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(54) **METHOD AND APPARATUS OF DIFFERENTIAL PUMPING IN AN X-RAY TUBE**

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(51) **Int. Cl.**
H01J 35/02 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **378/139**; 378/123

(58) **Field of Classification Search** 378/123, 378/139

See application file for complete search history.

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

An x-ray tube includes an anode, a first chamber enclosing the anode and having a first pressure therein, a cathode, and a second chamber enclosing the cathode and having a second pressure therein. A separator is positioned between the first and second chambers and has a conductance limiter therein.

5 Claims, 5 Drawing Sheets

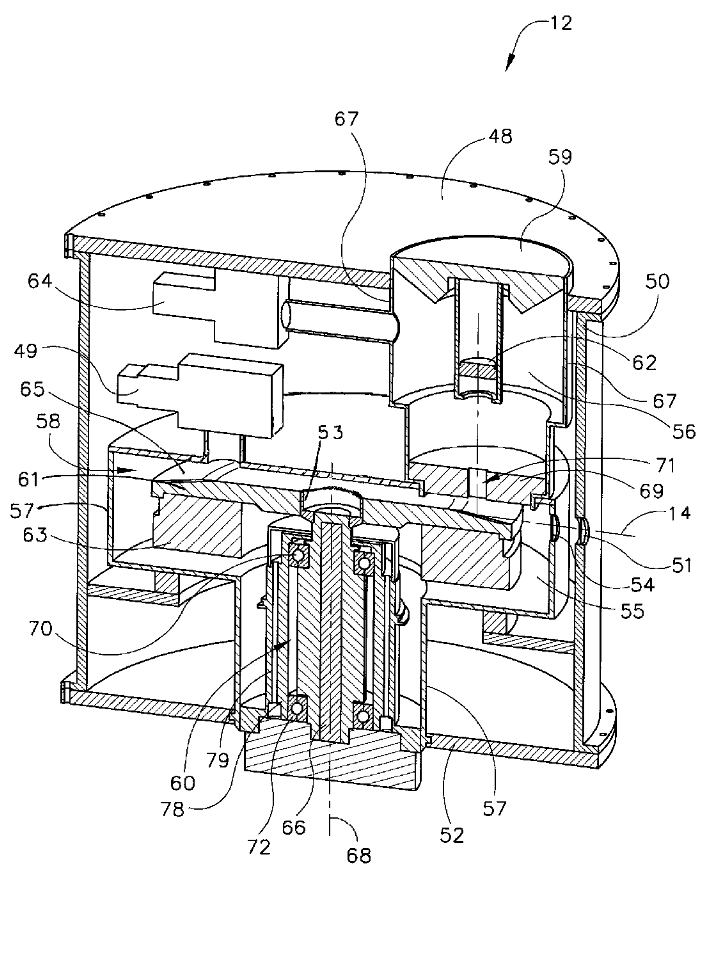

FIG. 1

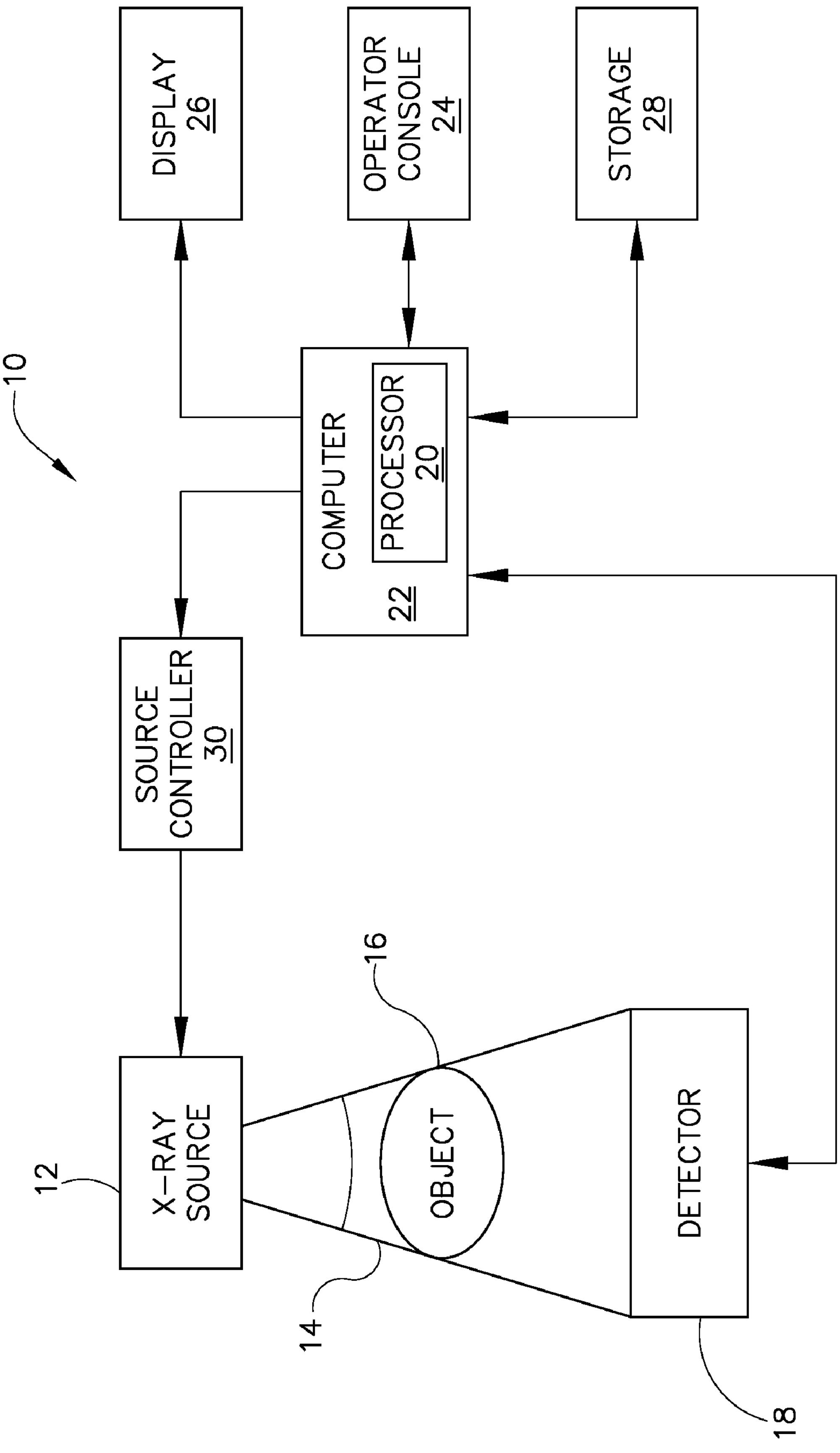
DISPLAY
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FIG. 2

