ON CORRECT COLOR: NOTES ON MARGARET HONDA'S FILMS

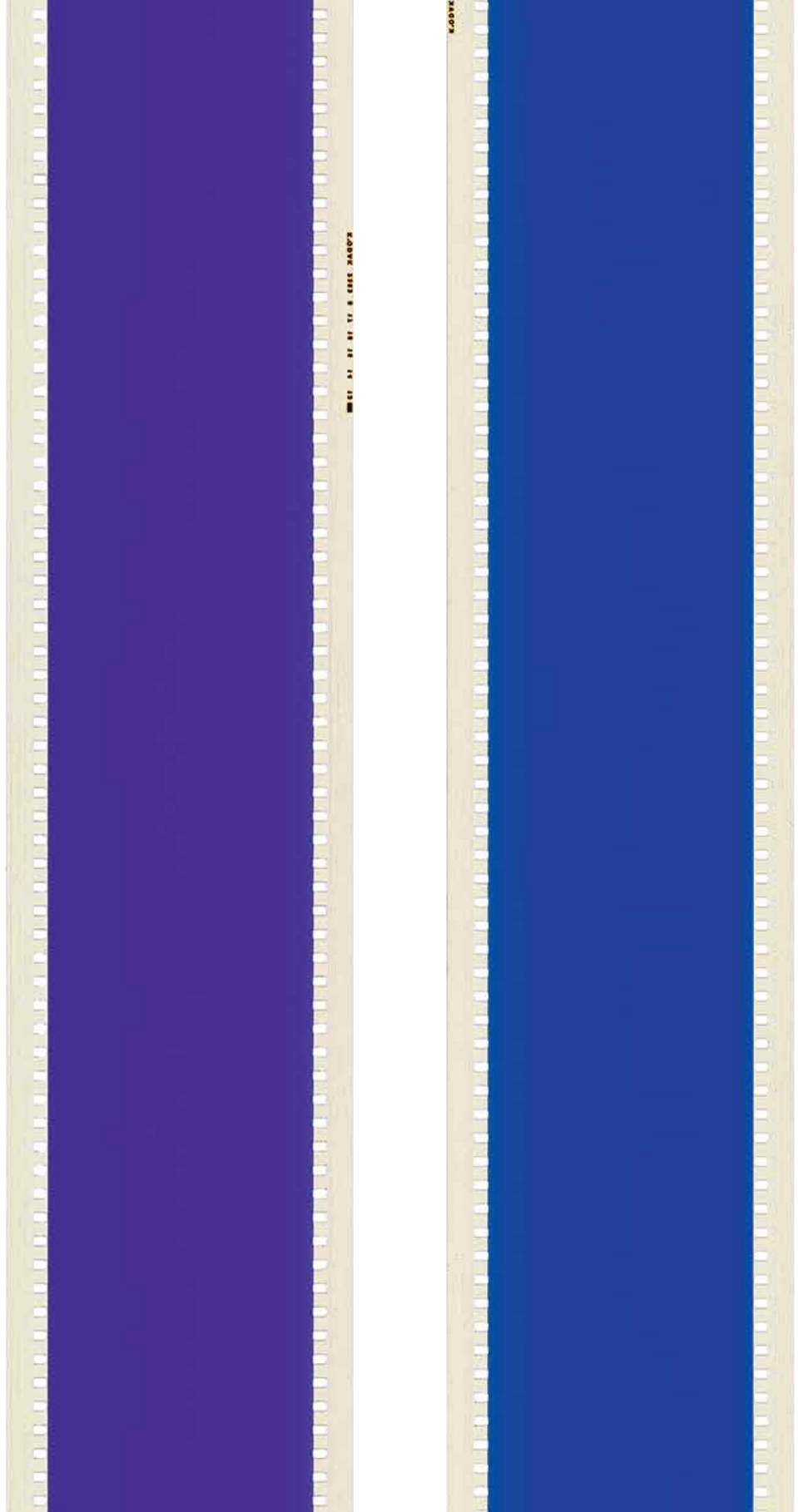
George Clark

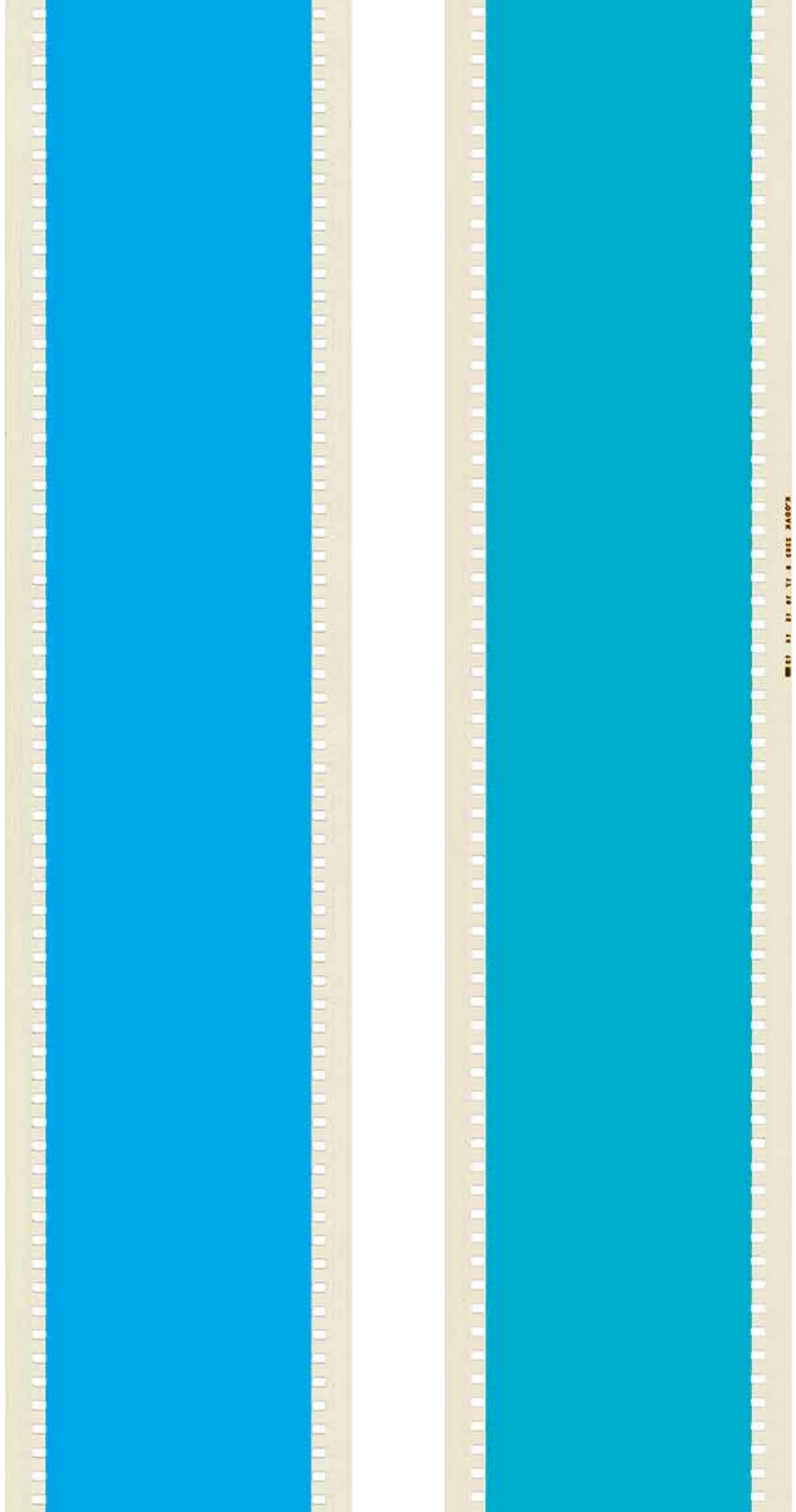
To observe is not the same thing as to look at or to view.
"Look at this colour and say what it reminds you of." If the colour changes
you are no longer looking at the one I meant.
One observes in order to see what one would not see if one did not observe.
—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour* (1950)

Margaret Honda's recent film projects are interrogations of the medium, exploring the potential of the physicality of film to capture and make observable a concept. Her immersive films *Color Correction* (2015) and *Spectrum Reverse Spectrum* (2014) treat color as a quantifiable product of the processes of industrial cinema yet also as an elusive philosophical concept that reveals the gulf between our experience of the world and the language and processes we use to describe it. Honda's work investigates philosophical concepts over long periods of time and often in collaboration with other people, in order to develop the forms and methods through which her ideas are realized. Her ongoing project *4366 Ohio Street* (2004–) is a testament to these methods. Like much of Honda's work, the project started with a sculptural proposition: a full-scale version of the California house in which she grew up is being published and distributed, one room at a time, over an unknown span of time. As an occasion presents itself, a single room is published in a journal or exhibition catalogue, and the accumulated surfaces of all the rooms will eventually map the contours and dimensions of the entire house. Taking into account the specific details of each publication—its printing method, dimensions, and edition size—she divides the surface area of a given room into a series of units in order to distribute the 1:1 scale sculpture of the house, room by room, unit by unit, out into the world.

