

Redeeming Organ III, (detail), 2000
INK PRINT, 14 X 24 IN., COURTESY FITZGERALD WERTZ GALLERY AND
JACK SHAPIRO GALLERY

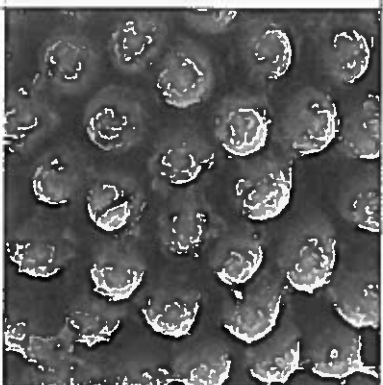
Closer

GLEN HELFAND

The

FOUNDATIONS OF MODERN
LIFE—make that all life—
are often difficult to actually

SEE. They are complex, ostensibly hidden things like skeletons, architectural supports, ecosystems, and computer software. While often the seemingly inimitable products of evolution, time-honored building techniques, research, and scientifically "proven" theories, their invisibility imbues them with a sense of the mystical, of wonder. It relates to the kind of awe that goes with considering a single snowflake, close up. But you can't behold the



geometric beauty of its form casually—it requires a process of thought, an engagement with the world, and perhaps most importantly, the right tools.

Catherine Wagner has consistently worked with the concept of foundations. Her art reveals the basic structures that support life in all its guises—physical, intellectual, technological, and emotional. In the act of uncovering them, she shows us the formal beauty inherent in their function. Wagner investigates her subject matter to get to its core of meaning, as well as its visual properties. There is an

Redeeming Organ III, 2000
INK PRINT, 14 X 24 IN., COURTESY FITZGERALD WERTZ GALLERY AND
JACK SHAPIRO GALLERY



Charles T. Wagner, *Astronaut*, 1990
THREE SEVEN SLIVER PRINT, 10 x 14 IN.
COLLECTION OF THE WILSON FOUNDATION ART MUSEUM

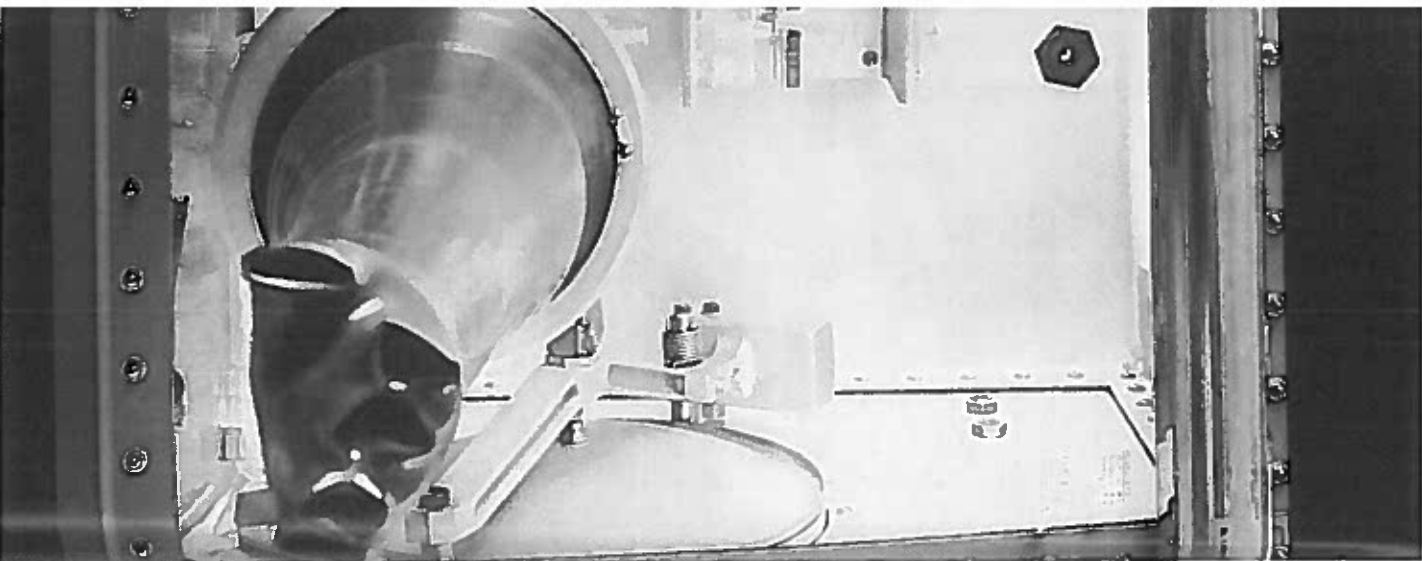
insistence and authority to her work, attributes that stem from the purity of her practice of going in deep and then presenting her findings. The process has a distinct parallel to scientific process—an apt if somewhat problematic comparison, since science is often equated with that which is arduous, cool, and clinical. Wagner is very much an artist, and her findings, while they make visible the systems, tools, and foundations that support both nature and culture, give equal weight to their rich aesthetic qualities.