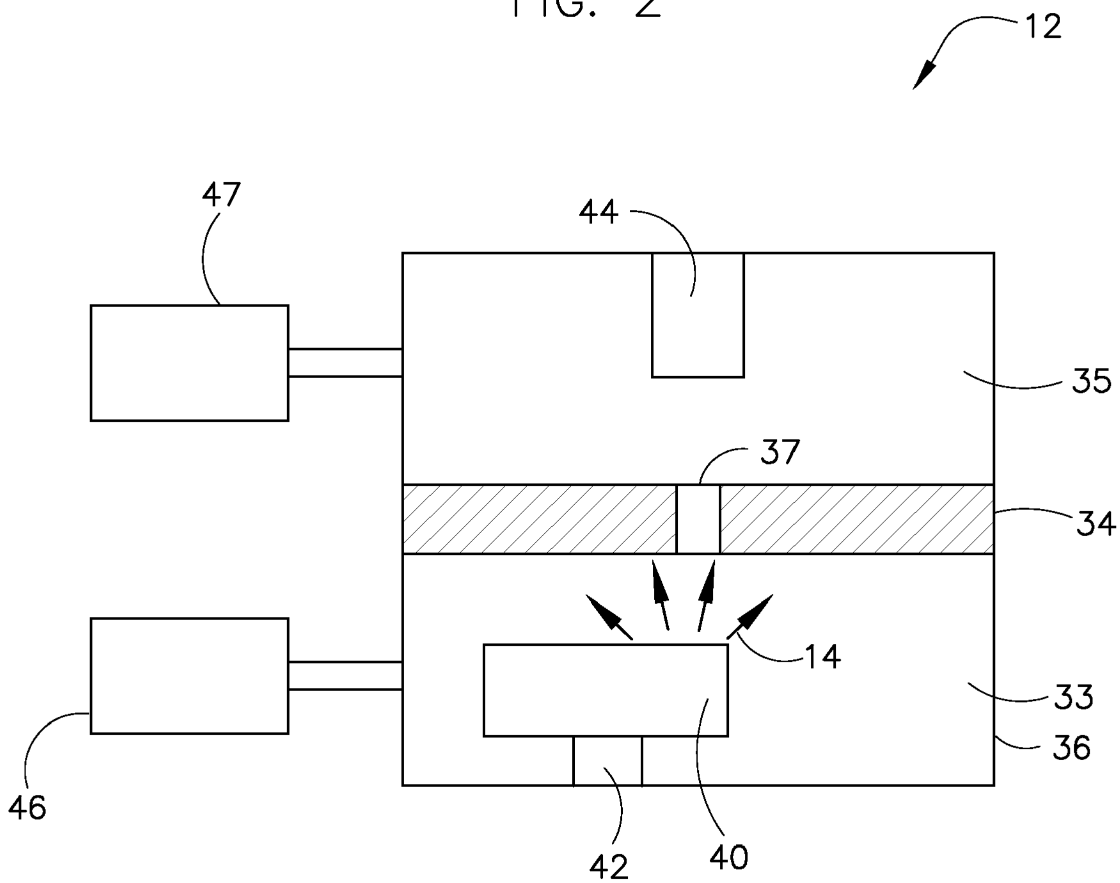
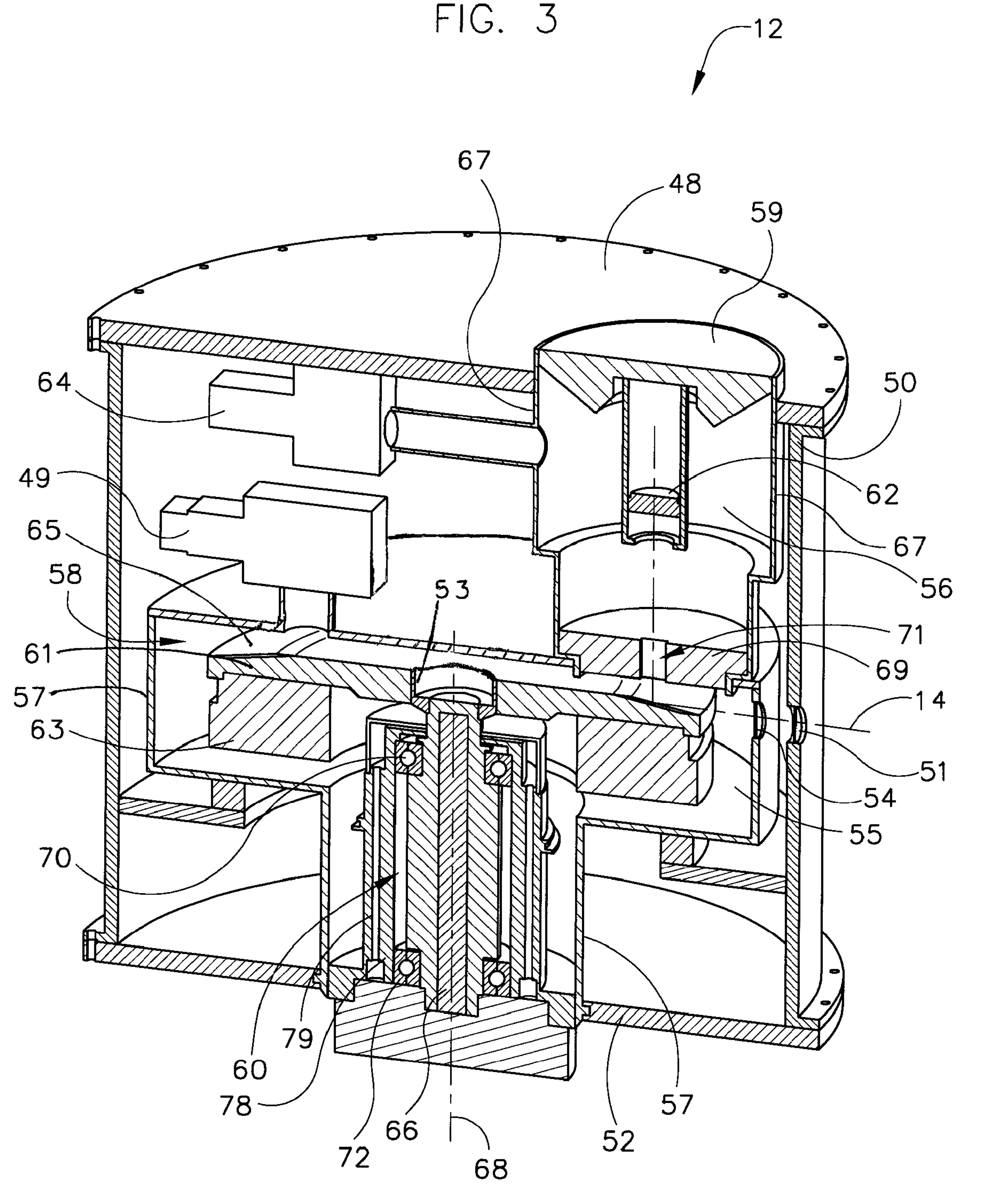