The complex calculations at play in *4366 Ohio Street* are a salient feature of Honda's oeuvre. Her 2015 exhibition *Sculptures* at Triangle France, in Marseille, included as one of its three works the limited-edition artist's book *Writings*, a complete written record of Honda's work to date that stands as a portable retrospective of her practice, albeit translated into written form.[1] The central work at Triangle, *Sculpture*, was a similar retrospective translation, in which Honda created full-scale replicas of all her previous studios, presenting a physical index of the spaces within which she has worked without exhibiting any of the works produced in them. The one independent work that could be encountered

Spectrum Reverse Spectrum, 2014. 70mm film, aspect ratio 2.2:1, color, silent. 21:00 min. Film strips.





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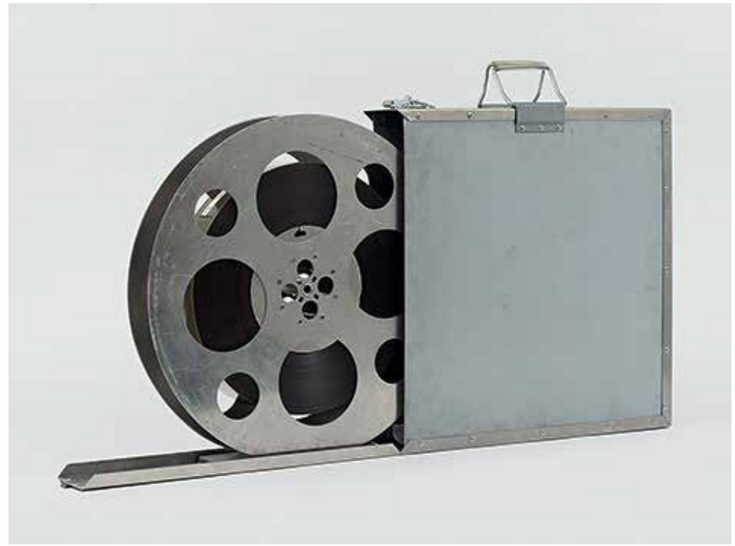


Case and reel for *Spectrum Reverse Spectrum* (2014).

in the center of the space was her projected 16mm film *Wildflowers (Fleurs Sauvages)* (2015), a catalogue of the short-lived desert flowers found in Southern California. Documented using outdated Kodachrome film stock, like the flowers, a rare and light-sensitive material. Due to its age, the film, when processed, revealed no direct images of the flowers. A voice-over narration describes the colors and structures of each flower at the moment it would have appeared on-screen. Based on Honda's shooting notes, the narration suggests the flowers' presence in the film even if they are not visible—a quantum thought experiment similar to Erwin Schrödinger's famous cat.

Honda's interest in modes of representation and layers of history has been a consistent element of her practice as she seeks to combine different modes of cultural production to interrogate the life of objects. In a series of recent reconfigurations she has melted down and recast past sculptures. For *Sift, 1992, 92.17a–c* (2013), the artist asked the Long Beach Museum of Art to allow her to borrow and reconfigure one of her own works from its permanent collection. This remarkable transgression of the museum's normative role of preserving and stabilizing artworks, both when they are and when they are not on display, speaks to Honda's interest in bringing time and context to bear on objects. Originally exhibited in 1992 as part of *Relocations and Revisions: The Japanese American Internment Reconsidered*, the work exists within a shifting historical context.[2] The history of Japanese American internment, which has gone through a slow process of acknowledgment, refutes notions of stable or linear history, as the exhibition's refrain of "relocation," "revision," and "reconsideration" makes clear. Honda has stated that although this sculpture has been changed and is subject to future changes, it "will always remain the same work."[3]

Processes of transformation and revision permeate Honda's work with film. Her recent engagement with the technicians and industrial apparatus of cinema has come during an unprecedented and dramatic period of change in the industry, with large-scale closures of processing laboratories and film manufacturing plants around the world that saw Kodak enter Chapter 11 bankruptcy in January 2012 and Fujifilm announce in March 2013 that it would cease producing film stock.[4] Only a few remaining laboratories

can produce her work, and in the particular case of the 70mm film *Spectrum Reverse Spectrum*, there is only one industrial laboratory still processing and making prints in this format, FotoKem in Burbank, California. The processes and elements employed to construct the films lead to objects that often defy description, striving as they do to utilize unique characteristics of the machines that created them.

