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(54) **RADIO FREQUENCY SCANNER**

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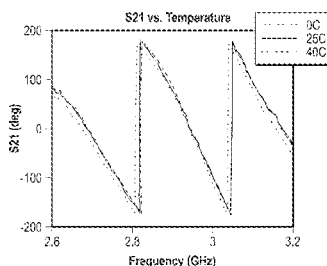
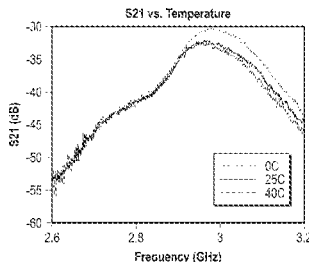
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A radio frequency (RF) scanner system provided with a multi-axis articulated robot and a sensor suite positioned on a first end of the multi-axis articulated robot. The sensor suite is provided with a shield, an antenna array probe, and a surface sensor. The shield has a first side and a second side opposite the first side. The first side is configured for positioning towards an active phased array antenna. The surface sensor is configured to determine X, Y, and Z positions of the active phased array antenna.

**20 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets**



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*G01R 29/08* (2006.01)  
*H01Q 25/00* (2006.01)  
*H01Q 3/08* (2006.01)  
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- (52) **U.S. Cl.**  
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 (2013.01); *H01Q 21/061* (2013.01); *H01Q*  
*25/001* (2013.01)
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 See application file for complete search history.

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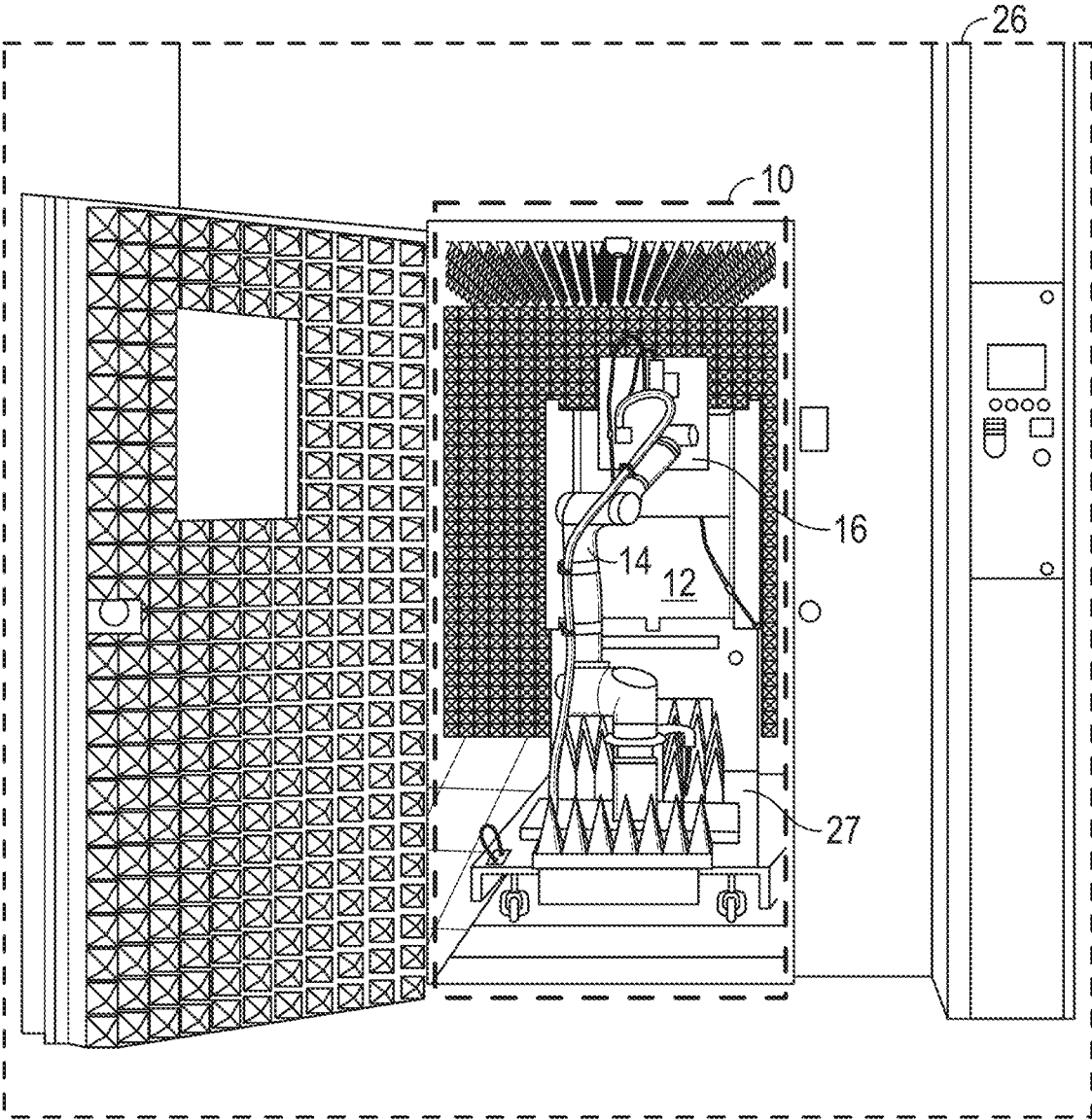