Over the past twenty years, Wagner has created distinct series of images that, while each being distinctly different in appearance, together form a cohesive and continuing narrative of investigation and discovery. In the early and mid-1980s, she looked at structures of architecture, photographing the rising rebar skeletons of San Francisco's Moscone Center—a monumental architectural backbone that has many implications for urban life and its renewal. Subsequently, she concentrated on places of learning and constructed paradigms of knowledge in her *American Classroom* series, and the idea of domestic order with still life images of the home in *Home and Other Stories*. In two commissioned projects, *Radiation and Illusion: Catherine Wagner Photographs the Disney Theme Parks*, at the Centre Canadien d'Architecture, and *Museum Piece*, at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco, she explored the support structures—the wires and painted backdrops—behind the magic of Disney illusion, and the infrastructure elements that hold together a museum display. These latter works are images that fuse the representational forms and hardware of entertainment, history, and culture.

In the 1990s, Wagner entered into scientific laboratories and photographed the sterilized beakers, petri dishes, and microscope slides smeared with bone tissue housed inside them. The resulting photographs, exhibited and published as *Art & Science: Investigating Matter* in 1996, offer uncommon glimpses into places where important ideas are formed and qualified, but which bear the marks of ragged humanness. Lab bottles are scribbled upon, and freezers full of important cancer and human genome research specimens resemble something from a neglected domestic fridge. Such images demystify the scientific realm, yet not completely: Wagner's images show us places that are still rather foreign, and the unexpected beauty of their presentation gives us cause to wonder about them.

Be they composed studio "portraits" of equipment or depictions of actual labs (some fittingly pristine, others humanly cluttered), the *Art & Science* photographs, a series started in 1992 (preceding the late-1990s fashion for art about science), show objects both mundane and foreign, imbued with the aura of research and knowledge. The scientific subjects are informed by prescribed practices, formulas, and tools. Many are things actually used in the Human Genome Project, which successfully cracked DNA code, the backbone of life. While the laboratory is informed by sets of rules, discovery frequently happens through a process of breaking rules, by thinking creatively or intuitively. That kind of thinking has a clear connection to art-making.

Conceptually, the *Art & Science* series paved the way to *Cross Sections*, Wagner's remarkable recent pictures, made between 1998 and 2001. In these new works, the



artix has moved closer to the core of life, not to mention scientific research, by literally and figuratively looking at cellular replication. They are pictures realized with medical imaging devices—the mri (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) and ssa (Scanning Electron Microscopy)—and by reconfiguring visual data compiled by scientists in their research. mri is a complex tool that can reveal cross-section views of living or inanimate elements. As objects, imaging devices are akin to the old-fashioned tools, the baskets and rubes, she had previously photographed in laboratories.

The images Wagner has created with those technologies show us a picture of contemporary science. Almost all of what currently goes on in major research labs takes place on a molecular level. The findings are not visible to either the unaided human eye or a mind that has not been primed with intricate formulae. If you're not in the field, you're just as mystified by what to do with a pipette stand as how to interpret a scan of a shark's tooth. But both are inherently intriguing.

For this series, Wagner had to expand her practice to work with new digital tools—image capturing and outputting—and widen her artistic foundation by reconsidering the processes and implications of the traditional camera lens. Because medical imaging devices are relatively rare and expensive pieces of equipment, *Cross Sections* required a great degree of collaboration with both art and scientific institutions. Its inspiration and realization followed a trajectory of research and development. In 1997 Wagner received a Visual Arts Fellowship from the San Jose Museum of Art to create a new body of work, an award that enabled her to continue her investigations into the objects of scientific inquiry in the technology- and research-rich Silicon Valley.

