

The ever malleable materials
of Margaret Honda



By Tenzing Barshee

Spectrum Reverse Spectrum, 2014.
70 mm film, aspect ratio 2.2:1, color, silent, 21 min.
Courtesy of the artist and Grice Bench, LA.

How can two things be the same? Or is it more interesting to ask how different things are alike? What are two or more things that mirror each other and at the same time acknowledge their differences? When, and more precisely how, do we determine an artwork as complete? And who does so? Considering Margaret Honda's work, these questions become essential. In 1989, Honda made a sculpture and titled it *Fish Trap*. Looking somewhat abstract, it consisted of a metal weave and was shaped like a funnel. Over the years, she repeatedly melted down the work, radically reconfiguring its form. By highlighting the nonidentical qualities of the different states of an object, the work produces an equalizing effect. Even though *Fish Trap* was edited several times, it concludes in the same work, as it remains the same material. This continued process of abstraction has different reasons. The original sculpture wasn't merely abstract. On the contrary, it replicated a functioning trap. Besides the bronze object, *Fish Trap* included another element. It came with a corresponding note, a few words that described the trap's properties and potential. At the time, Honda had been researching nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American material culture and, coincidentally, came across a number of descriptions of animal traps. While some of the traps – coming from hunter-gatherer cultures – had to do with subsistence, others were designed to eradicate animal populations that were considered a threat to industrial expansion. From the texts she collected, Honda constructed a group of full-scale, operational traps. The works involved mechanisms and specious assumptions about how they were supposed to function. Whenever the works were exhibited as sculptures, they came with

explanations of how each trap works, "allowing you to imagine the carnage they might inflict."¹ Straightforward and gruesome, the language highlights the overlap between human ingenuity's technical efficiency and destructiveness. For example, *Wolf Trap* (1987–89) incorporates a concealed blade within a piece of fat that is set out as bait. Licking the fat and eventually becoming injured, the first wolf becomes enraged by the scent of blood and continues to lick and bleed. "Attracted by the scent of the blood," writes Honda, "but confused over the absence of a carcass, other members of the pack attack each other until they are destroyed."² No less brutal, *Fish Trap*'s conical-shaped basket offers fish an inviting aperture to swim into. Once inside, they attempt to escape and swim backward, causing their gills to catch on the basket weave. Commonly, the fish trap is built with reed. For her version, Honda used a weave of bronze wire. In its materiality and geometric form, *Fish Trap* suggests an abstract object, which is countered by the text. If, as per Peter Halley, abstraction is nothing but the decoding of an already abstract world, a manifestation of a general shift toward abstract concepts that shaped the twentieth century, then *Fish Trap* performs a double bind. By introducing meaning through language, the supposedly abstract form is infused with anecdotal potential, the substance of life. The added information relates the sculpture to wildlife; if the geometric form embodies the insidiousness of technology, in its purpose it symbolically opposes nature. Confusingly, *Fish Trap* covers many bases. By emphasizing the experience of an abstract art object as something highly referential, it renders it reducible to its formal structure. As such,

the work addresses the problem of representation by exposing it as a method. The approximation of language to its object marks the conflict of the nonidentical aspect. Even though *Fish Trap* is declared as a fish trap, it ultimately remains a sculpture, an art object with material specificity. The difference here lies within the object's role as something fundamentally mimetic. So, the mimetically appropriated rationale of the work acts against its instrumental rationality; it counters its own logic. Like a hieroglyph, the artwork becomes quasi-linguistic, which doesn't require codes or decoding – like the fish getting stuck, there's no way out.³ In its original state, *Fish Trap* measured five feet and weighed approximately forty pounds. That iteration was exhibited several times. Once, when it was shipped back in a large crate, Honda was asked whether she had her own forklift to unload it. She did not. After discarding the crate, she stored the sculpture for about ten years. This was in a time when the artist had neither the opportunity to exhibit nor the money to make new work. Basically, she didn't expect to show the piece again. It was only taking up space. "If this work was going to be invisible," Honda explains, "I decided I wanted to control the terms."⁴ In 2007 she decided to melt *Fish Trap* into an ingot. Her motivation wasn't to destroy the sculpture but to maintain it for herself. "The original format was fine," she says, "but I did need the space and it was a chance to test an idea about looking at my completed works as materials, not as static objects." At first, the artist had trouble finding someone who would agree to melt down her sculpture. People either didn't call her back or, once she explained what she wanted to do, tried to convince her that it was cheaper to buy new metal if all she wanted was an ingot. "Men especially," she recalls, "didn't seem to like the idea of me destroying something I had made. Women didn't seem to have a problem with it, but I couldn't find any women who ran foundries." Finally, she found Kristan Marvell, an artist who runs a foundry just east of downtown Los Angeles. Although he was happy to take on the project, when Honda dropped off *Fish Trap* at his studio, he and his assistant said that they thought the sculpture looked fine the way it was. As a sculptor, Honda usually begins with the material. This originates in her academic background in "material culture." "As I studied it," she tells me, "it was all about starting with the object, not the text." This was the most influential part of her graduate

