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(54) **ULTRASOUND IMAGE ENHANCEMENT IN AN ULTRASOUND SYSTEM**

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

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Embodiments for providing enhanced ultrasound images without lowering a frame rate in an ultrasound system are disclosed. In one embodiment, the ultrasound system includes: an ultrasound data acquisition unit configured to transmit ultrasound beams to a target object along predetermined plural scan line groups of scan lines in an alternative and sequential manner, receive ultrasound echoes reflected from the target object, and provide a plurality of ultrasound frame data, said predetermined plural scan line groups being respectively associated with predetermined steering angles and each of the plurality of ultrasound frame data being produced in response to the transmission of the ultrasound beam along the respective scan line groups; and a processor configured to sequentially form ultrasound images based on the ultrasound frame data and compound the ultrasound images in an interleaving way to form compound images.

100

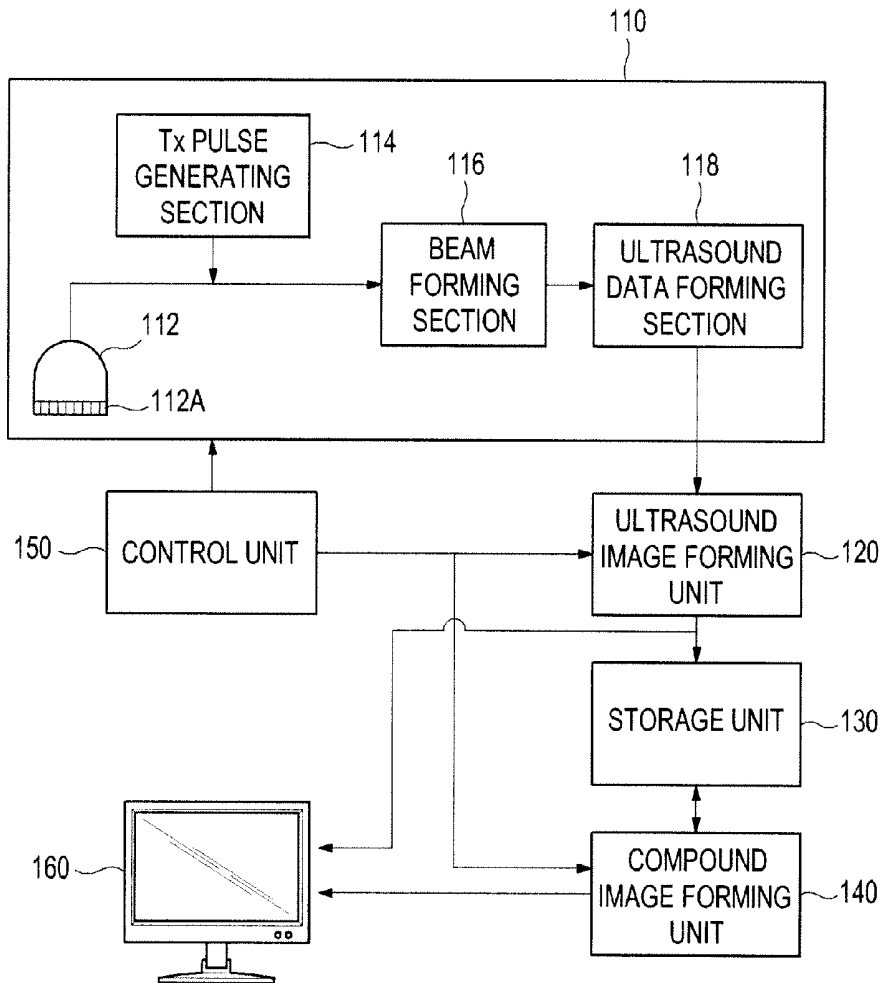


FIG. 1

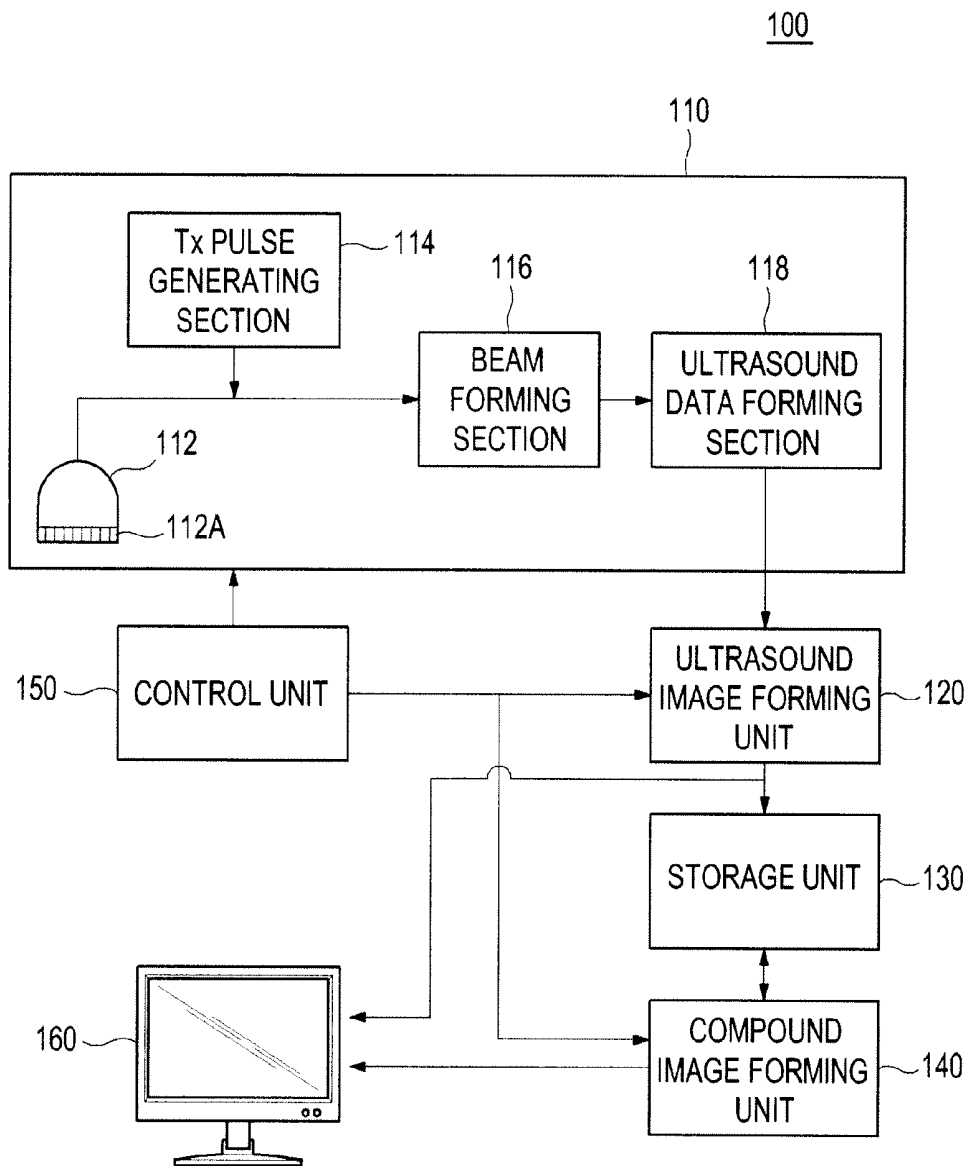


FIG. 2A

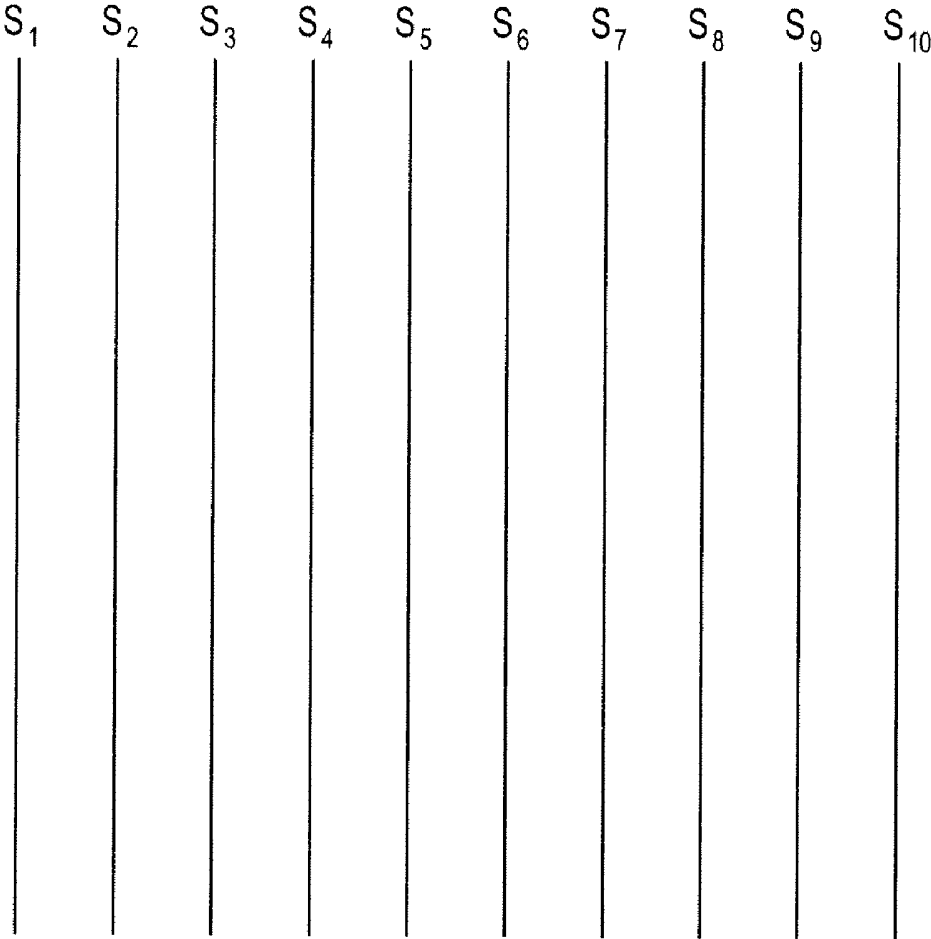


FIG. 2B

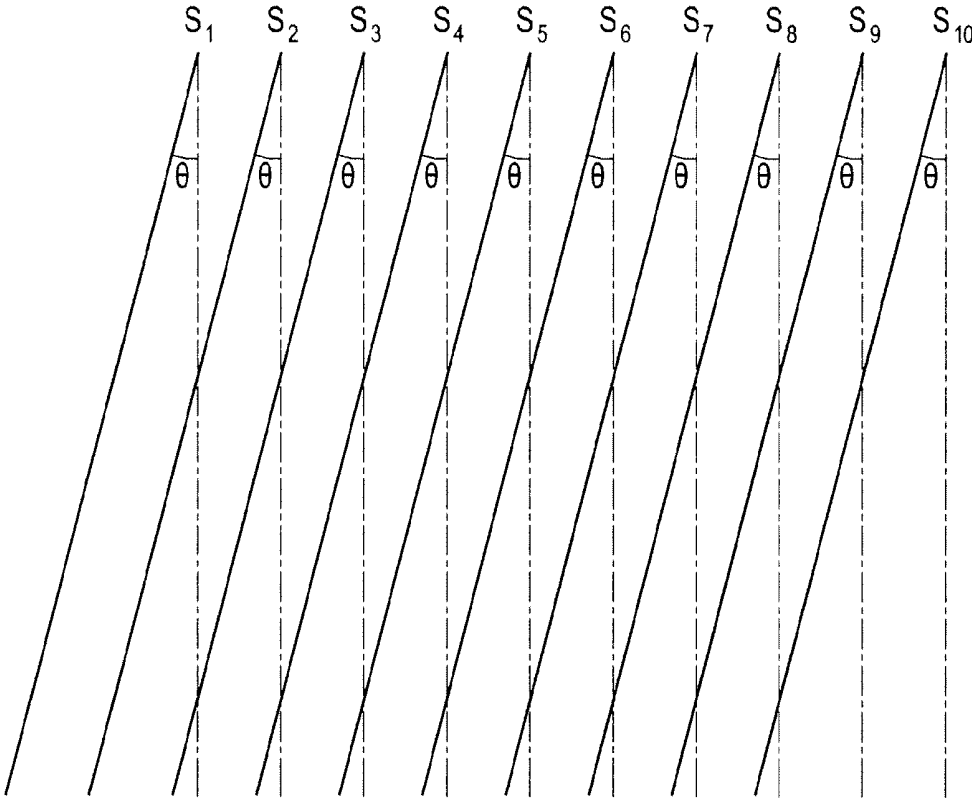


FIG. 2C

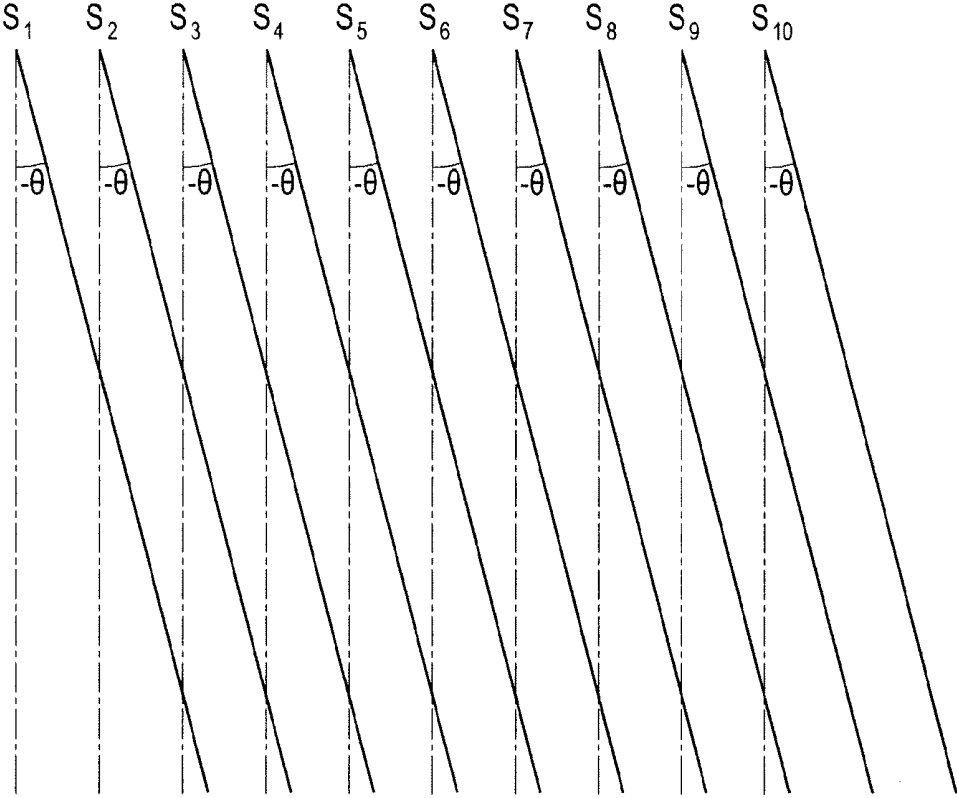


FIG. 3

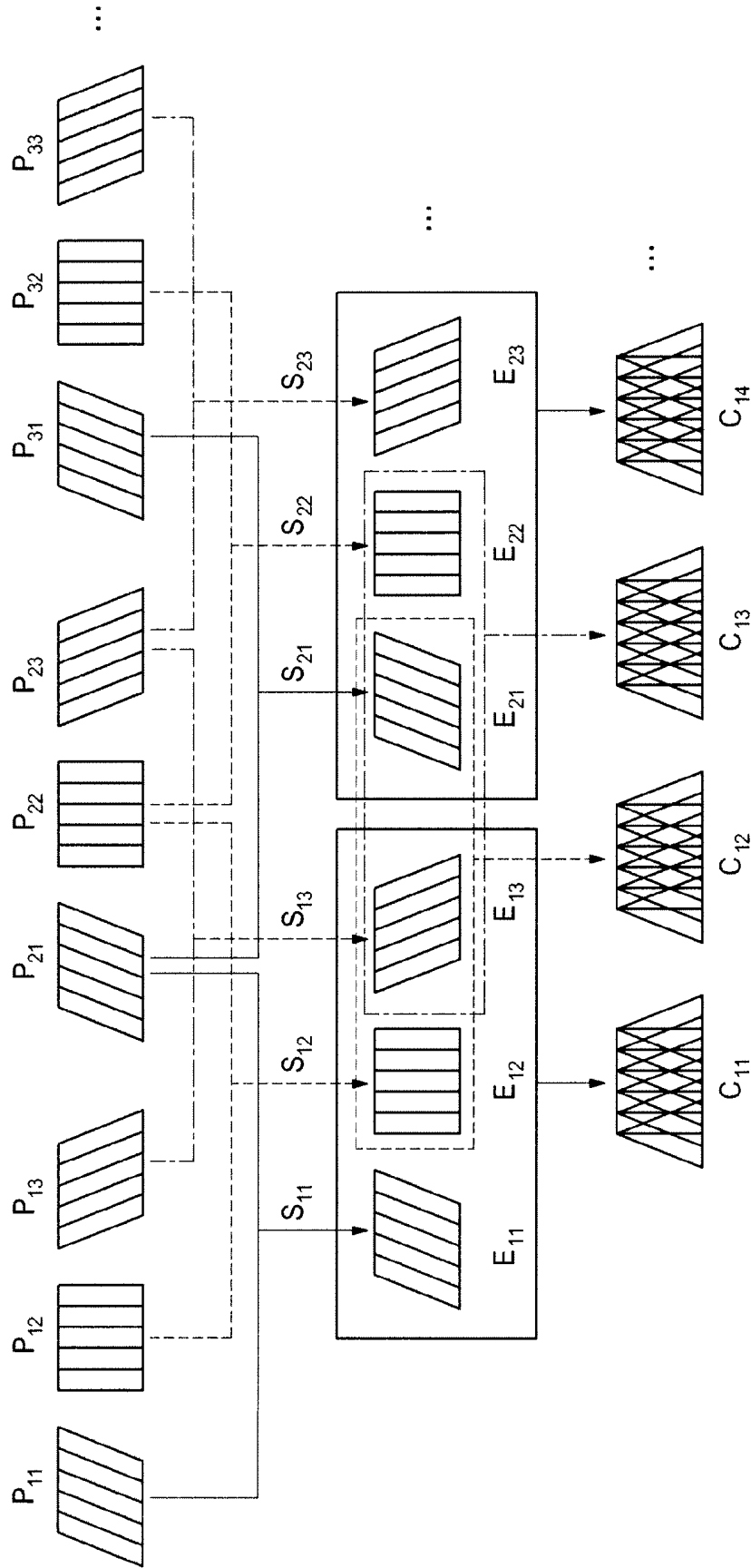
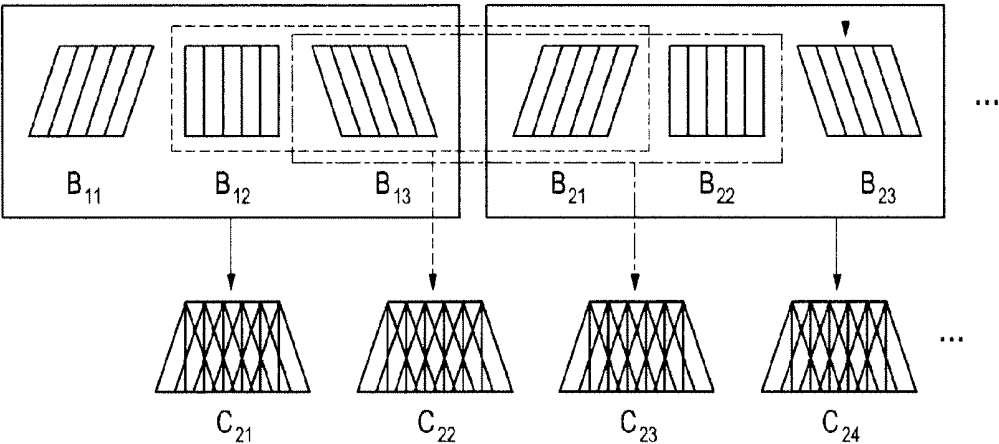