She began working with the mri in labs at Stanford University, where she started her "experiments" with pomegranates (and later, other fruits and vegetables), placing them in the mri and creating cross-sectioned interior images that are complex and formally striking. She worked with the resulting data to create pieces for this exhibition, including the monumental *Pomegranate Wall*, an 8 by 40 foot curved, illuminated wall composed of backlit images of the interior of a pomegranate. The sequence of repeating images,

which Wagner composed from mri-gathered data, emulates the process of cell replication while acknowledging the fruit's rich corporeal symbolism.

In 1998, soon after beginning her work at Stanford, Wagner received another fellowship from The American Committee for the Weizmann Institute of Science, supporters of the world-class research facility in Rehovot, Israel. Weizmann is a rare multidisciplinary facility that exists purely for the pursuit of knowledge—without corporate support—and has made many discoveries in the realms of medicine, brain research, plant and environmental sciences, and mathematics. Wagner eventually continued her mri research and image making in the Weizmann laboratories during two two-week residencies. During these visits to the camp-like setting, she also looked at archives of scientific research from which she appropriated for artistic purposes.

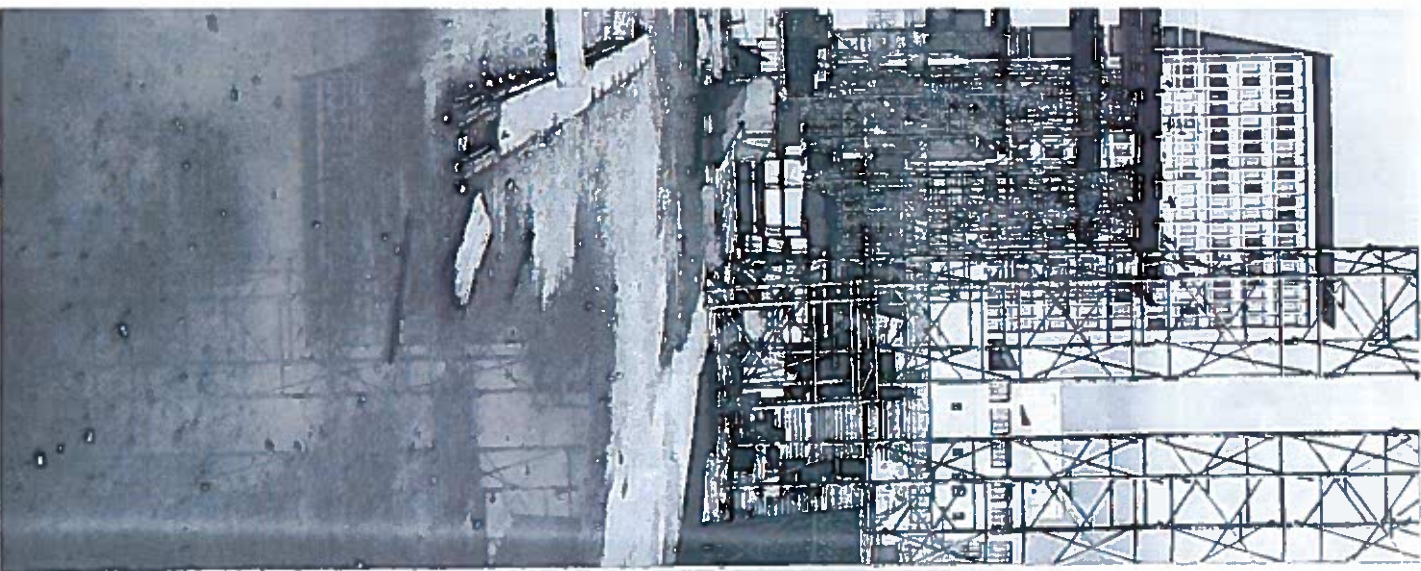
In the process of working there, Wagner became increasingly aware of the parallel practices of artists and scientists. Like the scientists, she spent extended periods of time working on a specific project. She used the same equipment and data as the scientists, but arrived at distinctly different, yet equally valid results.