FIG. 3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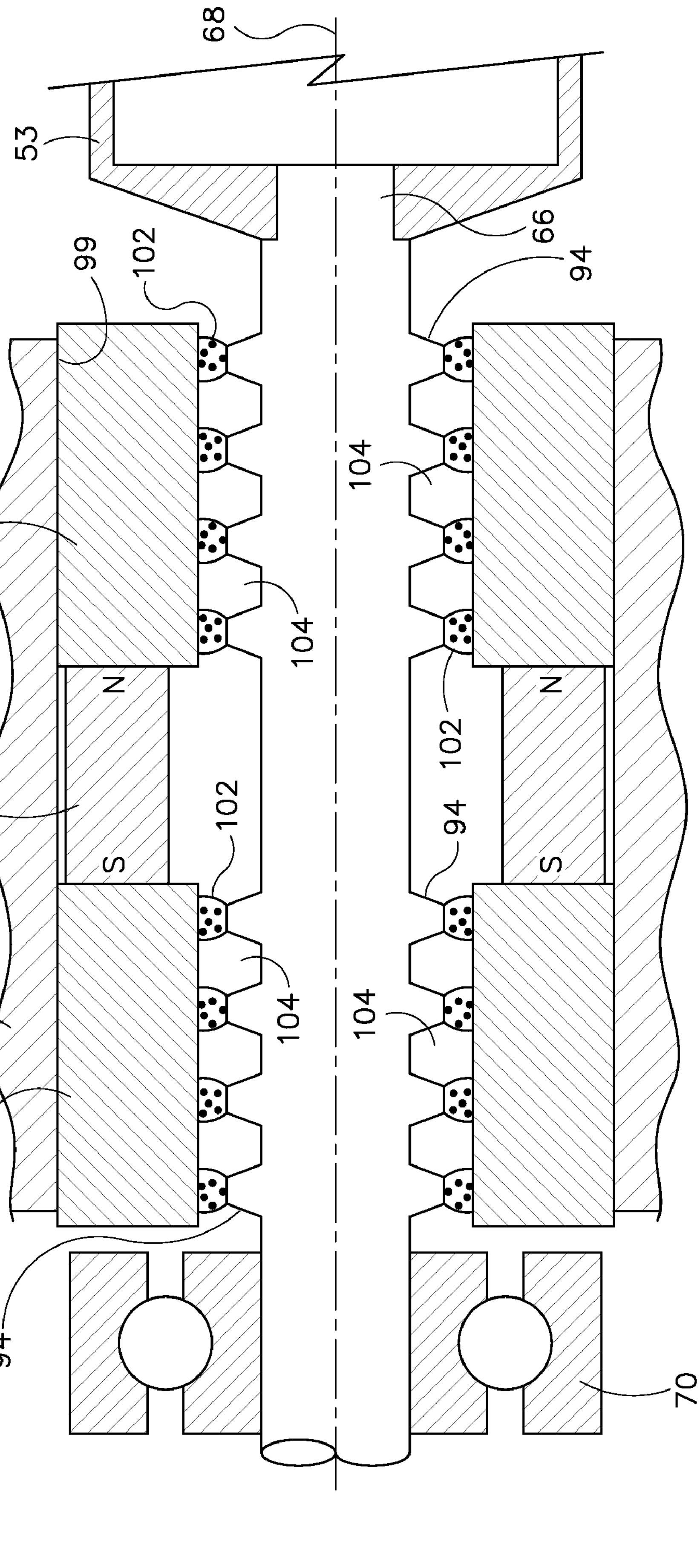
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FIG. 4