FIG. 1A

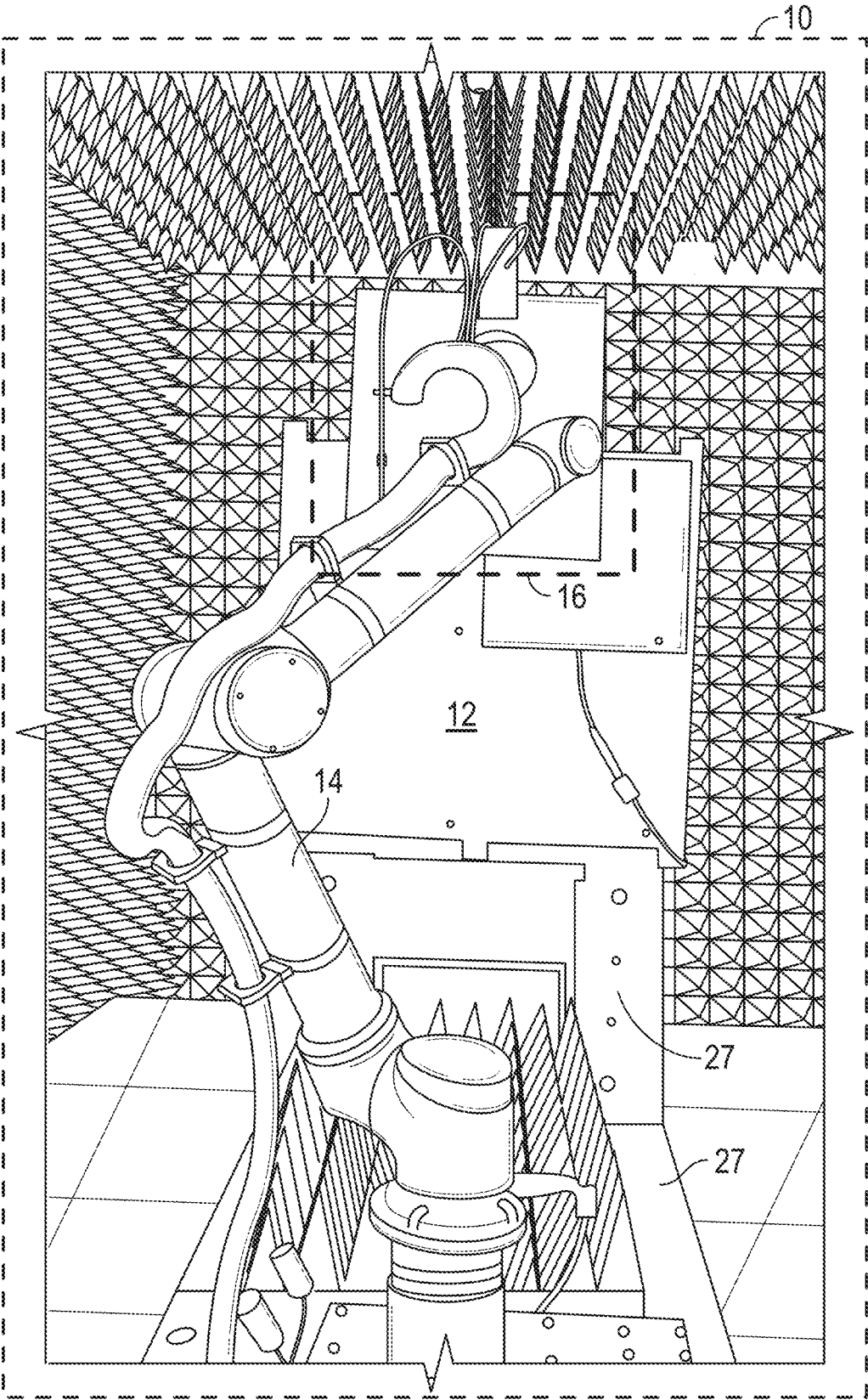


FIG. 1B

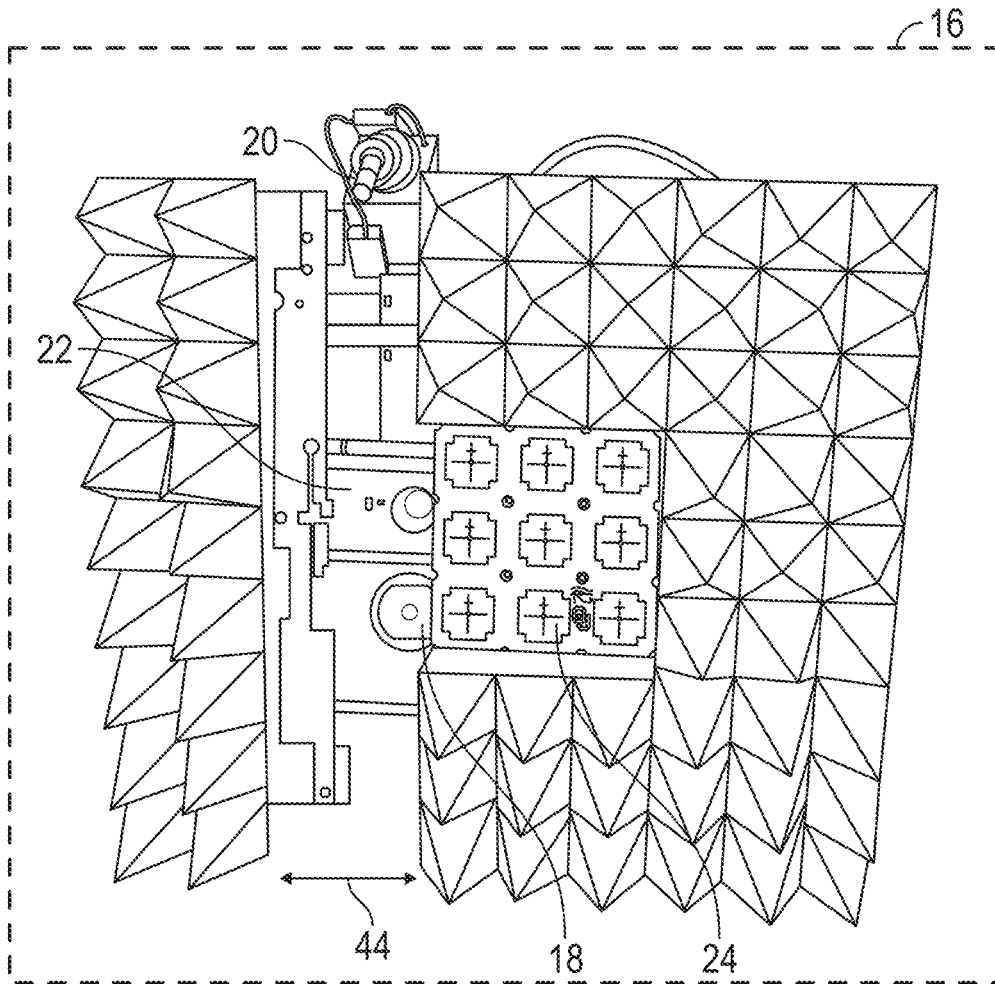


FIG. 1C

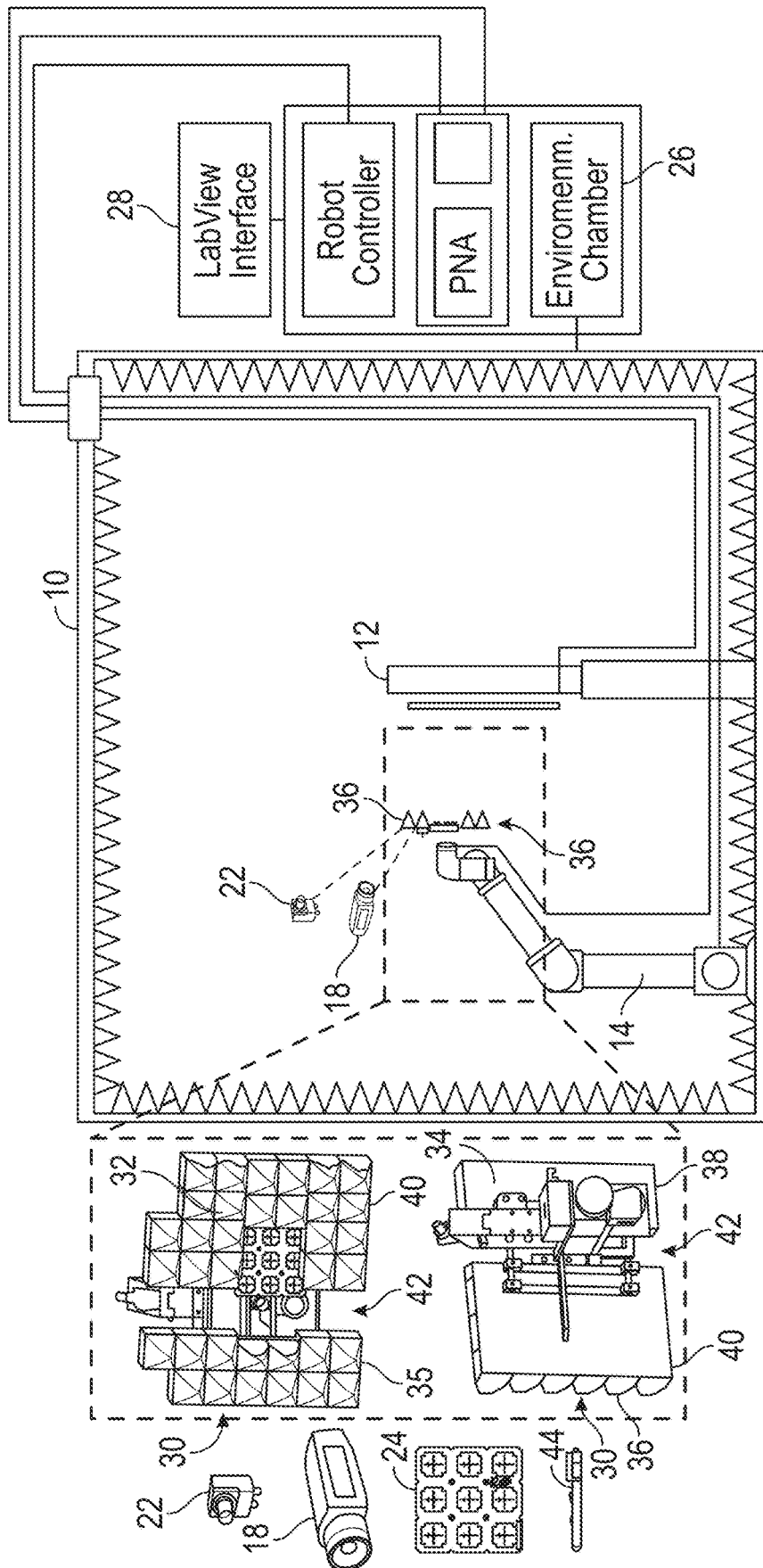


FIG. 2

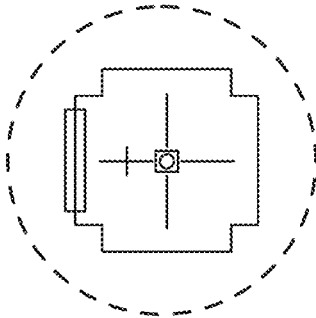


FIG. 3B

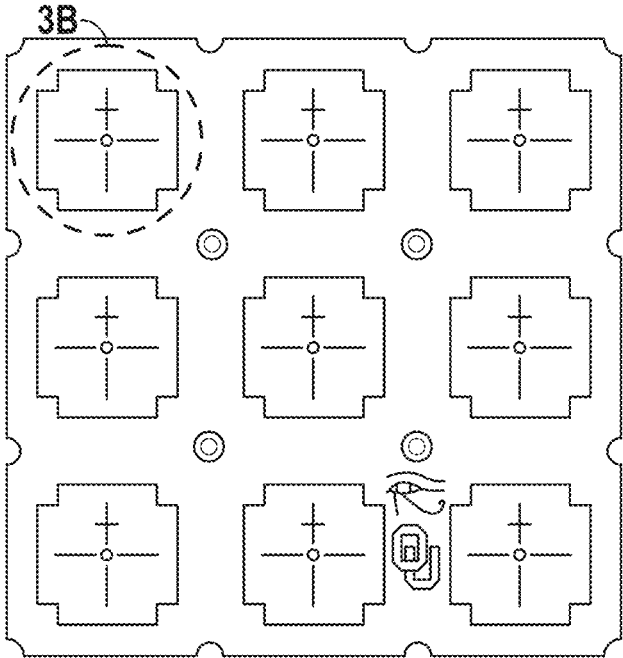


FIG. 3A

Thermal Image

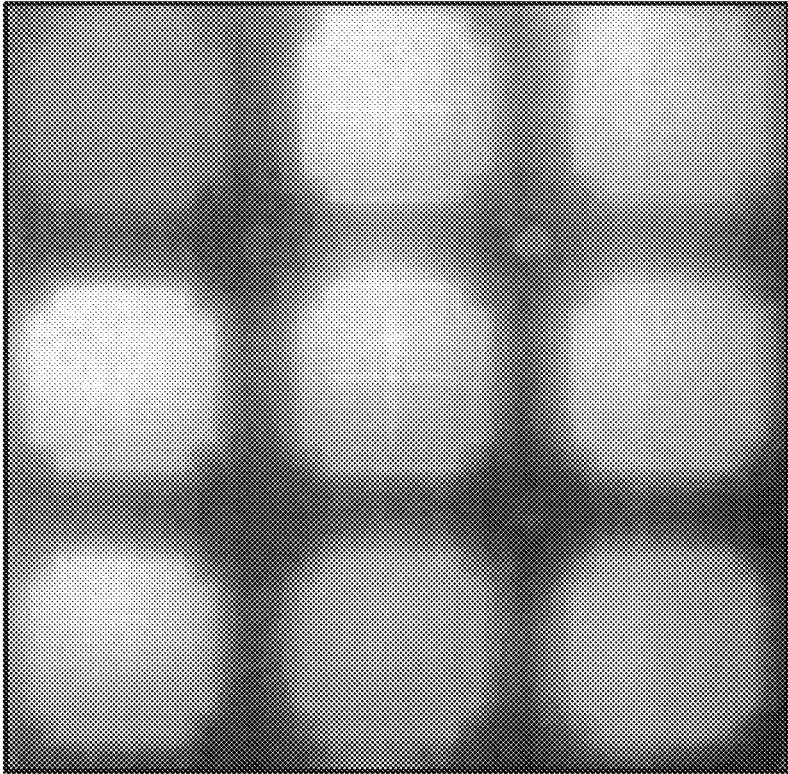


FIG. 3C

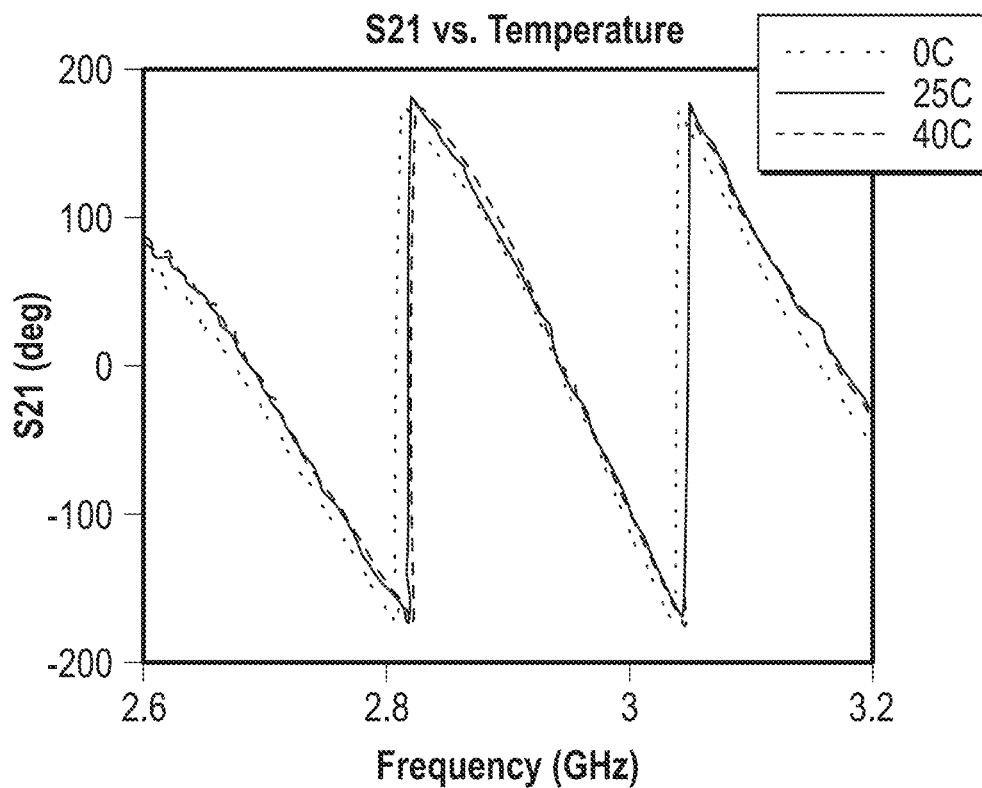
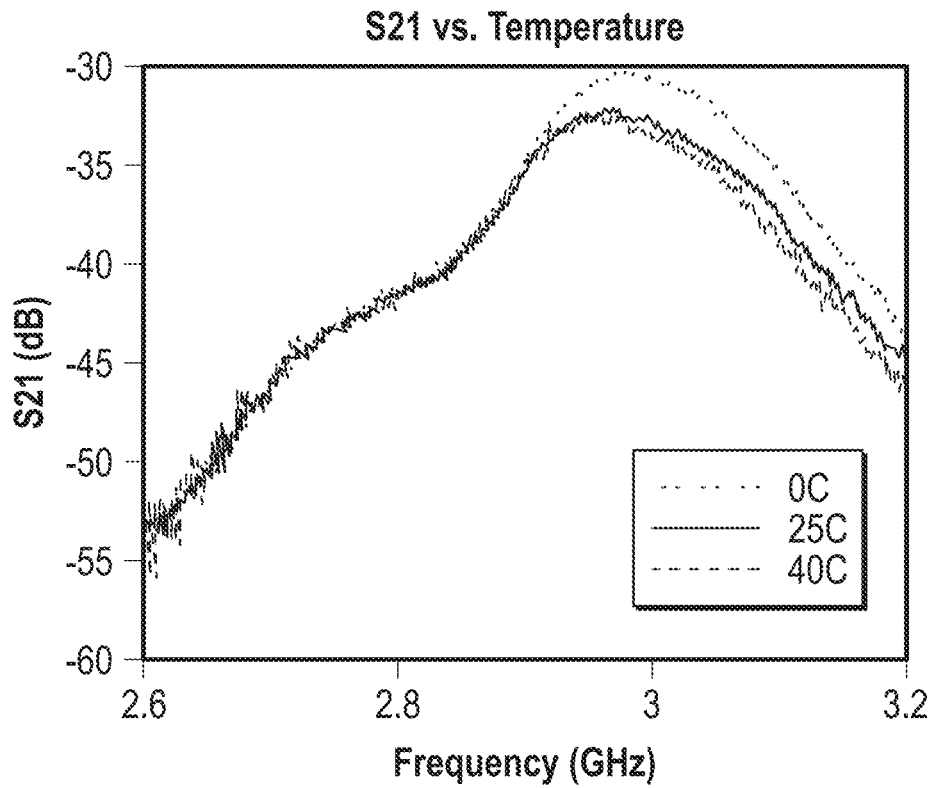


FIG. 3D



**RADIO FREQUENCY SCANNER**

## INCORPORATION BY REFERENCE

The present patent application claims priority to the provisional patent application identified by U.S. Ser. No. 62/393,947, filed on Sep. 13, 2016, the entire content of which is hereby incorporated herein by reference.

## BACKGROUND

The telecommunication and radar industries are undergoing a dramatic evolution in solid state. Digital transmission technology currently demands much higher frequencies and RF complexity. This, in turn, demands advancements in how such frequencies are calibrated and tested. Conventional 4-axis chamber scanners are simply too big, too slow and lack the ability to make swift and customized measurements above 100 GHz and within the spherical coordinate system.

Active and electronically scanned phased array antennas are attractive options for atmospheric radar applications. Fast scanning performance, high reliability, and multifunction capabilities make this new technology an ideal candidate for next generation weather radars systems. One of the biggest challenges of using this technology, however, may be the strict requirements for dual-polarized measurements. Accurate differential reflectivity in weather radars requires high degree of beam pattern matching (below 0.1 dB), and high cross polarization isolation (below -40 dB) between H and V polarizations.