Like a long-term scientific project, the *Cross Sections* images are a continuation of Wagner's ongoing interest in foundations. With these new works, she has entered a distinct new phase of her research. Whereas her earlier projects are visibly identifiable depictions of buildings and objects, the images here, by virtue of their up-close, internal perspective, appear dazzlingly abstracted. While these digitally produced pictures may even seem to be the product of something other than photography, in fact, each cross section is as crisply rendered as one of Wagner's earlier gelatin silver prints.

The *Cross Sections* works are running in their beauty, yet they point to how unfamiliar we are with our own omnipresent foundations. We find in these images an energized tension between their visual appeal and the challenge to understand just what they reveal. Wagner manages to make the process reassuring as she brings us inside, closer to our core than we may ever have been before.

Clara Bae, 1993
CLARIFIED SPACE PART II, #2 of 40 1/2",
COLLECTED BY THE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY GALLERY OF ART, ST. LOUIS,
UNIVERSITY MICROFILMS, SILICON VALLEY

BRITISH
Breath of Life—Ilse Crawford, 1994
27 PANELS, CRYSTOL, CRYSTAL & SILVER PAPER,
14 1/2 x 10 1/8" EACH, COURTESY OF ATTITUDE WHITE GALLERY



BETWEEN Science AND Wonder

CORNELIA BUTLER

Some

YEARS AGO, WHEN I undertook the daunting task of teaching the history of American art, I was struck by a defining impulse in the American creative psyche. Amidst that four hundred or so year span, which encompasses the simple logic of early Native American architecture and the triumphant chaos of Abstract Expressionism as well as scads of colonial portraiture early on—flat, clumsy representations that initiate



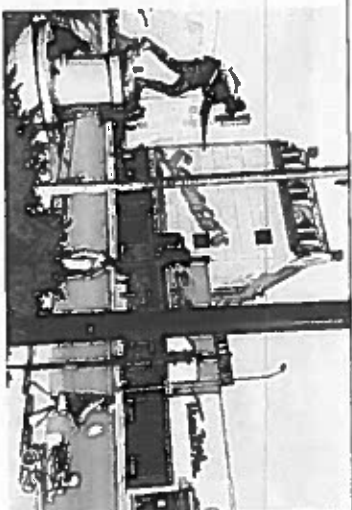
Charles Willson Peale, *The Drift in the Museum*, 1801. Oil on canvas, 10 1/2 x 17 1/8 in., courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Gift of Mrs. Sarah Harrison (the Ralph H. Harrison, Jr. collection), 1974. 21

Europe and must be memorized rather than understood—there emerges a clear obsession with science or, rather, a struggle to empirically understand and represent human industry. More broadly, this can be seen as a struggle with morality and a kind of native and often violent tug of war with time that has characterized American culture since its colonial beginnings. There is, for example, the beautiful

portrait *Boy with a Squirrel*, by John Singleton Copley, in which a boy dextrously while the exquisite pet squirrel and glass of water overlook the painting in the clarity and loveliness of their rendering. Copley repeatedly executed pictures in which he exercised his painterly virtuosity in crystalline representations of material objects, a painted inventory of daily existence. It is this restrained need to tacitly embody a kind of national self-discovery, to picture the every day of the self-made American citizen thriving in the land of opportunity, a proud combination of what Benjamin Franklin called industry and frugality, that distinguishes Copley's paintings from those of his contemporaries in the mid-eighteenth century.

In the nineteenth century, this tradition is continued by the remarkable Peale family of artists. Working in the creative center of Philadelphia, Charles Wilson Peale had an early career as a portrait painter and, in 1821, rendered his famous *The Artist in His Museum*, a kind of history painting as self-portrait, which invites the viewer to experience the artist's menagerie of art, history, and the natural world. In the scene depicted, taxidermied animals fill the shelves, the artist's palette and brushes rest between commissions, and visitors mingle with artifacts assembled in his constructed world. Also a practitioner of trompe l'oeil, Peale was one of the founders of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, one of the nation's first institutions devoted to the fostering of art practice as a discrete cultural discipline. Thomas Eakins would later show his controversial *The Gross Clinic* here as well as his experimental photographs, which recorded the effects of light and mood he tried to achieve in his paintings.

