interest and back to the transducer. More-

over, a "dead-time" may exist between consecutive transmissions to prevent reflection interference from the previous transmission. Ultrasound frame rates are typically 60 Hz for an imaging depth of 10 cm and 128 image lines.

[0007] Currently, the two mode system has several disadvantages. The system user may be required to switch between the two modes causing delay and exhaustive inefficient labor. Furthermore, object motion may occur during the time it takes to switch between the two images. Thus, the objects are not in the same position in both images causing undesirable results. A further disadvantage is the average frame rate for each modality is reduced, since it is not operated while the imager is in the other mode.

[0008] The present disclosure provides systems and methods for generating photoacoustic images and ultrasound images in real time. In a preferred embodiment, an imaging system is disclosed having an illumination system, adapted to generate photoacoustic signals within a sample, at least a first transducer, adapted to transmit ultrasound waves, receive ultrasound signals, and receive the photoacoustic signals and a timing control unit adapted to be in communication with the illumination system and the transducer. The timing control unit is adapted to control the timing of the illumination system and timing of the transducer, such that the ultrasound waves are transmitted between the output photoacoustic signals. The illumination system can be a laser, a source of pulsed microwave frequency radiation, or a combination thereof. The transmitted ultrasound waves can be focused beams, steered plane waves, limited-diffraction beams, synthetic aperture beams, or combinations thereof. As the ultrasound waves propagate through the sample, they will be reflected, scattered, absorbed and refracted by the sample. A single transducer can be used both to transmit the ultrasound waves and to receive the ultrasound signals. In this case, the received ultrasound signals are termed pulse-echo signals. Alternatively, separate transmitting and receiving transducers can be placed on either side of the sample to generate through-transmission ultrasound signals.

[0009] In a preferred embodiment, the illumination system is a laser adapted to generate laser pulse signals. The laser energy is absorbed by the sample, generating photoacoustic signals. Typically, the ultrasound signals and the photoacoustic signals are processed to generate ultrasound images and photoacoustic images, respectively. These images can then be combined and displayed on a display system.

[0010] The timing control unit is adapted to generate multiple communication signals characterized by (i) signal A adapted to be in communication with the illumination system, (ii) signal B adapted to be in communication with a transmit beamformer; and (iii) signal C adapted to be in communication with a receive beamformer. The illumination system is characterized by an energy beam wherein the energy beam is coupled to an optical delivery system adapted to illuminate a sample, wherein the optical delivery system includes a mirror and a diverging lens adapted to increase the area of the beam to illuminate more of the sample. If the energy source is a source of pulse microwave frequency radiation, then a waveguide is used rather than an optical delivery system. The transmit beamformer is adapted to be in communication with the transducer. An exemplary system has a multiplexer (MUX) adapted to facilitate communication among the transducer, the transmit beamformer, and the receive beamformer.

[0011] The receive beamformer is adapted to store signals from the transducer and applies appropriate processing

depending on how the signals were generated. The receive beamformer is adapted to store the ultrasound images and photoacoustic images in an ultrasound frame buffer and a photoacoustic frame buffer respectively, followed by combining the stored ultrasound and photoacoustic images in an image combiner, and displaying the combined image on the display system.

[0012] The timing control unit includes a counter **1** adapted to (a) be in communication with the clock, (b) be a first frequency divider that counts to a value of $D1/T_c$ generating a first output pulse wherein a first portion of the first output pulse is delayed by delay term $D3$, wherein a first portion of the delayed output pulse is signal A and a second portion of the delayed output pulse is further delayed by a monostable **2** term $D5$ generating signal C, and (c) transmit a second portion of the first output pulse, which is delayed by a monostable **1** term $D2$. The timing control unit further includes a counter **2** adapted to (a) be in communication with the clock, (b) receive a first portion of delayed output pulse from monostable **1**, and (c) be a second frequency divider and count to a value of $D3/T_c$ generating a second output pulse. The timing control unit further includes, an AND gate adapted to receive (a) counter **2** output pulse and (b) a second portion of monostable **1** delayed output pulse generating signal B.

[0013] The transducer can be a single focused element, an array of elements, a microbeamformed array, a synthetic aperture array, or combinations thereof. If the transducer is the synthetic aperture array it should be adapted to form the ultrasound signals by moving the synthetic aperture array to different positions on the sample and taking a measurement at each position.

