

Accessing Inaccessible Interfaces: *In Situ* Approaches to Materials Tribology

W. Gregory Sawyer and Kathryn J. Wahl,
Guest Editors

Abstract

The field of materials tribology has entered a phase of instrumentation and measurement that involves accessing and following the detailed chemical, structural, and physical interactions that govern friction and wear. Fundamental tribological research involves the development of new experimental methods capable of monitoring phenomena that occur within the life of a sliding contact. Measuring friction phenomena while the process is ongoing is a major improvement over earlier techniques that required the surfaces to be separated and analyzed, thereby interrupting the friction-causing event and modifying surface conditions. In the past, *MRS Bulletin* has highlighted how *in situ* approaches can greatly enhance our understanding of materials structure, processing, and performance. This issue highlights *in situ* approaches as applied to materials tribology, namely, the study of contacting surfaces and interfaces in relative motion.

Introduction

Tribology is a field of study that is focused on the fundamental investigations of friction and wear. As recently summarized in a report on the "Frontiers of Fundamental Tribology,"¹ new tools are needed to monitor tribological phenomena that are occurring within buried interfaces. These tools are essential for fundamental studies of friction and wear because they are not intrinsic properties of a material; rather, they are functions of the tribological system (which includes the contacting surfaces that are in relative motion, the local environment, the background temperature, the surface roughness and preparation, the sliding speeds and loads, and a host of other contributors). Over the past half century, tribological systems have been discussed and described in terms of three basic groups of thematically linked elements:² (1) the types

of materials in contact and the contact geometry; (2) the operating conditions, including the gross motion, loads, stresses, and duration of operation; and (3) the environment and surface conditions, including the surface chemistry, surface topography, and ambient temperature. The incredibly large number of factors affecting tribological performance makes fundamental studies of materials tribology exceedingly difficult.

Energy and material losses in moving mechanical devices as a result of friction and wear impose an enormous cost on the national economy. Engineering tribology involves the designs of bearings, bushings, and a wide variety of interfaces that support our everyday mobility and often aims to simultaneously reduce both friction and wear. Practical solutions to mitigate friction and wear have traditionally

been through the use of fluid lubricants such as oils and greases. However, there are a number of applications where traditional fluid lubrication strategies are either precluded or undesirable.^{3,4} Materials tribology, and in particular solid lubrication, is an area of research that aims to control friction and wear through both the appropriate selection of known materials and the development of new materials and surface treatments.

The contact between macroscopic surfaces occurs on asperities, which are irregularly shaped protuberances that exist on all engineering surfaces.⁵ Like fractals, these surface features occur across all length scales and define the distribution and shape of the real area of contact, which is orders of magnitude smaller than the apparent contact area.⁶⁻⁸ Thus, friction and wear arise from microscopic contacts that are under tremendous stresses and might have contact lifetimes of microseconds. In macroscopic systems, these contact locations are unknown and are buried in an apparent area of contact that is typically inaccessible by most measurement techniques.

Most materials tribology studies have focused on the friction coefficient and the wear rate. As shown in Figure 1, the friction coefficient (μ) can be defined as the ratio of the friction force (F_f) to the normal force (F_n). The wear rate (K) is typically defined as the ratio of the volume of material removed (V) to the product of the applied normal load (F_n) and the distance of sliding (d). Both the friction coefficient and the wear rate are sensitive to the starting conditions, load, speed, temperature, and environment. The initial transients during the approach to steady-state sliding are usually monitored but not modeled, and many of the reported and tabulated values for friction coefficients and wear rates are for steady-state conditions.