FIG. 4



ULTRASOUND IMAGE ENHANCEMENT IN AN ULTRASOUND SYSTEM

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] The present application claims priority from Korean Patent Application No. 10-2009-0076246 filed on Aug. 18, 2009, the entire subject matter of which is incorporated herein by reference.

TECHNICAL FIELD

[0002] The present disclosure generally relates to ultrasound image processing, and more particularly to enhancing ultrasound images without lowering a frame rate in an ultrasound system.

BACKGROUND

[0003] An ultrasound system has been extensively used in the medical field due to its non-invasive and non-destructive nature. Modern high-performance ultrasound imaging diagnostic systems and techniques are commonly used to produce two-dimensional or three-dimensional ultrasound images of internal features of patients.

[0004] Recently, spatial compounding has been adopted in the ultrasound system to provide enhanced ultrasound images. Spatial compounding is implemented by compounding a predetermined number of ultrasound images (e.g., three ultrasound images), which have been successively formed at different steering angles of scan lines, to form a compound image. However, since spatial compounding must be implemented after forming the predetermined number of ultrasound images, it may result in a reduced frame rate of the compound images.

SUMMARY

[0005] Embodiments for enhancing ultrasound images without lowering a frame rate in an ultrasound system are disclosed herein. In one embodiment, by way of non-limiting example, an ultrasound system comprises: an ultrasound data acquisition unit configured to transmit ultrasound beams to a target object along predetermined plural scan line groups of scan lines in an alternative and sequential manner, receive ultrasound echoes reflected from the target object, and provide a plurality of ultrasound frame data, said predetermined plural scan line groups being respectively associated with predetermined steering angles and each of the ultrasound frame data being produced in response to the transmission of the ultrasound beam along the respective scan line groups; and a processor configured to sequentially form ultrasound images based on the ultrasound frame data and compound the ultrasound images in an interleaving way to form compound images.

[0006] In another embodiment, a method of providing compound images in an ultrasound system, comprises: a) transmitting ultrasound beams to a target object along predetermined plural scan line groups of scan lines in an alternative and sequential manner, and receiving ultrasound echoes reflected from the target object; b) providing a plurality of ultrasound frame data, said predetermined plural scan line groups being respectively associated with predetermined steering angles and each of the ultrasound frame data being produced in response to the transmission of the ultrasound beam along the respective scan line groups; c) sequentially

forming ultrasound images based on the ultrasound frame data; and d) compounding the ultrasound images in an interleaving way to form compound images.

[0007] The Summary is provided to introduce a selection of concepts in a simplified form that are further described below in the Detailed Description. This Summary is not intended to identify key or essential features of the claimed subject matter, nor is it intended to be used in determining the scope of the claimed subject matter.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0008] FIG. 1 is a block diagram showing an illustrative embodiment of an ultrasound system.

[0009] FIG. 2A is a schematic diagram showing a scan line group with its scan lines not steered.

[0010] FIG. 2B is a schematic diagram showing a scan line group with its scan lines being steered at a predetermined steering angle (θ) with respect to a direction of a scan head of an ultrasound probe.

[0011] FIG. 2C is a schematic diagram showing a scan line group with its scan lines being steered at a predetermined steering angle ($-\theta$) with respect to a direction of a scan head of an ultrasound probe.

[0012] FIG. 3 is a schematic diagram showing an example of forming elastic images and compound images.

[0013] FIG. 4 is a schematic diagram showing an example of forming B-mode images and compound images.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0014] A detailed description may be provided with reference to the accompanying drawings. One of ordinary skill in the art may realize that the following description is illustrative only and is not in any way limiting. Other embodiments of the present invention may readily suggest themselves to such skilled persons having the benefit of this disclosure.

[0015] Referring to FIG. 1, an ultrasound system constructed in accordance with one embodiment is shown. The ultrasound system 100, which embodies methods of the present invention, may include an ultrasound data acquisition unit 110. The ultrasound data acquisition unit 110 may be configured to transmit ultrasound beams to a target object and receive ultrasound echoes reflected from the target object to thereby form ultrasound data representative of the target object.