education and one that has guided how she works until today. "The best course I ever took was called 'Things in History.' Every week we were given an object to study and then we would write a paper about it. This course is as alive for me today as it was thirty years ago. It taught me how to look at something very closely, and how to put aside any preconceptions. We looked at things like toasters, saws, a Coke can, things like that." From her sculptures to her recent film projects (e.g., *Spectrum Reverse Spectrum*, 2014; *Color Correction*, 2015; *Film (Künstlerhaus Bremen)*, 2016), it is material properties, availabilities, and parameters, industrial and otherwise, that inform the outcome of her work. She treats limitations as potential and uses them as guidelines for her own process. Within any given framework, she wouldn't think of breaking its natural logic arbitrarily – unless highlighting the arbitrariness itself becomes the subject of her investigation. Following this logic, Honda asked the foundry to use the molds they had on hand to melt down *Fish Trap*. In 2010 she reconfigured the work and made *Fish Trap, 1989* by casting her original bronze sculpture into three standard-size ingots. She presented the work on a pedestal made from old catalogues and other printed matter related to her past shows. Six years later she recast the piece and made *Fish Trap, 1989, 2010*. This time

she worked with a different foundry, which led her to receive two instead of three ingots for the same amount of bronze. This wasn't an aesthetic decision by the artist, but the foundry's choice based on how to do their job in the fastest and most cost-effective way possible. Again she presented the sculpture on the pedestal that referenced her own exhibition history, possibly for the last time. Since then, she has decided to eliminate the pedestal. She came to realize that the idea for *Fish Trap* is that it remains the same work as it has always been, regardless of its present form. *Fish Trap, 1989, 2010* is the current state of the work. Its description reads: "bronze sculpture melted and reconfigured in 2010 and 2016." Because Honda owns the work, she can cast it whenever it is displayed publicly. She intends to continue this process, even if the work gets sold. *Fish Trap, 1989* originated in practical considerations. For the artist, those same types of considerations still inform the reconfigured objects. In 1992 Honda participated in a group show at the Long Beach Museum of Art titled "Relocations and Revisions: The Japanese-American Internment Reconsidered." Her contribution was *Sift*, a group of three sculptures shaped like round sieves, made of steel, copper, and brass. Her work symbolically dealt with the sifting of society, which she related to the internment and forced