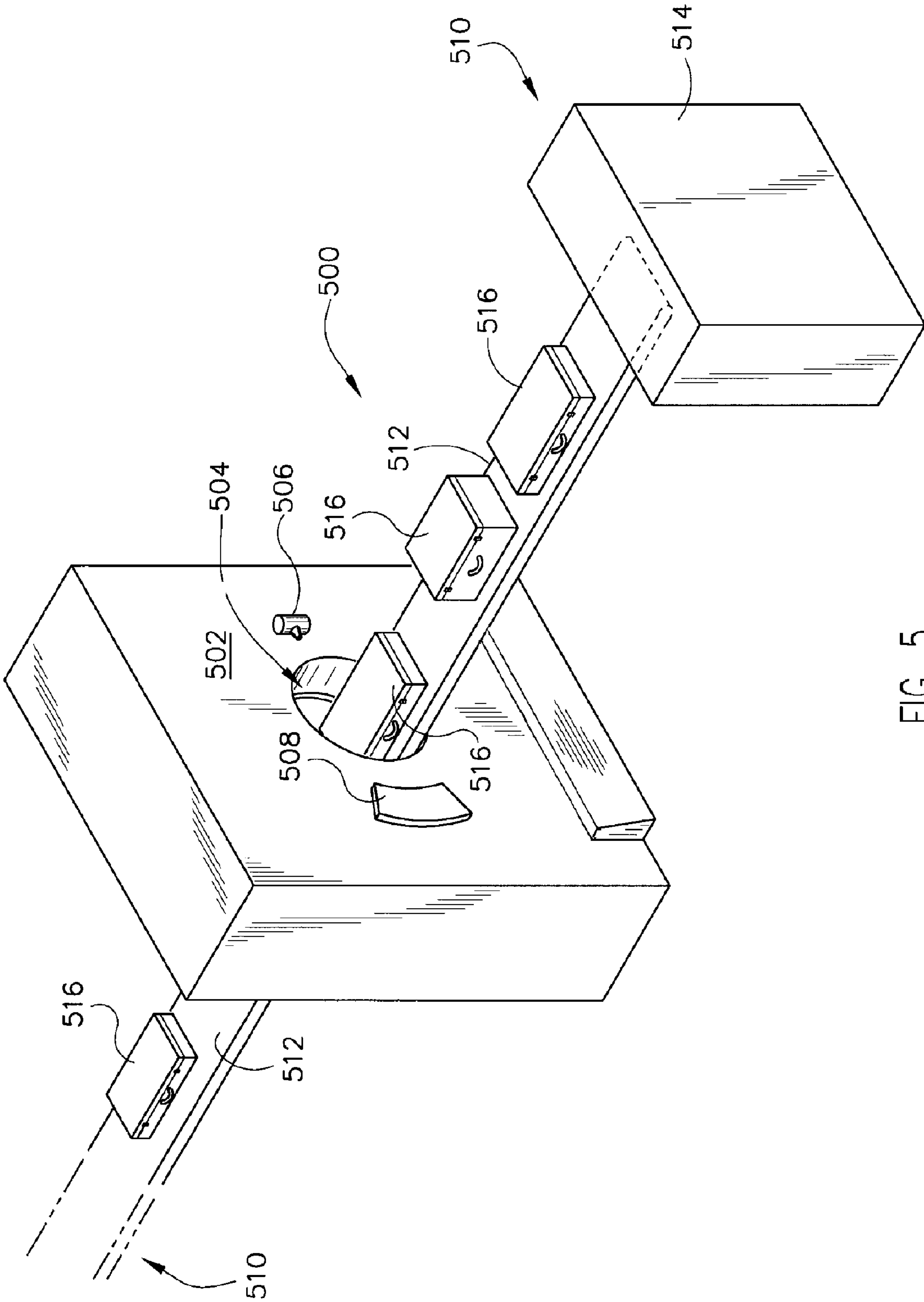

FIG. 5

METHOD AND APPARATUS OF DIFFERENTIAL PUMPING IN AN X-RAY TUBE

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The invention relates generally to x-ray tubes and, more particularly, to a method and apparatus of reducing high-voltage activity therein.

X-ray systems typically include an x-ray tube, a detector, and a rotatable assembly to support the x-ray tube and the detector. In operation, an imaging table, on which an object is positioned, is located between the x-ray tube and the detector. The x-ray tube typically emits radiation, such as x-rays, toward the object while the x-ray tube and detector are rotated about the object. The radiation typically passes through the object on the imaging table and impinges on the detector. As radiation passes through the object, internal structures of the object cause spatial variances in the radiation received at the detector. The detector then transfers data received, and the system translates the radiation variances into an image, which may be used to evaluate the internal structure of the object. One skilled in the art will recognize that the object may include, but is not limited to, a patient positioned in a medical imaging scanner and an inanimate object as in, for instance, a package in a computed tomography (CT) package scanner.

X-ray tubes typically include an anode having a high density track material, such as tungsten, that generates x-rays when high energy electrons impinge thereon. The anode structure typically includes a target cap and a heat storage unit, such as graphite, attached thereto. X-ray tubes also include a cathode that has a filament and a high voltage applied thereto to provide a focused electron beam. The focused electron beam comprises electrons that emit from the filament, typically tungsten, and are accelerated across an anode-to-cathode vacuum gap to produce x-rays upon impact with the track material. The anode and the cathode are typically positioned within a single volume that is maintained at a single vacuum level.

Because of the high temperatures generated when the electron beam strikes the track material, the anode assembly is typically rotated at high rotational speed. The anode typically includes a cylindrical rotor built into a cantilevered axle that supports the anode. An iron stator structure with copper windings surrounds the rotor and causes rotation of the anode via the rotor. The heat storage unit receives heat generated at the focal spot via conduction, and radiates the heat to the surrounding walls of the vacuum enclosure, where the heat is carried away by a coolant located outside the walls. The heat storage unit increases the heat capacity of the anode assembly, thus enabling longer and more frequent imaging sessions to be performed before the components of the x-ray tube overheat. The anode is typically mounted on a bearing assembly and rotated by an induction motor, and the bearing is typically placed within the vacuum region of the x-ray tube. The bearing assembly typically includes tool steel ball bearings and tool steel raceways positioned within the vacuum region, therefore a solid lubricant such as silver is typically adhered to the balls to increase the life of the bearings.

Because of the high voltage requirements, the x-ray tube is susceptible to high voltage discharges, or "spits," which interfere with operation of the x-ray system and lead to early life failure of the tube. Discharges occur as a result of high voltage operation in the presence of gases or particulate material within the x-ray tube (which raise its pressure), and the area surrounding the cathode is particularly susceptible to spit activity.

