US 20020139477A1

(19) United States
(12) Patent Application Publication (10) Pub. No.: US 2002/0139477 A1
Ni et al. (43) Pub. Date: Oct. 3, 2002

(54) PLASMA PROCESSING METHOD AND APPARATUS WITH CONTROL OF PLASMA EXCITATION POWER

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(21) Appl. No.: **09/821,753**

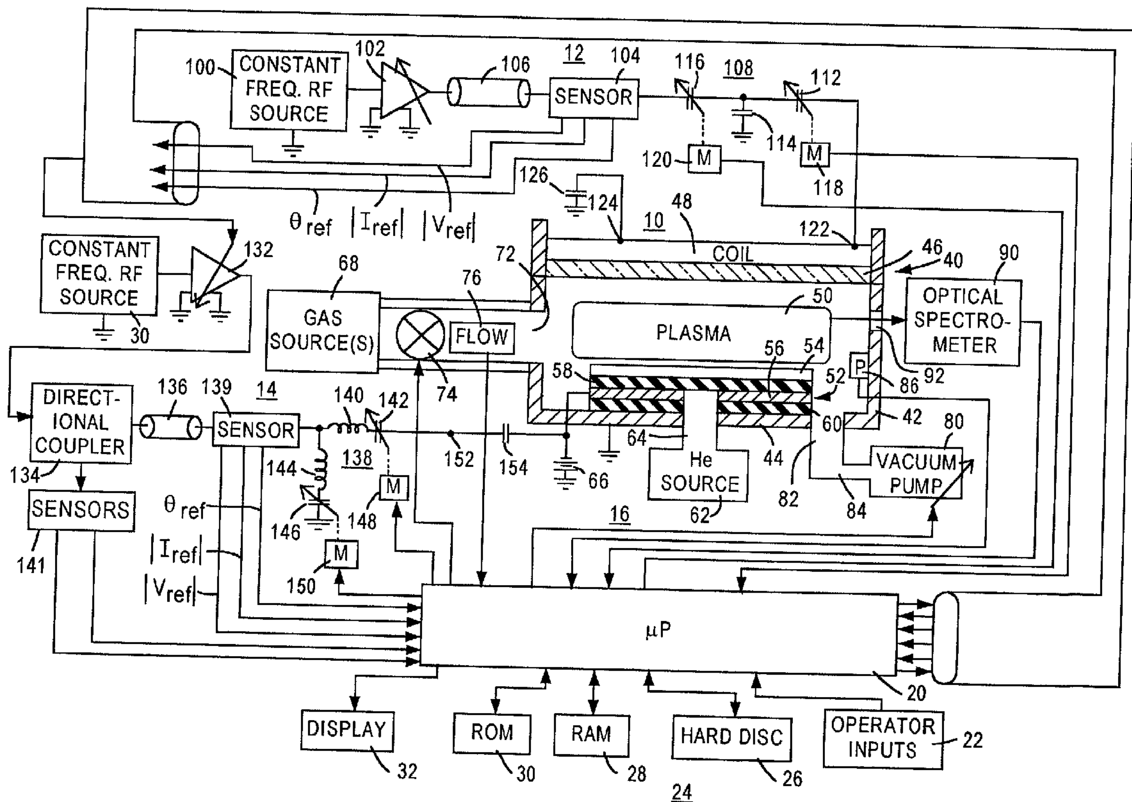
(22) Filed: **Mar. 30, 2001**

Publication Classification

(51) **Int. Cl.**^{7} **B44C 1/22**; C23F 1/00; C23C 16/503
(52) **U.S. Cl.** .... **156/345.44**; 216/67; 118/723 E

(57) ABSTRACT

The amount of RF power supplied to a plasma in a vacuum plasma processing chamber is gradually changed on a pre-programmed basis in response to signals stored in a computer memory. The computer memory stores signals so that other processing chamber parameters (pressure, gas species and gas flow rates) remain constant while the gradual change occurs. The stored signals enable rounded corners, instead of sharp edges, to be etched, e.g., at an intersection of a trench wall and base.