One common solution for automated antenna RF characterization is the use of a robotic manipulator with a RF probe attached to it to perform near-field (NF) measurements. Conventionally, these types of arrangements are classified in planar, cylindrical, and spherical systems according to the scan pattern they are able to execute. Moreover, these systems typically have no more than 4 degrees of freedom (DOF). Nonetheless, some of these systems need to be able to freely move the RF probe to any position and orientation in order to perform any arbitrary scan patterns. This requirement translates into the need for 6 DOF position capability. To add this versatility to the scanning setup, some researchers have included 6-axis industrial robotic arms to their NF measurement chambers. As an example, the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) has developed a robotically controlled mm-wave NF scanner range, integrating a 6-axis robot, a high precision robotic hexapod, a commercial open-ended waveguide probe, and a laser tracker for measurement of antenna patterns. This system allows the possibility of performing different types of scan patterns for antenna measurements all using the same testing setup.

Additionally, for dual-polarized phased array radars (PAR) devised for atmospheric applications, large temperature gradients may induce significant phase errors. Such errors may affect the accuracy of the calibration process in the antenna array. In the case of low frequency and large phased array systems that operate in S- and C-bands, the maximum allowable temperature gradient across the array is generally on the order of 15° C. However, for a PAR that operates at higher frequency bands (for example, W-band), the maximum allowable temperature gradient across the array may be reduced to 1.2° C.

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Several embodiments of the present disclosure are hereby illustrated in the appended drawings. It is to be noted