[0014] In an exemplary embodiment, an imaging system is described wherein multiple transducers are used wherein at least one is adapted to receive a portion of the ultrasound signals, at least another is adapted to transmit ultrasound waves, and at least another is adapted to receive photoacoustic signals, generating multiple sets of measurements wherein the timing control unit is adapted to be used to prevent acoustic interference between the multiple sets of measurements. The timing control unit is adapted to be programmed to generate multiple delay times such that signal interference is prevented. The timing control unit is adapted to be applied to medical imaging of vasculature, thyroid, skin, breast, limbs and any other superficial body part or combinations thereof.

[0015] The present disclosure also describes a method of generating a combined photoacoustic and ultrasound image of a sample including the steps of, programming a timing control unit adapted to communicate with (i) an illumination system adapted to generate photoacoustic signals, (ii) an ultrasound imaging means adapted to generate ultrasound waves, and (iii) a receive beamformer, illuminating a sample with the illumination system to generate photoacoustic signals, receiving the output photoacoustic signals by a signal receiving means such as the transducer then transmitting the ultrasound waves to the sample, and receiving output ultrasound signals, by the signal receiving means wherein the receiving means is in communication with the receive beamformer, which processes the signals generating photoacoustic and ultrasound images, respectively, transmitting the images to an image combiner adapted to generate a combined image, and then transmitting the combined image to a display system.

[0016] Additional features, functions and benefits of the disclosed systems and methods will be apparent from the description which follows, particularly when read in conjunction with the appended figures.

[0017] To assist those of ordinary skill in the art in making and using the disclosed systems and methods, reference is made to the appended figures, wherein:

[0018] FIG. 1 is a schematic illustrating a combined imaging system;

[0019] FIG. 2 is a schematic illustrating the timing of the signals generated by a timing control unit;

[0020] FIG. 3 is a schematic illustrating a hardware implementation of a timing control unit;

[0021] FIG. 4 is a schematic illustrating delay times of a hardware implementation of a timing control unit.

[0022] The present disclosure describes a system and method for a timing control unit, which controls the time at which illumination system signals, adapted to generate photoacoustic (PA) signals within a sample, and ultrasound waves are fired into a medium. The timing control unit is adapted to prevent signal interference among the different acoustic signals. The system allows a combined imaging mode, whereby photoacoustic signal means (typically a laser) may fire at its maximum repetition rate, 10 Hz for example, and ultrasound waves are transmitted between the illumination system transmissions.

[0023] The timing control unit may overcome at least one of the disadvantages of the current two mode system by not requiring switching between the separate imaging modes, minimizing the time between acquisitions (and hence minimizing disruption from object motion), preventing signal interference, and allowing each modality to operate up to its optimal frame rate.

[0024] A schematic of a preferred embodiment of the combined imaging system is shown in FIG. 1. An illumination system, typically a laser, adapted to generate photoacoustic signals within a sample, may be a Q-switched Nd:YAG laser, such as the Brilliant B manufactured by Quantel. For stable operation, preferred lasers may operate at a fixed pulse repetition rate, e.g. 10 Hz or 20 Hz. It is possible to vary the rate by a percentage of the nominal value. However, an arbitrary pulse repetition should not be set. The Q-switch of the laser is in communication with signal A generated by at least one timing control unit, thus controlling the time of the laser firing. In an exemplary embodiment, signal A can be in communication with a flash lamp of the laser. The timing control unit may also generate signal B, in communication with a transmit beamformer, and signal C in communication with a receive beamformer.

[0025] In an exemplary embodiment, the illumination system generates an energy beam, which is coupled to an optical delivery system such that the sample is illuminated. A simple optical delivery system is shown in FIG. 1 consisting of a mirror and a diverging lens. The diverging lens is capable of increasing the area of the beam, thus increasing the area of sample illumination. Illuminating the sample generates photoacoustic signals within the sample.

[0026] The timing control unit of FIG. 1 is connected to at least one clock, which provides a timing reference signal. The transmit beamformer generates electrical impulses, which are applied to a transducer. In an exemplary embodiment, a transducer has an array of piezoelectric elements, typically capable of transmitting ultrasound waves, receiving ultrasound signals and receiving PA signals. When the transmit

beamformer is activated by signal B from the timing control unit, a high voltage pulse is generated. In an exemplary embodiment, the high voltage pulse signal is in communication with the piezoelectric elements of the transducer via a multiplexer, thus controlling the transducer's ultrasound transmissions. In order to focus the ultrasound wave, the transmit beamformer delays the pulse by different amounts of time on different transducer elements.

