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Semi-Crystalline Rubber as a Light-Responsive, Programmable, Resilient Robotic Material

Qi Yang, Hamed Shahsavan, Zixuan Deng, Hongshuang Guo, Hang Zhang, Heng Liu,* Chunyu Zhang, Arri Priimagi, Xuequan Zhang, and Hao Zeng*

Polymers with large and reversible light-induced deformation offer a plethora of opportunities for the wireless control of small-scale soft robots. However, their widespread adoption in real-world applications is hindered, mainly due to their intrinsic softening upon illumination. Such limitation has detrimental effects on the achievable stress, durability, and precise positional control of the soft actuators after multiple cycles of use. Here, a synthetic rubber from a polybutadiene-polyethylene copolymer is reported as a durable material for light-controlled soft robots. The rubber can be programmed to exhibit various deformation modes controlled by visible-to-infrared light through a photothermal effect. Semi-crystallinity of polyethylene within the rubbery network provides this material with a remarkable modulus at high temperatures (2.5 MPa at 100–140 °C), deformation repeatability (>90%) and shape-recovery (>98%) after 100 actuation cycles subject to loads ranging from 10 to 10 000 times of its body weight (1.4 kPa–1.4 MPa).

Soft robotic applications are demonstrated, such as thermally-driven jumping and photo-driven cargo transport carrying up to 1200 times its own weight. The results expand the portfolio of materials in designing remotely-controlled, robust, and resilient soft robots working at small scales.

1. Introduction

The emergence of small-scale soft robots has brought about a wealth of possibilities for safe interaction between robots and humans. Owing to their softness and size, such robots can perform a range of delicate tasks in tiny and constrained environments. In long term, they are expected to revolutionize healthcare by offering targeted and minimally invasive procedures. Despite great progress in developing various powering, monitoring, and manipulation techniques, the synthesis of novel robotic materials is one of the most pressing issues in small-scale soft robotics. Such materials are typically made of stimuli-responsive polymers with embedded sensing and actuation capabilities. Their actuation performance can be precisely programmed, and they can be miniaturized via different microfabrication techniques. Accordingly, such polymers are important candidates for realizing wireless controlled soft actuators with much smaller sizes than their pneumatic and dielectric counterparts.

The actuation mechanism in the majority of stimuli-responsive polymers is rooted in reversible phase transitions, such as glass transition in shape memory polymers (SMPs), nematic-to-isotropic transition in liquid crystal elastomers (LCEs), and coil-to-globule transition in hydrogels. Such phase transitions are typically triggered by heat and manifest themselves in reversible strain or shape changes. Nowadays, LCEs are commonly used responsive materials in soft small-scale robotics, thanks to their large, reversible, and programmable deformation in response to various stimuli such as heat, light, and electric fields. Such properties are rooted in the anisotropic ordering of their molecules locked in an elastic network. Disruptions in the molecular alignment result in various modes of deformation such as expansion/contraction, bending, and twisting. These deformation profiles have been deployed for a variety of soft robotic locomotion modes, such as walking, swimming, and jumping, in addition to functions such as gripping and cargo transport.

Despite such achievements, stimuli-responsive polymers still face challenges in their widespread adoption of real-world soft robotic applications. Softening and dramatic decrease in the modulus (E) of such polymers upon heating...
or illumination[30-32] is one of the major drawbacks that diminishes their performance. For instance, the output work of LCEs, $W_{\text{out}}$ (proportional to $E$) could considerably decrease when they soften at elevated temperatures.[33] Soft actuators essentially function through active strains, during which they are constantly subject to external forces such as friction, adhesion, or load-bearing during motion. Thermal softening not only curtails actuator' ability to withstand such external forces, but also adversely affects their durability, actuation repeatability, and shape-recovery over multiple cycles of use, or active strain. As such, a solution to remedy all these issues is highly desired.