however, that the appended drawings only illustrate several typical embodiments and are therefore not intended to be considered limiting of the scope of the present disclosure. Further, in the appended drawings, like or identical reference numerals or letters may be used to identify common or similar elements and not all such elements may be so numbered. The figures are not necessarily to scale and certain features and certain views of the figures may be shown as exaggerated in scale or in schematic in the interest of clarity and conciseness.

FIG. 1A is a perspective view an RF scanner system positioned inside of an environmental chamber in accordance with the present disclosure.

FIG. 1B is an enlarged view of the RF scanner system illustrated in FIG. 1A having a multi-axis articulated robot used to move a sensor suite to perform near field (NF) measurements as well as surface and thermal measurements of an active phased array antenna.

FIG. 1C is an enlarged view of the sensor suite illustrated in FIG. 1B.

FIG. 2 is a block diagram of the RF scanner system illustrated in FIG. 1 including a perspective view of a front end and a back end of an exemplary sensor suite illustrating locations of sensors and actuators.

FIG. 3A is an image of a 3x3 arrangement on an exemplary active phased array antenna having fiducial marks indicating central points of each radiating element within the array.

FIG. 3B is an image illustrating pattern recognition performed on a fiducial mark of an array element of the active phased array antenna.

FIG. 3C is an image of a 3x3 antenna array probe taken by a thermal camera. Different colors identify temperature gradients on the surface of the active phased array antenna.

FIG. 3D is a graphical representation of near-field measurements taken by an antenna array probe illustrating behavior of S-Parameters in amplitude and phase at different test temperatures.

## DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Most active phased array antennas for weather radar applications may require high transmit power (from 10 kW to 100 kW) to attain the required radar sensitivity level. With sufficient radar sensitivity and polarization accuracy, it may be possible to distinguish different types of atmospheric signatures, depending on the range, especially for low-level precipitation which the radar requires a high sensitivity (-10 dBz to 10 dBz) to detect. In phased array antennas, the overall transmit power is distributed over several thousand active radiating elements, each one capable of managing 4 W to 10 W of peak power in typical systems.

Since generally underneath each active radiating element exists a high-power density T/R module, a significant amount of heat may be transferred into the radiating element from the T/R module. The generated heat can affect the performance of the PAR due to any temperature gradient in the array surface. Characterization of amplitude and phase of each radiating element in the array, as a function of temperature, may be needed to guarantee the effectiveness of any built-in calibration techniques, or to provide first-order look-up corrections vs. temperature, especially for weather applications wherein beam matching in antenna co-polar patterns may be less than 0.1 dB and cross-polarization isolation may be below -40 dB.

Further, panels on phased array antennas are generally not perfectly flat; nor is the electronic center of each radiating

element consistently spaced by a known pitch. Moreover, as the operation temperature varies, thermal deformations of the active phased array antenna panel may change the location of panel radiating elements. Most active phased array antennas make use of multilayer structures composed of various dielectric materials. Phase stability over a temperature range with phase reference at room temperature (26° C.) may be needed to minimize the phase errors due to the thermal expansion.

The present disclosure, in at least certain embodiments, is directed to automated radio frequency (RF) scanner systems to characterize active phased array antennas and other RF devices that its performance is sensitive to temperature fluctuation. Generally, the RF scanner systems may enable characterization of electromagnetic surfaces, and thermal properties of active phased array antennas. For example, the RF scanner system may enable fully automated characterization of an active phased array antenna from 1 GHz to 60 GHz, and up to 100 GHz, over a temperature range of 0° C. to 50° C.

The RF scanner system may include an industrial multi-axis articulated robot used to move a sensor suite to perform near-field measurements, as well as, surface and thermal inspection of an active phased array antenna. For example, an arm of the multi-axis articulated robot may be configured to follow contours of active phased array antennas, thereby maintaining the sensor suite at a fixed distance away from an active phased array antenna as the active phased array antenna is being measured and characterized by the sensor suite.

The sensor suite may include one or more mechanical fixtures supporting an infrared camera, and an antenna array probe. The sensor suite may also include a surface sensor that may include a laser and an optical camera, each enabling characterization of topography and/or size of active phased array antennas. The sensor suite may also include a thermal imaging camera for obtaining information indicative of a plurality of thermal readings that collectively form a thermal distribution of the panel radiating elements.

The optical camera of the surface sensor may be used to capture one or more images and determine X and Y position of features of the active phased array antenna. The laser may be used to characterize deviations in the Z direction (e.g., “hills,” i.e., peaks, and “valleys,” i.e., depressions) of the surface of the active phased array antenna, or other material. In some embodiments, the surface can be characterized in different ways. For example, a pair of stereo cameras can be used for stereoscopically determining X, Y, and Z features of the active phased array antenna.

In some non-limiting embodiments, the active phased array antenna, robotic manipulator, and the sensor suite may be located inside of an environmental chamber. The interior of the environmental chamber and the exterior of the multi-axis articulated robot may be covered with RF microwave absorbers to prevent unwanted RF reflections. The interior of the environmental chamber may enable characterization of the active phased array antenna under controlled temperature and/or humidity.

Unless otherwise defined herein, scientific and technical terms used herein shall have the meanings that are commonly understood by those having ordinary skill in the art. Further, unless otherwise required by context, singular terms shall include pluralities and plural terms shall include the singular.

All patents, published patent applications, and non-patent publications mentioned in the specification are indicative of the level of skill of those skilled in the art to which the

present disclosure pertains. All patents, published patent applications, and non-patent publications referenced in any portion of this application are herein expressly incorporated by reference in their entirety to the same extent as if each individual patent or publication was specifically and individually indicated to be incorporated by reference.

All of the systems and methods of production and application thereof disclosed herein can be made and executed without undue experimentation in light of the present disclosure. While the systems and methods of the present disclosure have been described in terms of particular embodiments, it will be apparent to those of skill in the art that variations may be applied to the systems and/or methods and in the steps or in the sequence of steps of the method described herein without departing from the concept, spirit and scope of the inventive concepts. All such similar substitutes and modifications apparent to those of skilled in the art are deemed to be within the spirit and scope of the inventive concepts disclosed herein.

It should be understood that the processes described in the present disclosure can be performed with the aid of a computer system running software adapted to perform the functions, and the resulting images and data are stored on one or more non-transitory computer readable mediums. Examples of a non-transitory computer readable medium include an optical storage device, a magnetic storage device, an electronic storage device or the like. The term “Computer System” as used herein means a system or systems that are able to embody and/or execute the logic of the processes described herein. The logic embodied in the form of software instructions or firmware may be executed on any appropriate hardware which may be a dedicated system or systems, or a specially programmed computer system, or distributed processing computer system. When the computer system is used to execute the logic of the processes described herein, such computer(s) and/or execution can be conducted at a same geographic location or multiple different geographic locations. Furthermore, the execution of the logic can be conducted continuously or at multiple discrete times. Further, such logic can be performed about simultaneously with the capture of the optical images, thermal images, RF information, or thereafter or combinations thereof.

As utilized in accordance with the methods and compositions of the present disclosure, the following terms, unless otherwise indicated, shall be understood to have the following meanings:

The use of the word “a” or “an” when used in conjunction with the term “comprising” in the claims and/or the specification may mean “one,” but it is also consistent with the meaning of “one or more,” “at least one,” and “one or more than one.” The use of the term “or” in the claims is used to mean “and/or” unless explicitly indicated to refer to alternatives only or when the alternatives are mutually exclusive, although the disclosure supports a definition that refers to only alternatives and “and/or.” The use of the term “at least one” will be understood to include one as well as any quantity more than one, including but not limited to, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 55, 60, 65, 70, 75, 80, 85, 90, 95, 100, or more, or any integer inclusive therein. The term “at least one” may extend up to 1000 or more, depending on the term to which it is attached; in addition, the quantities of 100/1000 are not to be considered limiting, as higher limits may also produce satisfactory results. In addition, the use of the term “at least one of X, Y and Z” will be

understood to include X alone, Y alone, and Z alone, as well as any combination of X, Y and Z.

As used in this specification and claims, the words “comprising” (and any form of comprising, such as “comprise” and “comprises”), “having” (and any form of having, such as “have” and “has”), “including” (and any form of including, such as “includes” and “include”) or “containing” (and any form of containing, such as “contains” and “contain”) are inclusive or open-ended and do not exclude additional, unrecited elements or method steps. For example, unless otherwise noted, a process, method, article, or apparatus that comprises a list of elements is not necessarily limited to only those elements, but may also include elements not expressly listed or inherent to such process, method, article or apparatus.

The term “or combinations thereof” as used herein refers to all permutations and combinations of the listed items preceding the term. For example, “A, B, C, or combinations thereof” is intended to include at least one of: A, B, C, AB, AC, BC, or ABC, and if order is important in a particular context, also BA, CA, CB, CBA, BCA, ACB, BAC, or CAB. Continuing with this example, expressly included are combinations that contain repeats of one or more item or term, such as BB, AAA, AAB, BBC, AAABCCCC, CBBAAA, CABABB, and so forth. The skilled artisan will understand that typically there is no limit on the number of items or terms in any combination, unless otherwise apparent from the context.