[0016] The ultrasound data acquisition unit 110 may include an ultrasound probe 112 containing an array transducer 112A that may be operable to transmit ultrasound beams along scan lines being aligned with a direction of a scan head of the ultrasound probe 112. The scan lines may be steered at one of the multiple angles relative to a scan head of the ultrasound probe 112. In one embodiment, the ultrasound probe 112 may include any one of a linear probe, a convex probe and the like. The ultrasound beam may be transmitted while applying pressure to the target object. The pressure may be applied using any device capable of uniformly applying the pressure on the target object such as the scan head of the ultrasound probe 112. A plate may be mounted around the scan head of the ultrasound probe 112 to extend an effective pressure area. A stress sensor (not shown) may be provided to sense stress caused by the pressure application. The stress sensor may be installed on any place (e.g., front surface of the plate mounted around the scan head) to sense the stress.

[0017] In one embodiment, the transmission of the ultrasound beams may be controlled by a transmission (Tx) pulse generating section **114**. The Tx pulse generating section **114** may include a plurality of pulsers to generate Tx pulses, which are delivered to the elements of the array transducer for actuation thereof. The Tx pulse generating section **114** may be further operable to apply delays to the Tx pulses to form a Tx pattern, by which the phasing and time of the actuation of the elements of the array transducer may be controlled. In this way, the ultrasound beam may be transmitted at a predetermined steering angle.

[0018] For example, three groups of scan lines may be set as illustrated in FIGS. 2A-2C. FIG. 2A is a schematic diagram showing a first scan line group with its scan lines not steered. FIG. 2B is a schematic diagram showing a second scan line group with its scan lines being steered at a predetermined steering angle (θ) with respect to a direction of a scan head of an ultrasound probe. FIG. 2C is a schematic diagram showing a scan line group with its scan lines being steered at a predetermined steering angle ($-\theta$) with respect to a direction of a scan head of an ultrasound probe. Each of the scan line groups may consist of scan lines necessary for obtaining one frame. In one embodiment, the ultrasound beam may be controlled to be transmitted along the first to third scan line groups sequentially and alternately.

[0019] The elements of the ultrasound probe **112** may receive ultrasound echoes reflected from the target object and then output electrical receive signals. The ultrasound data acquisition unit **110** may further include a beam forming section **116**, which may be operable to digitize the electrical receive signals to obtain digital signals. The beam forming section **116** may also apply delays to the digital signals in consideration of distances between the elements of the ultrasound probe **112** and focal points, and the steering angles of the scan lines. The beam forming section **116** may be further operable to sum the delayed digital signals to form receive-focused beams. In one embodiment, the beam forming section **116** may form a first receive-focused beam based on the ultrasound echoes reflected from the first scan line group. Also, the beam forming section **116** may form second and third receive-focused beams based on the ultrasound echoes corresponding to the second and third scan line groups, respectively.

[0020] The ultrasound data acquisition unit **110** may further include an ultrasound data forming section **118**. The ultrasound data forming section **118** may be operable to form ultrasound data corresponding to a plurality of frames based on the receive-focused beams. In one embodiment, the ultrasound data forming section **118** may form first to third ultrasound frame data by using the first and third receive-focused beams, which are provided from the beam forming section **116**. The ultrasound data may be radio frequency data, In-phase/Quadrature data or the like. Further, the ultrasound data acquisition unit **110** may be operable to perform upon the receive-focused beams a variety of signal processing such as gain adjustment, filtering and the like, which are necessary in forming the ultrasound frame data.

[0021] The ultrasound system **100** may further include an ultrasound image forming unit **120** that may be operable to form ultrasound images based on the ultrasound frame data, which are sequentially provided from the ultrasound data acquisition unit **110**. In one embodiment, the ultrasound images may include at least one of elastic images, a bright-

ness-mode (B-mode) image, etc. However, the ultrasound images may not be limited thereto.

[0022] In one embodiment, the ultrasound image forming unit **120** may include an elasticity information computing section (not shown) and an elastic image forming section (not shown). The elasticity information computing section may be operable to compute displacements between successive ultrasound frame data, which are obtained from an identical scan line group. In one embodiment, by way of non-limiting examples, the displacements may be computed by using auto-correlation or cross-correlation. The elasticity information computing section may form elasticity information based on the stress applied to the target object and the computed displacements.