Herein, we report a synthetic rubber from poly(ethylene-co-butadiene) (PEB), which has similar characteristics to LCEs (anisotropy, programmed and reversible deformation, and large shape-change) and exhibits remarkable durability and resilience. This material consists of rubbery domains of polybutadiene and semi-crystalline domains of polyethylene, cross-linked by a photothermal croconaine dye. The pre-strain in the rubbery domains along with the melting/crystallization of the semi-crystalline domains enable reversible deformations with various programmable modes, in response to photothermal heating. The material possesses high modulus and strains even at elevated temperatures (2.5 MPa and 28% at 140 °C), excellent actuation repeatability (>90%), and shape-recovery (>98%) over 100 actuation cycles subject to loads ranging over four orders of magnitude (1.4 kPa–1.4 MPa). As a proof-of-concept, we deployed these rubbers in soft robotic applications such as locomotion by crawling or jumping and cargo transport by carrying loads up to 1200 times their own weight. Our results offer a new robust material for small-scale soft robots that can be manipulated wirelessly by stimuli such as light.

2. Results

2.1. Synthesis of the Responsive Rubber

Synthetic rubbers are artificial elastomers, produced by polymerization of petroleum-based monomers.[34] Similar to natural rubbers, they possess stable physical and chemical properties and high mechanical resilience.[35] Synthetic rubbers are also superior to their natural counterparts in resistance to wear and ozone cracking. They are also amenable to the engineering of their functional constituents,[36] which facilitates their application in various user products such as roof covers, tires, and shoes.[37] Plastics are polymeric materials with different mechanical properties below and above their glass transition temperature.[38] Polyethylene (PE) is a common semi-crystalline plastic with relatively low material hardness and resilience most often used in our daily life. The mechanical stability of PE can be tuned by the molecular weight or branching degree, which affects its melting point (typically in the range of 100 to 130 °C).[39] Many cross-linked networks of semi-crystalline polymers benefit from stable physicochemical properties,[40] and synthetic rubbers from thermally triggered deformation and resilience.[41]

Cross-linking of copolymers made from rubbery segments (polybutadiene, PB, in our case), and semi-crystalline segments (PE), yields networks capable of two-way shape memory and reversible (photo-)thermoresponsive deformations.[42,43] A sketch of such a cross-linked network is illustrated in Figure 1a, where crystalline domains formed by the PE segments gradually melt upon heating and drive the system toward disorder. Due to the entropic elasticity, the cross-linked chains in the rubber contract along the pre-stretched direction upon heating and expand in the perpendicular direction (Figure 1b). In this system, chemical cross-linking increases the toughness and allows for reversible shape-change to be obtained. Upon cooling, the PE segments re-crystallize, the rubbery chains return to the original state fixed by the cross-links and the sample retains the original dimensions.

Figure 1c presents the scheme for the synthesis of photo-responsive poly(ethylene-co-butadiene) rubbers (PEB). In the first step, we used the hydrogenation reaction of cis-1,4-polybutadiene (CPB) chains to create cis-1,4-polyethylene-polybutadiene (PEB) with randomly distributed chain blocks of polyethylene. In the next step, we used a photothermal croconaine dye,[44] 2,5-Bis[(6-thiolhexyl-4-carboxylate-piperidylamino)-thiophenyl]-croconium (TTC), to chemically cross-link the network via UV-assisted thiol-ene reaction, to obtain PEB-TTC. The cross-linking process was carried out under three different pre-straining conditions (0%, 50%, and 100%). The details of the synthesis protocol and the nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectra are shown in Figures S1 and S2 in Supporting Information. The polyethylene segments content of PEB is about 65% calculated from the 1H NMR (Figure S2, Supporting Information). We confirmed the full conversion of the thiol-ene reaction via Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy, by monitoring the depletion of the characteristic S-H stretching vibration at 2563 cm$^{-1}$ (Figure 1d). The obtained copolymer network (60 min curing) has a gel fraction of 40%, estimated by weighing the material before and after immersion in tetrahydrofuran (THF) for 24 h (Figure S3, Supporting Information).