Throughout this application, the term “about” may be used to indicate that a value includes an inherent variation of error, or the variation that exists among the study subjects. Further, in this detailed description and the appended claims, each numerical value (e.g., temperature or time) should be read once as modified by the term “about” (unless already expressly so modified), and then read again as not so modified unless otherwise indicated in context. For example but not by way of limitation, when the term “about” is utilized, the designated value may vary by plus or minus fifteen percent, plus or minus twelve percent, or plus or minus eleven percent, or plus or minus ten percent, or plus or minus nine percent, or plus or minus eight percent, or plus or minus seven percent, or plus or minus six percent, or plus or minus five percent, or plus or minus four percent, or plus or minus three percent, or plus or minus two percent, or plus or minus one percent, or plus or minus one-half percent.

Also, any range listed or described herein is intended to include, implicitly or explicitly, any number within the range, particularly all integers, including the end points, and is to be considered as having been so stated. For example, “a range from 1 to 10” is to be read as indicating each possible number, particularly integers, along the continuum between about 1 and about 10, including for example 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9. Similarly, fractional amounts between any two consecutive integers are intended to be included herein, such as, but not limited to, 0.05, 0.1, 0.15, 0.2, 0.25, 0.3, 0.35, 0.4, 0.45, 0.5, 0.55, 0.6, 0.65, 0.7, 0.75, 0.8, 0.85, 0.9, and 0.95. For example, the range 3 to 4 includes, but is not limited to, 3.05, 3.1, 3.15, 3.2, 3.25, 3.3, 3.35, 3.4, 3.45, 3.5, 3.55, 3.6, 3.65, 3.7, 3.75, 3.8, 3.85, 3.9, and 3.95. Thus, even if specific data points within the range, or even no data points within the range, are explicitly identified or specifically referred to, it is to be understood that any data points within the range are to be considered to have been specified, and that the inventors possessed knowledge of the entire range and the points within the range.

As used herein, the term “substantially” means that the subsequently described event or circumstance completely

occurs or that the subsequently described event or circumstance occurs to a great extent or degree. For example, the term “substantially” means that the subsequently described event or circumstance occurs at least 90% of the time, or at least 95% of the time, or at least 98% of the time, or comprises at least 90%, 95%, or 98% of the reference quantity.

Referring to the Figures, and in particular FIGS. 1A-1C and FIG. 2, shown therein is a RF scanner system **10** for characterization of electromagnetic surface(s), and thermal properties of an active phased array antenna **12**. The RF scanner system **10** may include a multi-axis articulated robot **14** used to move a sensor suite **16** to perform near field (NF) measurements as well as surface and thermal measurements of the active phased array antenna **12**. The sensor suite **16** may include a support fixture positioning a thermal camera **18**, a laser **20**, an optical camera **22** (e.g., high-definition camera), and an antenna array probe **24**. Generally, the multi-axis articulated robot **14** is used to move the sensor suite **16** which contains the antenna array probe **24**, the optical camera **22**, the laser **20** for surface characterization, and the thermal camera **18** for temperature monitoring. The optical camera **22** may be used to capture one or more images and determine X, Y features of the active phased array antenna **12**. The laser **20** may be used to characterize deviations in the Z direction (e.g., hills and valleys) on the surface of the active phased array antenna **12**. In some non-limiting embodiments, a topographic sensor may be used in lieu of or in addition to the optical camera **22** and/or the laser **20**. For example, two optical cameras **22** spaced a distance apart may be used to determine X, Y features and/or Z features of the surface of the active phased array antenna **12**. Additionally, other stereo-photographic techniques may be used to determine X, Y features and/or Z features of the surface of the active phased array antenna **12**. As such, RF, surface, and thermal properties of the active phased array antenna **12** may be determined. Even further, use of the multi-axis articulated robot **14** may allow for data regarding features of the active phased array antenna to be determined while the antenna array probe **24** continues in motion (e.g., at a constant speed or at an intermittent speed).

In at least certain embodiments, the RF scanner system **10** can be used to characterize the scattering and propagation properties of a radome that might affect signal transmission and reception of an antenna therein, for example using methods disclosed herein. Various parameters of the radome that can be characterized with the RF scanner system **10** include, but are not limited to, transmission efficiency, band-width change, beam imbalance, horizontal and/or vertical beam deflection, pattern distortion, signal attenuation, and antenna reflection characteristic.

In some non-limiting embodiments, the active phased array antenna **12**, the multi-axis articulated robot **14**, and the sensor suite **16** may be located inside of an environmental chamber **26**. The environmental chamber **26** may enable characterization of the active phased array antenna **12** under at least one controlled parameter, such as temperature and/or humidity. In one non-limiting example, the combination of multi-axis articulated robot **14**, sensor suite **16** environmental chamber **26** and a vector network analyzer (VNA), in addition to, a software interface **28**, may provide automated characterization of the active phased array antenna **12** from 1 GHz to 18 GHz, up to 100 GHz, over a temperature range of 0 degrees Celsius to 50 degrees Celsius, for example.

Referring to FIGS. 1A and 1B, the multi-axis articulated robot **14** and the active phased array antenna **12** may be mounted facing each other on a mechanical fixture **27**. In at

least certain embodiments, the multi-axis articulated robot **14** may be mounted on a separate stage. Generally, the multi-axis articulated robot **14** may allow for scanning of the active phased array antenna **12** by the sensor suite **16** in any pattern. In some non-limiting embodiments, mounting of the multi-axis articulated robot **14** on the mechanical fixture **27** and/or the separate stage may provide six degrees of freedom in orientation and alignment. Additionally, mounting of the active phased array antenna **12** on a separate stage and/or the mechanical fixture **27** may provide six degrees of freedom in orientation and alignment for a total of twelve degrees of freedom between the multi-axis articulated robot **14** and the active phased array antenna **12**.

In some embodiments, the laser **20** may provide for a laser beam reflecting off of targets, such as an antenna surface, on the end of the multi-axis articulated robot **14** and may track the position of the antenna array probe **24**. The active phased array antenna **12** may be kept motionless on the mechanical fixture **27** and/or the separate stage while the antenna array probe **24** sweeps through an arc (e.g., arc of up to 240 degrees) around the active phased array antenna **12**. The active phased array antenna **12** may then be rotated a small increment, and another sweep may be made. The process may be repeated until data collected and determined provides a spherical picture of performance of the active phased array antenna **12**. During collection and determination of the data, the antenna array probe **24** may be continuously moving (e.g., at a constant speed). In at least some embodiments, the antenna array probe **24** may be intermittently moving.

In some non-limiting embodiments, the multi-axis articulated robot **14** may be a 6-axis articulated robot; however, the multi-axis articulated robot **14** may include any number of axes greater than six. In some embodiments, the multi-axis articulated robot **14** moves to follow contour of the active phased array antenna **12**, thereby maintaining the sensor suite **16** a fixed distance from the active phased array antennas **12** as the active phased array antennas **12** are being measured and characterized by the sensor suite **16**.

