



Jean Marc Prévost

Through their work Little Warsaw, the Hungarian artist duo András Gálik and Bálint Havas, interrogates historical memory, collective consciousness, and the way official narratives are constructed and transformed. One of their strategies is to shift forms or objects into other contexts in order to question the illusion of objective historical truth, as meaning is necessarily dependent on the context and time in which they are presented.

This approach can be found in *Shock Absorber* (2025), which uses a film from the archives of a research institute concerned with technological innovations in agriculture during the socialist period. It shows a machine travelling on a circuit where various obstacles have been placed. We are confronted with outdated images that prompt us to take a different look at the era of utopias that could have transformed society. These images also take us back to childhood, to electric train sets, now also out of fashion, where boredom set in after a while as we watched the train go round and round in circles.

The video *Sculptor Machine* (2014) combines a 1947 film showing András Beck giving students a tour of the retrospective of his father's work, the sculptor Ödön Fülöp Beck, at the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest, with a 1953 film promoting new Russian agricultural machinery to farmers. These two propaganda films reflect the socialist and modernist vision linking economic and cultural progress.

In *Babaabab* (2022), we see their interest in the language of modernist architecture, the Bauhaus, which they question and subvert. The form develops in space and, depending on the perspective from which it is viewed, can become negative or positive. The Bauhaus, founded in 1919 by Walter Gropius, has been the subject of ideological and political challenges over time and can still be thought today as an unfinished utopia. This sculpture also refers to questions about the relationship between the religious and the secular.

In *Unknown Coefficient* (2021), there is a reminder of architecture through the evocation of the architect László Rajk, who, following the arrest of his parents in 1949, was placed in the Pikler Emmi Institute, known for its educational principles. The sculpture takes the form of the educational parks that were at the heart of the Institute's practice, which encouraged the free movement of children. The title, which may seem enigmatic at first glance, refers to a model used in both mathematics and psychology that suggests the radical freedom of the subject in the face of contingencies, the part of what may happen. The motif of the hand, often present in their works, recalls a vernacular pattern of architecture but also the idea of the collective.



LITTLE WARSAW *The Lost Sculpture* 2025 clay

The Lost Sculpture (2025) is perhaps the most enigmatic work in the exhibition. It is an extremely fragile clay sculpture representing a larger-than-life eye, a fragment of a large unknown sculpture. This fragment refers to a sculpture representing Saint Sebastian, created between 1914 and 1944, which has since disappeared after being purchased by the city of Budapest. Destroyed by the secret police for unknown reasons and probably thrown into the river, its history is shrouded in mystery. The eye looks at us and we look at it. But what kinds of questions is it supposed to raise? Clearly, it forces us to think about disappearance, about the erasure of lives and moments in history that survive only through the power of storytelling.

Little Warsaw's works deconstruct the promises of socialist utopias, which can also appear as forgotten political alternatives with their paradoxes and contradictions. In a way, they reveal a collective amnesia by revisiting forms from the past that are reminiscent of political ideologies. In doing so, they remind us of the dead ends of neoliberalism, which also promises emancipation while engendering alienation and control. The artists question, using archives and forms of different origins, at a time when individualistic society has replaced the utopia of an emancipatory future with a rationality that serves economic hegemony. Their work is particularly meaningful today in activating historical consciousness in the face of rising nationalism and populism in Europe. There are different ways of constructing history, and certain facts are very often exploited. All of Little Warsaw's work leads us to question hastily established certainties, drawing on both historical facts and fiction to make way to the possibility of political subjectivation.

Jean-Marc Prévost is an art historian and Chief Curator of Heritage. Previously at the Contemporary Art Museum of Rochechouart and the Carré d'Art in Nîmes. He served within the French Ministry of Culture and curated landmark projects including the Marcel Duchamp Prize's 10th-anniversary exhibition and Ernesto Neto's *Leviathan* at the Panthéon, Paris. He is currently involved with exhibitions at Fundação Iberê Camargo in Porto Alegre and Gallery Sfeir-Semler in Beirut.

John Douglas Millar

A man sits on a simple studio chair; right hand placed near his neck. His gaze appears mournful, tired, resigned, questioning, or perhaps done with questions. There is much ambiguity. For instance, that hand might be a little sinister; it could be moving toward a cut across the neck signifying potential violence, or it might be a barrier between the man and the camera and what it seeks. Although of course the camera doesn't have intention, like a gun it requires a finger pressing a trigger to do its work. It requires nerves stretched through a particular arm, across a particular heart, plugged into a particular brain chemistry and through a particular personal, somatic and political history. To come to the moment where this man is sitting in front of this camera a lot of history had to happen.

In one of the texts that she composed to sit alongside these images, Sarah Dobai writes that a subject's toothache and his difficulty getting treatment reminds her of "how bodies are inscribed by the privations and injustices of civic life." The man is Hungarian and the cyst under the tooth swells to contain Orbán, Németh, Nagy. Red tanks rolling across red lines. The pain of history in a poisoned gum. Migrants beaten at the edge of a park, a red line, a smear of blood. The struggle to make art under the regime.