In her introductory essay on Catherine Wagner's photographic series *Home and Other Stories*,¹ fiction writer Anne Lamott describes the human need, evidenced in Wagner's poignant black and white portraits of the interiors of people's homes, to prove our own existence. In Wagner's pictures we do this through the accumulation and careful arrangement of things, the clutter and stuff of daily life on display. The uniquely American character of the information presented is striking, as neutrally presented in Wagner's triptychs: a kind of creeping class envy evident in the furnishings and faux-everything decor, the national obsession with sports, and the display of religious piety. In the context of other work, Wagner has



Lee Friedlander, *The American Menagerie: Dogday, Sunday, Caesarsville*, 1974 (oil on paper, 7 1/2 x 5 1/2 in., this artist's or contemporary art, Los Angeles, the Allen M. Robinson Foundation Photographic Collection)

described her own lofty goal of charting, as she says, who we are and who we will become—of locating a culture under construction.² In fact, the artist's career suggests a restless trajectory that itself attempts to map our efforts to make meaning through the rather Protestant, American ethics of industry and frugality. The built-in failure of this project, the impossibility of representing this cultural tension, is what propels Wagner forward to each new body of work. Her interest in documenting something as intangible as the desire to annotate our existence is complicated further by her simultaneous belief in photographs as evidence and her embrace of quite subjective means of constructing an image and a body of work. Like her predecessor, Lee Friedlander, in his conceptually based photographs of the early 1970s, Wagner fundamentally adheres to the notion of photograph as document, while self-consciously including herself as observer in the pictures. In her series *American Classroom*, for example, Wagner journeyed across the country, equipped like Robert Frank with a Guggenheim grant and very little in the way of an itinerary, to photograph spaces of learning. Capturing these institutional sites without imposing any hierarchy in terms of the type of school represented, Wagner is interested in the photographs' functioning as pure information. There is a resolute blankness to these pictures, an effort to let the residual human presence speak for itself. Wagner's view is epistemological rather than moral. Traces of the mundane—globes and maps, labels, chairs, bags, or a child's "I don't know"

1. ANNE LAMOTT, "Standard Story," in *Home and Other Stories: The essays by Catherine Wagner by Susan Cookson*, (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991), p. 11.

2. CATHERINE WAGNER, "Vanderbilt Avenue," in *Catherine Wagner: Art and Space Investigating Memory by Cecilia Lealvy*, with essay by William H. Gass and Helen E. Longino (St. Louis: William H. Gass and Helen E. Longino Foundation Gallery of Art, 1991), p. 6.

Catherine Wagner, *Daylight, Sunlight, Cameraman*, 1978
1/8 x 1/8, 111/2 x 111/2 in., courtesy of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles,
BANK OF AMERICA FOUNDATION PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTION



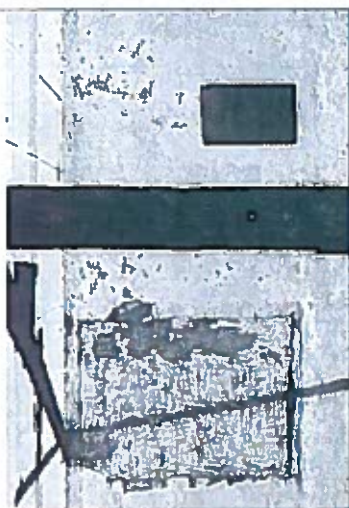
goal of charting, as she says, who we are—of locating a culture under construction suggests a restless trajectory that our efforts to make meaning through the screen ethics of industry and frugality, this project, the impossibility of representation, is what people Wagner forward to look. Her interest in documenting some—the desire to annotate our existence in her simultaneous belief in photographs as a body of work. Like her predecessor, Wagner journeyed across the country, tank with a Cugentheim grant and very itinerant, to photograph spaces of team-mutualities without imposing any type of school represented. Wagner is a graphic functioning as pure information, almost to these pictures, an effort to let essence speak for itself. Wagner's view is than moral. Traces of the mundane—charts, tags, or a child's "I don't know"

1. CATHERINE WAGNER, *Daylight, Sunlight, Cameraman*, 1978, 1/8 x 1/8, 111/2 x 111/2 in., courtesy of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Bank of America Foundation Photography Collection.