We used small-angle X-ray scattering (SAXS), shown in Figure 1e and Figure S4 (Supporting Information), to monitor the crystallinity of the rubbery network. 2D SAXS patterns verify structural anisotropy induced by the stretching during cross-linking, from an initially isotropic network of randomly sized and distributed semi-crystalline domains. Such semi-crystalline domains result from the segregation of crystallites from amorphous PE segments. Note that external stress applied during the thiol-ene reaction determines both the alignment of the rubbery chains and the orientation of the PE crystallites. Stress-induced nanoscopic anisotropy consequently dictates the mode of macroscopic deformation of the rubber upon stimulation.

The crystalline domains of the PE also serve as physical connections in the rubbery networks (Figure 1a) that influence the thermomechanical properties of the rubber.[45] For instance, the non-uniform size of the PE segments results in a broad window of melting between 20 and 90 °C, as shown in Figure 1f by differential scanning calorimetry (DSC). Such a wide phase transition range enables tuning of thermal strain by adjusting the heat to be applied. Figure 1g shows the variation of the thermal strain against time at different temperatures for the semi-crystalline rubber sample, reaching a maximum of 28% at 90 °C followed by a plateau. Cyclic heat induced strain evolution, see Figure S5 (Supporting Information).
2.2. Programmable Light-Driven Shape Changes

Prior to this work, a two-way shape-memory effect has been reported for PEB networks that have been physically cross-linked with hydrogen bonds. Although such networks could be deformed, they suffered from creep and possessed only limited reversibility. Such issues are resolved in this work by the use of TTC for the covalent cross-linking of the PEB chains. TTC enables the fixation of permanently programmed geometries, yielding reversible thermoresponsive shape-morphing. Moreover, the high absorption of TTC results in a significant temperature elevation, up to \( > 180 \degree C \), upon exposure to visible (532 nm, 633 nm) or NIR (808 nm) light (Figure S6, Supporting Information).

The shape-change programming can be achieved by UV-initiated thiol-ene cross-linking during pre-straining the uncross-linked PEB to a desirable geometry. Both the percentage and geometry of the pre-strain, together with the cross-linking time, can be used to fine-tune the initial shape and the deformation profile. Figure 2a (top) shows uniaxially aligned PEB rubber, obtained by stretching and simultaneous UV exposure from both sides. Illuminating from both sides ensures uniform cross-linking and identical mechanical properties throughout the film thickness. The uniaxially aligned PEB-TTC actuator contracts upon photothermal heating and recovers its original shape after ceasing the irradiation (Figure 2a bottom).

In addition to the pre-straining profile, the duration of the UV-induced cross-linking can be utilized to control the initial shape and the extent of photothermal deformation. Figure 2b (top) shows a PEB rubber being cross-linked when exposed to UV from only one side while stretched. A light intensity gradient through the sample thickness during the cross-linking is created owing to the material absorption and scattering. Such gradient results in a higher cross-linking density (lower actuation strain) on the side closer to UV, which causes a bending toward the opposite direction. The schematic drawing of cross-linking densities upon UV irradiation is shown in the inset of Figure 2b. Figure 2b (bottom) shows the photothermal bending of the sample programmed via this technique. The effect of cross-linking time on the initial geometry and the photothermal bending under identical stimulation conditions is shown in Figure S7a (Supporting Information).

Also, the percentage of pre-strain during the cross-linking affects the achievable strain as it determines the extent of elongation of the rubbery chains during the cross-linking. Figure S7b (Supporting Information) shows the increase in bending angle for samples with higher pre-straining during cross-linking. We examined the extent of chain elongation by...
uniaxially stretching the rubbers during in situ wide-angle X-ray scattering (WAXS) analysis (Figure S8, Supporting Information). The orientational order parameter ($S$) perpendicular to the stretching decreases from 0 to $-0.13$ for samples pre-stretched from 0 to 200%, calculated by the Hermans formula (0 for randomly orientated polymer chains and $-0.5$ for a perfect alignment). These results indicate that the higher the pre-strain of uncured samples, the higher the degree of alignment order within the polymer chains, which in turn enhances the photothermal actuation amplitude.

