



Catherine Wagner: "Bad at Sports: Interview with Catherine Wagner"

In conversation with Patricia Maloney and Brian Andrews

May 12, 2016



Catherine Wagner. *Interior Wall Construction* from the series *Moscone Site*, 1979; gelatin silver print; 20 x 24 in.  
Courtesy of the Artist and Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco.

**Catherine Wagner:** I thought I would just start with the fact that I have about four or five projects going on right now in the studio. I do tend to work on things simultaneously, and the first one is interesting to me because it's the oldest project I worked on and it's coming back thirty-plus years later. It is the schematic drawing of the new subway that comes up in front of SFMOMA, and when you exit that subway you will see these eight-foot-by-twelve-foot granite panels of photographs that I made thirty-plus years ago in 1978, from a series called *The Moscone Center*. I was in my early 20s and I photographed the construction of Moscone Center because I was interested in this notion of change, and the fact that this area has now become the cultural center of San Francisco, but at that time it was this kind of silent demarcation, an area not even considered part of San Francisco. I was interested in this arena of construction, where the common denominator is all about change. I worked on it for five years, and it was probably my first recognized body of work. So here we are in 2016 and the subway will open in 2017. It's the first north-south subway, it will start at Caltrain and goes to Moscone, and they're calling it the Museum Subway.

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Catherine Wagner. *Arch Construction II* from the series *Moscone Site*, 1981; gelatin silver print; 20 x 24 in.  
Courtesy of the Artist and Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco.



Catherine Wagner. *Arch Construction IV* from the series *Moscone Site*, 1981; gelatin silver print; 20 x 24 in.  
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**Patricia Maloney:** I think that's going to be very interesting for visitors arriving at this stop. I think so many people who will be going through these stations are people who are not living in San Francisco, but visitors to San Francisco. Even for a lot of people who live in this city, there's very little evidence and knowledge of the history of the Moscone Center and the extent to which it completely eradicated a whole section of the city and a whole population.

**CW:** Absolutely. In fact, at the time, in effect this was skid row. Their way of solving it was to move it up four blocks.

**PM:** To the Tenderloin.

**CW:** That's what happened, and a little further, to Sixth Street. I've always talked about this project as being a kind of archaeology in reverse, the notion of future ruins. I think it's very interesting for people to be able to come up from the underground and see these very large-scale granite photographs of this archaeology in reverse.

**Brian Andrews:** Looking at these images, I think this is a really great place to start our conversation because it is sort of bookending your current work and your earliest work. What has this process been like for you, actually revisiting these images?

**CW:** It's really like coming home on certain levels. I began this work as a young woman looking at the landscape, and in the midst of what the California image makers were—completely about nature and Yosemite—and my work is antithetical to all that. I was really looking at the urban landscape and the environment and the change much more related to the new topographic group of work than to what I call the grandeur of the imagery of Yosemite. So conceptually I think this work really contributed to the way I think now, because I was really out on a limb. In 1976, I was literally photographing dirt, and I was literally photographing rebar, and standing firmly behind this as ideas about archaeology in reverse. It's an important group of work for me because it really shaped the way I think conceptually.

**PM:** I love that you used the phrase "bookending" because as we're standing here in the studio, immediately adjacent to this body of work is a much more recent, radically different body of work that is of a style that I much more readily associate with your work, in which the geographic context is removed. The landscape is removed, and what we are looking at is an object more or less in isolation and all of the meaning that gets embedded in the object by putting this kind of spotlight on it. It's also work where color really comes strongly into play.

**CW:** I had spent the year before in Rome at the American Academy of Art, where I was a Rome Prize fellow. And I would take these weekend trips to various places around Italy, and I kept going back up to Bologna because I was fascinated—I love Morandi's paintings. I found out that the Museo Morandi, which is part of the Museum of Modern Art, Bologna, had all of these paintings. I would go so often, I met a curator who says, "I see you here all the time to see this work," and basically they invited me. They have a program where they invite contemporary artists into the Morandi archives. When I say the archives, it's his apartment where he lived, so you go into this apartment and there's his bed and his library, and his studio—but it's been made into this kind of Disneyesque situation so that there's this plate glass, a very kind of super-contemporary Italian architect has made it almost like a diorama. But you're in Morandi's apartment. They invite contemporary artists to spend time at the Morandi archives and to use Morandi's work as a place to begin a new conversation that may or may not be specifically about Morandi, but it serves as a

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catalyst, as a way of thinking. I think Morandi was really the grandfather of minimalism. I think the austerity of those paintings and the quietness of those paintings has long informed my work, where it's *in situ* geographically or in the studio, there's something I'm always trying to pare down to get to the essence or the structure of the idea, and I think, in studying Morandi's paintings for so long, I just think he's the godfather of a lot of that thinking.