To date, despite considerable efforts at understanding the origins of friction, there is no model capable of predicting friction coefficients from first principles. Similarly, there is no model for wear (which is often defined as the gradual removal of material from contacting surfaces in relative motion) that is based on first-principles arguments. Thus, careful and proven experimental techniques represent the most sophisticated and reliable approach for investigating, designing, and assessing the tribological worthiness of new materials. Fundamental studies of friction involve developing an understanding of the real area of contact, surface chemistry, adhesion, and shear strength of the interface, as well as the nature of

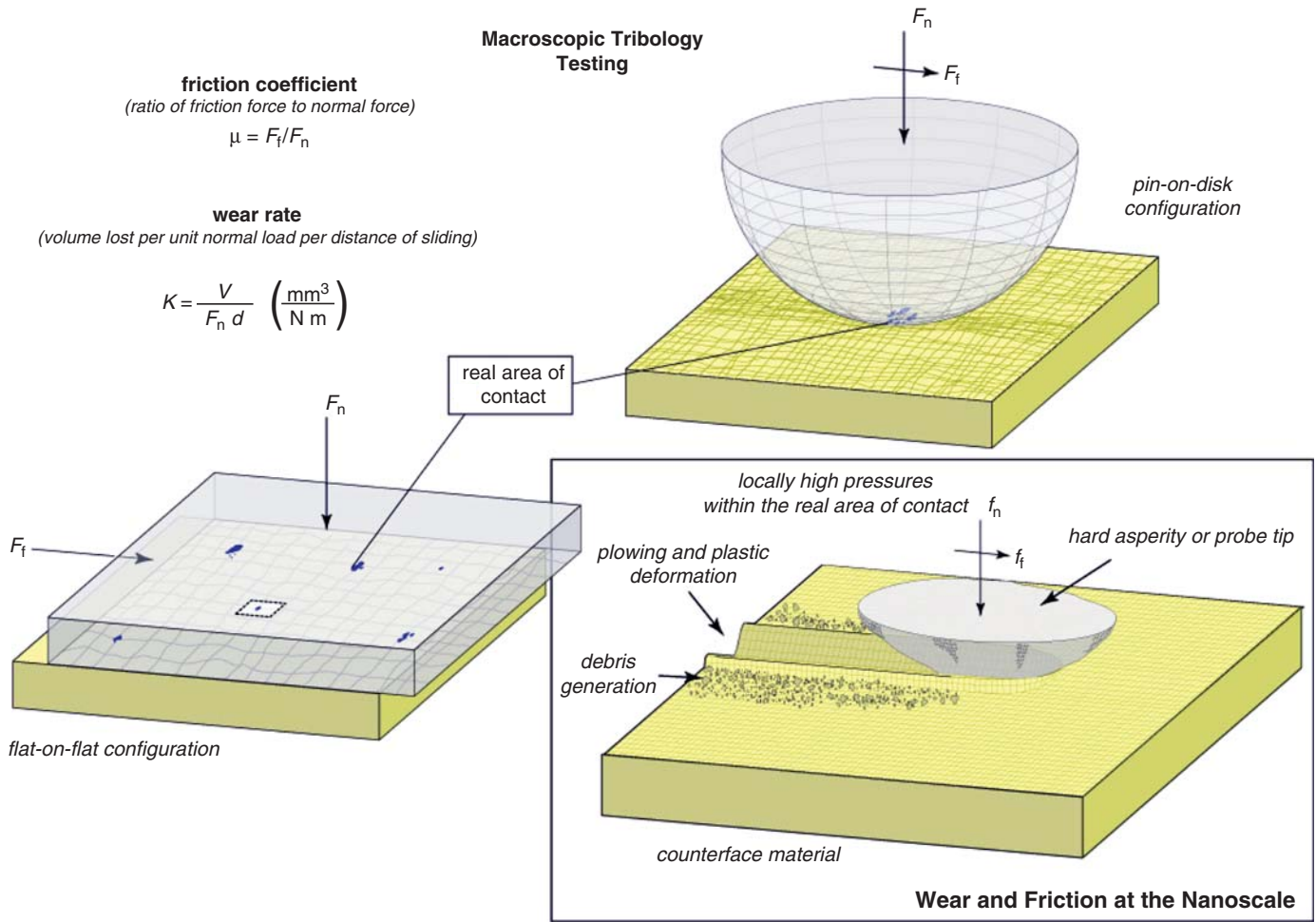


Figure 1. Tribology measurements for friction coefficient (μ) are traditionally made dynamically through force transducers that record both the lateral, or friction force (F_f) and the normal force (F_n). Whether a spherically tipped pin or a flat countersurface, the real area of contact (shown in blue) is a very small component of the apparent or projected contact area. The wear rate (K), defined as a ratio of the volume of material removed (V) to the product of the normal load (F_n) and the sliding distance (d), is rarely measured under dynamic conditions. As shown in the inset (lower right), the contact pressures at the asperity level (f_f and f_n , where $F_f = \sum f_f$ and $F_n = \sum f_n$) are typically large and approach the flow stress of the softer material. Single-asperity tribology measurements of friction can be accessed using atomic force microscope probes, and the deformation and structural transformation at this scale can be studied using tools such as *in situ* transmission electron microscopy.

deformation and energy dissipation occurring at the asperity junctions.

State of the Art