[0023] As shown in FIG. 3, the elasticity information computing section may compute the displacements between successive frames for the identical steering angle of θ (e.g., P_{11} and P_{21} , P_{21} and P_{31} , etc.), and then compute elasticity information S_{11} , S_{21} , etc. based on the computed displacements. Also, the elasticity information computing section may compute the displacements between successive frames for the identical steering angle of 0 (e.g., P_{12} and P_{22} , P_{22} and P_{32} , etc.), and then compute elasticity information (e.g., S_{12} , S_{22} , etc.) based on the computed displacements. Further, the elasticity information computing section may compute the displacements between successive frames for the identical steering angle of $-\theta$ (e.g., P_{13} and P_{23} , P_{23} and P_{33} , etc.), and then compute elasticity information (e.g., S_{13} , S_{23} , etc.) based on the computed displacements. The elastic image forming section may be operable to form elastic images E_{11} , E_{12} , E_{13} , E_{21} , E_{22} , E_{23} . . . by using the elasticity information S_{11} , S_{12} , S_{13} , S_{21} , S_{22} , S_{23} . . . , which are provided from the elasticity information computing section, as shown in FIG. 3. In one embodiment, the ultrasound image forming unit **120** may further include a brightness-mode (B-mode) image forming section (not shown). The B-mode image forming section may be operable to form B-mode images B_{11} , B_{12} , B_{13} , B_{21} , B_{22} , B_{23} . . . by using the ultrasound frame data provided from the ultrasound data acquisition unit **110**, as shown in FIG. 4.

[0024] The ultrasound system **100** may further include a storage unit **130** to store the ultrasound data, the ultrasound images including the elastic images, the B-mode images and the like. In one embodiment, the storage unit **130** may include at least one of a flash memory, a hard disk, floppy disk, a magnetic tape, an optical disc, RAM, EEPROM and the like.

[0025] The ultrasound system **100** may further include a compound image forming unit **140**. The compound image forming unit **140** may be operable to compound, for example, two or more ultrasound images, which are successively formed by different steering angles, to thereby form a compound image. The image compounding may be carried out by averaging pixel values, which are identically positioned at the respective ultrasound images, but the image compounding may not be limited thereto. In one embodiment, the compound image forming unit **140** may form the compound images in an interleaving way.

[0026] One embodiment of the compounding by the interleaving way will be described in detail. The compound image forming unit **140** may compound $(i+1)$ ultrasound images, i.e., m^{th} to $(m+i)^{th}$ ultrasound images, wherein m and i are positive integers. In this case, the ultrasound images may include elastic images, B-mode images and the like. Subsequently, the compound image forming unit **140** may compound ultrasound images determined by increasing m by 1.

For example, assuming that three elastic images are compounded to form a compound image, the compound image forming unit **140** may compound elastic images E_{11} , E_{12} and E_{13} , which may be formed based on frames acquired by different steering angles, i.e., $-\theta$, 0 and θ , respectively, to thereby form a compound image C_{11} . Subsequently, the compound image forming unit **140** may compound elastic images E_{12} , E_{13} and E_{21} , which are acquired by different steering angles of 0 , θ and $-\theta$, to thereby form a compound image C_{12} . The above process of forming the compound images is performed repeatedly so that compound images C_{13} , C_{14} . . . may be formed, as shown in FIG. 3. As described above, the previously acquired ultrasound images (e.g., two ultrasound images) are used to form the compound image through the interleaving way according to one embodiment. Thus, enhanced elastic images may be obtained without lowering a frame rate thereof.

[0027] In one embodiment, the compound image forming unit **140** may further compound the B-mode images, which are formed in the B-mode image forming section, to form compound images, as illustrated in FIG. 4. For example, the compound image forming unit **140** may compound B-mode images B_{11} , B_{12} and B_{13} to thereby form a compound image C_{21} . Subsequently, the compound image forming unit **140** may compound B-mode images B_{12} , B_{13} and B_{21} , which have been acquired by different steering angles of 0 , θ and $-\theta$, to thereby form a compound image C_{22} . The compound image forming unit **140** may be operable to subsequently compound the B-mode images in the same manner as above so that compound images C_{23} , C_{24} . . . may be formed, as shown in FIG. 4. As described above, the previously acquired B-mode images (e.g., two B-mode images) are used to form the compound image. Thus, an enhanced B-mode image may be obtained without lowering a frame rate.

[0028] The ultrasound system **100** may further include a control unit **140**, which may be operable to control the operations of elements of the ultrasound system **100**, such as the ultrasound data acquisition unit **110**, the ultrasound image forming unit **120**, the compound image forming unit **140** and the like. The control unit **150** may be coupled to a user interface (not shown) such as a keyboard, a mouse, a track ball, etc. to receive user instructions. The control unit **150** may be operable to enable the elements of the ultrasound system **100** to operate appropriately in response to user instructions.

[0029] In one embodiment, it is described that the ultrasound image forming unit **120**, the compound image forming unit **140** and the control unit **150** are configured with separate elements in the ultrasound system **100**. However, those may be embodied with a single processor such as a central processing unit, a microprocessor, a graphic processing unit, an application-specific integrated circuit and the like.

[0030] The ultrasound system may further include a display unit **160**, which may be operable to display the ultrasound images, such as the elastic images, the B-mode images, the compound images and the like. In one embodiment, the display unit **160** may include at least one of a cathode ray tube (CRT) display, a liquid crystal display (LCD), an organic light emitting diode (OLED) display and the like.