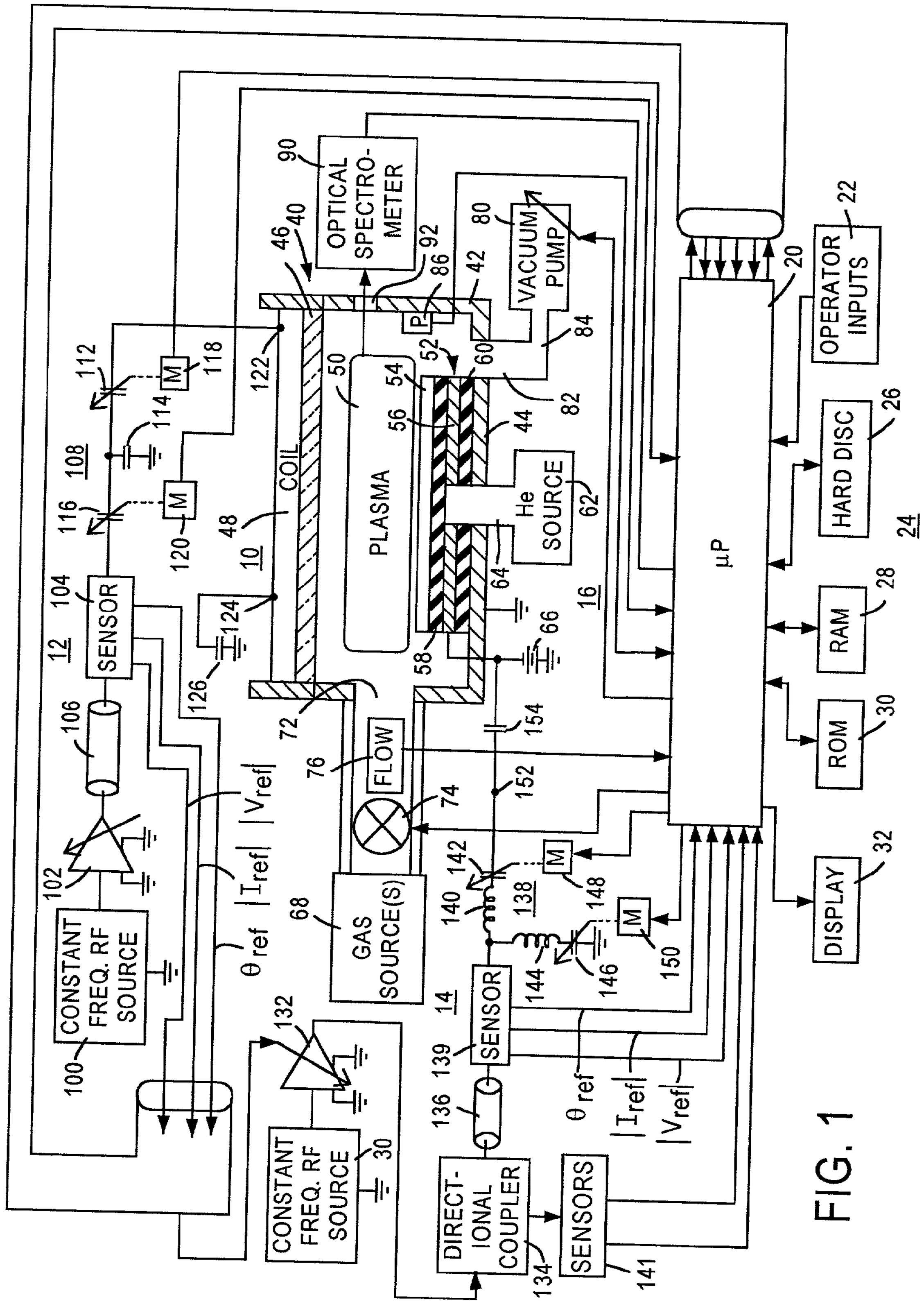


FIG. 1

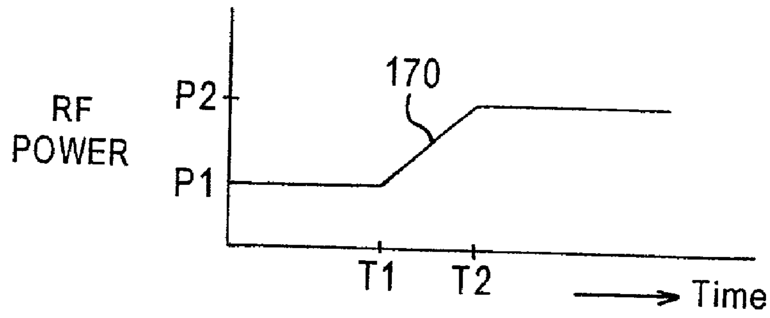


FIG. 2

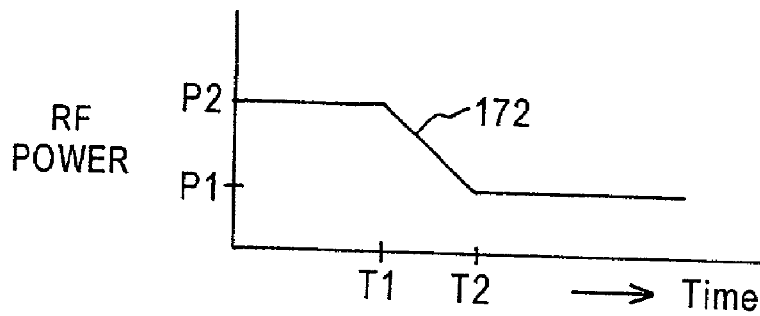


FIG. 3

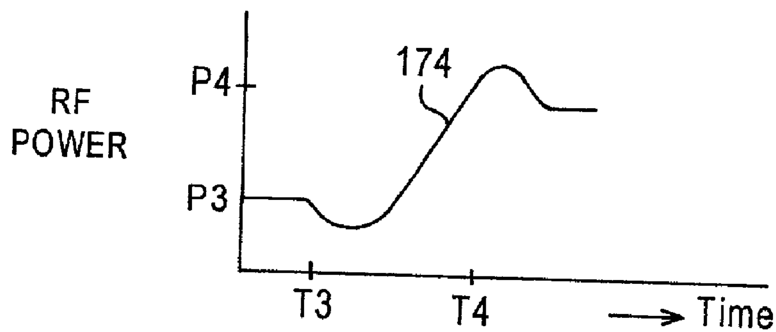


FIG. 4

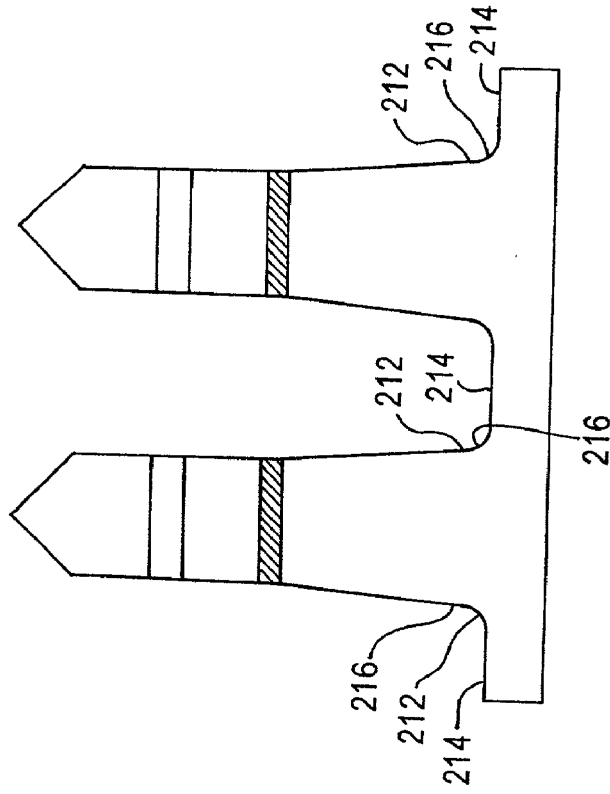


FIG. 6

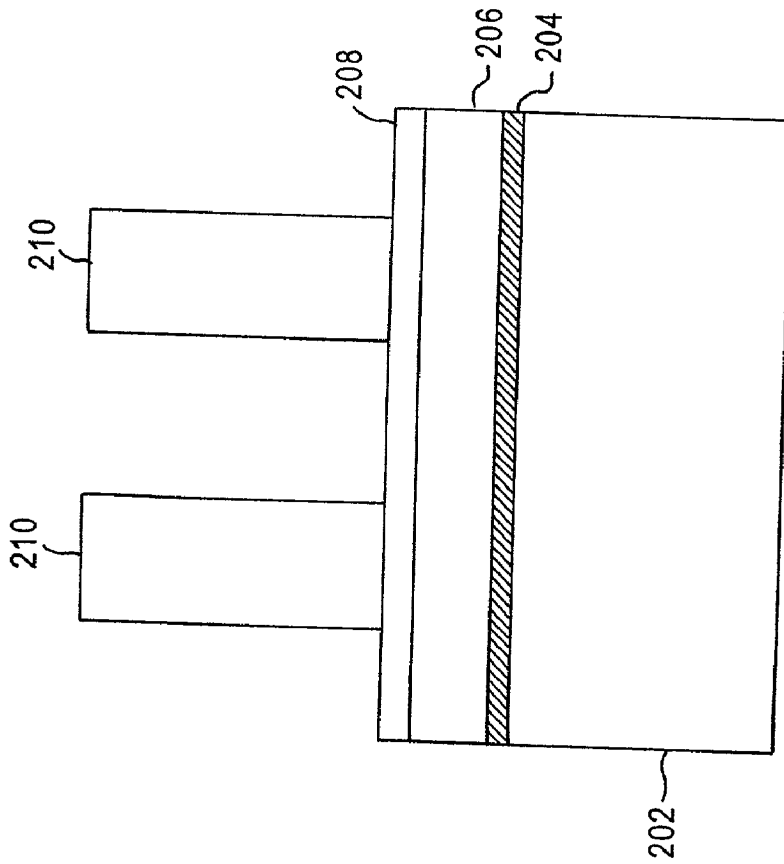


FIG. 5

PLASMA PROCESSING METHOD AND APPARATUS WITH CONTROL OF PLASMA EXCITATION POWER

FIELD OF INVENTION

[0001] The present invention relates generally to vacuum plasma processors for processing workpieces on a workpiece holder and more particularly to a method of and apparatus for gradually changing, on a preprogrammed basis, power an AC plasma excitation source supplies to plasma in a vacuum processor chamber.

BACKGROUND ART

[0002] Vacuum processors for processing a workpiece (i.e., etching materials from or depositing materials onto the workpiece) typically include first and second ports respectively connected to a vacuum pump and one or more gas sources. The gas is excited to a plasma in the chamber by an electric source including a reactance responsive to a first AC source, typically an RF or microwave source. A first matching network is usually connected between the first AC source and the reactance for exciting the plasma. If the source is an RF source, the reactance is either a coil for supplying magnetic and electric fields to the chamber interior via a dielectric window or a parallel plate capacitive arrangement for supplying an electric field to the chamber interior.

[0003] The workpiece, which is typically a semiconductor wafer or a dielectric sheet or a metal plate, is clamped in place on a workpiece holder, i.e., chuck, that frequently includes an electrode covered by a dielectric. DC voltage is typically applied to the electrode to provide an electrostatic clamping force to hold the workpiece in situ on the holder. The workpiece is usually cooled by applying a coolant agent, such as helium, to a recess in the chuck and by applying a liquid to conduits in the chuck. To accelerate ions in the plasma to the workpiece, a second AC source is connected to the electrode by way of a matching network. Each matching network includes a pair of variable reactances having values that are varied by motors, typically step motors.

[0004] Sensors for electric parameters associated with the plasma, as coupled to the excitation reactance and as coupled to the chuck electrode, derive signals which assist in controlling the values of the variable reactances. Pressure and flow rate transducers respectively in the chamber and in a line supplying gas to the second port derive signals which assist in controlling the vacuum pressure in the chamber and the flow rate of gas flowing into the chamber through the second port.

[0005] A controller, including a microprocessor and a memory system including a hard drive, random access memory (RAM) and a read only memory (ROM), responds to the signals derived by the transducers and signals from an operator input console to produce signals for controlling the variable reactances, output power of the two AC sources, the vacuum pressure in the chamber and the flow rate of gases supplied to the chamber through the second port. The memory system stores several recipes, each in the form of signals representing various parameters controlling the deposition and etching of the workpieces for differing situations. The parameters of each recipe are, inter alia, gas species to be supplied to the