There are no standard reference samples (such as the standard kilogram prototype maintained by the International Bureau of Weights and Measures) in materials tribology because the specimens are consumed during testing. Thus, friction and the progression of wear must be monitored by sensitive force and displacement measurements and with periodic interruptions to examine the contacting surfaces. As illustrated in Figure 2, two common *in situ* approaches are used to follow and link chemical, structural, and physical interactions with friction and wear processes.

The most common *in situ* tribology approach has been to perform detailed measurements on the surface of the sample within the environment but outside the contact. The tribofilms and surface topography that develop during testing can be carefully studied between contacts; postprocessing of the data enables cycle-by-cycle analysis that can be used to link data from the current cycle with the friction and wear measurements of the previous cycle. The advantage here is that the testing of the samples can take place under the appropriate tribological system conditions in an environment that is not varying during observation and experimentation. Full-scale engineering components down to devices on the scale of

microelectromechanical systems can be analyzed in this way. A serious limitation is that the analytical measurements are not carried out within the contact, so inferences need to be drawn between the observations outside the contact and the probable dynamics (chemical and mechanical) that exist within the contact.

In situ approaches that enable measurements within a contact are ideal. However, such approaches frequently require compromises of sample composition, geometry, and testing environment to be made. For example, transparent materials enable observations of the intimate contact areas but are often not the traditional counterface material for the application. Additionally, spherical or pla-