This phenomenon is exacerbated for a monopolar, or anode-grounded, tube design as compared to a bipolar design. When, for instance, a −140 kV voltage differential is maintained between the cathode and the anode and the tube is a bipolar design, the cathode may be maintained at, for instance, −70 kV, and the anode may be maintained at +70 kV. As such, the voltage differential between the cathode and the surrounding components at ground (and not the anode) is a net 70 kV. In contrast, for a monopolar design having likewise a −140 kV standoff between the cathode and the anode, the cathode accordingly is maintained at this higher potential of −140 kV while the anode is grounded and thus maintained at approximately 0 kV. Accordingly, the anode is operated having a net 140 kV difference with surrounding components within the tube. Thus, a monopolar tube design has increased voltage stand-off requirements for particularly the cathode, and therefore has increased sensitivity to gas and particulate in the area of the cathode. The high potential of the cathode in a monopolar design thus increases the propensity for high voltage activity in the cathode region as compared to a bipolar design. And such propensity is further exacerbated as gases and particulates collect within the vacuum region (thus raising its pressure) during the life of the tube.

Gases and particulates in an x-ray tube may emit from several sources. Such sources include, but are not limited to, the walls of the enclosure, the cathode components, and the anode components. For instance, the tungsten filament sublimates as a result of high temperature operation, thus causing tungsten particulate to emit into the vacuum region. Additionally, the walls of the enclosure, having a high surface area and typically an emissive coating thereon, emit gas into the vacuum region. The emission of gas and particulate matter is compounded as the operating temperature increases.

Furthermore, the anode itself typically has several sources from which gas and particulate matter may emit. Graphite in the anode, for instance, emits particulate and gas and is one of the worst offenders for causing high voltage activity. The bearing, likewise, emits particulate as a result of wear and is also a major source of particulate contaminants within an x-ray tube. Thus, by its operation, an x-ray tube typically includes a number of sources from which contaminant within the vacuum region may derive.

Commonly, the vacuum level in an x-ray tube is statically maintained and the vacuum region is evacuated at elevated temperature and sealed off. Gettering material is sometimes included in the vacuum vessel to aid in vacuum level retention. When the vacuum vessel is hermetically sealed via solid joints, the vacuum levels can be maintained so that the x-ray tube has a reasonably long operational life. However, if a constant gas source is included in the x-ray tube (e.g. a ferrofluidic rotating seal), additional vacuum pumping may be included to maintain the vacuum level during the tube life.

Typically, despite the various sources of contaminants, the vacuum level of the x-ray tube may be maintained by a single vacuum pump, such as an ion pump with a capacity of, for instance 8 l/s. However, such a pump is typically fairly bulky and is sized in order to properly pump the relatively large amounts of contaminants that emanate from primarily the anode and bearing in order to maintain the very high vacuum level around, for instance, the cathode.

The effect of gas and particulate emission from sources can be minimized to some extent by implementing design improvements or alternatives in an x-ray tube. For instance, an x-ray tube cathode is typically designed to have smoothed and rounded surfaces. And proper spacing between the anode, the cathode, and the surrounding components is typically maintained in the design to minimize the propensity for high voltage discharge. Such design activities represent practices that are developed with experience in the industry and may result in an increased tolerance of gas and particulate contamination within the vacuum.

As another example of gas and particulate emission reduction in x-ray tube design, the bearing may be placed outside the vacuum region by use of, for instance, a ferrofluid seal. Because the bearings may be positioned outside the vacuum region, they may be oil lubricated and may be designed to have greater load-bearing capacity than conventional x-ray tube bearings. A ferrofluid seal typically includes a series of annular regions between a rotating component and a non-rotating component. The annular regions are occupied by a ferrofluid that is typically a hydrocarbon-based or fluorocarbon-based oil with a suspension of magnetic particles therein. The particles are coated with a stabilizing agent, or surfactant, which prevents agglomeration of the particles in the presence of a magnetic field. When in the presence of a magnetic field, the ferrofluid is caused to form a seal between each of the annular regions. The seal on each annular region, or stage, can separately withstand pressure of typically 1-3 psi and, when each stage is placed in series, the overall assembly can withstand pressure varying from atmospheric pressure on one side to high vacuum on the other side.

The ferrofluid seal allows rotation of a shaft therein designed to deliver mechanical power from the rotor on one side of the seal to the anode on the other side. As such, the rotor may be placed outside the vacuum region and particulate generated due to bearing wear may be prevented from passing from the bearing to the vacuum region. However, while ferrofluid seals hermetically seal one side from the other, gas and water vapor may diffuse through the ferrofluid and into the high-vacuum region of the x-ray tube. In addition, the hydrocarbon-based or fluorocarbon-based oil used in the ferrofluid tends to evaporate or otherwise emit into the high-vacuum region of the x-ray tube as well. Accordingly, ionizable gases that transport through the seal or emit from the ferrofluid oil, when exposed to the high voltage environment of an x-ray tube, may lead to ionization failure of the x-ray tube, thus introducing a source of contaminant into the vacuum region.

Contaminants in an x-ray tube may also be minimized by use of proper cleaning and handling during the manufacturing process. However, despite even the efforts of special cleaning and processing of the components, gases and particulates may yet accumulate within the x-ray tube as a result of operation of the tube, thus increasing the tube pressure and causing increased high voltage activity that may lead to early life failure.

Therefore, it would be desirable to design an apparatus and method to minimize gas and particulate within an x-ray tube, thus improving the vacuum level surrounding the cathode of an x-ray tube and reducing high-voltage activity therein.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The invention provides a method and apparatus for improving an x-ray tube that overcomes the aforementioned drawbacks.

According to one aspect of the invention, an x-ray tube includes an anode, a first chamber enclosing the anode and having a first pressure therein, a cathode, and a second chamber enclosing the cathode and having a second pressure therein. A separator is positioned between the first and second chambers and has a conductance limiter therein.

In accordance with another aspect of the invention, a method of manufacturing an x-ray tube includes the steps of enclosing an anode in a first compartment, enclosing a cathode in a second compartment, providing a separator with a passageway therein, and positioning the separator between the first compartment and the second compartment such that electrons that emit from the cathode to the anode pass through the passageway.