[0031] In one embodiment, it has been described that the compound images are formed through the procedure of: computing displacements between neighboring frames, which have been acquired at the identical steering angle; computing elasticity information based on the displacements; forming

elastic images based on the computed elasticity information; and compounding elastic images, which have been formed at different steering angles. In another embodiment, however, the elastic images may be formed by the following process: computing displacements between neighboring frames, which have been acquired at the identical steering angle; compounding displacements, which have been computed from frames acquired at different steering angles; computing elasticity information based on the compounded displacements; and forming elastic images based on the elasticity information.

[0032] Although embodiments have been described with reference to a number of illustrative embodiments thereof, it should be understood that numerous other modifications and embodiments can be devised by those skilled in the art that will fall within the spirit and scope of the principles of this disclosure. More particularly, numerous variations and modifications are possible in the component parts and/or arrangements of the subject combination arrangement within the scope of the disclosure, the drawings and the appended claims. In addition to variations and modifications in the component parts and/or arrangements, alternative uses will also be apparent to those skilled in the art.

What is claimed is:

1. An ultrasound system, comprising:

an ultrasound data acquisition unit configured to transmit ultrasound beams to a target object along predetermined plural scan line groups of scan lines in an alternative and sequential manner, receive ultrasound echoes reflected from the target object, and provide a plurality of ultrasound frame data, said predetermined plural scan line groups being respectively associated with predetermined steering angles and each of the plurality of ultrasound frame data being produced in response to the transmission of the ultrasound beam along the respective scan line groups; and

a processor configured to sequentially form ultrasound images based on the ultrasound frame data and compound the ultrasound images in an interleaving way to form compound images.

2. The ultrasound system of claim 1, wherein the compounding in the interleaving way is performed by compounding m^{th} to $(m+i)^{th}$ ultrasound images, wherein m is increased by 1 in forming a new compound image, and wherein m and i are positive integers.

3. The ultrasound system of claim 2, wherein the compounded ultrasound images are formed based on framed data obtained at different steering angles.

4. The ultrasound system of claim 3, wherein the compounded ultrasound images include an ultrasound image formed based on frame data obtained at a steering angle of 0 .

5. The ultrasound system of claim 4, wherein the ultrasound images include elastic images.

6. The ultrasound system of claim 5, wherein the ultrasound data acquisition unit transmits the ultrasound beam by applying a pressure to the target object.

7. The ultrasound system of claim 6, wherein the processor includes:

an elasticity information computing section configured to compute elasticity information between neighboring frame data obtained at an identical steering angle based on the pressure;

an elastic image forming section configured to form the elastic images based on the elasticity information; and

- a compound image forming section configured to compound the predetermined number of elastic images in an interleaving way to form the compound images.
7. The ultrasound system of claim 3, wherein the ultrasound images include brightness-mode (B-mode) images.
8. The ultrasound system of claim 7, wherein the processor includes:
- a B-mode image forming section configured to form B-mode images corresponding to the respective steering angles based on the ultrasound data; and
 - a compound image forming section configured to compound the predetermined number of B-mode images in an interleaving way to form the compound images.
9. A method of providing compound images in an ultrasound system, comprising:
- transmitting ultrasound beams to a target object along predetermined plural scan line groups of scan lines in an alternative and sequential manner, and receiving ultrasound echoes reflected from the target object;
 - providing a plurality of ultrasound frame data, said predetermined plural scan line groups being respectively associated with predetermined steering angles and each of the plurality of ultrasound frame data being produced in response to the transmission of the ultrasound beam along the respective scan line groups;
 - sequentially form ultrasound images based on the ultrasound frame data; and
- compounding the ultrasound images in an interleaving way to form compound images.
10. The method of claim 9, wherein the d) is carried out by compounding m^{th} to $(m+i)^{\text{th}}$ ultrasound images, wherein m is increased by 1 in forming a new compound image, and wherein m and i are positive integers.
11. The method of claim 10, wherein the compounded ultrasound images are formed based on framed data obtained at different steering angles.
12. The method of claim 11, wherein the compounded ultrasound images include an ultrasound image formed based on frame data obtained at a steering angle of 0.
13. The method of claim 12, wherein the ultrasound images include elastic images.
14. The method of claim 13, wherein the step a) is carried out during application of a pressure to the target object.
15. The method of claim 14, wherein the step c) includes: computing elasticity information between neighboring frame data obtained at an identical steering angle based on the pressure; and forming the elastic images based on the elasticity information.
16. The method of claim 12, wherein the ultrasound images include brightness-mode (B-mode) images.

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专利名称(译)	超声系统中的超声图像增强		
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摘要(译)

公开了用于在不降低超声系统中的帧速率的情况下提供增强的超声图像的实施例。在一个实施例中，超声系统包括：超声数据采集单元，被配置为以可替换和顺序的方式沿预定的多个扫描线组扫描线将超声波束发射到目标对象，接收从目标对象反射的超声回波，并提供多个超声波帧数据，所述预定的多个扫描线组分别与预定的转向角相关联，并且所述多个超声波帧数据中的每一个响应于沿着各个扫描线组的超声波束的发送而产生；处理器，被配置为基于超声帧数据顺序地形成超声图像，并以交错方式合成超声图像以形成复合图像。