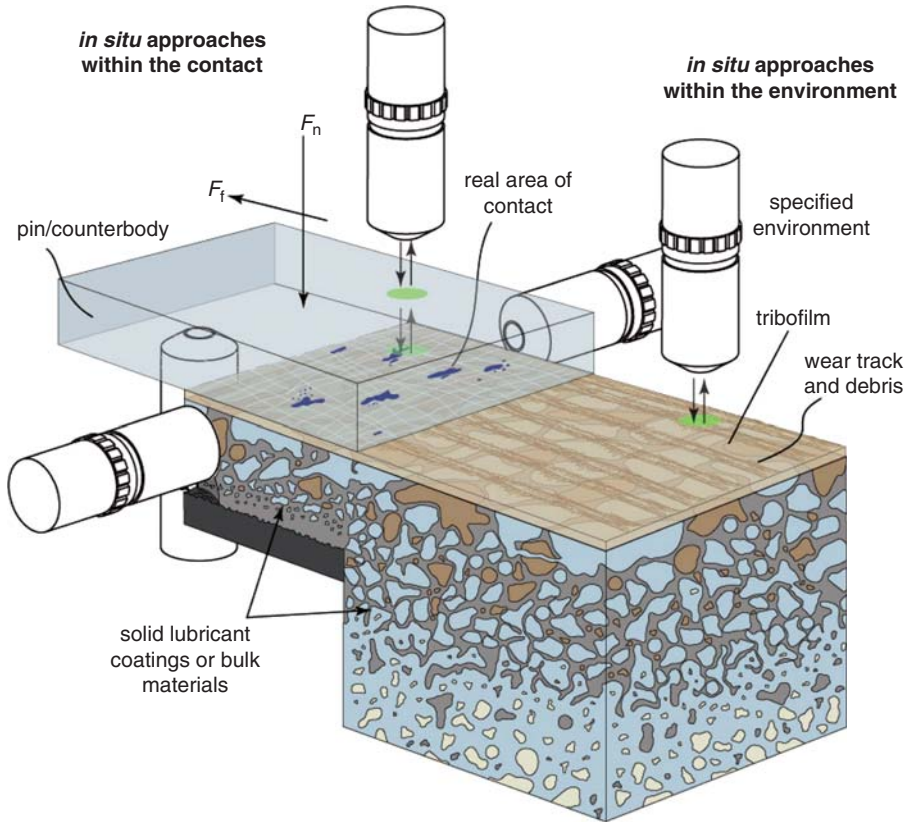


Figure 2. Various *in situ* approaches have been employed in tribological studies. Fundamental measurements of the real area of contact, the interfacial film or tribofilm chemistry, and the wear track morphology and wear rates are common goals. Here, microscope objectives illustrate pathways for *in situ* studies. The most common approach is to examine the surfaces emerging from a contact within the specified environment. A more complex scenario is to perform the measurements within the contact, as illustrated by the objectives looking through a transparent counterbody from above, below, or the side. Some compromise of the sliding contact (for example, materials, geometry, or scale) is typically required to achieve an *in situ* measurement of this type.

nar geometries are frequently selected for their suitability to the measurement rather than to the application. A number of analytical techniques have been employed for *in situ* tribology studies. Many of these techniques are listed in Table 1, with examples of the measurement application, resolution, and limitations.

The miniaturization of force and displacement measurement technologies have enabled a new suite of tribological test equipment that can be relatively easily integrated within a variety of existing surface analytical instruments. In other cases, advances in surface-science instrumentation have enabled these tools to be integrated with existing tribological equipment. Together, the merging of surface analytical instrumentation and careful tribological instrumentation is providing new and exciting opportunities to study the fundamentals of friction and wear.

In This Issue

In this issue of *MRS Bulletin*, we highlight the possibilities of applying *in situ* methods to the study of buried sliding interfaces found in tribological contacts. We have selected topics describing the state of the art in five areas ranging from the propagation of interfacial slip along crack fronts that simulate geological interfaces relevant to earthquakes to nanoscale single-asperity contacts probing how small collections of atoms accommodate, and are transformed by, sliding. Whereas previous *MRS Bulletin* issues tackling materials tribology⁹⁻¹¹ have highlighted a combination of parallel experimental and computational methods, the focus of this issue is on the development of experimental approaches allowing direct probing of materials mechanics and chemistry active in sliding contacts. Two of the articles address fundamental studies of liquid and solid lubrication using a range of *in situ*

microscopy and spectroscopy approaches. The article by Cann reviews the application of infrared and Raman microscopy to liquid-lubricated contacts, showing how the relationship between molecular conformation, pressure, additives, and lubricant degradation can be correlated to friction performance. The article by Wahl and Sawyer reviews *in situ* approaches to understanding solid lubrication phenomena. Examples are provided to illustrate how optical and interference microscopy, Raman microscopy, and electron microscopy are applied to link real-time changes in interfacial film chemistry, morphology, and rheology to friction and wear events.

The remaining three articles address the state of the art in examining tribological contacts controlled by asperity-scale interactions. Marks et al. describe advances in *in situ* transmission electron microscopy to understand asperity-asperity interactions. The tools for controlling indentation and sliding of nanoscale contacts within the field of view of an electron microprobe provide unprecedented opportunities to observe atomic-scale tribological deformation processes in real time. The article by Bennewitz and Dickinson reviews another aspect of the state of the art in *in situ* atomic-scale measurements of wear. In this case, carefully prepared surfaces and controlled chemical environments allow examination of the role of defects and chemistry in the initiation of wear and its relation to atomic-scale friction. The last article, by Rubenstein et al., describes *in situ* optical measurements of the onset of sliding that show that the crack front motion comprises velocities from sluggish (tens of meters per second) to beyond the shear wave speed (>1,000 m/s). These direct observations indicate how the onset of sliding is influenced and controlled by these unusual crack propagation modes.