chamber, flow rates of the species, vacuum pressure in the chamber and output powers of the two AC sources. Each recipe can include other parameters, such as time for carrying out each recipe step. The controller responds to the parameters of the recipe to control valves for the flow of the gases into the chamber, the chamber pressure, as well as the output power of the first and second AC sources. During processing, the controller controls the reactances of the first and second matching networks so that there is an efficient transfer of power between the first and second AC sources and the loads they drive so the impedances seen looking into the output terminals of the first and second sources are substantially equal to the impedances the first and second sources respectively see by looking from their output terminals into cables connected to the first and second matching networks.

[0006] Typically, a recipe change has been marked by step, i.e. sudden, changes in at least one of (1) gas flow rate, (2) chamber pressure, (3) power supplied to a plasma excitation coil, (4) the gas species flowing into the chamber, and (5) power supplied to (a) an electrode, such as bottom electrode on which the workpiece is mounted or a top electrode for exciting a gas to a plasma, or (b) an RF plasma excitation coil. These step changes result in sharp demarcations between layers etched from the workpiece or deposited on the workpiece. For example, the step changes during etching of a trench in a workpiece, e.g., a silicon substrate, result in sharp corners between a wall and base of the trench. Such step changes also frequently result in sharp corners at a boundary between a trench wall and a layer at the top of the trench. Such sharp corners can make it difficult to fill the trench during subsequent operations and have other known disadvantages, such as causing stress related defects and/or electrical leakage.

[0007] One method of addressing the problem which has resulted in somewhat smooth transitions when certain recipe changes are made involves adding dilutants, such as argon or helium, or passivation gases, such as oxygen, on a transient basis, to gases flowing into the processing chamber during a process recipe step occurs. However, there are disadvantages in transiently adding dilutant and/or passivation gases to the processing chamber. Because of the relatively large volume of a typical plasma processing chamber, a significant amount of time, up to ten seconds, is required to purge "old" gas from a line coupling gas from a gas source into the chamber. As a result, there are substantial increases in workpiece processing time, to reduce chamber efficiency and decrease workpiece throughput. In addition, changing the gas species on a transient basis results in a change in plasma impedance. The change in plasma impedance adversely affects the ability of the matching network between the electric source and the coil and/or electrode to provide an efficient transfer of power between the source or sources and the driven loads. In addition, the time for the new gas, i.e., the dilutant or passivation gas, to flow into the chamber is likely to vary as a function of gas line length between the chamber and the gas source. As a result, precise control of the processing step is difficult to achieve and/or recipe processing steps must be customized for the different gas line lengths between the different gas sources and the chamber.

