

CRISTIN TIERNEY

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

ArtSeen

## Victor Burgin: *Photopath*

By James Welling



Installation view: *Victor Burgin: Photopath*, Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy the Artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

For his recent show at the Cristin Tierney Gallery, Victor Burgin installed a single work, *Photopath* (1967–69). Last seen in New York in the 1971 Guggenheim International, this pioneering site-specific photographic installation returned, like a brilliant comet from a distant galaxy.

*Photopath* runs diagonally across the gallery space and is composed of twenty-one color inkjet prints of, and glued precisely over, the gallery floor. According to David Company, who wrote an entire book on *Photopath* (MACK, 2022) this version is the seventh iteration of the

## CRISTIN TIERNEY

work. Each time *Photopath* is remade, Burgin refers to the following instructions he first set down in the late 1960's: *A path along the floor, of proportions 1 × 21 units, photographed. Photographs printed to actual size of objects and prints attached to floor so that images are perfectly congruent with their objects.*

*Photopath* was created in an edition of one with a single artist proof. Company tells us that this unique edition is owned by a Belgian collector and that Burgin holds the artist proof to authorize subsequent installations. The instructions that guide *Photopath* are surprisingly flexible, and the media and dimensions can vary with every reinstallation. For instance, the choice of black and white or color photographs is not specified in the instructions. Perhaps because C-prints were costly and had limited color fidelity in the late 1960s, color photography was not entertained as an option and the first five installations of *Photopath* were made using black and white materials. The two most recent—first in Chicago in 2011 and then this year at Tierney—were produced digitally as color inkjet prints, with their concomitant lower cost and improved color accuracy. As such, *Photopath*'s linguistic flexibility allows it to keep pace with changes in the technology. One could imagine a *Photopath* installed in 2073 with yet-to-be-invented photosensitive gels. Another example of the openness of Burgin's prompt is that the proportions of the twenty-one units are not indicated. Squares? Rectangles? Trapezoids? Circles? It is extremely difficult to install *Photopath* exactly congruent with the floor. Perhaps the twenty-one rectangular units offer the intrepid installer a flexible cushion to correct miniscule errors as they crop up.



## CRISTIN TIERNEY

Installation view: *Victor Burgin: Photopath*, Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy the Artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

Nowadays most large photographs are attached to a substrate before they are hung on a wall. With *Photopath* the substrate is horizontal, and this planar orientation aligns the work with domestic rugs and protective floor mats. In December 2011 *Photopath* was included in *Light Years: Conceptual Art and the Photograph, 1964–1977* at the Art Institute of Chicago. After the conclusion of the show, *Photopath* was stripped from the floor and a faint, discolored oblong, the exact size of the work, appeared. During the run of the exhibition the inkjet prints masked the floor from the blanching effects of daylight, thereby producing a solar “contact print.”

Contact prints date to the very beginnings of photography. Photosensitive paper was placed in contact with a negative, exposed to light, and processed. Because optics were not involved, contact prints exhibited exceptional sharpness, and this acutance prompted early modernist photographers to view them as a stand-in for “the thing itself.” With the advent of smaller film formats and the greater light sensitivity of photographic paper, prints enlarged from small negatives became the norm and contact printing retreated to industrial processes such as the production of architectural blueprints and computer memory chips.

Even though black-and-white versions of *Photopath* were made from enlarged medium-format negatives, the isomorphic relation of object and photograph produced what I would call a “metaphoric” contact print. It is as if, somehow, the hardwood, brick, or terrazzo below projects itself auto-mimetically up onto the photographic paper. This metaphor recalls the traditional practice of taking rubbings off textured objects such as metal plaques or tombstones. In snapshots of *Photopath* laid down on rough floors in early exhibitions, the work resembles a gigantic rubbing made with sticks of compressed graphite.

Judging from a 1969 color image published in Campany’s book that shows *Photopath* installed at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, black-and-white iterations of the piece stood out glaringly from the natural wood floorboards. When I saw *Photopath* in the 1971 Guggenheim International, the black and white prints serendipitously matched the value and color of the gray terrazzo of the museum floor. From some angles, *Photopath* submerged completely into the monochrome stone and became nearly invisible. When I moved around the piece, and the angle of the light changed, the outline and the surface of the photographs reappeared, completely visible now against the sloping floor.