These articles illustrate a subset of the wide range of possibilities for applying *in situ* experimental methods to the challenge of understanding the materials and interface science of buried sliding interfaces. The *in situ* approaches could confirm or refute commonly accepted lubrication models and will allow closer comparison with molecular simulations of friction processes. Progress in materials tribology will depend on developing a detailed understanding of what is happening in buried sliding interfaces.

Acknowledgments

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Table I: *In situ* approaches used for tribological interface studies

Technique	Measurement	Spatial Resolution	Limitations
Optical microscopy	Tribofilm formation and motion, contact size	~ 1 μm	One counterface must be optically transparent.
Interferometry (contact)	Contact separation	~ 1 μm	One counterface must be optically transparent.
Interferometry (wear track)	Wear	~ 1 μm	Index of refraction or reflectivity changes can distort results.
Raman microscopy	Composition/chemistry, film thickness	~ 1 μm	One counterface must be optically transparent.
ATR-FTIR spectroscopy	Chemical bonding	mm to cm (width of crystal)	One counterface must be IR-transparent.
TEM + EELS + AFM/nanoindentation	Microstructural transformation, interfacial film formation composition, chemistry	0.1 nm	Interface region must be electron-transparent; vacuum environment
SEM/EDX	Surface morphology, composition	10 nm	Contact charging, contamination in low vacuum environments
SEM + FIB	Cross section of sliding surfaces w/o separation	0.1 nm	Potential beam damage from FIB sectioning
SFA + x-ray diffraction or neutron reflectivity	Structure	μm 's	Requires synchrotron access
AFM	Friction, surface topography, contact stiffness, wear	~ 1 nm	Difficult to ascertain contact size, chemistry
AES	Composition	10 nm	Cannot probe inside contact zone
XPS	Composition, chemical state	10s of μm	Cannot probe inside contact zone
Contact resistance	Coating thickness, damage, interfacial film formation		

Note: ATR-FTIR, attenuated total reflection Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy; TEM, transmission electron microscopy; AFM, atomic force microscopy; EELS, electron energy loss spectroscopy; SEM, scanning electron microscopy; EDX, energy dispersive x-ray spectroscopy; FIB, focused ion beam; SFA, surface force apparatus; AES, Auger electron spectroscopy; XPS, x-ray photoelectron spectroscopy.

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W. Gregory Sawyer

W. Gregory Sawyer, Guest Editor for this issue of *MRS Bulletin*,



Kathryn J. Wahl

can be reached at the University of Florida, Department of

Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA; and e-mail wgsawyer@ufl.edu.

Sawyer is the N.C. Ebaugh Professor of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering at the University of Florida. He received his PhD degree from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1999. Sawyer's research interest is in the area of materials tribology. Over the past decade, the

Tribology Laboratory at the University of Florida has developed numerous experimental apparatuses for interrogating materials under extreme environments, including vacuum, cryogenic, and high temperature. The laboratory also designed and built an array of tribometers that are currently scheduled to be operated in space as part of a 2009 NASA–Materials International Space Station Experiment.

Sawyer also has been active in developing polymeric nanocomposites for solid lubrication (recently demonstrating ultra-low wear with polytetrafluoroethylene nanocomposites) and probing the molecular origins of friction and wear (using a coupled computational simulation and experimental tribology program at the University of Florida). Additionally, Sawyer was chair of the 2008 International Joint



Roland Bennewitz



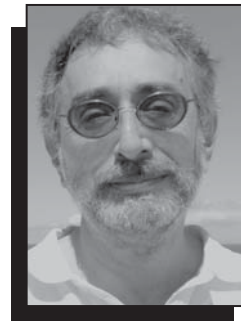
Gil Cohen



J. Thomas Dickinson



Jay Fineberg



Laurence D. Marks

Tribology Conference and serves on the editorial boards of the journals *Wear* and *Tribology Letters*.