[0008] Chen et al, U.S. Pat. No. 5,807,789 discloses a method of operating a plasma processor to form in a

semiconductor workpiece a shallow trench with a tapered profile and round corners. Such a shallow trench is formed during successive recipe steps. During a first step the plasma power and chamber pressure are respectively relatively high and low. During the next steps, the plasma power and chamber pressure are respectively decreased and increased. The process continues in this way for at least one additional step.

[0009] In a particular etching embodiment Chen et al discloses, the plural gas species applied to the chamber remain the same and at constant flow rates while power supplied to the plasma is reduced in three steps, each of which occurs simultaneously with an increase in chamber pressure. During a first step, which lasts for eight seconds, the power supplied to a plasma excitation reactance and chamber pressure are respectively 800 watts and 50 millitorr. At the beginning of a second eight second step, the supplied power is reduced suddenly from 800 watts to 750 watts while chamber pressure is increased suddenly to 80 millitorr. At the beginning of a third 46 second step, supplied power is suddenly reduced further to 650 watts while chamber pressure is suddenly increased to 100 millitorr.

[0010] The aforementioned process suffers from similar problems to the previously mentioned problems associated with adding dilutants because of the substantial time required to change pressure in the relatively large volume vacuum chamber. In addition, the sudden power changes frequently do not enable the corners to be rounded to the desired extent.

[0011] It is, accordingly, an object of the invention to provide a new and improved method of and apparatus for operating a vacuum plasma processing chamber.

[0012] An additional object of the invention is to provide a new and improved method of and apparatus for operating a vacuum plasma processing chamber in such a manner that sharp corners on processed workpieces are avoided.

[0013] Another object of the invention is to provide a new and improved method of and apparatus for controlling a vacuum plasma processor such that changes in a processing recipe are performed in a manner which avoids sharp corners on a processed workpiece.

[0014] Still another object of the invention is to provide a new and improved method of and apparatus for processing a workpiece in a vacuum plasma workpiece processor so that changes during a recipe are performed in such a way as to avoid sharp corners in a processed workpiece and wherein processor throughput is relatively high.

[0015] Still another object of the invention is to provide a new and improved method of and apparatus for controlling processing of workpieces in a vacuum plasma processor, wherein changes in steps of a recipe are performed in such a way that sharp corners of the workpiece are avoided, without substantial impedance mismatches occurring between one or more sources driving reactive components which supply power to processing gas in the chamber.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0016] In accordance with the present invention, AC power supplied to a plasma in a vacuum plasma workpiece processing chamber is controlled on a preprogrammed basis so there are gradual changes in the amount of AC power supplied to the plasma during processing of one workpiece. Preferably, the gradual power change occurs while no change is made in (a) the gas species flowing into the chamber, (b) the chamber pressure or (c) the gas species flow rates. The AC power can be supplied to the chamber by an upper or lower chamber electrode coupling an AC electric field to gas in the chamber or a coil coupling an AC electromagnetic field to the chamber gas. The gradual power change is typically such that it causes a gradual transition in the shape of material in the processed workpiece.

[0017] In one preferred embodiment, a gas species is ionized into a plasma that etches the material and the preprogrammed gradual power change and the species are such that the material is shaped so a rounded corner is formed in the material as a result of the etching. In one specific application, the etching forms a trench wall including the rounded corner, which in one embodiment is at an intersection of a wall and a base of a trench.

[0018] The gradual change is typically performed in response to a computer program storing steps having (1) power changes in the range of a few milliwatts to less than 5% of the maximum output power of a source (e.g., if a source has a maximum output power of 3 kW, the maximum power change is 15 watts), and (2) durations in the range of about 1 millisecond to about 1 second. Steps having power changes greater than about 5% of maximum output power are too steep to provide the desired control over the plasma to achieve the desired workpiece shapes and steps lasting longer than about 1 second do not have adequate temporal resolution to achieve the desired workpiece shapes.

[0019] The above and still further objects, features and advantages of the present invention will become apparent upon consideration of the following detailed description of several specific embodiments thereof, especially when taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

[0020] **FIG. 1** is a block diagram of a typical vacuum plasma processor and controller capable of performing the present invention;

[0021] **FIG. 2** is a waveform of power versus time that can be applied to the coil or electrode of the apparatus illustrated in **FIG. 1**, wherein power increases gradually in an upwardly ramping manner;

[0022] **FIG. 3** is a waveform similar to the waveform of **FIG. 2**, wherein the power ramps downwardly;

[0023] **FIG. 4** is a waveform of power versus time that can be applied to the coil and/or electrode of **FIG. 1**, wherein the waveform is derived from experimental data;

[0024] **FIG. 5** is a schematic diagram of a cross section of an illustrative semiconductor wafer prior to etching; and

[0025] **FIG. 6** is an schematic diagram of the wafer illustrated in **FIG. 5** after it has been etched in accordance with a specific embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

[0026] The workpiece processor illustrated in **FIG. 1** includes vacuum plasma processing chamber assembly **10**,

a first circuit **12** for driving a reactance for exciting ionizable gas in chamber assembly **10** to a plasma state, a second circuit **14** for applying RF bias to a workpiece holder in chamber assembly **10**, and a controller arrangement **16** responsive to sensors for various parameters associated with chamber assembly **10** for deriving control signals for devices affecting the plasma in chamber assembly **10**. Controller **16** includes microprocessor **20** which responds to various sensors associated with chamber assembly **10**, as well as circuits **12** and **14**, and signals from operator input **22**, which can be in the form, for example, of a keyboard. Microprocessor **20** is coupled with memory system **24** including hard disk **26**, random access memory (RAM) **28** and read only memory (ROM) **30**. Microprocessor **20** responds to the various signals supplied to it to drive display **32**, which can be a typical computer monitor.

[**0027**] Hard disk **26** and ROM **30** store programs for controlling the operation of microprocessor **20** and preset data associated with different recipes for the processes performed in chamber assembly **10**. The different recipes concern gas species and flow rates applied to chamber assembly **10** during different processes, the output power of AC sources included in circuits **12** and **14**, the vacuum applied to the interior of chamber assembly **10**, and initial values of variable reactances included in matching networks of circuits **12** and **14**.

