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*Published in:*
Applied Physics Letters

*DOI:*
10.1063/1.3647557

Published: 01/01/2011

*Document Version*
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Please cite the original version:*
https://doi.org/10.1063/1.3647557
Long hold times in a two-junction electron trap


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(Received 8 August 2011; accepted 16 September 2011; published online 5 October 2011)

The hold time $\tau$ of a single-electron trap is shown to increase significantly due to suppression of photon assisted tunneling events. Using two rf-tight radiation shields instead of a single one, we demonstrate increase of $\tau$ by a factor exceeding $10^3$, up to about 10 h, for a trap with only two superconductor (S)—normal-metal (N) tunnel junctions and an on-chip resistor $R \sim 100$ k$\Omega$ (R-SNS structure). In the normal state, the improved shielding made it possible to observe $\tau \sim 100$ s, which is in reasonable agreement with the quantum-leakage-limited level expected for the two-electron cotunneling process. © 2011 American Institute of Physics. [doi:10.1063/1.3647557]

Creating a quantum current standard based on frequency-driven single-electron transport has been one of the major goals of metrology for about 25 years. In the 1990’s, the efforts were focused mainly on metallic tunnel junction devices. Relative uncertainty of about $10^{-5}$ was reached by the seven-junction electron pump for small currents at the level of a few pA. Recent advances have raised the hope to increase the current by factor 10–100 towards a more practical level, renewing the interest to the accuracy issues.

Photon (aka environmentally) assisted tunneling (PAT) has been found to limit the transport accuracy at the level far above theoretical predictions. Recently, it was shown that PAT rate $\Gamma$ in the superconductor (S) – normal metal (N) hybrid turnstile can be reduced down to time-resolved single events by using on-chip noise filtering elements: a high-ohmic resistor (R-SNS turnstile) or a capacitively coupled ground plane. The electron trapping properties of the pumps are important for electron-counting capacitance standards and also a way to study the leakage mechanisms. In the preceding experiment with the R-SNS turnstile-based electron trapping circuit, Ref. 11, a reasonably low value of $\Gamma = \tau^{-1} \sim (20 \text{ s})^{-1}$ was achieved in a strong Coulomb blockade. Here, $\tau$ is the average hold time of an electron in the trap.

In this letter, we report on the very same R-SNS trap samples tested in a cryogenic setup with a different type of noise filtering: double rf shielding of the sample stage. We demonstrate more than 1000-fold improvement of the hold times previously reported for arrays with 7 or more tunnel junctions or with 4 junctions and a high-ohmic resistor connected in series. With the superconductivity suppressed by a magnetic field, tunneling rates down to the level expected for two-electron cotunneling were achieved.

Two nominally similar samples, $S_A$ and $S_B$, were measured in two cryostats, $C_A$ and $C_B$, respectively. Both sample stages were equipped with two nested rf radiation shields, see Fig. 1(a). In setup $C_A$, the signal lines were filtered by the combination of Thermocoax™ and powder filters and in $C_B$ only by Thermocoax. One of the connectors in $C_B$ was not perfectly rf tight, and otherwise stated, the reported results are from $S_A/C_A$. During the preparation of this report, we have applied similar nested rf shielding in studies of sub-gap behaviour of SNS transistors and we also became aware of the work of Barends et al. in which similar techniques were used to lower loss and decoherence in superconducting quantum circuits.

The equivalent circuit of the trapping device is shown in Fig. 1(a). The left junction of an Al–AuPd–Al SNS turnstile is connected to an on-chip Cr resistor with $R \sim 100$ k$\Omega$, and the right junction is terminated by a trapping island whose charge state $n_q$ is monitored by a capacitively coupled SNS single-electron transistor (SET) electrometer operating in the voltage-bias regime. For the details of sample fabrication, see Ref. 11. At low temperatures, $T < 100$ mK, tunneling in the zero-biased trap is blocked by the energy barrier formed by the quasiparticle excitation energy $\Delta_A = 260 \mu eV = k_B \times 3.0 \text{ K}$ and charging energies $E_{C_1} \approx k_B \times 7.6 \text{ K} > E_{C_2} \approx k_B \times 3.3 \text{ K}$ of an electron located in the middle and in the trapping island, respectively. The corresponding stability diagram is shown in Fig. 1(b) with the hold times $\tau$ calculated using the orthodox theory of single-electron tunneling for four charge states of the trap in thermal equilibrium.

Electrons can be loaded or unloaded from the trap by ramping the bias voltage $V_b$ and, thus, lowering the energy barrier for one of the two tunneling directions. Due to the energy barrier, the bias voltage dependence of the trapped charge $n_q$ monitored by electrometer current $I_{el}$ appears hysteretic, see Fig. 1(c). The maximum of the barrier height and, thus, the width of the hysteresis loop can be controlled by the gate voltage $V_g$ which is coupled to the middle island by the gate capacitance $C_g$. Figure 1(e) shows several ramps of $V_b$ encircling the widest loop which corresponds to an integer value of $n_q \equiv C_g V_b/e$, see Fig. 1(b). Due to finite $T$ and external excitations particularly addressed in this work, the observed switchings between charge states include a random component, leading to an uncertainty of the loop width and to the two-level fluctuator behavior depicted in Fig. 1(d).
To support the conclusions of the long hold times shown below, we studied $\tau$ as a function of the energy barrier (electrostatic energy change) of tunneling, $\Delta E$, which can be controlled by voltages $V_b$ and $V_g$. Two-state switching traces were analyzed statistically for different values of $\Delta E$. Figure 2(a) shows typical dependences of $\tau$ on the deviation of bias voltage from the middle of the hysteresis loop ($\Delta V_b$) for three different values of the electrometer current $I_{el}$. When $\Delta V_b = 0$, $\Delta E$ is the same for the two values of $n_2$. A shift in $\Delta V_b$ shifts proportionally both values of $\Delta E$ but in opposite directions. The observed linear dependency of $\log(\tau)$ on $\Delta E$ is typical for thermal activation (TA, e.g., Ref. 15): $\tau \propto \exp(-\Delta E/(k_B T))$, where the effective temperature $T'$ characterizes the spectrum of fluctuations driving the state switchings.