Kathryn J. Wahl, Guest Editor for this issue of *MRS Bulletin*, can be reached at U.S. Naval Research Laboratory, Code 6176, Washington DC 20375, USA; tel. 1-202-767-5419; and e-mail kathryn.wahl@nrl.navy.mil.

Wahl heads the Molecular Interfaces and Tribology Section at the Naval Research Laboratory (NRL). She joined the NRL in 1992 as a National Research Council Postdoctoral fellow and became a staff scientist in 1995. She received a B.A. in Physics and Mathematics from St. Olaf College in 1987, and a Ph.D. in Materials Science and Engineering from Northwestern University in 1992. Her research has focused on fundamental physics and chemistry of sliding and adhesive interfaces, both at macroscopic and nanometer scales. Currently, her research efforts include the development of *in situ* chemical and mechanical methods to probe bioadhesive contacts created by marine biofoulants, such as barnacles. Wahl chaired the 2008 Tribology Gordon

Research Conference, serves on the editorial boards of *Tribology Letters* and *Wear*, and is a fellow of the American Vacuum Society.

Roland Bennewitz can be reached at INM—Leibniz Institute for New Materials, Campus D2 2, 66123 Saarbrücken, Germany; and e-mail roland.bennewitz@inm-gmbh.de.

Bennewitz is head of the Nanotribology Group at the INM—Leibniz Institute for New Materials in Saarbrücken, Germany. He received his Habilitation degree from the University of Basel, Switzerland, in 2002. Bennewitz was an assistant professor at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, from 2004 until 2008, where he also held the Canada Research Chair in Experimental Nanomechanics. His main research focuses are the microscopic mechanisms of friction and wear and the mechanical properties of materials with a nanometer-scale structure.

Philippa M. Cann can be reached by e-mail at p.cann@imperial.ac.uk.

Cann is a principal research fellow in the Tribology Group at Imperial College London. Throughout the

last 20 years, her research has focused on experimental studies of lubrication and lubricants, particularly grease lubrication of rolling element bearings. More recently, Cann has been developing experimental methods in biotribology and, in particular, synovial joint lubrication research. Her research has been recognized by a number of awards: the IMecE Thomas Stephen Prize (1996), the STLE Walter D. Hodson Award (1998), the STLE Wilbur Deutsch Award (2001), the NLGI Authors Award (2000), and the Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences, Jacob Wallenberg Foundation Grant (2004). In 2004, Cann was awarded the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, Tribology Silver Medal from the Tribology Trust.

Gil Cohen can be reached at the Racah Institute of Physics, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Givat Ram, Jerusalem 91904, Israel; tel. 972-2-6585720; fax 972-2-6584437; and e-mail gilc@vms.huji.ac.il.

Cohen has been a laboratory researcher at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem since 2003. He received his PhD degree from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2000. His research

interests include friction, fracture, nonlinear phenomena, and biophysics.

J. Thomas Dickinson can be reached at Washington State University, Pullman, WA 99164-2814, USA; tel. 509-335-4914; and e-mail jtd@wsu.edu.

Dickinson is the Paul A. Anderson Professor of Physics and Regents Professor at Washington State University (WSU). He also leads the Surface Dynamics Group at WSU. Dickinson received his bachelor's degree from Western Michigan University and his PhD degree in physics at the University of Michigan. He joined the faculty at WSU in 1968. Dickinson's work has focused on the interaction and consequences of mechanical, chemical, and radiative stimuli on primarily nonmetallic materials. His current research interests include nanometer scale tribochemistry and VUV/femtosecond laser-surface interactions. He is the author/co-author of more than 320 refereed publications and is a fellow of MRS, APS, AVS, and AAAS.

Jay Fineberg can be reached at the Racah Institute of Physics, Hebrew University of

Jerusalem, Givat Ram, Jerusalem 91904, Israel; tel. 972-2-6585207; fax 972-2-6584437; and e-mail jay@vms.huji.ac.il.