[**0028**] Plasma chamber assembly **10** includes chamber **40** having metal, non-magnetic cylindrical side wall **42** and metal, non-magnetic base **44**, both of which are electrically grounded. Dielectric, typically quartz, window **46** is fixedly positioned on the top edge of wall **42**. Wall **42**, base **44** and window **46** are rigidly connected to each other by suitable gaskets to enable a vacuum to be established within the interior of chamber **40**. Planar plasma excitation coil **48**, for example, as configured in Ogle, U.S. Pat. No. 4,948,458 or Holland et al., U.S. Pat. No. 5,759,280, sits on or in very close proximity to the upper face of window **46**. Coil **48**, an electric reactance, reactively supplies magnetic and electric AC fields usually at an RF frequency such as 13.56 MHz, to the interior of chamber **40**, to excite ionizable gas in the chamber to plasma, schematically illustrated in **FIG. 1** by reference numeral **50**. It is to be understood that for the purposes of the present invention, coil **48** can be replaced with a powered or grounded electrode that extends parallel to electrode **56** and can be located in chamber **40**.

[**0029**] The upper face of base **44** carries holder, i.e. chuck, **52** for workpiece **54**, which is typically a circular semiconductor wafer, a rectangular dielectric plate such as used in flat panel displays or a metal plate. Chuck holder **52** typically includes metal plate **56** that forms an electrode (a reactive element). Electrode **56** carries dielectric layer **58** and sits on dielectric layer **60**, which is carried by the upper face of base **44**. A workpiece handling mechanism (not shown) places workpiece **54** on the upper face of dielectric layer **58**. Workpiece **54** is cooled by supplying helium from a suitable source **62** to the underside of dielectric layer **58** via conduit **64** and grooves (not shown) in electrode **56** and by supplying a liquid from a suitable source (not shown) to conduits (not shown) in chuck **52**. With workpiece **54** in place on dielectric layer **58**, DC source **66** supplies a suitable voltage through a switch (not shown) to electrode **56** to clamp, i.e., chuck, workpiece **54** to chuck **52**.

[**0030**] With workpiece **54** secured in place on chuck **52**, one or more ionizable gases from one or more sources **68** flow into the interior of chamber **40** through conduit **70** and port **72** in sidewall **42**. For convenience, only one gas source **68** is shown in **FIG. 1**, but it is to be understood that usually there are several gas sources of different species, e.g. etchants, such as SF_6, CH_4, C_{12} and HBr, dilutants such as Ar or He, and O_2 as a passivation gas. The interior of conduit **70** includes valve **74** and flow rate gauge **76** for respectively controlling the flow rate of gas flowing through port **72** into chamber **40** and measuring the gas flow rate through port **72**. Valve **74** responds to a signal microprocessor **20** derives, while gauge **76** supplies the microprocessor with an electric signal indicative of the gas flow rate in conduit **70**. Memory system **24** stores for each recipe step of each workpiece **54** processed in chamber **40** a signal indicative of desired gas flow rate in conduit **70**. Microprocessor **20** responds to the signal memory system **24** stores for desired flow rate and the monitored flow rate signal gauge **76** derives to control valve **74** accordingly.

[**0031**] Vacuum pump **80**, connected to port **82** in base **44** of chamber **40** by conduit **84**, evacuates the interior of the chamber to a suitable pressure, typically in the range of one to one hundred millitorr. Pressure gauge **86**, in the interior of chamber **40**, supplies microprocessor **20** with a signal indicative of the vacuum pressure in chamber **40**. Memory system **24** stores for each recipe step a signal indicative of desired vacuum pressure for the interior of chamber **40**. Microprocessor **20** responds to the stored desired pressure signal memory system **24** derives for each recipe step and an electric signal from pressure gauge **86** to supply an electric signal to vacuum pump **80** to maintain the pressure in chamber **40** at the set point or predetermined value for each recipe step.

[**0032**] Optical spectrometer **90** monitors the optical emission of plasma **50** by responding to optical energy emitted by the plasma and coupled to the spectrometer via window **92** in side wall **42**. Spectrometer **90** responds to the optical energy emitted by plasma **50** to supply an electric signal to microprocessor **20**. Microprocessor **20** responds to the signal that spectrometer **90** derives to detect an end point of the process (either etching or deposition) that plasma **50** is performing on workpiece **54**. Microprocessor **20** responds to the signal spectrometer **90** derives and a signal memory system **24** stores indicative of a characteristic of the output of the spectrometer associated with an end point to supply the memory with an appropriate signal to indicate that the recipe step has been completed. Microprocessor **20** then responds to signals from memory system **24** to stop certain activities associated with the completed recipe step and initiate a new recipe step on the workpiece being processed in chamber **40** or commands release of workpiece **54** from chuck **52** and transfer of a new workpiece to the chuck, followed by instigation of another series of recipe processing steps.

[**0033**] Excitation circuit **12** for driving coil **48** includes constant frequency RF source **100**, having a constant output power and typically having a frequency of 13.56 MHz. Source **100** drives power amplifier **102**, having an electronically controlled power gain, so that the amplifier response time is on the order of a few microseconds or less, i.e., the output power of amplifier **102** changes from a first value to a second value in a few microseconds or less. The output

power of amplifier **102** is in the range between 100 and 3000 watts. Amplifier **102** typically has a 50 ohm output impedance all of which is resistive and none of which is reactive. Hence, the impedance seen looking back into the output terminals of amplifier **102** is typically represented by (50+j**0**) ohms, and cable **106** is chosen to have a characteristic impedance of 50 ohms.

[**0034**] For any particular recipe, memory system **24** stores a signal for desired output powers of amplifier **102**. Memory system **24** supplies the desired output power of amplifier **102** to the amplifier by way of microprocessor **20**. The output power of amplifier **102** can be controlled in an open loop manner in response to the signals stored in memory system **24** or control of the output power of amplifier **102** can be on a closed loop feedback basis, as known in the art. The output power of amplifier **102** is also gradually dynamically changed as a function of time as preprogrammed changes in a recipe step are ordered by memory system **24**. The preprogrammed dynamic changes in the output power are stored in memory system **24** and control the power gain of amplifier **102**.