More complex geometries and shape-change profiles can be obtained using different pre-straining geometries during the cross-linking. Figure 2c (top) shows the shape-programming of the PEB rubber into a coil. The resulting construct exhibits a reversible change in the coil pitch under light irradiation (Figure 2c, bottom). Using the same strategy, we obtained various geometries and deformation profiles, some of that are shown in Figure 2d.

2.3. Load-Bearing and Resilience

Photothermal temperature increase beyond 100 °C causes the PE crystallites to melt, resulting in macroscopic contraction forces capable of lifting heavy objects. Figure 3a shows a strip of PEB-TTC rubber (uniaxially aligned, pre-elongated 100%, undergoing UV illumination from both sides) capable of reversibly lifting a load 3500 times its body weight (BW) (486 kPa) with an active strain of 27%. The load-bearing capability of the PEB-TTC rubber was tested at different light intensities, and the rubber maintained an active strain of >18% subject to loads of 10 000 times BW (1.4 MPa) with a work capacity of 220 J kg$^{-1}$ (Figure 3b; Movie S1, Supporting Information). Regardless of the loading condition, the active strain for the tested actuators plateaued when the light intensity reached 700 mW cm$^{-2}$.

The large actuation strength is reflected by the material's modulus at $>90$ °C. As shown in Figure 3c, Young's modulus of the rubber decreases upon heating because of the melting of the crystalline PE segments (see Figure S9 in Supporting Information for more details on the mechanical testing). However, the modulus maintained a high value of $>2.5$ MPa at temperatures up to 140 °C. Muti-cycled stress versus strain diagram reveals good recovery and low hysteresis of the material upon passively induced deformation (inset of Figure 3c). Detailed mechanical measurements, i.e., testing the elastic limit and showing up to 50 stress–strain cycles at elevated temperatures, are shown in Figure S10 (Supporting Information). The large Young’s modulus and resilience indicate good durability over cycles of load-bearing actuation.

Generally, bearing loads for multiple cycles may impose irreversible alterations to the polymer network, which adversely affects the active strain that highly depends on the specific
amount of load. Figures S11 and S12 (Supporting Information) show the formulation and reversibility of strain for an exemplary LCE actuator. The soft LCE exhibits 4% shrinkage upon loading of 1000 × BW (1.4 MPa). The irreversibility of material deformation depends on the amount of external loading, thus posing challenges for precise control of position/station over multiple actuation cycles. Herein, to quantify the reversibility of the actuators’ strain, we define two metrics: shape-recovery ($\eta_r$) and deformation reversibility ($\eta_d$) (see Figure 3a).

Shape-recovery is defined as $\eta_r = L_n / L_0$, which shows the ratio between the length of the actuator at room temperature, or light off state ($L_0$), after $n$ cycles of photothermal actuation and the length of the original actuator ($L_n$). The length measurements in both cases are carried out under a constant load. Deformation reversibility is defined as $\eta_d = (L_n' - L_0') / (L_1' - L_0')$, which shows the ratio between the deformation amplitude in the $n^{th}$ cycle to that of the first cycle of actuation, under identical loading conditions. $L_n'$ is the length of the photothermally deformed actuator (in the $n^{th}$ cycle), or light on state, while $L_0'$ represents the length of the same actuator at room temperature or light off state.