In her book *The Art of Daylight, Sunlight, Cameraman*, Catherine Wagner explores the relationship between photography and the construction of a culture. She argues that photography is not just a means of recording the world, but a way of creating a new reality. She discusses the role of the camera in the construction of a culture, and how it can be used to create a new reality. She also discusses the role of the camera in the construction of a culture, and how it can be used to create a new reality.

The *Daylight, Sunlight, Cameraman* project is a series of photographs that Wagner took while traveling across the United States. The project is a series of photographs that Wagner took while traveling across the United States. The project is a series of photographs that Wagner took while traveling across the United States. The project is a series of photographs that Wagner took while traveling across the United States.

Catherine Wagner, *Nimrod, California*, 1976
CATHERINE WAGNER, 1/8 x 1/8, 111/2 x 111/2 in., courtesy of STEINBERG WHITE GALLERY



scrawled in letters that fill an empty chalkboard—operate as cultural detritus, providing clues about the construction of knowledge.

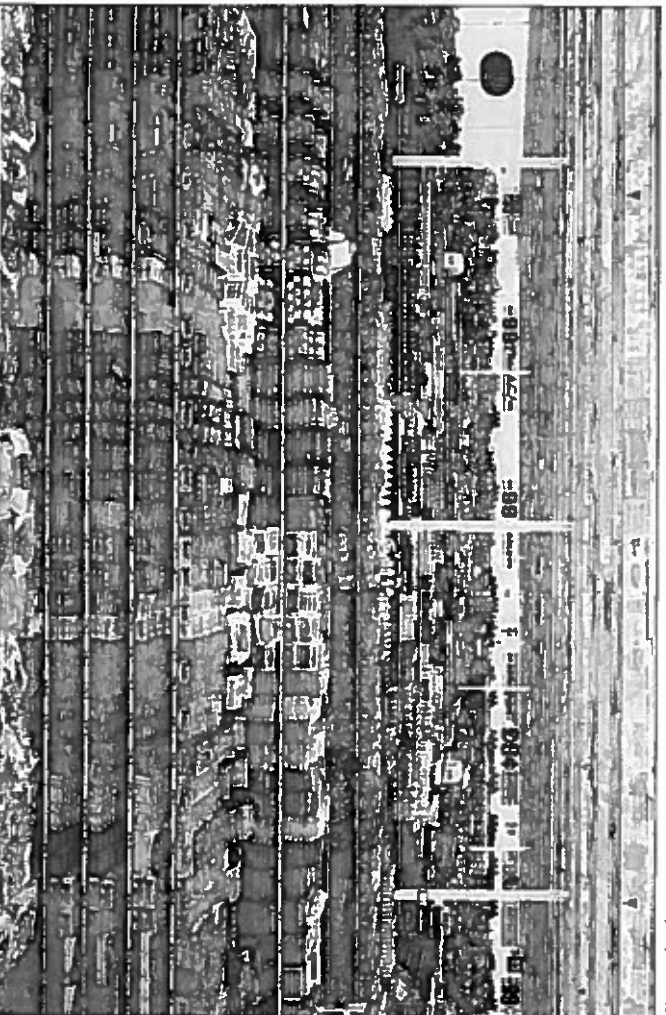
Wagner has always been seduced by sites of construction and, while never overtly political, there is in her work a consistent, residual social inscription embedded in the imagery. In her *California Landscapes* (1976-1979) and photographs of the Moscone Center in San Francisco under construction (1979-1981), she juxtaposes a strong architectural formal sensibility with a sort of micro view of texture in the urban landscape. Borrowing from Friedlander's collapsed abstraction of city intersections and urban space in his *American Memoranda*, and Aaron Siskind's reductive black and white abstractions of the cityscape, Wagner's views are somehow less formal exercises than the one and grimmer than the other. The San Francisco site pictures sit on the brink between the romantic turn of the century of its past and the high-tech, dot-com infrastructure that threatens to overtake the future. The Moscone site is particularly ironic in this regard, the city's Mission District now completely transformed and, some would say, compromised by the new economy. Like *Louisiana World Exposition* (1981), *American Clairvoyant* (1983-1986), and a 1998 commission to photograph Disneyland, initiated by the Canadian Center for Architecture and noted by certain critics as quietly subversive,⁵ Moscone Center is a relic from the preglobal culture, a site of idealism