They allowed me to take all of those objects that Morandi painted, the bottles, the very simple, simple objects, and the first thing I did when I was there, I wanted to make sure that I wasn't trying to emulate Morandi, because I thought, oh my god, that's sacrilegious, you know? What do you do? So I tried to take the patina of Morandi away from his actual objects. I covered all of the objects I wanted to work with with aluminum foil, and that's actually been a material that I've worked with for a long time. For me, it's a 20th-century material, and it takes the patina of nostalgia away. Before I left, I studied Morandi paintings and, looking in the catalog, I sampled all the different colors from the paintings and I took them down to JCX, which is a filmmaking production house, and I bought all the different filters of the colors that I found in Morandi's paintings. When we think about Morandi, at least I immediately come to beiges and some very muted colors, but if you really study the paintings, there is always these little like punctuated pieces of color. So I bought all the different colors I could find in Morandi's paintings. I gelled the lights that I was working with and started making these very simple still lifes using those gels [of color] that I found in these various paintings. But then I became really interested in the shadow that was cast by the actual object, and then I started making my own. I started doing these very simple still lifes where I would set up, actually, Morandi's objects, but then I repositioned myself so that I was only photographing the shadow, or what the Italians call the *fantasma*, which is like the ghost of Morandi. There are three parts to the work I'm working on now, which is called *Musings on Morandi: Still Lifes and Shadows*. Sometimes the shadows become more representational, sometimes they become more abstract, but people ask about where is this really rich color coming from—they're coming from Morandi's paintings, but we don't see them because we're so used to accepting the fact that the majority of it is more muted beiges.

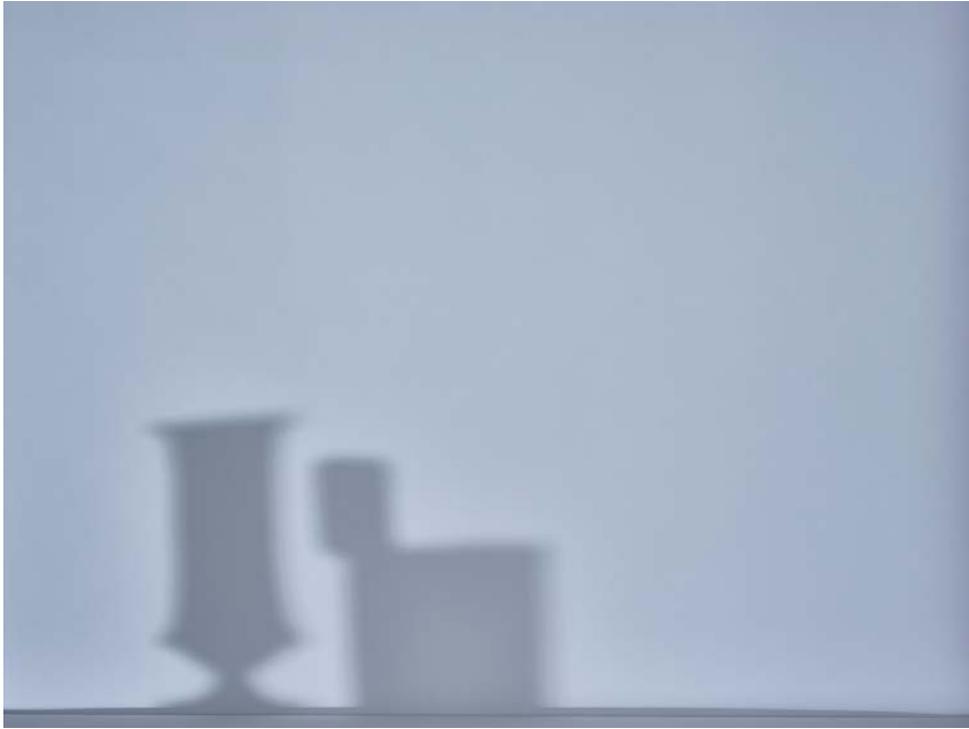


Catherine Wagner. 017 from the series *Musings on Morandi: Still Lifes and Shadows*, 2015; archival pigment print; 50 x 37 6/8 in.