To study the crossover from TA to PAT, we present a plot in Fig. 2(b) summarizing the hold time data $\tau$ versus $\Delta E$ for different electrometer currents $I_g$. For this approximative plot, we used the following conventions: (i) The origin of the $\Delta E$ axis was chosen arbitrarily as the point where $\tau \approx 0.1$ s. (ii) The proportionality between $\Delta E$ and $\Delta V_b$ is based on the fitted stability diagram. (iii) For the curves with the smallest $I_{el}$ (yielding the longest hold times), we combined the piecewise-continuous data sets measured at different $V_g$ and arranged them along the $\Delta E$ axis in Fig. 2(b) to ensure their smooth alignment. This was done because collecting the statistics for a short-living state would take impractically long if following a large hysteresis loop: switching back from the long-living counter state would take hours.

Although Fig. 2(b) is approximative, it allows us to make several conclusions. For small $I_g < 100$ pA, a well distinguished slope of $\log(\tau)$ vs. $\Delta E$ corresponding to $T' \approx 120$ mK is observed when $\tau \approx 10$ s. The typical electron temperature in cryostat $C_A$ is lower, about 50 mK, so even in this case, there are still contributing mechanisms beyond the pure TA process. For higher barriers and longer hold times, the slope is much lower, corresponding to $T' \approx 1$ K. We presume that the shallow slopes are due to PAT at frequency $f \sim \Delta E/\hbar$, activated either by residual photons leaking inside the shields or by the back-action of the electrometer. It generates random telegraph noise (RTN) whose power spectrum has a relatively slow decay $S(\omega) \propto 1/\omega^2$ in the relevant frequency scale $f \gg I_g/\hbar$ (for more details, see Ref. 13). The electrometer back-action is obviously dominant at the larger values of $I_{el}$, but it cannot be ruled out even in the case of low $I_{el}$ and high $\Delta E$.

Our main result, very long hold time, was achieved with the widest hysteresis loop, i.e., the highest energy barrier $\Delta E \sim (\Delta A_1 + E_C) \sim k_B T \times 10$ K and $I_{el} < 100$ pA. In this case, the hold time was too long to obtain statistically valid data, but the example of Fig. 3(a) shows a 36-h trace during which the state changed only once. This should be compared with the maximum $\tau \approx 20$ s for the same sample reported in Ref. 11. At higher $I_{el}$, see Fig. 3(b), the electrometer back-action imposes a significant limitation for the maximum $\tau$. We also did some measurements with sample $S_B$ in cryostat $C_B$. The maximum hold times were of the order of 1 h. The difference was most likely due to a lower quality of the radiation shielding.

The trapping times for sample $S_B$ were studied also in the normal state in a magnetic field in cryostat $C_B$. A data trace near the maximum of the hysteresis is shown in Fig. 3(c). Contrary to the NS hybrid state, where two-electron cotunneling is suppressed by the superconducting energy...
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been measured for the same device over a wide dynamic
cotunneling was achieved. The hold times of the trap have
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We acknowledge H. Koivula for advice in rf issues, O.
Hahtela and E. Mykkänen for contributions in building the measurement system, and T. Aref for assistance in measurements. The work was partially supported by Technology Industries of Finland Centennial Foundation and by the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, Väisälä Foundation. The research conducted within the EURAMET joint research project REUNIAM and EU project SCOPE has received funding from the European Community’s Seventh Framework Programme under Grant Agreements Nos. 217257 and 218783.

FIG. 3. (Color online) (a) Electrometer data trace at the maximum hysteresis shown in Fig. 1(c) and at low I_d. The trap state changed only once at t \approx 14 h. Slow drifts in I_d are caused by background charge fluctuations of the electrometer. (b) Switching trace at the maximum hysteresis with higher I_d > 500 pA. (c) Normal state switching trace for sample S_R.

Note that the cotunneling rates are very sensitive to the pa-
tative environment. For a similar structure without the resis-
tor, the expected value for \tau is of the order of 0.1 ms. We
note that the cotunneling rates are very sensitive to the pa-
ters of the trap, which we have estimated rather indi-
rectly. Hence, an exact quantitative comparison between
theory and experiments would require that the parameters
were determined by measuring the IV curve of the trap, for
instance, with the help of a cryogenic switch. Nevertheless,
our observations indicate that a high degree of shielding of
the sample space makes it possible to reach and study a
quantum-leakage-limited behaviour of SET circuits in the
normal state.

To conclude, a 1000-fold extension of the hold times
was achieved for a two-junction R-SNS electron trap by
enclosing it into a specially designed low-noise environment.
In the normal state, a switching rate near the quantum leakage
floor set by the resistively suppressed two-electron
cotunneling was achieved. The hold times of the trap have
been measured for the same device over a wide dynamic
range from 0.1 s to about 10^5 s, showing high sensitivity to
environmental fluctuations, including the back-action from
the SET electrometer. Device application for sensitive on-
chip noise spectrometry seems feasible.