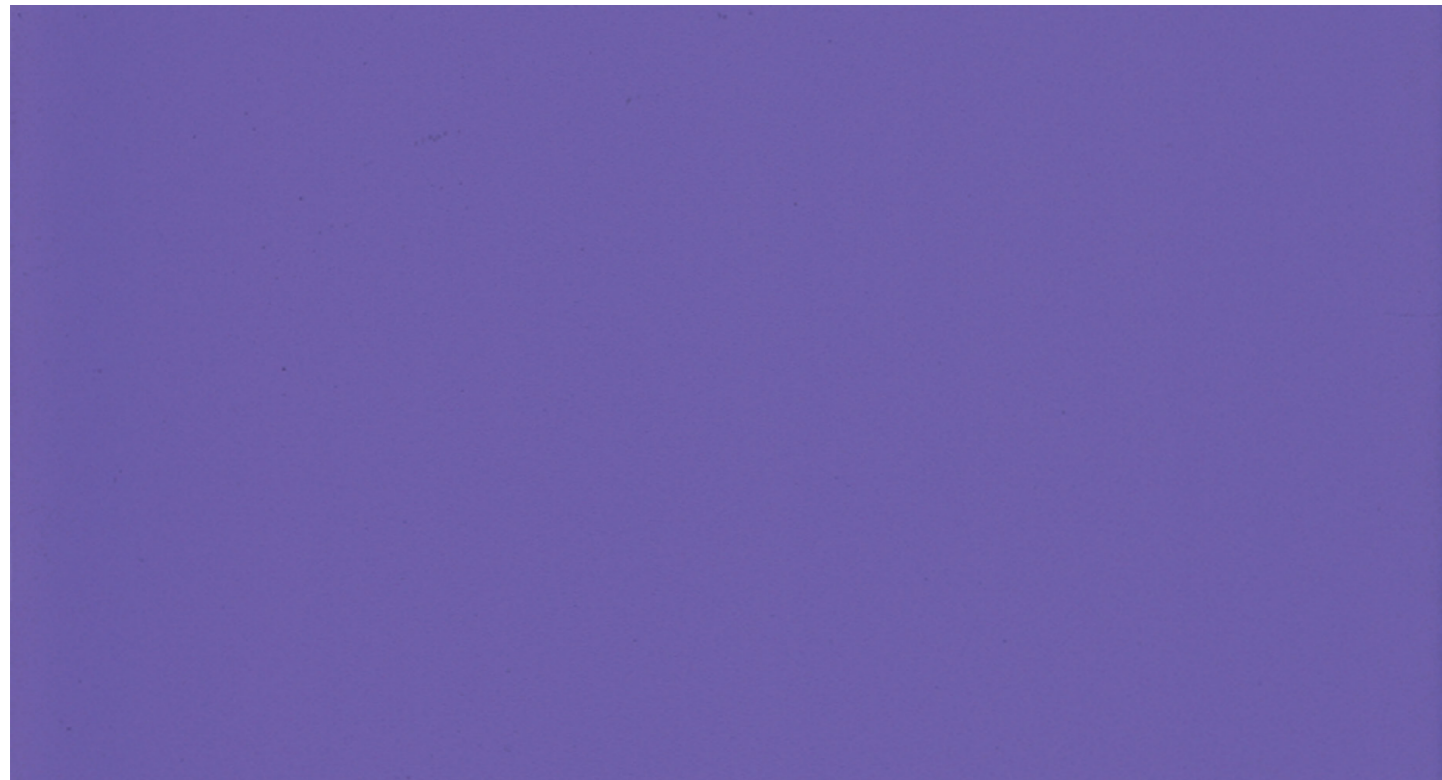
relocation of over a hundred thousand people of Japanese ancestry – her own parents and grandparents among them – during World War II. After the exhibition, her work entered the museum's collection. In 2012, the museum agreed to Honda's proposal to melt down *Sift* with the understanding that the reconfigured object would remain in their holdings as, essentially, the same work. "Because *Fish Trap* was in my possession," Honda says, "it was easy for me, as the artist, to intervene in what was a completed work. *Sift*, however, was in a museum collection and subject to institutional oversight. This project was of interest to me and the museum mainly because it raised questions of valuation, accession protocols, and ethical and other practices related to an institution's permanent holdings." The first time I learned about the fate of *Fish Trap* and *Sift*, I found it mesmerizing. The way Honda talked of her own work being deformed into something of pure potentiality – not a loss but actually a gain – was inspiring. It can be immensely difficult to let go of a formed idea, a written thought. The way she attempted to edit her own work, out of economic necessity and learning to conceptualize the process as something generic, seemed truly independent of the burden of so-called creation. The act of defining one's artwork as an ever-malleable material opens it up to endless possibilities.