Fineberg has been a faculty member at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem since 1992 and holds the Max Born Chair in Natural Philosophy. He received his PhD degree from the Weizmann Institute of Science in 1988. His interests include fracture, the dynamics of friction, nonlinear wave interactions, and nonlinear phenomena. The recipient of a number of prestigious awards, Fineberg also has authored numerous scientific papers.

Laurence D. Marks can be reached at the Department of Materials Science and Engineering, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL 60208, USA; tel. 847-491-3996; and e-mail L-marks@northwestern.edu.

Marks is a professor of materials science and engineering at Northwestern University. After receiving his BA degree in chemistry at the University of Cambridge, UK, and his PhD degree in physics at the Cavendish Laboratory, Cambridge, UK, Marks was a post-doctoral researcher at Arizona State University.



Arno Merkle

He joined the faculty of Northwestern University in 1985. Marks' current research interests include nanotribology, dry-cutting, transmission electron microscopy, oxide surface science and catalysis, nanoparticles, solid-oxide fuel cells, nanoplasmonics, and density-functional theory. In addition, he is the author or co-author of more than 250 refereed articles.

Arno Merkle can be reached at Carl Zeiss SMT Inc., One Corporation Way, Peabody, MA 01960, USA; tel. 617-515-5031; and e-mail a.merkle@smt.zeiss.com.

Merkle is a transmission electron microscopy (TEM) specialist at Carl Zeiss SMT Inc. for their operations in North America. In 2001, he received a BA degree in physics at Gustavus



Andrew Minor

Adolphus College in St. Peter, MN. Merkle earned his PhD degree in 2007 from the Materials Science and Engineering Department at Northwestern University. His research experience and collaborations extend to a number of institutions worldwide, including Argonne National Laboratory (USA), the Max Planck Institute for Metals Research in Stuttgart, Germany, and the Fraunhofer Institute for the Mechanics of Materials in Freiburg, Germany. Merkle's research interests combine both theoretical (physical model generation) and experimental (*in situ* TEM) approaches to understanding fundamental nanoscale mechanisms at tribological interfaces. He is the recipient of a DAAD research grant and was named teaching



Shmuel M. Rubinstein

assistant of the year while at Northwestern University.

Andrew Minor can be reached at 1 Cyclotron Road, MS 72, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA; tel. 510-495-2749; fax 510-486-5888; and e-mail aminor@berkeley.edu.

Minor is an assistant professor of materials science and engineering at the University of California, Berkeley (UCB), and also a faculty scientist at the National Center for Electron Microscopy at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. He received his bachelor's degree in economics and mechanical engineering from Yale University and his MS and PhD degrees in materials science and engineering from UCB. Minor's research group focuses on



Oden L. Warren

nanomechanical size effects, characterization of soft materials, and novel *in situ* TEM methods for materials science research.

Shmuel M. Rubinstein can be reached at the Racah Institute of Physics, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Givat Ram, Jerusalem 91904, Israel; tel. 972-2-6584330; fax 972-2-6584437; and e-mail rshmuel@vms.huji.ac.il.

Rubinstein is nearing completion of his PhD degree studies at the Racah Institute of Physics of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He received his BS and MS degrees from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The recipient of the Charles Clore fellowship in 2007, Rubinstein's interests include the dynamics of friction, fracture, and nonequilib-

rium electro-osmotic instabilities.

Oden L. Warren can be reached by e-mail at owarren@hysitron.com.

Warren is the chief technology officer of Hysitron, Inc. He received his PhD degree in physical chemistry from Iowa State University, where he performed ultrahigh-vacuum surface science research on ultrathin-film systems. Thereafter, Warren advanced the interfacial force microscope as a postdoctoral fellow at Sandia National Laboratories, New Mexico, and the University of Western Ontario, Canada. He joined Hysitron in 1998, where he has led a number of major instrumentation development projects related to nanomechanical testing—including serving as the principal investigator of several U.S. Department of Energy Small Business Innovation Research grants. Warren has co-authored more than 50 papers in surface science, nanomechanics, and nanotribology fields and has received an R&D 100 Award for the development of a quantitative nanoindenter for the transmission electron microscope. □

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