Referring to FIGS. 1C and 2, in some embodiments, the sensor suite **16** is attached or mounted on one end of the multi-axis articulated robot **14**. In some non-limiting embodiments, the sensor suite **16** may include a shield **30** having a front surface **32** facing the active phased array antenna **12** and a back surface **34** opposite of the front surface **32**. The front surface **32** may be covered with RF microwave absorbers **36** and the back surface **34** may be devoid of RF microwave absorbers **36**. The optical camera **22**, the thermal camera **18** and the laser **20** may be positioned adjacent to and mounted on the rear surface of the shield **30**. The shield **30** may be provided as a mechanical shutter having at least two separate portions that are movable relative to each other so as to selectively expose and cover the optical camera **22**, the thermal camera **18** and the laser **20**. For example, the at least two separate portions may be implemented as a first portion **38** and a second portion **40** that are movable away from each other to define an aperture **42** aligned with the optical camera **22**, the thermal camera **18** and the laser **20**. The shield **30** may also be provided with one or more actuators **44** for selectively moving the first portion **38** relative to the second portion **40**. The first portion **38** and the second portions **40** may include a substrate covered with RF microwave absorbers **36** on the front surfaces thereof.

The optical camera **22** and the laser **20** are capable of characterizing topography and size of the active phased array antenna **12**. The optical camera **22** may be used in

conjunction with the laser **20** to inspect the surface of the active phased array antenna **12** when the shutter mechanism is open defining the aperture **42**. The setup may be able to measure the position of each radiating element of the active phased array antenna **12**, relative to the others, using machine vision techniques. In some embodiments, a printed fiducial mark located exactly at the center of each radiating element is used to facilitate the recognition of each element and its position by the machine vision system, as shown in FIG. 3A. The optical camera **22** may be capable of pattern recognition from the scanned images of the fiducial marks, shown in FIG. 3B. As such, location of the X, Y position of the center of the radiating element may be determined and also quantification of the rotation angle of the plane of the element, both with respect to the current position of the sensor suite **16**. In some non-limiting embodiments, location measurement resolution of 24 m can be attained.

The laser **20** may be mounted on the top of the sensor suite **16** and configured to indirectly measure the Z coordinate of the element, i.e., the distance between the sensor suite **16** and the element on the surface of the active phased array antenna **12**. The laser **20** draws a reference line on the surface of the active phased array antenna **12**, which by techniques of optical triangulation executed by the machine vision camera, can be used to determine how far the surface of the active phased array antenna **12** may be from the sensor suite **16**. In effect, using machine vision may allow for measurement of the X, Y and Z coordinates of the center point of the radiating element, and the misalignment angle between the antenna array probe **24** and element on the active phased array antenna **12**.

In some non-limiting embodiments, several images of the surface of the active phased array antenna **12** antenna may be stitched together to generate a mosaic of the entire panel. This mosaic may allow for characterization of distances between radiating elements, according to the temperature gradient on the surface of the active phased array antenna **12**. Additionally, gaps intentionally placed between sub-arrays for operational systems may be determined using characterization of distances between radiating elements according to the temperature gradient on the surface of the active phased array antenna **12**.

The thermal camera **18** may be any thermal imaging camera used to detect the thermal state of radiating elements. In a non-limiting example, the thermal camera **18** may be a thermal camera manufactured by FLIR Systems, having a principal place of business in Wilsonville, Oreg. The thermal camera **18** may be used to detect the thermal state of the radiating elements of the active phased array antenna **12**. The thermal camera **18** may use infrared technology, for example, to capture the heat radiation of one or more radiating elements, producing a thermal profile. The thermal image can be processed by computer software to obtain correct temperature values for characterization of the active phased array antenna **12**. Consequently, the function of the thermal camera **18** is to provide the information needed to characterize the thermal gradients along the surface of the active phased array antenna **12**. FIG. 3C shows an image of a 3-by-3 sub-array of the active phased array antenna **12** taken by the thermal camera **18** wherein different colors represent different temperatures.

In some non-limiting embodiments, the antenna array probe **24** may be implemented as a dual polarized cross-stacked antenna array. Exemplary embodiments of dual polarized cross-stacked antenna arrays are set forth in U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2016/0079672, (the entire disclosure of which is hereby incorporated herein by

reference) and the article titled, and published on. In one non-limiting embodiment, the antenna array probe **24** may include an  $n \times m$  array of antenna elements. For example, the antenna array probe **24** may be a 3-by-3 antenna array although other sizes of arrays can be used. The design of the antenna array probe **24** may be optimized to minimize the potential impact on the NF measurements accuracy that can be affected by the coupling between the antenna array probe **24** and active phased array antenna **12**. The design may also take into consideration the reduction of the payload of the multi-axis articulated robot **14**, for position accuracy. The antenna array probe **24** may be connected to a 2-port vector network analyzer (VNA). The other port of the VNA may be connected to the active phased array antenna **12**. The antenna array probe and the VNA may allow the RF scanner system **10** to take S-Parameters measurements as shown in FIG. 3D.

Referring to FIGS. 1A-1C and FIG. 2, in some non-limiting embodiments, the environmental chamber **26** may be used to control and monitor the test environment temperature and/or humidity during the characterization of the active phased array antenna **12**. The environmental chamber **26** can be described as a closed room that may be thermally isolated, with an air conditioning system for controlling and tracking the temperature and/or humidity inside the environmental chamber **26**. The environmental chamber **26** implemented may allow, for example, a range of temperature testing of  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$ . to  $85^{\circ}\text{C}$ . With the active phased array antenna **12** and sensor suite **16** located on the inside of the environmental chamber **26**, as indicated in FIG. 1, performance of active phased array antenna **12** may be determined at different temperature conditions. In some non-limiting embodiments, the interior of the environmental chamber **26** may be covered with RF microwave absorbers **36** to prevent unwanted RF reflections.

The RF scanner system **10** may be configured to perform three stages of the process of characterization: surface characterization of the active phased array antenna **12**, RF characterization of each radiating element in the active phased array antenna **12**, and temperature characterization of the active phased array antenna **12**. All the stages can be performed as discrete steps at different instances of time that are to be performed under conditions of controlled temperatures. Additionally, processes may be commanded by a software program stored on one or more non-transitory computer readable medium that includes instructions for implementing a visual user interface. As such, the user may be able to select the radiating elements to be characterized and set the ranges of frequency and temperature operation while monitoring in real time the measured values. Additionally, the software may be configured to set one or more environmental parameter, such as temperature, inside the environmental chamber **26** in order to evaluate the performance of the active phased array antenna **12** as a function of the environmental parameter. In some non-limiting embodiments, the software may interface with the controller of the active phased array antenna **12** to evaluate performance of the internal calibration procedure of the active phased array antenna **12**, using the RF scanner system **10** as the "ground truth" estimator of amplitude and phase errors.

In some embodiments, the first stage of operation is the surface characterization of the active phased array antenna **12**. During the first stage, the scanner opens the shutter mechanism to expose the radiating elements of the active phased array antenna **12** to the optical camera **22** and the laser **20**, and then registers the position of each radiating element of the active phased array antenna **12** using the

optical camera **22** and laser **20**, which may also be used to register the absolute position of each radiating element across the active phased array antenna **12** using machine vision.