Spectrum Reverse Spectrum was produced without a camera by the lab technicians at FotoKem using a modified Bell & Howell 70mm contact printer with Michelson light valves. The film was created by plotting a gradual shift through the visible light spectrum with this machine, from violet to red and then back again with precise color and exposure values that maintain the relative density and duration for each color according to the spectrum itself over the standard length of a single reel of 70mm film. Printed as a palindrome, the film can be played forward or backward, as it goes through the same spectrum and reversal either way. The sheer intensity of the large-scale 70mm image when projected and the format's unprecedented color saturation cause shifts in how we experience color. As the project's technical adviser, Vince Roth, told Honda during the making of the film: "I just finished going through the roll and measuring the color at every pure color point, and they are identical forward and backwards. This means that all the differences we perceived were entirely the result of having seen what happened before."[5]

The scarcity of equipment for 70mm film has meant that this gauge has remained largely the preserve of spectacular or prestige productions, immersive science and technology displays, advertisements, or special effects sequences.[6] Honda's fascination lies in the exceptional nature of 70mm. Her film is an attempt to return the gauge to an industrial essentialism, to reveal the qualities inherent and irreducibly present in this format. Printed onto Kodak 2383 color print stock, which is currently used for 70mm release prints,[7] and timed to fit with its head and tail leader to a 2,500-foot-long reel, the film lasts around twenty-one minutes. The film reel itself has a substantial physical presence and has been exhibited as an object.[8] Unlike most films, the print has no frame lines due to its cameraless production, so when unrolled, it is a fluid color spectrum. Yet these aspects of the film are not apparent when it is projected. The dimensions of the object can be experienced only when it is in situ, and even then only a fragment of the 2,500 feet of film can be seen at a time. The experience of the physical dimension of the work is fittingly the preserve of the lab technicians and projectionists who are Honda's principal collaborators.

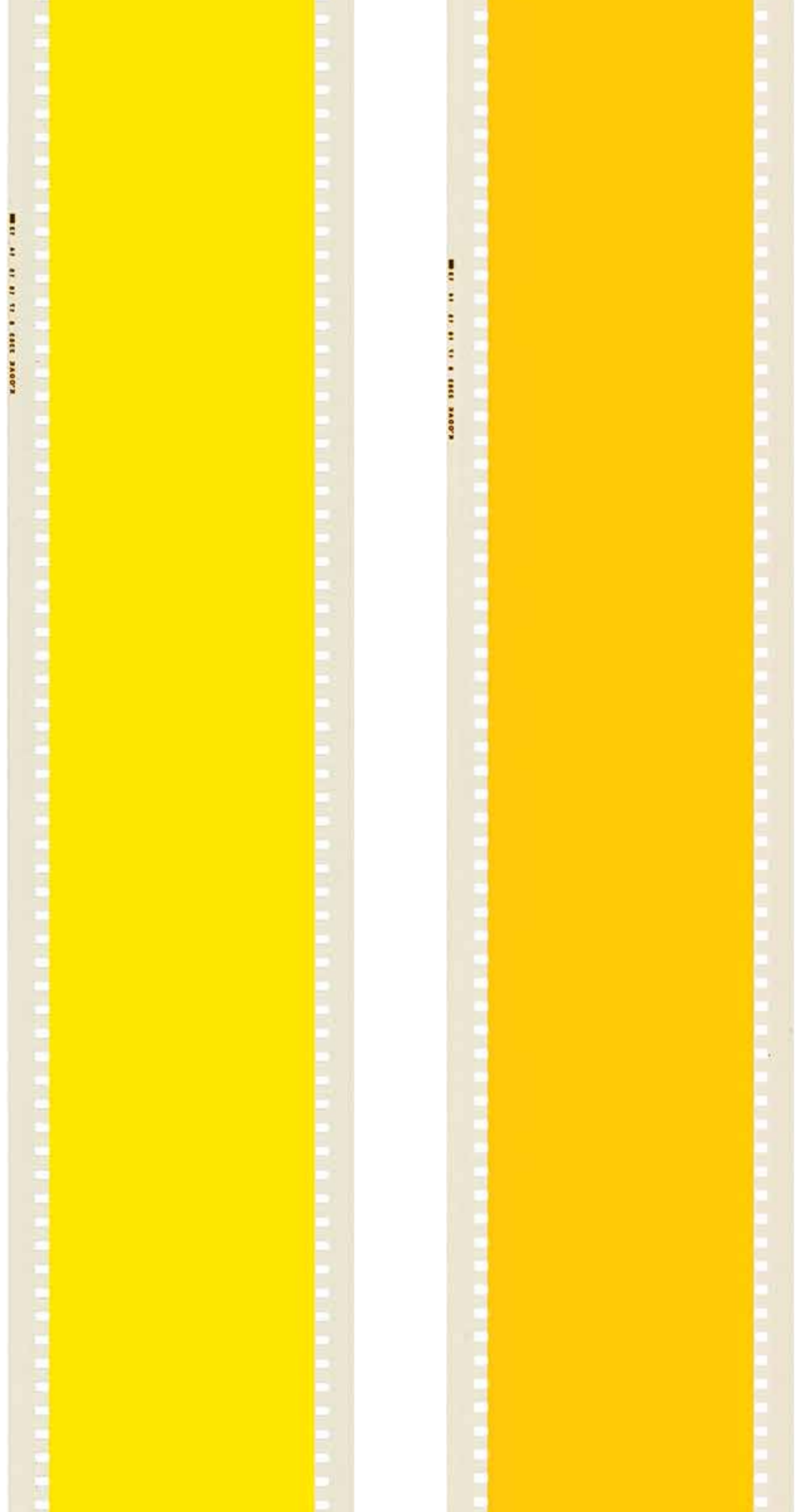
Color Correction *is not a typical film, but it should be projected as if it is.*