[**0035**] The output power of amplifier **102** drives coil **48** via cable **106** and matching network **108**. Matching network **108**, typically configured as a "T," includes two series legs including variable capacitors **112** and **116**, as well as a shunt leg including fixed capacitor **114**. Coil **48** includes input and output terminals **122** and **124**, respectively connected to one electrode of capacitor **112** and to a first electrode of series capacitor **126**, having a grounded second electrode. The value of capacitor **126** is preferably selected as described in the commonly assigned, previously mentioned, Holland et al. patent.

[**0036**] Electric motors **118** and **120**, preferably of the step type, respond to signals from microprocessor **20** to control the values of capacitors **112** and **116** in relatively small increments to maintain an impedance match between the impedance seen by looking from the output terminals of amplifier **102** into cable **106** and by looking from cable **106** into the output terminals of amplifier **102**. Hence, for the previously described (50+j**0**) ohm output impedance of amplifier **102** and 50 ohm characteristic impedance of cable **106**, microprocessor **20** controls motors **118** and **120** so the impedance seen looking from cable **106** into matching network **108** is as close as possible to (50+j**0**) ohms.

[**0037**] To control motors **118** and **120** to maintain a matched condition for the impedance seen looking into the output terminals of amplifier **132** and the impedance amplifier **132** drives, microprocessor **20** responds to signals from conventional sensor arrangement **104** indicative of the impedance seen looking from cable **106** into matching network **108**. Alternatively, sensors can be provided for deriving signals indicative of the power amplifier **102** supplies to its output terminals and the power reflected by matching network **108** back to cable **106**. Microprocessor **20** responds, in one of several known manners, to the sensed signals that sensor arrangement **104** derives to control motors **118** and **120** to attain the matched condition.

[**0038**] Circuit **14** for supplying RF bias to workpiece **54** via electrode **56** has a construction somewhat similar to circuit **12**. Circuit **14** includes constant frequency RF source **130**, having a constant output power and typically having a frequency such as 400 KHz, 2.0 MHz or 13.56 MHz. The output of source **130** drives electronically controlled variable gain power amplifier **132**, having the same characteristics as amplifier **102**. Amplifier **132** in turn drives a cascaded arrangement including directional coupler **134**, cable **136** and matching network **138**. Matching network **138** includes a series leg comprising the series combination of fixed inductor **140** and variable capacitor **142**, as well as a shunt leg including fixed inductor **144** and variable capacitor **146**. Motors **148** and **150**, which are preferably step motors, vary the values of capacitors **142** and **146**, respectively, in response to signals from microprocessor **20**.

[**0039**] Output terminal **152** of matching network **138** supplies an RF bias voltage to electrode **56** by way of series coupling capacitor **154** which isolates matching network **138** from the chucking voltage of DC source **66**. The RF energy circuit **14** applies to electrode **56** is capacitively coupled via dielectric layer **48**, workpiece **54** and a plasma sheath between the workpiece and plasma to a portion of plasma **50** in close proximity with chuck **52**. The RF energy that chuck **52** couples to plasma **50** establishes a DC. bias in the plasma; the DC bias typically has values between 50 and 1000 volts. The DC bias resulting from the RF energy circuit **14** applies to electrode **52** accelerates ions in plasma **50** to workpiece **54**.

[**0040**] Microprocessor **20** responds to signals indicative of the impedance seen looking from cable **136** into matching network **138**, as derived by a known sensor arrangement **139**, to control motors **148** and **150** and the values of capacitors **142** and **146** in a manner similar to that described supra with regard to control of capacitors **112** and **116** of matching network **108**.

[**0041**] For each process recipe step, memory system **24** stores set point signals for the net power coupled by directional coupler **134** to cable **136**. The net power coupled by directional coupler **134** to cable **136** equals the output power of amplifier **132** minus the power reflected from the load and matching network **138** back through cable **136** to the terminals of directional coupler **134** connected to cable **136**. Memory system **24** supplies the net power set point signal associated with circuit **14** to microprocessor **20**. Microprocessor **34** also responds to output signals directional coupler **134** supplies to power sensor arrangement **141**. Power sensor arrangement **141** derives signals indicative of output power of amplifier **132** and power reflected by cable **136** back toward the output terminals of amplifier **132**.

[**0042**] Microprocessor **20** responds to the set points and measured signals sensor arrangement **141** derives, which measured signals are indicative of the output power of amplifier **132** and the power reflected back to amplifier, to control the power gain of amplifier **132**. The output power of amplifier **132** is also gradually dynamically changed as a function of time as changes in a recipe are ordered by memory systems **24**. The dynamic changes in the output power are stored in memory system **24** and control the power gain of amplifier **132**.

[**0043**] One of the elements of memory system **24**, typically read-only memory **30**, stores preprogrammed values for controlling the output power of amplifier **102** and/or **132** during a step of the recipe of plasma **50** processing workpiece **54**. The preprogrammed values thereby control the amount of power coil **48** and/or electrode **56** supply to the plasma **50** in chamber **40** to enable the power that coil **48**

and/or electrode **56** supplies to the plasma to change gradually as a function of time in accordance with a preprogrammed predetermined function, such as the mathematical functions **170** and **172** illustrated in **FIGS. 2 and 3** or the empirical function **174** illustrated in **FIG. 4**. Functions **170** and **172** of **FIGS. 2 and 3** are respectively upwardly and downwardly directed substantially continuous, gradual linear ramping functions.

[**0044**] The preprogrammed values for controlling the output power of amplifier **102** and/or **132** that read-only memory **30** stores are, in actuality, a series of relatively small incremental steps, each of which usually has the same value. The incremental steps are such that the output power of amplifier **102** and/or **132** changes suddenly at the beginning of each step, by a small value, in the range of about 1 milliwatt to less than 5% of the maximum output power of amplifier **102** and/or **132** (e.g., if the maximum output power of amplifier **102** is 3000 watts, the maximum change in a step of the output power of amplifier is 15 watts). Each step usually has the same relatively short duration, typically between one millisecond and one second during which the output power of amplifier **102** and/or **132** remains constant. Steps longer than one second will not usually provide the desired rounding effect previously discussed in this document. A series of steps in the foregoing ranges provides substantially continuous and gradual variations in power supplied to coil **48** and electrode **56** and therefore the power supplied to plasma **50**.

[**0045**] When it is desired to change the output power of amplifier **102** and/or **132** in accordance with a preprogrammed function, such as those illustrated in any of FIGS. **2-4**, the stored program in hard disk **26** periodically reads stored numeric values in read-only memory **30** indicative of the gain amplifier settings which provide the desired output power of the amplifier. Microprocessor **20** responds to the values read from read-only memory **30** to control the gain of at least one of amplifiers **102** and **132** and thereby vary the power at least one of coil **48** and electrode **56** supplies to plasma **50**.