[0027] The multiplexer (MUX) of FIG. 1, typically connects the transducer to either a transmit beamformer or a receive beamformer. This may ensure that high transmit voltages are not applied to the sensitive receive circuitry of the receive beamformer. The receive beamformer stores signals from each element of the transducer and applies appropriate processing depending on how the signals were generated. In an exemplary embodiment, ultrasound signals can be pulse-echo ultrasound signals. For pulse-echo ultrasound signals, time delays are applied to per-element signals and they are then summed, forming a single A-line. The delays are calculated using the time taken for the ultrasound wave to propagate into the medium and back out again (round-trip). For photoacoustic signals, a similar delay-and-sum operation can be performed but using different time delays. Since the speed of light is much greater than the speed of sound, the laser illumination does not take a significant amount of time to penetrate the sample, and the PA signals are generated throughout the sample at the same time instant. The time delays for the photoacoustic signal therefore correspond to one-way propagation from the sample to the transducer. Alternatively, a Fourier domain reconstruction can be performed (see e.g. M. Soumekh, "Depth-Focused Interior Echo Imaging," *IEEE Transactions on Image Processing*, vol. 8, no. 11, pp. 1608-1618, November 1999).

[0028] Signal C from the timing control unit is in communication with the receive beamformer. Operation of the receive beamformer can be controlled using signal C. The ultrasound and photoacoustic signals are stored in frame buffers before being combined by an image combiner and displayed on a display system.

[0029] To further illustrate the uses and advantages associated with the disclosed systems and methods, reference is made to the following examples. However, it is to be understood that such examples are not limiting with respect to the scope of the present disclosure, but are merely illustrative of exemplary implementations and/or utilities thereof:

EXAMPLE 1

Timing Control Unit Operation

[0030] In the present example, one timing control unit is used. The timing of the signals generated by a timing control unit is shown schematically below in FIG. 2. Signal A is a laser trigger control signal, signal B controls the ultrasound transmit, and signal C is the receive beamformer control signal. Signal A occurs at a specified frequency (e.g. 10 Hz: $D1=100$ ms). $D2$ is the delay between the laser trigger and the next ultrasound transmit. $D2=(\text{Time between laser trigger and illumination of sample})+(\text{Time for ultrasound to propagate from sample to transducer})+(\text{Photoacoustic (PA) Deadtime})$.

[0031] For several applications, the time between the laser trigger and the sample being illuminated will be small compared with the other timing terms, and will be ignored in the following description. In an exemplary embodiment, using a

sample of dimension 10 cm and an assumed speed of sound of 1540 m/s, the time taken for the photoacoustic ultrasound pulse to propagate to the transducer $=0.1 \text{ m}/1540 \text{ m/s}=65 \mu\text{s}$. The PA deadtime may be required to allow ultrasonic photoacoustic reverberations within the sample to dissipate. If the deadtime is not present, then these reverberations may be received by the transducer during the subsequent pulse-echo signal and misinterpreted as part of the pulse-echo signal.

[0032] Signal B controls the ultrasound transmit signal. In an exemplary embodiment, the ultrasound transmit signal is a pulse-echo transmit signal. As illustrated in FIG. 2, ultrasound pulses are transmitted between laser firings, once the PA signals, generated from the illumination by the laser, have been received by the transducer ($D2$ complete). The time between consecutive pulse-echo transmits is $D3$:

$$D3=(\text{Time between pulse-echo transmits})=2d/c+(\text{Pulse-echo deadtime}),$$

where d is the maximum imaging depth, and c is the speed of sound in the sample; for example: when $d=10$ cm and $c=1540$ m/s then $2d/c=130 \mu\text{s}$. The pulse-echo deadtime ensures that reverberations or reflections from deeper parts of the sample than the specified imaged region are not ambiguously represented within the output of the pulse-echo signal.

[0033] The number of pulse-echo signal transmits between laser pulses is determined by the expression, $N_PE_transmits=\text{floor}((D1-D2)/D3)$. (E.g. $N_PE_transmits=\text{floor}((100 \text{ ms}-65 \mu\text{s})/130 \mu\text{s})=768$). An ultrasound image, generated by the received ultrasound signals, is composed of a number of pulse-echo signal transmits, typically between 100 and 200. Therefore, several pulse echo frames can be acquired between laser pulses. Some pulse-echo frames may be interrupted by the laser pulse, as shown for pulse-echo frame 16 in FIG. 2. FIG. 2 illustrates an exemplary schematic of only a few ultrasound transmits per frame.