The question of how the making, the staging, the construction, the *techne* of a photograph can sediment, contain, make available the affects and histories of political mourning is what is at stake in this body, this *corpus* of work. But here bodies are inscribed with the violence and injustices and fleeting mercies of personal life, too. How those things intertwine is at the core of these images. An individual *practice of life* appears to be made visible by the way a sitter holds themselves, but what is also revealed is the way that particular practice of life is tested and contorted, broken and sometimes destroyed by the culture within which it seeks articulation.

Another image, a room bisected by a scarlet line. Like the hand at the neck this is another deeply ambiguous gesture. In the book of Joshua, the 'harlot' Rahib of Jericho hides two Israelite spies. In exchange for saving them she is told to hang a scarlet cord, or line, from her window so that they will know to spare her



Sarah Dobai Studio (Budapest) 2024. C-type photograph (50.8 cm X 40.64 cm)

life when Jericho is razed. In Budapest the red underground line crosses from the Buda side (Déli Pályaudvar) under the Danube to the Pest side (Órs vezér tere). The red line might of course symbolise blood, or the point beyond which we will not go – ethically, politically, sexually, or it might be a border, the shifting red lines of *Mitteleuropa*. In the image at hand the red line bisects the artist's studio and we are in a *mise en abyme*. The symbol collapses into the fractal.

In a passage from his 'autobiography' *Roland Barthes on Roland Barthes*, a passage that is in conversation with his early passion for Brecht whose poem *Vergnügen* (*Pleasures*) it echoes, Barthes writes, "I like: salad, cinnamon, cheese, pimento, marzipan, roses, peonies, lavender, champagne, loosely held political convictions ... realistic novels", and then, "I don't like: women in slacks, geraniums, strawberries, the harpsichord," finally he asks, "who cares? None of this is of any consequence to anyone whatsoever. It is all apparently meaningless. And yet – all this means – or more literally – all that it wants to say is: *my body is not the same as yours*." Barthes comes to mind in part here, I think, because he seeks to raise the urbane to the level of a kind of ethics. Sarah's work maintains a similar kind of urbanity in the true sense of the word, that is, it maintains ambiguity as a virtue, it keeps much in suspension while holding an ethical through line. The value of an art that can do this in the current climate seems hardly worth stating but to Barthes protestation of singularity I want/need to add Anne Boyer's poetics of propinquity:

What philosophy often forgets is this: that few of us exist most of the time as just one person. This unoneness can hurt, just like any oneness can hurt, too.

We move in and out of each other's holes or make new ones. We cut each other open, leave wasted DNA around, leave shards of evolutionary codices discarded in our lovers and our mothers and our children. Many of us have bodies that other people have sometimes lived or died in, too. It can hurt that we enter and exit, are entered and left, that we are born into another sentient other's hands and into the environment more sentient others built around us, born into the rest of the world, all capable of pain, too, which will make us hurt even more.

I hurt. I am in pain - and I therefore I need a language, a discourse that can hold that pain, that can hold me within it, that does not produce frames and arguments that are constricting, definitive, constructed, impervious and unassailable, that try to catch one out. We are tired of dogma, of the *explication de texte*. Barthes again, this time in *Camera Lucida* writing of how, when addressing photography, he finds the languages of sociology, of semiology, and of psychoanalysis hardening around him: "[B]y [my] ultimate dissatisfaction with all of them, I was bearing witness to the only sure thing that was in me (however naïve it might be) : a desperate resistance to any reductive system. For each time, having resorted to any such language to whatever degree, each time I felt it hardening and thereby tending to reduction and reprimand, I would gently leave it and seek elsewhere: I began to speak differently."

There is a corollary here I think with this body of photographs and texts. Sarah studied with Jeff Wall and came of age in the context of the post-Pictures generation of photographers where, as Moyra Davey puts it "we are all self-consciously trying to signal that what's going on behind the camera – the emotional register, the labour register, the thinking register, the mechanical register, the risk factor – is to us as important as the image itself." But like Barthes with *Camera Lucida* where the personal catastrophe of his mother's death required a shifting of his writing away from the generalisations of the various languages of theory, so here the fact of personal loss, of the varieties of mourning, forces the work into a new space. One where its prior concerns remain, carried over as a continuation of theoretical and aesthetic commitments, but



Sarah Dobai O.K (London) 2023 C Type Photograph (30.4 X 40.6cms)

where there is a subtle shift toward a new modality, one that can contain and sustain an ambiguity that is beyond the merely theoretical, where the stakes, both personal and political, are more exposing, where there is a different kind of risk involved.

I seek another language, *gently*.

John Douglas Millar is a writer based in London. He is currently working on a biography of the American photographer Peter Hujar to be published by Fitzcarraldo Editions in the UK and Liveright/Norton in the U.S (Both 2029). With Gary Schneider he co-curated *Peter Hujar: Eyes Open in the Dark* at Raven Row Gallery, London, which opened in January 2025. The exhibition will travel to the Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn, Germany, in February 2026.

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