Figure 3d,e shows the durability and reversibility of the PEB-TTC actuator under loads ranging from $10^{\times}$ to $10 000^{\times}$ BW (1.4 kPa–1.4 MPa), for over 100 actuation cycles under identical conditions (633 nm, 710 mW cm$^{-2}$, 30 s light ON and 30 s light OFF). As can be seen in Figure 3d, the actuator shows negligible drift in its active strain when loaded by $10 000^{\times}$ BW (1.4 MPa). The shape-recovery ($\eta_r$) after 100 actuation cycles remains as high as 99.7% upon the application of $100^{\times}$ BW (14 kPa) and shows up to 2% drift under $10 000^{\times}$ BW load (1.4 MPa). The deformation reversibility ($\eta_d$) shows a decrease after 20 cycles but maintains a plateau at $\approx 90\%$ for all applied loads. While it appears that there is no direct correlation between $\eta_d$ and the applied load, $\eta_r$ seems to increase with the loading. Such increase may be attributed to the higher alignment order and chain orientation achieved under larger loads, which results in better reversibility.\(^{[28]}\)

### 2.4. Robotic Applications

The reversible deformation and resilience of the light active rubber can be employed for a variety of light-fueled robotic functionalities, such as spatially controlled shape-morphing,\(^{[49,50]}\) locomotion,\(^{[51,52]}\) and heavy cargo transport.\(^{[24]}\) For the photo-induced shape-morphing, precise localization of stimulating light can be used for the spatial control of deformation in an active rubbery construct, as shown by the selective movement of humanoid parts in Figure 4a. Figure 4b shows a long strip of rubber that undergoes a large coiling deformation upon illumination. For locomotive function, a light-driven walker is shown in Figure 4c and Movie S2 (Supporting Information). By switching the light on and off, the actuator cyclically deforms and moves in the desired direction, which is dictated by the
location, speed, and mode of illumination (Figure 4c,d). The key to achieving directional locomotion is the friction bias produced by asymmetric leg structures that undergo cyclic movements. When the strip bends to reduce the leg-distance (light ON), it experiences similar frictions from both sides; when the strip unbends to expand (light OFF), the friction on the back leg is significantly larger than the former, as schematically shown in the insets of Figure 4d. Cyclic deformation on
the substrate yields a net motion toward the forward direction. The materials shown in Figure 4c are experiencing minimal external forces (same order of magnitude as BW or less) such as friction. Unlike these examples, robotic materials when encountering the interfaces should be able to perform specific functions under dynamic friction and to bear opposing friction/drag forces across a large range of amplitudes. The conventional light-responsive soft materials typically fail under such conditions.

We demonstrate the outstanding performance of the active rubbers developed in this work to overcome external forces such as friction in the following two examples. Figure 4e and Figure S13 (Supporting Information) show the jumping locomotion of a rubber strip placed on top of a droplet of water poised on a hot plate. Upon heating, the bent rubber strip, which is fixed by a transient capillary layer, flattens and stores elastic energy. Evaporation of the water layer eventually leads to a burst release of the stored elastic energy, which is sufficient to eject the rubber. Figure 4f and Movie S3 (Supporting Information) visualize the jumping through a thermal camera and Figure 4e and Movie S4 (Supporting Information) show the trajectory of the jumping over time. The maximum jumping height is observed at 80 °C hot stage, as shown in Figure 4g. This may be ascribed to the competition between the elastic energy-storing process upon heating and reduction in capillary force through water evaporation. Low hot plate temperatures result in a small elastic strain and energy for triggering jumping, while high temperature causes fast evaporation of water, yielding a sudden drop of the capillary adhesion before a large amount of elastic energy is stored. The material deformation is fully reversible, allowing jumping performance over a hundred cycles without a decrease in efficiency, as shown in the inset of Figure 4g. The size-dependent jumping behavior is also shown in Figure S14 (Supporting Information).

The large work capacity of the PEB-TTC rubber at elevated temperatures along with its reversibility in deformation can be used for the transport of heavy cargo. Figure 4h and Movie S5 (Supporting Information) show the locomotion of a PEB-TTC strip carrying cargos weighing 165×BW on a flat substrate. This may be deemed more suitable for comparing material metrics. Upon light excitation, the energy is fully absorbed close to the sample surface due to the high absorbance. The heat is then transferred to the other side of the sample through thermal conduction. Due to the small thickness (typically 0.1–0.2 mm), the temperature difference between two surfaces is rather small (<3 at 120 °C), as indicated by the Finite Element simulation in Figure S18 (Supporting Information). This case, light excitation can be considered as a uniform heating source across the sample thickness, in contrast to the light absorption gradient in photoswitch-containing polymers. The resulting deformations (bending, contraction or coiling) are thus predominantly determined by the polymer chain orientation as programmed during fabrication (Figure 2), and not by the temperature gradient.