[0034] Signal C is the receive beamformer control signal. When signal C is low, the beamformer will perform PA processing on the received ultrasound signals. When signal C is high, the beamformer will perform pulse-echo processing on the received signals. Signal C, generated by the timing control unit, is generated such that the correct type of processing is applied to the received signals, depending on whether they are PA or pulse-echo signals. For example, it controls whether round-trip or one-way beamforming delays are used. The duration of the low signal is determined by the expression, $D5=(\text{Time for ultrasound to propagate from sample to transducer})+(\text{PA Deadtime})$. (E.g. $D5=65 \mu\text{s}$). The duration of the high signal is determined by the expression, $D4=D1-D5$.

EXAMPLE 2

[0035] A Timing Control Unit construction is shown in FIG. 3. FIG. 4 illustrates the delay times of the hardware implementation of the timing control unit. In an exemplary embodiment, the clock has a period of about 40 MHz: Clock Time (T_c) $=25$ ns. Counter 1 acts as a frequency divider and counts to a value of $D1/T_c$, and then generates a pulse at its output. The output, therefore has a period of $D1$. The output signal is delayed by the delay element, which has a value of $D3$. This delayed signal is Signal A, the laser trigger signal.

[0036] Counter 2 also acts as a frequency divider. It counts to a value of $D3/T_c$, and then generates a pulse at its output, therefore having a period of $D3$. For most of the time during operation, the output of Monostable 1 is high. In the present exemplary embodiment, the output of Counter 2 will pass

through an AND gate and form Signal B, thus triggering the pulse-echo transmissions having a period of D3.

[0037] When the output of Counter 1 generates a pulse, the output of Monostable 1 goes low for a duration D2 generating one input to the AND gate. As a result, signal B will be low and no ultrasound pulses will be fired. After a delay of D3 (which is sufficient time for the pulse-echo cycle to complete), signal A will be active and the laser will be triggered. After a time D2, the output of Monostable 1 will become high again. This transition resets Counter 2. Following a time D3 after the transition, signal B will fire again and the pulse-echo sequence will continue.

Monostable 2 is used to generate signal C, generating output that is high except for a time D5 after each laser trigger.

[0038] Exemplary embodiments are disclosed below to more precisely illustrate the present disclosure. It is to be understood that such examples are not limiting with respect to the scope of the present disclosure, but are merely illustrative of exemplary implementations and/or utilities thereof. They are not intended to limit the scope of the present disclosure.

[0039] The hardware described above can be implemented using standard integrated circuits, dedicated hardware (an ASIC) or a field-programmable gate array. The above timing signals can also be generated by software, for example a real-time operating system such as VxWorks. The values of the delays (D1-D5) can be made programmable. This allows them to be changed depending on the depth of imaging, speed of sound in the medium, laser parameters, etc. In addition, they can be adapted dynamically, for example varying depending on measurements of speed of sound in the medium. A source of pulsed microwave frequency radiation can be used instead of the laser or a combination of both. The ultrasound image can be formed using an alternative type of pulse transmission or a combination of the following, for example steered plane waves, limited-diffraction beams, or synthetic aperture beams. The ultrasound-only image can also be formed by through-transmission. In the present disclosure, multiple transducers can be used. In an exemplary embodiment, a first transducer can be used to transmit the ultrasound waves, and a second transducer can be used to receive the ultrasound signals.

[0040] The ultrasound transducer can be a single focused element, a microbeamformed array, or an array of elements. It may also be a synthetic aperture array, formed by moving the transducer to different positions and measuring at each position. An exemplary transducer can have an array of piezoelectric elements, or be a Capacitive micromachined ultrasonic transducer (CMUT). Signal C can be used to control other processing stages in addition to the receive beamformer. Thus, different processing can be applied to signals received from the illumination system excitation and the ultrasound pulse. For example the signals from the different sources may be filtered with different bandwidth filters.

[0041] The PA and pulse-echo measurements can be made by multiple transducers. In an exemplary embodiment a first transducer is used to receive the photoacoustic signals and a second transducer is used to receive the ultrasound signals. In an exemplary embodiment using multiple transducers, the timing control unit is further used to prevent acoustic interference between multiple sets of measurements. Ultrasound signals and photoacoustic signals must not be generated within the sample at the same, or close times.

[0042] The present disclosure can be applied in medical imaging. It can be incorporated into a combined ultrasound

and photoacoustic imaging device. This can be similar in form to existing ultrasound only imaging devices, such as the Philips iU22 or iE33. It can be used for example to image the vasculature, thyroid, skin, breast, other superficial parts of the body, or combinations thereof. It can also be used during interventional procedures. The photoacoustic signal can be used to generate images of blood, or contrast agents (such as gold nanorods).