[**0046**] For purposes of explanation, assume that the functions of **FIGS. 2, 3** and **4** represent the power RF source **30** and variable gain amplifier **132** supply to electrode **56**. Prior to the beginning of ramping function **170**, at time T1, memory system **24** and microprocessor **20** set the gain of amplifier **132** so that electrode **56** supplies constant power **P1** to plasma **50**. During a recipe step of interest, memory system **24** and microprocessor **20** control the gain of amplifier **132** to increase the power supplied to electrode **56** as indicated by linear, upwardly directed, gradually increasing and substantially continuous ramping function **170**. Ramping function **170** continues until the recipe step has been completed at time T2. Thereafter, memory system **24** and microprocessor **20** maintain the gain of amplifier **132** constant so that electrode **56** supplies constant power P2 to plasma **50**. Memory system **24** and microprocessor **20** control the gain of amplifier **132** and the power electrode **56** supplies to plasma **50** to gradually and substantially continuously decrease the plasma power along ramping function **172**. Ramping function **172** extends from a constant value P2, at time T1, to a constant value P1, at time T2. The power decrease from P2 to P1 is performed in the same manner described for upwardly directed ramping function **170**.

[**0047**] The slopes of ramping functions **170** and **172** are determined by the magnitude and duration of each step change in the gain of amplifier **132**. Typically, the magnitude and duration of each step change in the gain of amplifier **132** for a particular recipe change are the same; it is to be understood, however, that different step changes in the gain of amplifier **132** for a particular recipe change can have different magnitude and duration values.

[**0048**] Function **174** of **FIG. 4** is empirically derived and results from a series of experiments performed on test workpieces **54** under various RF power settings and from measurements of profile angles under these various power settings. It is to be understood that function **174** of **FIG. 4** is merely for illustrative purposes and that many different empirically derived functions can be employed, as necessary. The particular function **174** varies between a constant power level P3 to a higher constant power level P4, which respectively subsist prior to time T3 and subsequent to time T4, the temporal boundaries of function **174**. Function **174** decreases slowly from power level P**3**, then increases at a faster rate to a value above power level P**4** and then returns to power level P**4** at time T4.

[**0049**] Reference is now made to **FIGS. 5 and 6** of the drawing, respectively schematic drawings of an illustrative semiconductor structure prior and subsequent to etching operations in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention. The pre-etch structure of **FIG. 5** includes silicon substrate **202** having a top face coated by thin film silicon oxide layer **204**, typically having a thickness of 150 angstroms, which in turn is covered by a thin film silicon nitride layer **206**, typically having a thickness of 1600 angstroms. Layer **206** is coated with an epitaxial bottom anti-reflective coating **208**, typically having a thickness of 570 angstroms, in turn covered by two spaced photoresist strips **210**.

[**0050**] The structure of **FIG. 5** is initially processed by reducing the height of photoresist strips **210** to form truncated photoresist strips **212**. Photoresist strips **210** are reduced in height by supplying a typical photoresist etchant from gas sources **68** to the interior of chamber **40** under the control of a program hard disk **26** stores and which is read to microprocessor **20**. Simultaneously, the program that hard disk **26** stores and microprocessor **20** cause the power supplied to coil **48** and electrode **56** and the vacuum in chamber **40** to remain constant. Next, the program that hard disk **26** stores causes bottom anti-reflective coating **28** to be etched by opening valves **74** connected to hydrogen bromide (HBr) and oxygen (O_2) sources **68** so that the flow ratio of these gases is 75 to 22. At the same time, disk **26** and microprocessor **20** control vacuum pump **80** so the pressure in chamber **40** is 3 millitorr. Simultaneously, hard disk **26** causes the gains of amplifiers **102** and **132** to be such that coil **40** is supplied with 500 watts of RF power at 13.56 MHz while electrode **56** is supplied with 178 watts of RF power at 13.56 MHz; the 178 watts of RF power supplied to electrode **56** causes a DC bias of −200V to be established on the electrode. Optical spectrometer **90** detects when the etching end point of layer **208** occurs. Microprocessor **20** and memory system **24** respond to the signal from optical spectrometer **90** to cause over etching of layer **208** by 30 percent, a result achieved by not changing the etching parameters in chamber **40**.

[0051] When the over etch has been completed, microprocessor **20** and memory system **24** cause silicon nitride layer **206** to be etched in a somewhat similar matter to that described in connection with coating **208** until optical spectrometer **90** detects an etch end point. Etching of layer **206** is in response to a suitable mixture of fluorine-based etchants while the chamber **40** pressure is 10 millitorr, the RF power supplied to coil **48** is 1000 watts and the RF power supplied to electrode **56** is 155 watts, resulting in the electrode having a DC bias of −70V.

[0052] Microprocessor **20** and memory system **24** then cause silicon nitride layer **206** to be over etched for 10 seconds. The over etch is performed by causing a suitable mixture of fluorine-based etchants argon and oxygen to flow from sources **68** into chamber **40**, while the chamber is maintained at a pressure of 7 millitorr, and 1400 and 400 watts RF power are respectively applied to coil **48** and electrode **56**. The application of 400 watts RF power to electrode **56** results in the electrode being at a DC voltage of −145 V.

[0053] Microprocessor **20** and memory system **24** then cause a breakthrough of silicon oxide layer **204** by causing 100 sccm Cl_2 to be applied for five seconds from gas sources **68** to chamber **40**, while 500 and 120 watts are respectively applied to coil **48** and electrode **56**.

[0054] Microprocessor **20** and memory system **24** then cause the main etch operation for shallow trench isolation of silicon substrate **202** to be performed. The main etch operation is performed for 65 seconds in response to a suitable mixture of $HBr/Cl_2/O_2$ flowing from gas sources **68** to chamber **40**. During the 65 seconds, vacuum pump **80** maintains the pressure in chamber **40** at 15 millitorr, the output of amplifier **102** supplies coil **48** with 1000 watts and amplifier **132** supplies electrode **56** with 235 watts so that the DC bias voltage of electrode **56** is −320V.

[0055] Upon completion of the 65 second main etch operation, the silicon in substrate **202** is at the location indicated by point **212**, **FIG. 7**, slightly above the trench final base **214**. The final etch operation of silicon substrate **202** between point **212** and base **214** is performed in such a manner as to achieve rounded edges **216** between point **212** and base **214**.