3. Discussion

Semi-crystalline phase transition as a driving mechanism for two-way shape-memory deformation has been reported in the literature. In this study, we focus on actuation reversibility, which is key to the precise positional control of the robotic motion over multiple cycles of operation. We have quantified the actuation reversibility of our rubber actuators by two distinct metrics of deformation reversibility and shape-recovery rate, by systematically exposing them to identical light under different loads across four orders of magnitude (10x to 10000x of the actuator weight, or 1.4 kPa to 1.4 MPa). In these measurements, the rubber actuators exhibit remarkable reversibility metrics: >90% deformation repeatability and >98% shape-recovery rate.

One important issue to be noticed is that, the actuator itself follows the physical scaling law, i.e., heat capacity that dictates the heating-and-cooling rate, scales with L^3 (L is the characteristic length of the sample), active force scales with L^3, resonance frequency scales with L^-1. Govern by this scaling effect, any motions generally considered to be slow in macroscopic samples, i.e., ~1 Hz in mm-sized LCE, can be accelerated to 1000 Hz for a microscopic structure by using the same chemical composition. The BW multiple is also length scale dependent, thus some scalable quantity such as active stress is deemed more suitable for comparing material metrics.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, we report a programmable, resilient, light/heat-responsive soft robotic material based on synthetic polyethylene-co-polybutadiene rubber. The copolymer can be manually...
programmed to show various deformations, while the specific performance can be fine-tuned by changes in UV exposure time and/or applied pre-strain during the cross-linking process. The polybutadiene chains enable high material modulus of 2.5 MPa upon actuation at elevated temperatures up to 140 °C, while the synergy between re-crystallization of polyethylene segments and the rubbery network guarantees excellent reversibility for light-induced deformation (>90%) and shape-recovery (>98%), measured over 100 actuation cycles upon loads from 10x to 10000x of the actuator weight (1.4 kPa – 1.4 MPa). Two resilient locomotors are demonstrated that present sufficient energy to function and overcome opposing forces from their environment. First, a bending rubber strip attached to a hot plate via capillary force can store elastic energy and perform a high jump by overcoming the adhesion upon water evaporation. Second, a rubber-based transporter is used to show the load-carrying capability using scanning laser stimulation. The transporter is capable of carrying loads up to 1200x its bodyweight and translocating directionally on a substrate, exhibiting the ability to execute tasks under extremely hindered conditions. This study provides a novel material for stimuli-responsive soft robotics. A detailed analysis of the actuation reversibility and stimuli-driven control of the developed soft actuator may further promote the cross-talk between micro-roboticists and material scientists.

5. Experimental Section

Materials in Brief: Cis-1,4-Polybutadiene (CPB, cis-1,4 content: 96.8%, Mn: 239 kg mol⁻¹, Mw/Mn: 2.6) was purchased from Dushanzi Petrochemical Company, PetroChina. Cis-1,4 polyethylene-polybutadiene semicrystalline copolymer (PEB) was prepared through the hydrogenation reaction of CPB using the reagents of p-toluenesulfonyl hydrazide (TSH) and tri-n-propylamine (TPA). The synthesis process was according to the reported method.[3] The synthesis of the photothermal dyes, 2,5-Bis[(6-thiolhexyl-4-carboxylate-piperidylamino) thiophenyl]-propylamine (TPA). The synthesis process was

**Supporting Information**

Supporting Information is available from the Wiley Online Library or from the author.

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**Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Data Availability Statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

**Keywords**

copolymers, light driven, locomotion, photo-actuations, soft robots, synthetic rubber

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