

CRISTIN TIERNEY

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

Victor Burgin: *Photopath*

By **Hearne Pardee**



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

ON VIEW

Cristin Tierney Gallery

Victor Burgin: Photopath

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In anticipation of the artist's autumn retrospective at the Jeu de Paume, Cristin Tierney is showing *Photopath* (1967–69) a seminal early work by multimedia artist and theorist Victor Burgin. Operating at the intersection of vision and language, of art and everyday life, *Photopath* anticipates Burgin's lifelong preoccupations with semiotics, psychoanalysis, and narrative. As computer-generated art and photo-saturated social media arouse present day public concerns, Burgin offers a sovereign overview of our relationship to images. Burgin completed graduate studies at Yale in 1967 under the tutelage of Donald Judd and Robert Morris as the "sculptural object" was under attack. Seeing his problem as making a "non-material sculpture," Burgin took a conceptual leap and reduced his work to a set of specifications typed on an index card:

"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's subsequent wide recognition helped establish the rule-based concept as a strategy for art, even as Burgin's later investigations probed the complex subjectivities of visual images. Burgin's timing was propitious.

As Sol LeWitt began his series of conceptual wall drawings, executed according to his own verbal instructions while incidentally extending an age-old tradition, Burgin adopted the floor and the modern camera. Activated by Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, the floor had been claimed for sculpture by Carl Andre with his grids of metal plates, but Burgin's photo collage introduced a phenomenological shift. In 1967, photography still occupied an "in between" zone that was attractive to Burgin's theoretical instincts (he cites Ludwig Wittgenstein on the problem of looking at something and thinking about it at the same time). Linked to commercial printing and Pop art, photography's seductive rendering of textures and details, enhanced by developments in print technology that rendered its surface ever more glossy and transparent, also evoked the trompe l'oeil tradition associated with Georges Braque's collages of artificial woodgrains. The appeal of *Photopath's* conceptual layering lies in this "reality effect" in what Burgin later called "the condition of pure virtuality." His concept of congruence evokes the indexical purity of Man Ray's photograms, direct prints of objects placed on photographic paper. Attention is aroused, desires engaged.



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Documentation of past *Photopaths* shows the “path” placed at an angle to the regular grid of the floor, as it is at Cristin Tierney, in a performative gesture that sets up a formal interaction where the work’s edges are visible. Early versions reproduced the floor in black and white prints, emphasizing photography’s “system of representation” in contrast to the natural floor materials and resisting the illusion of color reproduction, but here it’s in color—twenty-one 18-inch square prints attached to the floor with double-sided carpet tape. Paths have romantic connotations, suggesting mythical narratives and implying a destination, but visitors can survey *Photopath* from all angles; viewed from the side, it becomes a landscape horizon. Yet closer inspection reveals complications and misalignments that generate jagged edges and disrupt the “perfectly congruent” meshing of photo and floor. Burgin, who has welcomed “fringe interference” in his later work across media, accepts these rough edges, which in fact generate visual activity in what is otherwise a mechanical copy. By calling attention to themselves, they raise questions about what we should really look at in a conceptual work. They call attention to the thin skin of the digital print and evoke a tactile response associated with our contemporary experience of touch screens. They embody the tension inherent in idealized conceptual spaces and disappoint the idealistic impulse implicit in the instructions’ call for congruence, exposing the gap between vision and language. *Photopath* succeeds in throwing us back on ourselves, our own fantasies of transcendence.



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Burgin went on to make works combining images with text, exploring photography in the context of visual culture—posters with captions exposing ideological assumptions embedded in the mass media and, more recently, extended narrative montages like *Afterlife* (2019), a website made with a “virtual camera” developed for video games. These hyper-realistic digital images extend his fascination with seamless replication, inflected by Lacanian analysis and the uncanny. Burgin’s montages frequently reference film (even as he sometimes disrupts them by including “real” photographs). *Photopath*’s linearity recalls the architectural framework of Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* (also 1967), with its camera’s relentless progress across a loft toward a picture of the sea. Bruce Nauman, meanwhile, whose performance-based videos also shaped conceptual art in the 1960s, has recently made 3D scans of his own studio environment, exposing hidden surfaces that viewers can explore virtually on iPads, extending the sculptural range of technologically enhanced vision. *Photopath*, on the other hand, while implicitly time-based, grounds viewers in its actual spatial context, avoiding the narcissistic self-enclosure Rosalind Krauss diagnosed in video art, as it interweaves everyday reality with its mechanical reproduction.