which no longer makes sense. That she could somehow capture this juncture in pictures made in the early 1980s is what is remarkable and present about this series, and, in part, she accomplishes this by creating ambiguity by disallowing a political critique and by photographing often from within the site. Her viewpoint and our float on the horizon, getting us into the body and guts of the mountain building under construction, what Sherry Conkleton has called "the history painting" of significant monuments built by some consensual agreement.⁶ The partial arch, the scaffolding, the strange scalelessness of a massive section of land exposed are all formal tropes that get reworked in *Cruel Section*, the current M1 (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) inspired work. By locating her pictures literally at ground zero of the construction zone, Wagner is interested in recording the anxiety at the heart of the culture that creates this consensus.

Recent writing about art and technology or art and science often lingers on strategies of critique, which are specifically not part of Wagner's project. Concurrent with her more neutral *California Landscapes*, photographers such as Lewis Baltz and Robert Adams made deeply pessimistic pictures of the relationship of suburban culture and construction to the vanishing landscape of the West. Many artists currently working with digital technology make imagery that either embraces the new factor of technology's facts or is critical of its stranglehold on twenty-first-century life. There is a confusion around even the language that encompasses the various so-called new technologies, particularly in relationship to photography. Artists such as the German photographer Andreas Gursky, who digitally alter their images, now the most primitive form of technological intervention, are still lumped together with emerging artist Jeremy Blake, for example, whose liquid crystal screen projections are unrecognizable as photographs, paintings, or video-based art works. Like Gursky's glorious doctored pictures of the architecture of urban, commodity culture, Wagner's use of digital processes to build her most recent pictures need not be mentioned except as a means to a resulting image—images of excellent clarity and dazzling finish whose contents reflect the moment in which they were made.

In many ways the origin of Wagner's current work with science and new technology lies in her

5. SHERRY CONKLETON, *History and Other Stories*, 1991, 1/8 x 1/8, 111/2 x 111/2 in., courtesy of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Bank of America Foundation Photography Collection.



Andrew Curry, 99 cm, 1990
CHROMOLITH PRINT, 24 OF 4, 81-8 1/2 x 13 1/8 in., THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART,
LOS ANGELES, PARTIAL COPY OF AERIAL AND TWO OTHER
CONTEMPORARY PICTORIAL PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES

revisioning of the American classroom. Just as she refused to distinguish between kinds of educational facilities—a military classroom receiving the same formal treatment as a religious or technical school—the also readily admits to a peculiarly ambivalent relationship to science and its practitioners. Her awe for the processes of science itself and respect for the pursuit of knowledge lead her to appreciate the possible nature of questioning that proper both artistic and scientific investigation. Contrary to other technologically based artwork, there is an optimism within Wigner's wide-eyed interest in the beauty, for example, of an MRI scan. Rather than being enslaved by the technology, she finds working with both the subject of science

and its tools of discovery liberating and feels free to engage in the abstraction of the act of looking and the chasing down of evidence. Deploying scientific imaging devices as the world a camera, Wigner's method is to seek the simultaneous moment of the outside and inside. Conclusion describes this aspect of wonder in Wigner's work:

[Her] method is distinctly nonauthoritarian and relativistic, polemical if not political in its disregard for the authority of systems and their evaluating methods. . . . She deliberately diverges theories that exist only as philosophical paradigms from . . . admits not to the limitation of reason but to the primacy of

Catherine Wigner, *Alfred University, Science Classroom, Alfred, New York (detail)*, 1957
CHROMOLITH PRINT, 24 OF 4, 81-8 1/2 x 13 1/8 in., COURTESY OF STEPHEN WINTER GALLERY

Catherine Wagner, *Ship II*, 1999
C-PRINT, 40 X 72 IN., COURTESY OF STEPHEN WIRTH GALLERY



Paul, p. 8

looking. Her entire construct is focused on encouraging the viewer to look beyond empirical theoretical notions and consider the possibility of looking in order to perceive.⁵