[0056] To this end, microprocessor **20** and memory system **24** perform the final etch operation for 15 seconds. During the 15 second final etch operation, vacuum pump **80** maintains the pressure in chamber **40** constant at 10 millitorr, amplifier **102** maintains the power supplied to coil **48** constant at 100 watts and a suitable mixture of HBr/O_2 constantly flows from sources **68** into chamber **40**, while the power that amplifier **132** supplies to electrode **56** gradually decreases from 200 to 100 watts. The gradual decrease in the power that amplifier **132** supplies to electrode **56** is in 15,000 steps, each having a duration of 1.0 millisecond and an amplitude of 6.667 milliwatts. After base **214** has been reached, the etchant gases are purged from the chamber while the chamber pressure remains constant as does the power supplied to coil **48** and electrode **56**. Then workpiece **54** can be removed from chamber **40** for further processing.

[0057] If it is desired to provide a rounded corner, that is a gradual transition, between the top portion of silicon substrate **202** and a layer deposited thereon, the power applied to electrode **56** and/or coil **48** can be similarly varied while the gas species and the flow rates thereof into chamber **40** are maintained constant, simultaneously with the pressure in chamber **40** remaining constant. Gradual transitions in deposited layers can also be provided by gradually and substantially continuously varying the power applied to coil **48** and/or electrode **56**, while maintaining constant the gas species, the flow rates thereof and the pressure in chamber **40**. Because of the fast response times of amplifiers **102** and **132**, the changes in the gains of these amplifiers almost instantaneously change the characteristics of plasma **50** to provide relatively high throughput processing of workpieces **54** and more accurate control of workpiece processing during a recipe step change than can be provided by varying a parameter such as gas flow rate or chamber pressure.

[0058] While there have been described and illustrated specific embodiments of the invention, it will be clear that variations in the details of the embodiments specifically illustrated and described may be made without departing from the true spirit and scope of the invention as defined in the appended claims. For example, the variable gain features provided by amplifiers **102** and **132** can be incorporated directly into RF sources **100** and **30**, respectively.

We claim:

1. A method of processing a workpiece in a vacuum plasma processor chamber wherein a gas species is converted into an AC plasma, the vacuum chamber being subject to operating at different pressures while the workpiece is being processed, the gas species being subject to flowing into the chamber at different flow rates while the workpiece is being processed, comprising, gradually changing on a pre-programmed basis, the amount of AC power supplied to the plasma during processing of the workpiece.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein the gradual power change occurs while no change is made in (a) the species, (b) the pressure or (c) the flow rate.

3. The method of claim 1 wherein the AC power is supplied by an electrode coupling an AC electric field to plasma in the chamber.

4. The method of claim 3 wherein the electrode is responsive to an AC power source that supplies RF bias voltage to the electrode, the electrode being on a holder for the workpiece.

5. The method of claim 3 wherein the electrode is responsive to an AC power source that supplies RF plasma excitation voltage to the electrode, the electrode responding to the RF voltage to supply RF electric field to the plasma to excite the gas to the plasma.

6. The method of claim 3 wherein the AC power is supplied by a coil coupling an RF plasma excitation electromagnetic field to the chamber.

7. The method of claim 1 wherein a gradual transition in the shape of material in the workpiece being processed occurs in response to the gradual power change.

8. The method of claim 7 wherein the species is ionized into a plasma that etches the material, the gradual power change and the species being such that the material is shaped to have a rounded corner in response to changes in the ionized plasma etchant resulting from the gradual power change.

9. The method of claim 8 wherein the etching, which occurs in response to changes in the ionized plasma etchant

resulting from the gradual power change, forms a trench wall including the rounded corner.

10. The method of claim 9 wherein the rounded corner is at an intersection of a wall and a base of a trench.

11. The method of claim 7 wherein the rounded corner is at an intersection of a wall and a surface intersecting the wall, the surface extending generally at right angles to the wall.

12. The method of claim 1 wherein the gradual change includes steps having power changes no greater than about several watts, the power remaining at a constant wattage for no more than about 1 second.

13. The method of claim 12 wherein the power steps are a few milliwatts and remain at a constant power for about 1 millisecond.

14. A vacuum plasma processor for processing a workpiece in a vacuum plasma processor chamber wherein a gas species is converted into an AC plasma comprising a reactive element for supplying an electric field to plasma in the chamber, and an electric source for supplying gradually changing amounts of power on a preprogrammed basis to the reactive element.

15. The processor of claim 14 further including a controller for causing the source to supply the gradually changing amounts of power on the preprogrammed basis to the reactive element while a single workpiece is being processed.

16. The processor of claim 15 wherein the controller is arranged for (a) controlling (i) a gas species adapted to flow into the chamber, (ii) the pressure in the vacuum chamber, and (iii) the flow rates of the gas species, and (b) maintaining the constant (I) the gas species, (ii) the gas species flow rate and (iii) the chamber pressure while the plasma power is gradually changing on the preprogrammed basis.

17. A computer program for controlling a computer for controlling processing of a workpiece in a vacuum plasma processor chamber wherein a gas species is converted into an AC plasma, the computer program storing signals causing (a) the vacuum chamber to operate at different pressures while the workpiece is being processed, (b) control of the gas species type and the flow rates thereof into the chamber while the workpiece is being processed, (c) the amount of AC power applied to the plasma while the workpiece is being processed; the stored signal for the amount of applied AC power causing gradual preprogrammed changes in the amount of AC power supplied to the plasma during processing of the workpiece.

18. The program of claim 17 wherein the stored signal causes the gradual power change to occur while no change is made in (a) the species, (b) the pressure or (c) the flow rate.

19. The program of claim 17 wherein the stored signal causing gradual power change causes a gradual transition in the shape of material in the workpiece being processed in response to the gradual power change.

20. The program of claim 19 wherein the stored signal controls etchant species supplied to the chamber while the workpiece is being processed and the gradual power transition so as to cause the workpiece to be etched to have a rounded corner.

21. The program of claim 20 wherein the stored signal controls etchant species supplied to the chamber while the workpiece is being processed and the gradual power transition so as to cause the workpiece to be etched to have a trench wall including the rounded corner.

22. The program of claim 21 wherein the rounded corner is at an intersection of a wall and a base of a trench.

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