During this stage, the multi-axis articulated robot **14** may be used to move the sensor suite **16** to obtain information about the radiating elements of the active phased array antenna **12**. First, the multi-axis articulated robot **14** may position the sensor suite **16** parallel to the active phased array antenna **12**, at a location wherein the range of vision of the optical camera **22** can capture the fiducial mark of an element on the active phased array antenna **12**. The scanner proceeds to open the shutter to enable the operation of the optical camera **22** and the laser **20**. The optical camera **22** may take an image, and later process the image to calculate the position (X, Y and Z coordinates) of a fiducial mark using machine vision, as well as the misalignment angle between the antenna array probe **24** and the active phased array antenna **12**. From this analysis it may be possible to measure distances among adjacent radiating elements once the (X, Y and Z coordinates are known), and the angle of the sensor suite **16** with the active phased array antenna **12**. By iterating this procedure, the positions and misalignment angles of all or a preselected group of the radiating elements of the active phased array antenna **12** can be measured relative to each other. Furthermore, since the environmental chamber **26** may be controlled by a user interface, the surface characterization stage may allow the RF scanner system **10** to characterize the thermal expansion of the active phased array antenna **12** as a function of temperature.

In some embodiments, the second stage of operation is thermal characterization to register the temperature gradients of the surface of the active phased array antenna **12**. The thermal camera **18** and the multi-axis articulated robot **14** may be used simultaneously. First, using the location data of the radiating elements of the active phased array antenna **12** obtained from the surface characterization stage, and while having the shutter open, the multi-axis articulated robot **14** may position the thermal camera **18** in front of at least one of the radiating elements of the active phased array antenna **12**. Next, the thermal camera **18** may capture an image of the thermal profile of the area surrounding the at least one radiating element of the active phased array antenna **12**. By processing the image, the temperature gradients along the surface of the active phased array antenna **12** can be characterized. Even further, adverse effects of the temperature gradients over the surface dimensions and RF performance of the active phased array antenna **12** may be determined.

In some embodiments, the last stage is the RF characterization, which measures the radiation performance of the PAR. At this stage, the scanner will close the shutter, placing the antenna array probe **24** in front of the center of the radiating element of the active phased array antenna **12**. Next, the RF scanner system **10** may trigger the VNA to measure the S-parameters at the current configuration of the environmental parameter, such as temperature.

In at least certain embodiments, the present disclosure is directed to a system, comprising: a radio frequency (RF) scanner system comprising: a multi-axis articulated robot having a first end and a second end; and, a sensor suite positioned on the first end of the multi-axis articulated robot. The sensor suite comprising a shield having a first side and a second side opposite the first side, the first side configured for positioning towards an active phased array antenna, an antenna array probe, and a surface sensor configured to determine X, Y, and Z positions of the active phased array antenna.

In other embodiments, the present disclosure is directed to a method for characterizing a surface of an active phased array antenna having a plurality of radiating elements, comprising: capturing, by a surface sensor, at least one image of an active phased array antenna, the surface sensor positioned in a sensor suite mounted on a multi-axis articulated robot; and determining X, Y and Z features of the active phased array antenna using the at least one image.

In yet other embodiments, the present disclosure is directed to a method for characterizing an active phased array antenna having a plurality of radiating elements, comprising: capturing at least one thermal image of an active phased array antenna by a thermal imaging camera mounted on a multi-axis articulated robot.

In yet other embodiments, the present disclosure is directed to a radio frequency scanner system, comprising: a multi-axis robot; an antenna array probe supported by the multi-axis robot; and a control system configured to send control signals to the multi-axis robot to move the antenna array probe in a predetermined manner, to collect sensor data from the antenna array probe indicative of near-field radio frequency measurements, and to correlate the sensor data with particular locations of the antenna array probe.

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What is claimed is:

1. A system, comprising:

a radio frequency (RF) scanner system comprising:

a multi-axis articulated robot having a first end and a second end; and,

a sensor suite attached to the first end of the multi-axis articulated robot, the sensor suite comprising:

one or more mechanical fixture attached to the first end of the multi-axis articulated robot

a shield supported by the one or more mechanical fixture, the shield having a front surface and a back surface opposite the front surface, the front surface configured for positioning towards an active phased array antenna, the front surface having at least one microwave absorber,

an antenna array probe supported by the one or more mechanical fixture on the front surface of the shield, the shield extending beyond the antenna array probe,

a surface sensor supported by the one or more mechanical fixture on the back surface of the shield, the surface sensor having a field of view, the surface sensor configured to characterize an electromagnetic surface of the active phased array antenna; and wherein the shield has a surface area sufficient to cover the field of view of the surface sensor, and is configured to be movable between a first position so as to not block the field of view of the surface sensor, and a second position to block the field of view of the surface sensor.

2. The system of claim 1, wherein the back surface of the shield is devoid of RF microwave absorbers.

3. The system of claim 1, wherein the surface sensor is adjacent to and mounted on the back surface of the shield.

4. The system of claim 1, wherein the surface sensor comprises an optical camera and a laser.

5. The system of claim 1, wherein the shield includes a first portion and a second portion, the second portion moveable relative to the first portion so as to form a gap aligned with a portion of the active phased array antenna and to selectively expose and cover the surface sensor.

6. The system of claim 5, wherein the shield further comprises at least one actuator for selectively moving the first portion relative to the second portion.

7. The system of claim 5, wherein the first portion includes at least one RF microwave absorber.

8. The system of claim 1, wherein the sensor suite further comprises a thermal camera.

9. A radio frequency scanner system, comprising:

a multi-axis articulated robot having a first end and a second end;

one or more mechanical fixture attached to the first end of the multi-axis articulated robot;

an antenna array probe supported by the one or more mechanical fixture attached to the multi-axis articulated robot and having a first field of view;

a surface sensor supported by the one or more mechanical fixture attached to the multi-axis articulated robot and having a second field of view coincident with the first field of view; and

a control system having one or more processors, the one or more processors executing computer executable instructions to cause the one or more processors to:

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- send control signals to the multi-axis articulated robot to move the antenna array probe in a predetermined manner;
  - to collect sensor data from the antenna array probe indicative of near-field radio frequency measurements;
  - to correlate the sensor data with particular locations of the antenna array probe; and
  - to characterize an electromagnetic surface of an active phased array antenna scanned by the antenna array probe with data obtained from the surface sensor.
10. The system of claim 8, wherein the thermal camera is a thermal imaging camera.
11. The system of claim 1, wherein the sensor suite includes a thermal camera configured to determine one or more thermal properties of the active phased array antenna.
12. The system of claim 1, wherein the sensor suite is further configured to determine fully automated characterization of the active phased array antenna within a range from 1 GHz to 59 GHz.
13. The system of claim 1, wherein the sensor suite is further configured to determine fully automated characterization of the active phased array antenna from 0° C. to 50°C.
14. The system of claim 1, wherein the surface sensor comprises a topographic sensor.

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15. The system of claim 4, wherein the optical camera and the laser are further configured to characterize the topography of the active phased array antenna.
16. The system of claim 4, wherein the optical camera and the laser are further configured to determine the topography and size of the active phased array antenna.
17. The system of claim 8, wherein the thermal camera is configured to determine a thermal state or distribution of one or more radiating elements of the active phased array antenna.
18. The system of claim 1, further comprising an environmental chamber configured to control and monitor temperature and or humidity.
19. The radio frequency scanner system of claim 9, comprising an optical camera and laser supported by the multi-axis articulated robot and configured to determine the topography and size of the active phased array antenna.
20. The radio frequency scanner system of claim 9, comprising a thermal camera supported by the multi-axis articulated robot and configured to determine a thermal state or distribution of one or more radiating elements of the active phased array antenna.

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