A few weeks ago, I went to the Alex Katz retrospective at the Guggenheim and located the exact section of the museum incline, just above the Thannhauser Collection, where *Photopath* was installed in 1971. I looked for some residue of the work but, unlike at the Art Institute, no visible index remained.

The 1971 Guggenheim International is largely remembered for the controversial removal of French artist Daniel Buren’s monumental “curtain” *Peinture-Sculpture* (1971) from the center bay of the museum before the exhibition opened. When I saw the show, I was completely oblivious to this controversy. *Photopath* was right at home with what I saw as the themes of the International—namely site-specificity, actual size, and bodily engagement with works. Jan

## CRISTIN TIERNEY

Dibbets showed a sequence of site-specific color slides projected on a screen in the lobby of the museum. A little up the museum ramp Michael Heizer positioned industrial-strength projectors that beamed black and white lantern slides of “actual size” photographs of gigantic boulders found in a quarry. Farther up the museum spiral Robert Morris placed exercise paraphernalia and floor mats in several bays along with recorded encouragement to “Do something with the ball, do something on the mat.”

Like the Dibbets slide piece, *Photopath* was specific to the Guggenheim. It was “actual size” like Heizer’s projections. And, as with Morris’s recorded exhortations, the work required physical interactivity. The viewer saw *Photopath* on the floor and altered course to avoid stepping on it as they progressed up the museum ramp. Or not. Judging from a vintage installation photograph, by the end of the show *Photopath* was covered with grubby footprints.



Installation view: *Victor Burgin: Photopath*, Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy the Artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein.

At the opening of the Tierney exhibition, one was instructed not to step on *Photopath*. This prohibition divided the room diagonally, with viewers dancing around a dead center of inkjet prints on the floor. When I returned to the gallery to see the show in daylight, I had a similar experience to the one I had had at the Guggenheim, but with a twist. As at the Guggenheim, from some vantage points I could see the entire strip of photographs standing visually apart from the

## CRISTIN TIERNEY

polished floorboards. And, as in 1971, from other positions, the entire work magically vanished. But at Tierney, from still other spots, only sections of *Photopath* submerged into the floor while, a foot to the left or right, the work remained discernable as matte inkjet prints. This phenomenon produced a vertiginous “checkerboard” of visible/invisible, on/off sections of *Photopath*.

*Photopath* at Tierney overlapped with the blockbuster *Cubism and the Trompe l’Oeil Tradition* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This sprawling exhibition tracked paintings created to “deceive the eye” from the mid-seventeenth century to Cubism. A few days after the Burgin opening, I went to the Met with Matt Mullican to see his favorite trompe l’oeil painting, Jefferson David Chalfant’s tiny *Which is Which?* (ca. 1890). Chalfant’s curious work presents an actual four-cent stamp pasted next to an almost perfect re-presentation of the same stamp in oil paint. While Chalfant’s stamps did not overlap as photograph and floor do in *Photopath*, I experienced a similar sensation of representational vertigo from this tiny painting.

*Photopath*’s trompe l’oeil verisimilitude uncannily anticipates the computer-generated video and image-based work Burgin has exhibited over the past few years. *Young Oaks*, presented at Tierney in 2020, used gaming software to create pairs of images depicting empty rooms that were inspired by the paintings of Danish artist Vilhelm Hammershøi. Burgin described *Young Oaks* as part of his larger “open project,” *Afterlife* (2019–ongoing). *Afterlife* contains images that run alongside a text that narrates a bittersweet science fiction fable of missed romantic connections in a digitally preserved hereafter. For *Young Oaks*, Burgin wrote that *Afterlife* proposed a dynamic interplay “between material reality and the virtual realities of memory, fantasy and computer simulations.” Fifty-two years ago, how many viewers standing in the Guggenheim rotunda could have imagined that *Photopath* would have anticipated so precisely our contemporary fixation with “computer simulations” of reality?