Yet another aspect of the invention includes an x-ray system that includes a detector positioned to receive x-rays that pass through an object and an x-ray tube positioned to emit the x-rays toward the object. The x-ray tube includes a chamber, a separator positioned in the chamber to form a first sub-chamber and a second sub-chamber, and a target positioned in the first sub-chamber. The x-ray tube further includes a cathode positioned in the second sub-chamber to emit electrons toward the target to generate the x-rays, a passageway in the separator positioned to allow passage of the electrons from the cathode to the target therethrough, and a pair of pressure-reducing devices, each pressure-reducing device fluidically coupled to a respective one of the first and second sub-chambers.

Various other features and advantages of the invention will be made apparent from the following detailed description and the drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The drawings illustrate one preferred embodiment presently contemplated for carrying out the invention.

In the drawings:

FIG. **1** is a block diagram of an imaging system that can benefit from incorporation of an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **2** is a cross-sectional view of an x-ray tube according to an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **3** is a cross-sectional view of an x-ray tube according to an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **4** illustrates a cross-sectional view of a ferrofluid seal assembly according to an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. **5** is a pictorial view of an x-ray system for use with a non-invasive package inspection system.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

FIG. **1** is a block diagram of an embodiment of an imaging system **10** designed to acquire original image data and to process the image data for display and/or analysis. It will be appreciated by those skilled in the art that embodiments of the invention are applicable to numerous medical imaging systems implementing an x-ray tube, such as x-ray or mammography systems. Other imaging systems or modalities such as computed tomography systems and digital radiography systems, which acquire image three dimensional data for a volume, also benefit from embodiments of the invention. The following discussion of x-ray system **10** is merely an example of one such implementation and is not intended to be limiting in terms of modality.

As shown in FIG. **1**, x-ray system **10** includes an x-ray source **12** configured to project a beam of x-rays **14** through an object **16**. Object **16** may include a human subject, pieces of baggage, or other objects desired to be scanned. X-ray source **12** may be a conventional x-ray tube producing x-rays having a spectrum of energies that range, typically, from 30 keV to 200 keV. The x-rays **14** pass through object **16** and, after being attenuated by the object, impinge upon a detector **18**. Each detector in detector **18** produces an analog electrical signal that represents the intensity of an impinging x-ray beam, and hence the attenuated beam, as it passes through the object **16**. In one embodiment, detector **18** is a scintillation based detector; however, it is also envisioned that direct-conversion type detectors (e.g., CZT detectors, etc.) may also be implemented.

A processor **20** receives the analog electrical signals from the detector **18** and generates an image corresponding to the object **16** being scanned. A computer **22** communicates with processor **20** to enable an operator, using operator console **24**, to control the scanning parameters and to view the generated image. That is, operator console **24** includes some form of operator interface, such as a keyboard, mouse, voice activated controller, or any other suitable input apparatus that allows an operator to control the x-ray system **10** and view the reconstructed image or other data from computer **22** on a display unit **26**. Additionally, console **24** allows an operator to store the generated image in a storage device **28** which may include hard drives, floppy discs, compact discs, etc. The operator may also use console **24** to provide commands and instructions to computer **22** for controlling a source controller **30** that provides power and timing signals to x-ray source **12**.

While embodiments of the invention will be described with respect to their use in an x-ray tube, one skilled in the art will appreciate that the embodiments are equally applicable for other systems that require operation of a target used for the production of x-rays wherein high peak temperatures are driven by peak power requirements.

FIG. **2** illustrates a cross-sectional view of an x-ray source, such as x-ray tube **12** of FIG. **1**, according to an embodiment of the invention. In this embodiment, x-ray source **12** includes a casing **36** having a first chamber **33** and a second chamber **35**, separated by a plate, or separator **34**. A slot **37** is positioned in the separator **34**. The slot **37** may include, but is not limited to an aperture, a restrictor, a passageway, or a conductance limiter. In one embodiment the slot includes a material therein that allows passage of electrons therethrough. An anode **40**, supported by a shaft **42**, is positioned in the first chamber **33**. A cathode **44** having filaments (not shown) is positioned in the second chamber **35** and positioned proximate the slot **37**. In embodiments of the invention, a first pressure-reducing device **46** is coupled to the first chamber **33** and a second pressure-reducing device **47** is coupled to the second chamber **35**.

In operation, electrons are caused to emit from cathode **44** by passing an electrical current through its filaments. The electrons are accelerated by the voltage potential (such as 140 kV), which is maintained between the cathode **44** and the restrictor plate **34**, and the anode **40** likewise is maintained, according to this embodiment, at approximately the same voltage potential as the restrictor plate **34**, and pass through slot **37** of plate **34**. X-rays **14** are produced when the electrons are suddenly decelerated when they encounter the anode **40**. To avoid overheating the anode **40** from the electrons, a rotor (not shown) rotates the anode **40** at a high rate of speed at, for example, 50-250 Hz. One skilled in the art will recognize that the restrictor plate **34** and the anode **40** may be maintained at different potentials from each other to optimize performance, thus with it is possible to maintain the cathode **44** at a first potential, the restrictor **34** at a second potential, and the anode **40** at a third potential in a manner that, in this embodiment, is not limited to bipolar or monopolar operation.

FIG. **3** illustrates a cross-sectional view of an x-ray tube, such as x-ray tube **12** of FIG. **1**, according to another embodiment of the invention. X-ray tube **12** includes a casing, or frame **50**, and a pair of backplates **52**, **48** that support a pair of chambers, compartments, or volumes **55**, **56**. First volume **55** is encircled by a housing **57** and is maintained at a high vacuum via a pressure-reducing device or vacuum pumping unit **49**, such as an ion pump, a vacuum pump, and a getter, fluidically attached thereto. A low density window material **54**, such as beryllium, is positioned in the housing **57**, and a low density material **51**, such as aluminum or plastic, is positioned in the casing **50** adjacent to the low density window material **54**. An anode assembly **58** is positioned in and enclosed by first volume **55** and includes a bearing assembly **60** and a target cap **61**. Target cap **61** has a track material **65** attached thereto for the generation of x-rays and has a heat-sink **63** also attached thereto constructed of a material such as graphite. Bearing assembly **60** includes a front bearing **70** and a rear bearing **72**, which together support a center shaft **66** to which target cap **61** is attached via a hub **53** and is positioned within a stem **78** that has cooling lines **79** therein.