The last pictures in *American Classroom* coincide with the time when Wagner got interested in science, which anticipated her later investigation of the Human Genome Project and the philosophical boundaries transgressed within its wake. Several pictures made in 1987, *Mère d'une des Vitaines School, Sixth Grade Classroom*, *Observing Shiri Protective Role*, *San Francisco, California, 1987, Calitanga Elementary School, Sixth Grade Science Classroom*, *Germination Experiment, Calitanga, California*, and *Alfred University, Science Classroom, Alfred, New York*, are close-up images of apples, seeds, and frogs, poignantly arranged in the service of the most basic scientific exploration. What captures Wagner's imagination are the parallels with the solitary, labeled canisters and beakers containing the life fluids of the Human Genome Project. The slippage between what she utters—being and intimacy is beautifully expressed in these elementary

investigations, which teach children to be inquisitive about both.⁶ There is also a sense of indulgent visual pleasure in how these pictures are arranged. The frogs are photographed from above, creating a flattened patterning of spotted skin, which formally anticipates the abstraction that overrules the relentless abstraction of works like the monumental *Pennygrammer Hall* from the recent *Cross Section* body of work.

In these recent digitally constructed images, which include such disparate materials as a pumpkin, a pomegranate, an onion, and the cross section of a heart, the natural patterns are serialized in dizzying ad infinitum. Instead of the subjectivity expressed in the household objects in *Frame and Other Stories*, the materials of science—a heart—are juxtaposed with the mundane beauty of a fruit or vegetable. While sleek and digitally produced, these pictures engage in a "science" seemingly as primitive as that of the American classroom's science fair aesthetic. This is Wagner taking liberties with technology's seriousness and muckling with the process of discovery. The static insularity of the *Art* and *Science* pictures, the cold

⁵ Conversation with the artist, December 15, 1999.

Catherine Wagner, *Ship II*, 1999
Oil on canvas, 60 x 72 in., courtesy of JEFFREY WHITE GALLERY



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Construction with the
artist, December 19,
1999

and

James Welling, *Schylak*, 1996
Oil on canvas, 60 x 72 in., THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES,
GIFT OF THE ARTIST AND BLOOM PROJECT



futility of vials of “bunny serum” occupying the same freezer cubicle with “tumor tissue” or “colon amplicon,” is neutralized in the recent work. Equally intrigued by a heart or an onion, Wagner embraces the anarchic anti-hierarchy of digital technology and indulges in the beauty of the world beyond vision. The laboratory is the artist’s cabinet of curiosities, filled with objects of wonder and the results of human activity.

Wagner has described this work and her process as physically reversing the way we see by beginning with the cellular or most intimate or incidental view and backing into the wider picture.³ In a recent commission for the exhibition *Museum Piece* at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, a group of artists including Wagner were commissioned to respond to the collection in its soon-to-be renovated home. Invited to more formally embark on a kind of institutional critique in this way, Wagner selected the museum’s storage as the subject of her work. The resulting photograph perfectly embodies an institution on the brink of a twenty-first-century overhaul from the nineteenth-century museum model of the cabinet of curiosities to the new high-tech mausoleum in which the tracking of objects occurs with the click of a mouse. The gorgeous, monumental color picture is a somehow touching portrait of an armature which supports the storage of smaller

armatures for housing sculptures. Replete with museum tags, strings, and wires, relics from the predigital archive, the fragile structure exists as an object of wonder on its own. foregrounding this poignant metaphor—the support structure for the high cultural institution—Wagner’s picture falls into a decades-long tradition which begins with Conceptual Art and artists such as Sol LeWitt, with whom the artist feels an affinity greater, perhaps, than with her predecessors in photographic history. Her contemporaries using photography—James Welling, Christopher Williams, or Gunby, among other German photographers, such as Candida Hofer—are all engaged in a kind of visual archiving of culture with a keen eye for visual pleasure. Like the realms of science with which Wagner has gingerly engaged, the economics of knowledge in which the museum participates can also seem primitive and fragile when exposed at their most elemental levels. From brain scan science to museology, anything begins to look like a cottage industry when you look closely enough.

For now, Wagner looks forward to getting back, as she says, to looking at the world. Her next project, still germinating, will focus on landscapes of technological detritus. Appropriately enough, she wants to know what happens to all the equipment that enables this global culture. What does a computer graveyard look like, and what does it mean? After isolating an insider world with its own logic, a microscopic world not in the world but somehow beyond it, she looks forward to again looking through the back of the camera.