Courtesy of the Artist and Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco.

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Catherine Wagner. 053 from the series *Musings on Morandi: Still Lifes and Shadows*, 2015; archival pigment print; 50 x 37 1/2 in.  
Courtesy of the Artist and Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco.

When I first was at Morandi's apartment, I noticed that all his drawing tables were still set up and he always worked from the same place, and he had a morning, afternoon, evening table, because he always worked with natural light, he never worked with any artificial light. He always made maps of where he would put bottles or objects, but he didn't change the paper. This photograph, which is a photograph of the paper on Morandi's drawing table, shows maybe 100 or 150 to 200 different paintings that he made because he's tracing and then he's moving on a week later to a different position for a different painting. There aren't any art historians who have actually studied these, and I noticed that Tacita Dean was also kind of enamored with these. There are five what I call "shaped photographs," because they're actual photographs of the specific piece of paper on Morandi's drawing table, and they're just basically still lifes of the mapping for his paintings.

**PM:** Amazing. There is something in the daily gesture that is so evident in here that you can imagine what these compositions were, but much more readily imagining the shifts between one grouping of objects and another, and his thinking about placing something slightly offset from where it had been before.

**CW:** You'll notice something, he signs his name all the time as he's drawing, so this is GM, GM, GM, and you see it everywhere. Just like as he's drawing, he's signing his name.

**BA:** It's almost like authenticating that placement within his larger system of his body of work.

**PM:** I have so many more questions about these images, but [...] thinking about that compulsion to touch makes me want to talk about the Braille images.

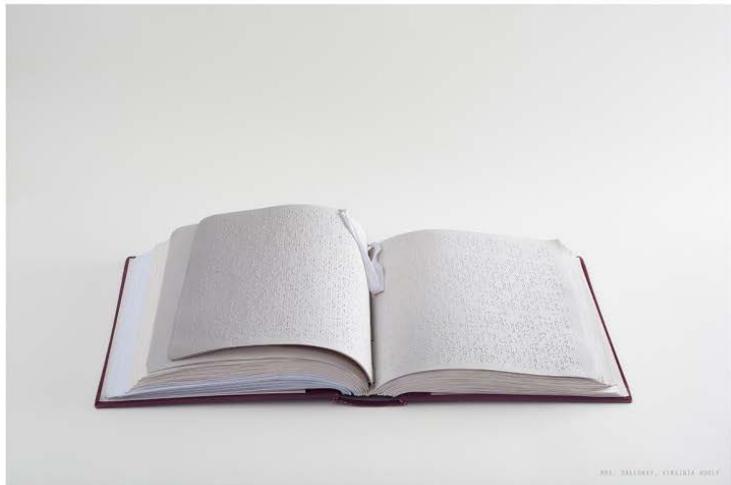
**CW:** About four or five years ago I did this project called *Transliterate*. I never think about

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something well ahead of time and go, "This is what I'm going to do." But I'd say if you had to ask me where do I work, I work in archives a lot. I work in the archives of libraries, I work in the archives of museums, and I'm decontextualizing [...] these systems, whether it's a library system or a cataloging system, and bringing a whole different way of reading that material. So I was working on a project in Seattle, and I'd been reading a lot about articles that would come up in the paper all the time about how Braille publishing was being phased out because of all the speech-to-text technology, and I was thinking what's going to happen if blind people can't read. Because to hear a book on tape is a lot different than the experience of being able to read. I found myself in Seattle and was in one of these horrendous rainstorms and I ducked into this library and it was one of the main northwest libraries for Braille. I started talking to the librarian there, and what I saw was a whole bunch of blue audiotapes being checked out to be mailed because people order these books online, and they're all audio books. Then I saw a section of about thirty Braille books to be mailed out. One-tenth of what gets sent out is in Braille, and the rest is all audio. I was really struck with the fact that not being able to read, whether you're sighted or you're blind, for me is the beginning of abstract thinking, and when I read, I find myself on the same page often, it's my own cadence where I'm stuck on this paragraph because I'm actually cognitively putting ideas together about what I'm reading. I got access to all these blind libraries, and over a period of three years I asked people sitting next to me on the plane or people I knew, people I didn't know, what book have you read that's changed the way that you think? And 90 percent of the people went back to either high school or college. Almost nobody chose a book from right now. I kept this little index, and every time a title was named more than three times, that became part of the series.