—Margaret Honda[9]

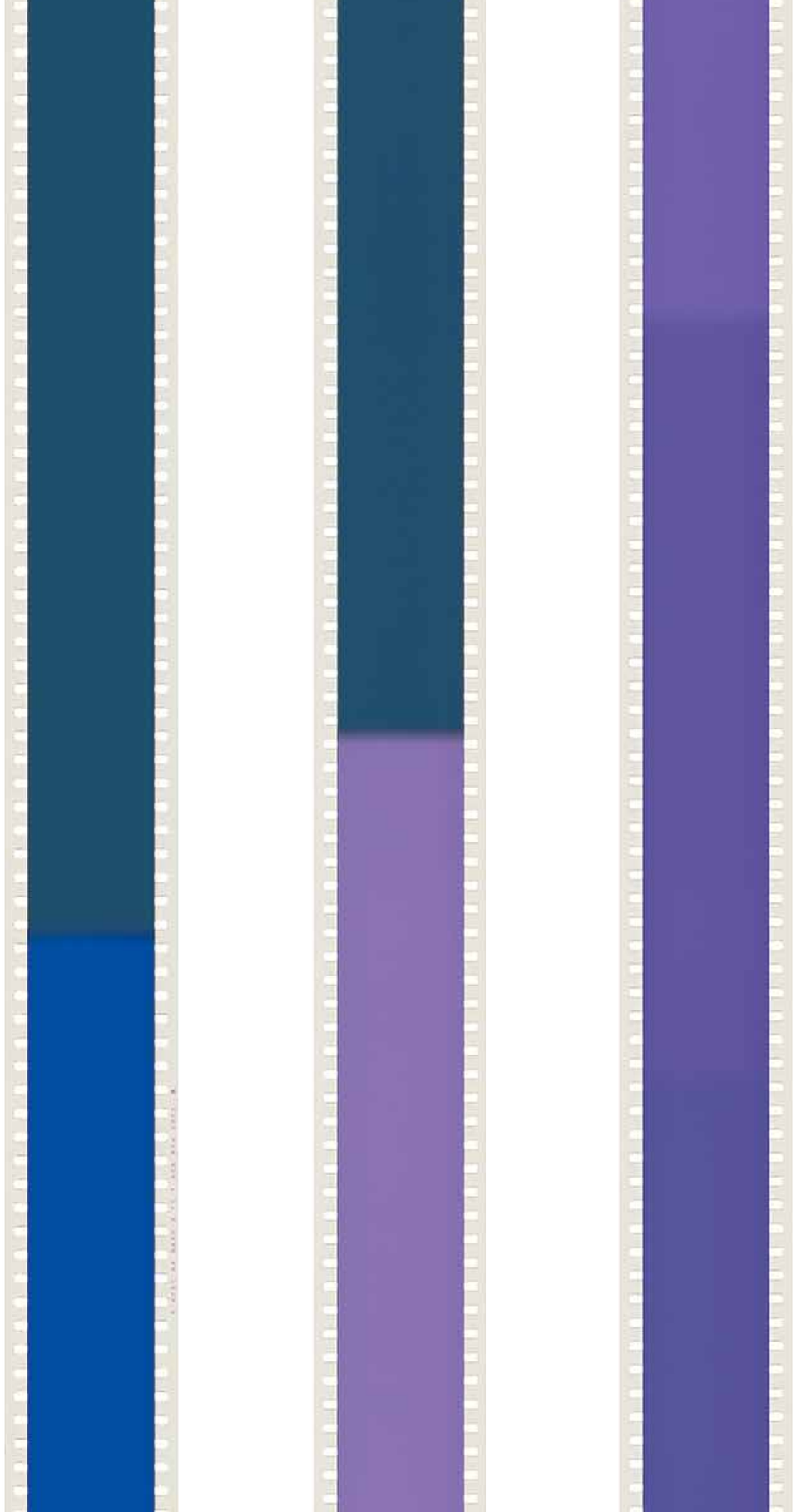
Realized in concert with *Spectrum Reverse Spectrum*, Honda's feature-length film *Color Correction* was created with a found object, a set of original timing tapes, which had been used in the production of release prints for a feature film. (The tapes were provided to Honda by a contact in the film industry, who did not disclose the identity of the film they were made for.) Ordinarily the film negative and its corresponding timing tapes are run together in the printer to make the release prints, with the timing tapes controlling the red, green, and blue light valves, which correct the color for each shot. The timing tapes are narrow rolls of paper with punched holes corresponding to the color values. The majority of the adjustments are made in order to ensure unified color within a scene, compensating for shifts and variations between shots. Without an original or a negative, Honda's 101-minute 35mm silent film was printed according to the automated instructions on the timing tapes. Its imagery consists solely of the colors determined by the corrections and adjustments logged in the tape. *Color Correction* goes further than other works to shift the decision making from Honda to industrial processes, in this case the labor of the original color timer, who, like the film for which the timing tapes were made, remains anonymous. Honda has stated that she "wanted to make a film where I would not know what it looks like until it is finished."[10]