[0043] In sum, the systems and methods of the present disclosure offer significantly enhanced techniques for a combined photoacoustic and ultrasound imaging system and method.

[0044] Although the present disclosure has been described with reference to exemplary embodiments and implementations thereof, the disclosed systems and methods are not limited to such exemplary embodiments/implementations. Rather, as will be readily apparent to persons skilled in the art from the description provided herein, the disclosed systems and methods are susceptible to modifications, alterations and enhancements without departing from the spirit or scope of the present disclosure. Accordingly, the present disclosure expressly encompasses such modification, alterations and enhancements within the scope hereof.

1. A combined imaging system, comprising:

a photoacoustic imaging system;
an ultrasound imaging system; and

at least one timing control unit in communication with said photoacoustic imaging system and said ultrasound imaging system adapted to control the timing of said imaging systems such that signal interference is prevented.

2. A combined imaging system, comprising:

a means for generating photoacoustic signals;

at least a first transducer adapted to: (i) transmit ultrasound waves; (ii) receive ultrasound signals generated from said ultrasound waves; and (iii) receive photoacoustic signals generated from said photoacoustic signal means;
a timing control unit adapted to be in communication with said photoacoustic signal means and said transducer; wherein said timing control unit is adapted to control the timing of said photoacoustic signal means and transducer such that signal interference is prevented.

3. An imaging system, comprising:

a means for generating photoacoustic signals;

at least a first transducer adapted to:

(i) transmit ultrasound waves, (ii) receive ultrasound signals generated from said ultrasound waves, and (iii) receive photoacoustic signals generated from said photoacoustic signal means;

a timing control unit adapted to be in communication with:

(i) at least a first clock adapted to generate a time reference signal, (ii) said photoacoustic signal means, and (iii) said transducer, wherein said timing control unit is adapted to (i) control the timing of said photoacoustic signals and timing of said ultrasound waves, such that said ultrasound waves are transmitted between said photoacoustic signals, and (ii) prevent signal interference between said ultrasound signals and said photoacoustic signals.

4. A system according to claim 3 wherein said photoacoustic signal means is accomplished by an illumination system adapted to generate a photoacoustic signal within a sample.

5. A system according to claims 4 wherein said illumination system is characterized by an energy beam.

6. A system according to claim 5 wherein said energy beam is a laser coupled to an optical delivery system adapted to illuminate a sample, wherein said optical delivery system having a mirror and a diverging lens is adapted to increase the area of said beam to illuminate more of said sample.

7. A system according to claim 5 wherein said energy beam is a source of microwave pulse frequency radiation coupled to a waveguide delivery system.

8. A system according to claim 3 wherein said ultrasound waves can take the form of a member selected from the group consisting of focused beams, steered plane waves, limited diffraction beams, synthetic aperture beams, and combinations therein.

9. A system according to claim 5 wherein said ultrasound signals and said photoacoustic signals are adapted to generate ultrasound images and photoacoustic images, respectively.

10. A system according to claim 9 wherein said ultrasound images and said photoacoustic images are combined and displayed on a display system.

11. A system according to claim 5, wherein said timing control unit is adapted to generate multiple communication signals characterized by (i) signal A adapted to be in communication with said illumination system, (ii) signal B adapted to be in communication with a transmit beamformer; and (iii) signal C adapted to be in communication with a receive beamformer.

12. A system according to claim 11 wherein said transducer has an array of piezoelectric elements and said transmit beamformer is adapted to be in communication with said array of piezoelectric elements.

13. A system according to claim 12 having a multiplexer (MUX) adapted to facilitate communication among said transducer, said transmit beamformer, and said receive beamformer.

14. A system according to claim 13 wherein said receive beamformer is adapted to store signals from each of said array of piezoelectric elements of said transducer and applies appropriate processing depending on how said signals were generated.

15. A system according to claim 14 wherein said receive beamformer is adapted to transmit said signals to an ultrasound frame buffer and a photoacoustic frame buffer adapted to store said ultrasound images and photoacoustic images respectively, wherein said frame buffers are adapted to transmit said images to an image combiner adapted to generate a combined image, said image combiner is adapted to transmit said combined image to a display system adapted to display said combined image.