Second volume **56** is encircled by a housing **67** and a high-voltage insulator **59**. Second volume **56** encloses a cathode **62** and is maintained at high vacuum via a pressure-reducing device or vacuum pumping unit **64**, such as an ion pump, a vacuum pump, and a getter, fluidically attached thereto. Cathode **62** includes one or more filaments (not shown), which have electrical connections attached thereto (not shown) that pass through the high-voltage insulator **59**. A restrictor plate, or separator **69**, having a slot or passageway **71** therein is positioned between first volume **55** and second volume **56**.

The slot **71** in the restrictor plate **69** has a size that is selected to be just large enough to allow passage of the electrons emitting from the cathode **62** to pass to the anode assembly **58** without interfering therewith, and impinge upon the track material **65**. In one embodiment, for an x-ray tube target cap **61** having a track material **65** positioned thereon with, for instance, a 7 degree target angle, and an electron beam having a cross-section of for instance 1.5 mm width by 10 mm length, the slot size is approximately 2 mm width and 11 mm length. To minimize the conductance between first volume **55** and second volume **56**, the slot is preferentially of rectangular cross-section having, in one embodiment a 10:1 cross-sectional area, although one skilled in the art will recognize that other cross-sections are applicable. In the molecular flow regime, in which an x-ray tube base vacuum level resides, the conductance of a rectangular slot is proportional to the product of the length of the slot and the square of the width of the slot divided by the length of the passageway. Thus, the thickness of the restrictor plate is selected to provide vacuum conduction resistance between the first volume **55** and the second volume **56** and, in embodiments described herein, ranges from approximately 2 mm to 25 mm in thickness.

In operation, electrons are caused to emit from cathode **62** by passing an electrical current through its filaments, and by maintaining the restrictor plate **69** at anode potential. The electrons are accelerated by the voltage potential (such as 140 kV), which is maintained between the cathode **62** and the restrictor plate **69**, and the anode assembly **58** likewise is maintained, according to this embodiment, at approximately the same voltage potential as the restrictor plate **69**, and pass through slot **71** of plate **69**. X-rays **14** are produced when the electrons are suddenly decelerated when they encounter track material **65**. In one embodiment, the anode assembly **58** and the restrictor plate **69** are maintained at ground potential. The x-rays **14** emitted pass through window material **54** and through low density material **51** toward a detector array (not shown), such as the detector array **18** of FIG. **1**. To avoid overheating target cap **61** from the electrons, a rotor (not shown) attached to center shaft **66** rotates target cap **61** at a high rate of speed about a centerline **68** at, for example, 50-250 Hz. One skilled in the art will recognize that the restrictor plate **69** and the anode assembly **58** may be maintained at different potentials from each other to optimize performance, thus with it is possible to maintain the cathode **62** at a first potential, the restrictor at a second potential, and the anode assembly at a third potential in a manner that, in this embodiment, is not limited to bipolar or monopolar operation.

Due to the proximity of the restrictor plate **69** to the rotating anode **58**, the restrictor plate **69** is subject to high thermal loads resulting from infra-red radiation emission from the hot rotating target cap **61** and from backscattered electrons rebounding from the target cap **61**. Consequently, the restrictor plate **69** is typically engineered to survive this environment. In one such embodiment, cooling channels (not shown) are provided to the restrictor plate **69**. In a further embodiment, the restrictor plate **69** is fabricated from refractory metals that can withstand very high temperatures, for example, molybdenum and tungsten alloys. This embodiment has a further benefit of providing local radiation shielding near to a focal spot point of generation, shielding both the external environment of the x-ray tube **12** and the second volume **56** from high energy charged and neutral particles emanating from the first volume **55**. In this embodiment, the second volume **56** is effectively isolated from the higher contamination first volume **56**, thereby creating a highly favorable vacuum volume surrounding the high-voltage cathode **62** and resulting in superior high voltage stability of the x-ray tube **12**.

As shown in FIG. **3**, anode assembly **58** and cathode **62** are positioned in separate chambers, or sub-chambers **55**, **56** and are separated by plate **69** having the slot **71** therein. Because the components of x-ray tube **12** may have differing levels of contaminant sources therein and differing levels of susceptibility to high voltage instability, it is contemplated that chambers **55**, **56** may have their vacuum levels controlled to different levels of vacuum by the use of the two vacuum pumping units **49**, **64**. However, it is also contemplated that chambers **55**, **56** may have their vacuum levels controlled to similar levels of vacuum.

In one embodiment of the invention, both vacuum pumping units **49**, **64** have pumping capacities of 2 l/s. According to another embodiment of the invention, pumping units **49**, **64** may have capacities different from one another, such as, for instance, 4 l/s for pumping unit **49** and 2 l/s for pumping unit **64**. As such, as an example, first volume **55** enclosing the anode assembly **58** has a higher amount of contaminant than second volume **56** enclosing cathode **62** by virtue of the different pump capacities. Because cathode **62** may be less tolerant to the presence of contaminants, such an arrangement may extend the life of the x-ray tube **12**. As such, one skilled in the art will recognize that the pumping units **49**, **64** may each be sized such that overall performance within the x-ray tube **12** is optimized to prevent gases and particulates from backstreaming into the second volume **56**. This differential pumping across the restrictor plate **69** can maintain a cleaner and higher level of vacuum in the cathode vessel compared to the anode vessel, thereby improving high voltage stability of the x-ray tube.