Various precedents exist in film and photography for producing images without a camera or negative, yet often these processes result in creating a new "original" that can be reproduced. Artists such as Stan Brakhage, José Antonio Sistiaga, and Jennifer West have all created films working directly on the film surface with paint or other substances.[11] The most salient parallel to Honda's project could be Derek Jarman's last film, *Blue* (1993). The visual aspect of Jarman's feature film consists solely of the color blue, inspired by Yves Klein's monochrome painting *IKB79* (1959).[12] The 35mm prints for the film were produced in the laboratory according to complex printing guidelines, similar to those for Honda's film, as there is no negative, just a color slide (based on a photograph of *IKB79*) and color timing instructions.

The use of saturated color, as Honda discovered in *Spectrum Reverse Spectrum*, leads our eyes to attempt to adjust or correct the color. The fluidity of our perception of color and its relationship with light has fascinated many artists and writers. One of the most notable early commentators



Spectrum Reverse Spectrum, 2014. 70mm film, aspect ratio 2.2:1, color, silent. 21:00 min. Film strips.



Color Correction, 2015. 35mm film, aspect ratio 1.85:1, color, silent. 101:00 min. Film strips from reel 1. Left: cues 2 to 3; center: cues 3 to 4; right: cues 10 to 11 to 12.

Cases and reels for *Color Correction* (2015).

on color, Leon Battista Alberti, observed in his 1435 treatise *Della pittura* (On painting): "Philosophers say that not one [object] can be seen if it is not covered by light and color. The relationship between colors and light in order to carry out vision is therefore very great; one realizes how great that [relationship] is by the fact that as light fades, the colors themselves also disappear, darkening little by little."[13] Indeed, when Jarman's *Blue* is shown, it is important that there is another small light source in the viewer's peripheral vision, which acts as a control to prevent the brain from correcting or neutralizing the intensity of the blue color. Without a contrast our minds adjust and desaturate colored light. To tackle color consistency, the film industry has developed various largely hidden codes and checks, including the numerical systems to time and regulate color density and the annotations on film prints, including stock numbers, color bars and charts, density values, and the so-called China girls used to check color calibration on exhibition prints. These elements created and used by industrial film workers are almost never projected or seen by audiences.[14]

The adjustments that are made visible in *Color Correction* are not the final color values that would be seen in the film print but instead show the light that was deemed to be required to correct each shot. In the same way that a plasterer creates a uniform surface by filling in all the irregularities, indentations, or crevices in a wall, the color density values we see are those deemed to be missing in the negative, heightening or diminishing certain light values to create a uniform surface. *Color Correction* exposes all the irregularities, crests, and crevices in the film; it is an index or relief, revealing the negative space that is corrected out of most films. The degree and effect of the adjustments, as well as the pace of each change, correspond to an original that is hidden from us. Rather than being a celebration of color, the film exposes viewers to an abstracted intentionality, a shadow or death mask of the industrial processes of cinema. *Color Correction* is a complex tribute to the unseen efforts and lives lived behind films, the processes of erasure, and the silent labor of cinema's history.

I've usually used one word to describe a colour, so red remains red with lapses into vermilion or carmine. I've placed no colour photos in this book, as that would be a futile attempt

to imprison them. How could I be certain that the shade I wanted could be reproduced by the printer? I prefer that the colours should float and take flight in your minds.