Fish Trap, 1989, 2010, 2016.
Bronze sculpture melted and reconfigured in 2010 and 2016.
Two elements, each 8×8.5×31 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Sift, 1992, 92.17a-c, 2013. Reconfigured sculpture: melted steel, copper, brass and stainless steel.
Five elements, 7×7.6×34.3 cm to 12.7×8.3×35 cm.
Photography by Yongho Kim. Collection of Long Beach Museum of Art, California.



Color Correction, 2015.
35 mm film, aspect ratio 1.85:1, color, silent, 101 min.
Courtesy of the artist and Grice Bench, LA.



Color Correction, 2015.
35 mm film, aspect ratio 1.85:1, color, silent, 101 min.
Courtesy of the artist and Grice Bench, LA.

Not having the option to show or sell work can inhibit an artist's drive to continue to making work. But artists have come up with ingenious way to deal with this supposedly stuck situation and make it the subject of their work. After a two-decade career, painter Rochelle Feinstein creatively responded to financial pressure in 2009. Having to consolidate her storage spaces, her work itself – after having fallen to the wayside of a fickle marketplace – suggested an opportunity to be used as material to make new work under the rubric of “The Estate of Rochelle F.” In 2014, artist Justin Lieberman recycled unsold sculptures and tacked them onto canvases, in a capitulating gesture affirming an artistic style thought to be en vogue within the market at the time. Such artistic decisions never come easily, and they are a testament to the harsh reality of making art in a capitalist and status-oriented society. *Fish Trap* and *Sift* retain their identities regardless of how many times and in what form they are recast. Because the material is maintained in the aggregate, melting and casting are the only processes used by the artist. Only a minute amount of metal might be burned off and lost as gaseous matter, but if Honda gives the foundry forty pounds of material, this is what she gets back. This is an important aspect

of this work: nothing is added or taken away. The material content stays the same. Subject to future morphological changes, these pieces question the role an artwork plays as a document of either a single moment or an archive of many moments.

Sift will probably stay in its current manifestation because it is in a public collection, and Honda highly doubts they will pay to have it re-melted. “There is a kind of stasis to public collections that I was thinking about when I melted *Sift*, but I was lucky because I had an advocate in the museum's administration.”

Because Honda isn't interested in morphological comparisons, she threw out images of the original states of *Fish Trap* and *Sift*. Even though the works are in a new format, for the artist the work stays the same – only with added history: “I only adjusted the physical appearance of the work, but it's still the same work, its history folded into it.” The artist is curious about what it means to do this, to eliminate the former appearance without the possibility of comparing. For her, the focus becomes the act and not the thing. So, the thing, in the case of *Fish Trap* and *Sift*, is its material. But this material isn't only forty pounds of bronze. It is material evidence of an artist making and believing in their work while having to deal with the circumstance of

opportunity. In light of this, I hope this project, and others like it, might further expand our concept of how a work comes to be – or not.

Tenzing Barshee is an independent writer and a curator at Sundogs, Paris.

- 1 Margaret Honda, *Writings* (Marseille: Triangle France/Künstlerhaus Bremen, 2015).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 In his 2007 essay “Living with Abstraction,” Sven Lütticken relates Halley's position back to Adorno's. Sven Lütticken, “Living with Abstraction,” *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 69 (March 2007), pp. 132–38.
- 4 This and all the following quotes from a conversation with the artist in January 2018.



Sculptures, 2015. Wood, drywall, paint. Installation view at Triangle France, Marseille. Photography by Aurélien Mole. Courtesy of the artist.



Model for "Sculpture", 2017. Wood, drywall, paint. Installation view at ICA, Miami. Photography by Aurélien Mole. Courtesy of the artist.

Included in this issue of *Flash Art* is one of Margaret Honda's iconic “Film Posters.” In the artist's words: “When I began showing my films in 2014, I made posters in advance of the screenings. At a certain point, I fell behind and began making the posters months after a screening had taken place. At the moment, the rationale for the posters is to be a record of events that have already passed rather than an advertisement for something in the present or future.” In Honda's typical fashion, the poster announces retroactively the world premiere of Honda's latest film, *6144 × 1024*, at the 68th Berlin Film Festival. *6144 × 1024* film poster is designed by Lucas Quigley for Margaret Honda.