16. A system according to claim 11 wherein said timing control unit includes:

- (i) a counter 1 adapted to (a) be in communication with a clock, (b) be a first frequency divider and count to a value of $D1/Tc$ generating a first output pulse wherein a first portion of said first output pulse is delayed by delay term $D3$, wherein a first portion of said delayed output pulse is signal A and a second portion of said delayed output pulse is further delayed by a monostable 2 term $D5$ generating signal C, and (c) have a second portion of said first output pulse be delayed by a monostable 1 term $D2$;
- (ii) a counter 2 adapted to (a) be in communication with said clock, (b) receive a first portion of delayed output pulse from monostable 1, and (c) be a second frequency divider and count to a value of $D3/Tc$ generating a second output pulse;

- (iii) an AND gate adapted to receive (a) counter 2 output pulse and (b) a second portion of monostable 1 delayed output pulse generating signal B.

17. A system according to claim 3 wherein said transducer can be selected from the group consisting of a single focused element, an array of elements, a synthetic aperture array, a microbeamformed array, and combinations thereof.

18. A system according to claim 17 wherein said synthetic aperture array is adapted to form said ultrasound signals by moving said synthetic aperture array to different positions on said sample and taking a measurement at each position.

19. A system according to claim 3 wherein multiple transducers are used adapted to generate said ultrasound signals having multiple sets of measurements wherein said timing control unit is adapted to be used to prevent acoustic interference between said multiple sets of measurements.

20. A system according to claim 16 wherein said timing control unit is adapted to be programmed to generate multiple delay times such that signal interference is prevented.

21. A system according to claim 3 wherein said timing control unit is adapted to be applied to medical imaging of a member of the group consisting of vasculature, thyroid, skin, breast, limbs and combinations thereof.

22. An imaging system, comprising:

means for generating photoacoustic signals;

means for generating ultrasound signals;

receiving means adapted to receive said photoacoustic and ultrasound signals,

a timing control unit adapted to be in communication with:

- (i) at least a first clock adapted to generate a time reference signal, (ii) said photoacoustic signal means, (iii) said ultrasound signal means, and (iv) said receiving means, wherein said timing control unit is adapted to control the timing of said photoacoustic signal generating means and timing of said ultrasound signal generating means to prevent signal interference between said ultrasound signals and said photoacoustic signals.

23. An imaging system according to claim 22 wherein:

said means for generating photoacoustic signal is an illumination system adapted to illuminate a sample,

said means for generating ultrasound signals is at least a first transducer adapted to transmit ultrasound waves into said sample,

said receiving means includes: (i) at least a second transducer adapted to receive at least a portion of said ultrasound signals; and (ii) at least a third transducer adapted to receive at least a portion of said photoacoustic signals.

24. An imaging system, comprising:

a combined imaging system made by combining at least one photoacoustic imaging system with at least one ultrasound imaging system wherein said photoacoustic imaging system is adapted to generate photoacoustic signals and said ultrasound imaging system is adapted to generate ultrasound signals,

at least a first timing control unit adapted to: control the timing of said photoacoustic imaging system and said ultrasound imaging system, said ultrasound signals being received between said photoacoustic signals by said transducer, wherein said ultrasound signals and photoacoustic signals are adapted to generate ultrasound images and photoacoustic images.

25. A method of generating a combined photoacoustic and ultrasound image of a sample comprising:

programming a timing control unit adapted to communicate with (i) an illumination system adapted to generate photoacoustic signals, (ii) an ultrasound imaging means adapted to generate ultrasound waves, and (iii) a receive beamformer;

illuminating a sample with said illumination system and receiving said photoacoustic signals by at least one signal receiving means,

transmitting said ultrasound waves to said sample and receiving ultrasound signals resulting from said ultrasound waves by said at least one signal receiving means;

wherein said receiving means is in communication with said receive beamformer, said receive beamformer processes said ultrasound signals and photoacoustic signals wherein said processing is adapted to generate photoacoustic images and ultrasound images, transmitting said photoacoustic images and ultrasound images to a display system.

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专利名称(译)	用于组合光声和超声成像仪的定时控制器		
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摘要(译)

本公开涉及能够同时生成PA和超声图像的组合光声 (PA) 和超声成像系统。这些图像可以实时组合和显示。通过将照明系统发射到被成像的样本中并且对接收的光声信号进行波束形成来获取PA图像。通过将超声能量发射到物体中并形成波束形成反射信号来形成超声图像。本公开描述了一种定时控制器，以允许照明系统和超声传输相对于彼此定时。这允许两种模态在接近其最大帧速率的同时操作，同时防止信号干扰。