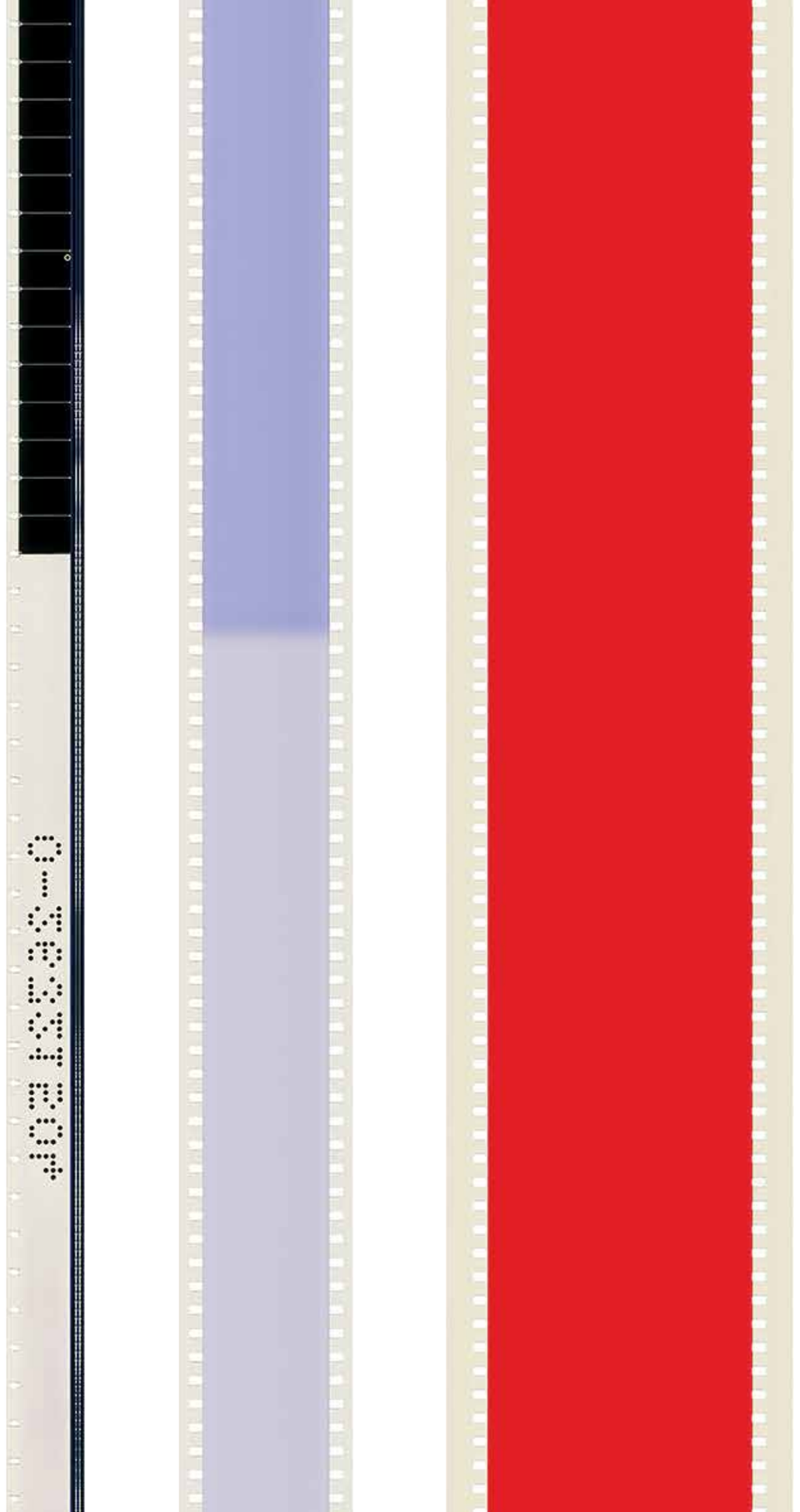
—Derek Jarman, *Chroma* (1994)[15]

Honda's recent film work draws together fading industrial processes with philosophical inquiry, exploring the tension between phenomenology, physical material, and the science of optics. Color, as in Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour*, provides territory through which to explore the gap between language and experience. It is a way for us to measure and quantify the world. In his famous question "How do I know that I can recognize red when I see it? How do I know it is the colour that I meant?"[16] Wittgenstein sought to explore how our perception of the world can be defined and understood through language, reflecting on the paradoxes inherent in the attempt to observe and measure a constantly moving field. These very processes of mediation and translation from one form to another, the gap between precisely calibrated values and fluctuations in our perception, are at the heart of Honda's practice. Yet rather than struggle against the excess meaning generated in the attempts to translate one form into another, her recent work thrives on the traces left by the processes involved. A central, even playful element of her practice—her interest in a work's liveness, its thingness[17]—often stems from the unpredictable outcomes that arise in the attempt to correct, reduce, or direct the production of an object. ▼

NOTES

Epigraph: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. Linda L. McAlister and Margarete Shättle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pt. 3, no. 326.

