A simple yet highly reproducible method to fabricate metallic electrodes with nanometer separation is presented. The fabrication is achieved by passing a large electrical current through a gold nanowire defined by electron-beam lithography and shadow evaporation. The current flow causes the electromigration of gold atoms and the eventual breakage of the nanowire. The breaking process yields two stable metallic electrodes separated by ~1 nm with high efficiency. These electrodes are ideally suited for electron transport studies of chemically synthesized nanostructures, and their utility is demonstrated here by fabricating single electron transistors based on colloidal cadmium selenide nanocrystals.

Electrical characterization of individual molecules and nanocrystals has received considerable attention recently in the scientific and engineering communities. Electron transport through these chemical nanostructures is strongly affected by electron-electron repulsion and energy-level quantization, and transport experiments can provide detailed insight into the electron dynamics. The ability to make electrical devices based on individual molecules and nanocrystals is technologically relevant as well because it allows the fabrication of new types of devices whose function is defined by the chemical identity of the components.

Despite considerable progress during the last decade, however, the field of nanometer-scale electron transport is still in its infancy. One of the major obstacles impeding further progress is the lack of reliable methods to interface a chemically synthesized nanostructure to macroscopic electronic circuits. In its simplest realization, an electrical measurement requires the fabrication of metallic electrodes whose separation is comparable to the size of the nanostructure itself. The resolution limit of current lithographic techniques remains, however, on the order of 10 nm, and consequently the reproducible generation of the required electrodes is difficult by conventional fabrication techniques.

Recently many different approaches have been put forward to address this problem. They can be broadly divided into two categories, one that employs scanning tunneling microscopy and the other that aims at defining a nanometer-sized tunnel gap through novel fabrication methods. Both types of approaches have yielded fruitful scientific results. Unfortunately, most experimental techniques reported so far suffer from precipitously low yields in fabricating successful structures or from the lack of mechanical and electrical flexibility required for the systematic investigation of the transport characteristics.

In this letter, a simple yet highly reproducible method to generate two metallic electrodes with a nanometer-sized gap is presented. The fabrication is based on the breakage of metallic nanowires using electromigration of metal atoms. Electromigration, which refers to the atomic motion in a conductor subject to large current density, has long been known to be the major failure mode in microelectronic circuitry. Here, this failure mode is exploited advantageous to break gold nanowires in a controllable and self-limiting fashion. The breaking process consistently produces two metallic electrodes whose typical separation is about 1 nm. These electrodes can be readily adapted for electron transport studies of molecules and nanocrystals, as demonstrated here by the transport measurements of individual cadmium selenide (CdSe) nanocrystals.

The electrode fabrication process starts with the generation of gold nanowires using conventional electron-beam lithography and shadow evaporation. This step has been described in detail previously, and only the modifications pertinent to the nanowire fabrication are presented here. Electron-beam lithography on a PMMA/P(MMA-MAA) bilayer resist was employed to create a 200-nm wide resist bridge suspended 400 nm above a SiO₂ substrate. Metallic nanowires were generated by evaporating 35-Å thick chromium and 100-Å thick gold at ±15° angles with respect to substrate normal. These fabrication parameters are chosen such that two electrodes...
The quantitative determination of the force threshold required to induce electromigration of gold atoms. Within this framework, the observation of a threshold break occurs near the region where two angle-evaporated electrodes overlap, presumably because of the high resistance associated with the region. The formation of a nanometer-sized gap is achieved by breaking fabricated nanowires through a controlled passage of current. For the characterization of the breaking process, the voltage drop across a nanowire was monitored in a four-probe configuration. Figure 2(a) shows a representative conductance trace during the breaking process. The conductance of a typical nanowire is on the order of 10 mS before the passage of current, and it remains constant at a small current level. As the current increases and the voltage drop reaches 300–500 mV, however, the conductance starts to change, indicating the onset of electromigration. Upon further increase of current, the conductance drops abruptly to almost zero, and the nanowire breaks. The whole process can be reproducibly performed as long as the thickness of a gold nanowire is below 20 nm. A representative SEM image of a broken wire is shown in Fig. 1(b). Inspection of many SEM images reveals that the failure of a nanowire typically occurs near the region where two angle-evaporated electrodes overlap, presumably because of the high resistance associated with the region.

Figure 2(b) shows a plot of voltages and currents at the nanowire break point obtained from 26 nanowires prepared from five independent fabrication runs. For all the data shown in the figure, voltage biasing through a series resistor was employed to break nanowires, although different methods of raising current were also found to achieve essentially the same results. As clearly illustrated in the figure, nanowire failure occurs consistently when the voltage drop across a wire exceeds a threshold of 470 mV. On the other hand, experimental parameters such as current at the breaking point, the total energy and the average power dissipated during the breaking process (typically on the order of 1 μJ and 10 nW, respectively) were found to vary significantly from nanowire to nanowire. The latter observation suggests that the Joule heating of the junction is not the major mechanism behind the nanowire breakage, although the increase in temperature may affect the process indirectly.

According to the conventional understanding of electromigration, the motion of atoms subject to large current density arises from the direct action of an external electric field on a charged defect (direct force) and the momentum transfer from the conduction electrons to a defect (electron-wind force). The direct force is proportional to the electric field strength at the defect site, whereas the electron-wind force is proportional to the local current density. Inside a metallic nanowire both forces are expected to increase with the voltage drop because the current density is directly proportional to this voltage. Within this framework, the observation of a threshold break voltage indicates the existence of a force (or energy) threshold required to induce electromigration of gold atoms. Unfortunately, the quantitative determination of the force threshold requires a knowledge of the voltage distribution inside a nanowire, and hence is not possible based solely on data presented here.

As described previously, electromigration of metal atoms has long been known to be the major failure mode of narrow conduction channels, and therefore the observation of nanowire breakage due to large current flow is not surprising in itself. A remarkable feature of the breaking process is, however, that it consistently yields two metallic electrodes with a measurable tunnel resistance between them. Figure 2(c) shows the histogram of tunnel resistances measured from 140 pairs of electrodes fabricated using this method. The broken wires typically exhibit low-bias tunnel resistances around 10 GΩ. In some instances, resistance values as small as a few hundred kΩ were observed, whereas for about 15% of broken nanowires resistances larger than 200 GΩ were seen. Resistances larger than 200 GΩ could not be measured accurately due to current leakage through the SiO₂ substrate.
Representative single electron transistors fabricated using this method. Both I-V curves in Fig. 3 clearly exhibit the suppression of electrical current at low bias voltages, known as the Coulomb blockade, characteristic of single electron tunneling through nanometer-sized structures. It was also found that the width of these Coulomb blockade regions could be tuned by applying the gate voltage that changes the electrostatic potential of the nanocrystal. Detailed electrical measurements of these CdSe-nanocrystal single electron transistors will be discussed in a future publication.

To conclude, a simple and highly reproducible method based on electromigration is developed to fabricate metallic electrodes with a typical separation of ~1 nm. The fabricated electrodes are stable in various experimental conditions including varying temperature and magnetic field, and are ideally suited for electron transport measurements of chemically synthesized nanostructures. Their utility was demonstrated by the fabrication of single electron transistors based on colloidal CdSe nanocrystals.

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[Fig. 3. Current vs. voltage curves at T = 1.5 K obtained from single electron transistors based on (a) 5 nm CdSe nanocrystals and (b) 7 nm CdSe nanocrystals. The inset in Fig. 3(a) shows the schematic diagram of an idealized device.]