**BA:** Was that only blind people?



Catherine Wagner. *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Wolfe from the series *Transliterate*, 2013; archival pigment print with Braille; 49 1/8 x 21 . in. diptych.

Courtesy of the Artist and Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco.

**CW:** No, I just asked anybody. You'll notice that it's *To Kill a Mockingbird*; *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison; *Absalom Absalom* by Faulkner. The first thing I decided to do is to take just the cover of the book, which I found fascinating. A lot of the covers of these books were so rich and so colorful, and when I installed them for an exhibition, they almost looked like these color-filled paintings. Then I opened to a very arbitrary page and made these photographs. In the second image, the Braille itself becomes so tactile you want to touch it. But we do not—at least I do not—read Braille visually, nor

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do I read Braille in terms of being able to sight it. We still don't have any information in terms of what is this book about. I thought it would be interesting to finally give the information of what the book is, and I did it both in Braille and in the text. There's actually Braille in the text below the title, and then in the exhibition I had a Braille title that you could touch underneath each one.

**PM:** What I like so much about this work, and I have to say that this was a point at which I stopped being really interested in your work and fell in love with your work because of what you're describing, about if Braille ceases to be produced as a medium for blind people that they will not be able to read, so just that idea that reading is not a visual act. Whether it's for sighted people or blind people, reading is this performative act and that one has to engage in a really particular way in order to read.

**CW:** It's such a personal way.

**PM:** Personal, yes. Looking at this body of work made me rethink so many other bodies of work that you've produced, and really about how one accesses knowledge.



Catherine Wagner. Moss Landing Elementary School, 7th and 8th Grade Science Room, Moss Landing, CA from the series American Classroom, 1983; 20 x 24 in.

Courtesy of the Artist and Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco.

Catherine Wagner. Moss Landing Elementary School, 7th and 8th Grade Science Room, Moss Landing, CA from the series American Classroom, 1983; 20 x 24 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco.

**CW:** If you think about the bodies of work that I've done over thirty-plus years, and they're all so

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seemingly different—I say “seemingly” different because I feel that they're built on the platform of the dissemination of knowledge, and that's much of what I'm trying to do. Right after the Moscone [series], I did this book called *American Classroom* where I'm looking at all the different clues that are left on the blackboard, all the different ways in which it reveals who we are as a culture, our aspirations, what is it that we're endeavoring to do, how is knowledge formed. So that question about knowledge and the dissemination of knowledge has been the catalyst, I think, for almost all of my work. When I say that there's a formal difference to a lot of what I'm doing, but the linkages and the lineages about knowledge are, I think, built upon that platform.

**PM:** Conceptually we're talking about your work and the dissemination of knowledge. Everything is driven from the object in all of your series, [yet] there are no actual humans present in these images, which is something I'm fascinated by. So it's about the projection, but there is something missing from the reception.

**CW:** I feel like all of my work is talking about who we are culturally. I'm making all sorts of comments about who we are as a culture or who people are, but I'm not photographing a portrait. Like in *American Classroom*, I photograph the classroom boards or the desks, or the task at hand, and there's the implied presence of people, but I'm not concentrating on the specificity of a portrait because the moment I do that it becomes about that person, and I'm trying to talk in much broader cultural strokes.

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For over thirty years Catherine Wagner has been observing the built environment as a metaphor for how we construct our cultural identities. She's examined institutions as various as art museums and science labs, the home and Disneyland. Ms. Wagner's process involves the investigation of what art critic David Bonetti calls "the systems people create, our love of order, our ambition to shape the world, the value we place on knowledge, and the tokens we display to express ourselves."

While Ms. Wagner has spent her life residing in California, she has also been an active international artist, working photographically, as well as in site-specific public art, and lecturing extensively at museums and universities. She has received many major awards, including the Rome Prize (2013–2014), a Guggenheim Fellowship, NEA Fellowships, and the Ferguson Award. In 2001 Ms. Wagner was named one of Time Magazine's Fine Arts Innovators of the Year. Her work is represented in major collections nationally and around the world, such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, SFMOMA, the Whitney Museum of American Art, MOMA, and MFA Houston. She has also published several monographs, including *American Classroom*, *Art & Science: Investigating Matter*, and *Cross Sections*.

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