1. Margaret Honda, *Writings*, ed. Matthew Evans and Tenzing Barshee (Marseille: Triangle France; Bremen, Germany: Künstlerhaus Bremen, 2015). The exhibition was on view from February 14 to April 19, 2015, and was curated by Tenzing Barshee.
2. *Relocations and Revisions: The Japanese American Internment Reconsidered*, Long Beach Museum of Art, CA, May 10–July 5, 1992. The exhibition included paintings, sculptures, conceptual works, and installations by ten American artists of Japanese ancestry. It was accompanied by a program of videotapes with eight additional artists and a thirty-page catalogue that was accompanied by a thirty-minute videotape.
3. See Margaret Honda's statement on *Sift, 1992, 92.17a–c* (2013), https://margarethonda.wordpress.com/projects/sift-1992-92-17a-c-2013/.
4. The changes within the industry have led to various high-profile campaigns that have brought attention to these potential catastrophic changes and the loss of the expertise and equipment necessary to maintain film. Kodak came out of bankruptcy in September 2013 and has since signed agreements with major Hollywood studios to guarantee supply and production of film stock. For more details on the campaign, see www.savefilm.org.
5. Vince Roth, e-mail correspondence with Margaret Honda, July 3, 2013.
6. After various experiments with large-scale film formats in the 1920s and 1930s, the majority of films made with 70mm emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as exhibitors and studios sought to compete with the advent of television with musical spectacles such as *Oklahoma!* (1955) and *West Side Story* (1961) or epic productions such as *Ben-Hur* (1959) and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). For a recent overview of the history of industrial applications of large-format films, see Nick Pinkerton, "What Is 70mm?," *Reverse Shot*, August 7, 2015, http://reverseshot.org/features/2078/70mm. And for a wealth of background on the format and its technical innovators and advocates, as well as extensive details on current and past exhibition, see the online magazine and 70mm resource *In70mm.com*, http://www.in70mm.com/.
7. Recently directors such as Christopher Nolan, Paul Thomas Anderson, and most recently Quentin Tarantino have championed the format, to the extent in Tarantino's case of installing numerous 70mm projectors in theaters across the United States for the release of his film *The Hateful Eight* (2015). But access to this format is incredibly limited, both in terms of the laboratories that process the film and the venues that can exhibit it. Even prior to the massive shift to digital projection in the majority of cinemas, 70mm projection has always been limited to specialist theaters, found mainly in film archives, science museums, and theme parks.
8. The reel was exhibited in *5th Footnote* at PØST, Los Angeles, July 11, 2014.
9. Margaret Honda, "Color Correction—Instructions for the projectionist" (2015). These notes are part of the guidelines for showing the film that accompany it when it is projected.
10. Margaret Honda, e-mail correspondence with the author, July 28, 2015.
11. All three artists have produced on various film formats, including 16mm and 35mm and exceptionally also 70mm. The Basque artist José Antonio Sistiaga produced *Impresiones en la alta atmósfera* (1988–89) and the as-yet-uncompleted film *Han (sobre el sol)* (1992–) by painting on frames of 70mm 15-perf film. Although the vast majority of his work was with 16mm film, Stan Brakhage's *The Dante Quartet* (1987) was made over six years using fragments of footage originally shot on 35mm, 70mm, and IMAX stock. Jennifer West has made various works with 70mm film, including: *A 70 MM Film Wearing Thick Heavy Black Liquid Eyeliner That Gets Smeary (70 mm film leader lined with liquid black eyeliner, doused with Jello Vodka shots and rubbed with body glitter)* (2008), *Lavender Mist Film/Pollock Film 1* (2009), and *Salt Crystals Spiral Jetty Dead Sea Five Year Film* (2013).
12. The ultramarine pigment solution used by Yves Klein, which he developed with the Parisian paint supplier Edouard Adam, was registered by Klein in May 1960 under the name International Klein Blue (IKB) at the Institut national de la propriété industrielle.
13. Leon Battista Alberti, *Leon Battista Alberti on Painting: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. Rocco Sinisgalli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 31.
14. With the notable exception of various works in which artists have explored these underlying elements of film, including Owen Land's *Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc*. (1966) and Morgan Fisher's *Standard Gauge* (1984) as well as Lucy Raven's recent work involving projector calibration cards *RP31* (2012). For further discussion of the references to China girls in artists' films, see Genevieve Yue, "The China Girl on the Margins of Film," *October*, no. 153 (Summer 2015): 96–116.
15. Derek Jarman, "On Seeing Red," in *Chroma: A Book of Colour—June '93* (London: Century, 1994), 42–43.
16. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. Raymond Hargreaves and Roger White (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 10 (§11).
17. Similarly the British artist Mark Lecky has attempted to define "thingness" through his work and the curatorial project *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things* (2013), Nottingham Contemporary, England.



Left: *Wildflowers (Flores Salvajes)*, 2015. 16mm film, black-and-white negative printed on color stock, optical sound. 3:09 min. Film strip showing head leader and beginning of first shot. Center: *Color Correction*, 2015. 35mm film, aspect ratio 1.85:1, color, silent. 101:00 min. Film strip from reel 1 showing cues 28 to 29. Right: *Spectrum Reverse Spectrum*, 2014. 70mm film, aspect ratio 2.2:1, color, silent. 21:00 min. Film strip.