In the embodiment illustrated in FIG. **3**, front and rear bearings **70**, **72** are positioned within first volume **55**. Because first volume **55** is maintained at a high vacuum, the bearings **70**, **72** are precluded from being lubricated with a liquid lubricant and are, instead, typically lubricated using a solid lubricant such as, for instance, silver. In the design illustrated, the bearings **70**, **72** are sealed from a surrounding environment outside the x-ray tube **12** and are operated under vacuum for the life of the tube. However, conventional solid lubricated x-ray tube bearings typically emit, as stated, particulate matter into the x-ray tube environment. Also, such bearings are typically positioned within very limited design space, and thus their overall load-bearing capacity may be limited.

As such, according to another embodiment of the invention, a ferrofluid seal, such as the ferrofluid seal **88** shown in FIG. **4**, may be positioned between front bearing **70** and hub **53** such that bearing assembly **60** is not enclosed within first volume **55**. Accordingly, ferrofluid seal assembly **88** hermetically seals and separates, in this embodiment, first volume **55** from bearings **70**, **72**. A pair of annular pole pieces **96**, **98** abut an interior surface **99** of stem **78** and encircle center shaft **66** that is centered the centerline **68**.

An annular permanent magnet **100** is positioned between pole piece **96** and pole piece **98**. In a preferred embodiment, center shaft **66** includes annular rings **94** extending therefrom toward pole pieces **96**, **98**. Alternatively, however, pole pieces **96**, **98** include annular rings extending toward center shaft **66** instead of, or in addition to, annular rings **94** of center shaft **66**. A ferrofluid **102** is positioned between each annular ring **94** and corresponding pole piece **96**, **98**, thereby forming cavities **104**. Magnetization from permanent magnet **100** retains ferrofluid **102** positioned between each annular ring **94** and corresponding pole piece **96**, **98** in place. In this manner, multiple stages of ferrofluid **102** are formed that hermetically seal the region containing bearings **70**, **72** from high vacuum first volume **55**. As shown, FIG. **4** illustrates 8 stages of ferrofluid **102**. Each stage of ferrofluid **102** withstands 1-3 psi of gas pressure. Accordingly, one skilled in the art will recognize that the number of stages of ferrofluid **102** may be increased or decreased, depending on the difference in pressure that is carried by ferrofluid seal **88**.

Thus, according to an embodiment of the invention, x-ray tube **12** of FIG. **3** includes a ferrofluid seal, such as the ferrofluid seal **88** illustrated in FIG. **4**. And, because the presence of a ferrofluid seal may either increase or decrease the total number of contaminant sources fluidically connected to first volume **55** (e.g., bearing particulate may be prevented from entering first volume **55**, but gas emission through and from ferrofluid **102** may increase the amount of contaminant), pumping units **49**, **64** may be sized accordingly to optimize removal of particulates within volumes **55**, **56**, as will be recognized by one skilled in the art.

FIG. **5** is a pictorial view of an x-ray system **500** for use with a non-invasive package inspection system. The x-ray system **500** includes a gantry **502** having an opening **504** therein through which packages or pieces of baggage may pass. The gantry **502** houses a high frequency electromagnetic energy source, such as an x-ray tube **506**, and a detector assembly **508**. A conveyor system **510** is also provided and includes a conveyor belt **512** supported by structure **514** to automatically and continuously pass packages or baggage pieces **516** through opening **504** to be scanned. Objects **516** are fed through opening **504** by conveyor belt **512**, imaging data is then acquired, and the conveyor belt **512** removes the packages **516** from opening **504** in a controlled and continuous manner. As a result, postal inspectors, baggage handlers, and other security personnel may non-invasively inspect the contents of packages **516** for explosives, knives, guns, contraband, etc. One skilled in the art will recognize that gantry **502** may be stationary or rotatable. In the case of a rotatable gantry **502**, system **500** may be configured to operate as a CT system for baggage scanning or other industrial or medical applications.

Therefore, according to one embodiment of the invention, an x-ray tube includes an anode, a first chamber enclosing the anode and having a first pressure therein, a cathode, and a second chamber enclosing the cathode and having a second pressure therein. A separator is positioned between the first and second chambers and has a conductance limiter therein.

In accordance with another embodiment of the invention, a method of manufacturing an x-ray tube includes the steps of enclosing an anode in a first compartment, enclosing a cathode in a second compartment, providing a separator with a passageway therein, and positioning the separator between the first compartment and the second compartment such that electrons that emit from the cathode to the anode pass through the passageway.

Yet another embodiment of the invention includes an x-ray system that includes a detector positioned to receive x-rays that pass through an object and an x-ray tube positioned to emit the x-rays toward the object. The x-ray tube includes a chamber, a separator positioned in the chamber to form a first sub-chamber and a second sub-chamber, and a target positioned in the first sub-chamber. The x-ray tube further includes a cathode positioned in the second sub-chamber to emit electrons toward the target to generate the x-rays, a passageway in the separator positioned to allow passage of the electrons from the cathode to the target therethrough, and a pair of pressure-reducing devices, each pressure-reducing device fluidically coupled to a respective one of the first and second sub-chambers.

The invention has been described in terms of the preferred embodiment, and it is recognized that equivalents, alternatives, and modifications, aside from those expressly stated, are possible and within the scope of the appending claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A method of manufacturing an x-ray tube comprising the steps of:

enclosing an anode in a first compartment;

enclosing a cathode in a second compartment;

selecting a separator thickness based on a desired conduction resistance between the first compartment and the second compartment;

providing a separator with a passageway therein having a thickness that corresponds to the selected separator thickness; and

positioning the separator between the first compartment and the second compartment such that electrons that emit from the cathode to the anode pass through the passageway.

2. The method of claim **1** further comprising coupling a first pressure-reducing device to the first compartment and a second pump to the second compartment.

3. The method of claim **2** wherein one of the first and second pumps is one of an ion pump, a vacuum pump, and a getter.

4. The method of claim **2** further comprising pumping the second compartment to a pressure that is lower than a pressure of the first compartment.

5. The method of claim **1** further comprising:

attaching a bearing to a stem of the anode; and

positioning a ferrofluid seal inside the stem such that the bearing is hermetically sealed from the first compartment.

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