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Li Ran, *Same Old Crowd*, 2016, four-channel synchronized HD video, black-and-white, sound, 15 minutes. Installation view. Photo: Justin Hei.

Li Ran

AIKE 艾可

In Li Ran's new exhibition "Same Old Crowd," the city of Singapore has been rendered almost entirely abstract. The Beijing-based artist, who spent three months in residence last year at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University Centre for Contemporary Art, takes a "participant observer" approach—using the tourist map as a starting point to craft a dehistoricized, flattened visual model of his subject. The two-channel video *It Is Not Complicated, A Guidebook* (all work, 2016) presents footage Li shot during a preplanned route through the city's Gardens by the Bay while accompanied by an off-camera audio guide. This iconic 250-acre park, a fabricated community riddled with contradictions, can be seen as a metaphor for the nation-state itself: Accompanying the tour guide's formulaic descriptions, tropical plants of all varieties are captured by the artist's extremely shaky lens, as are leisurely pedestrians. The silhouettes of skyscrapers are visible on the horizon, past the garden's confines. As evidence of the country's multicultural inclusivity, Mark Quinn's *The Planet*, 2008, a bronze sculpture of a giant floating baby installed in the garden, also inserts itself into

the footage. Throughout, multicolored text is superimposed over the imagery in the frame: a string of art-jargon-y keywords and names of twentieth-century movements—ITALIAN FUTURISM, NON-SYMBOLIC FORM, THE AVANT-GARDE OF PARIS among them—plucked from the Chinese-language visitor guide to the Centre Pompidou. The inclusion of this text keys the viewer in to a subtle antagonism: This somewhat garish contemporary faux-utopia is entangled with various idealistic modernist movements, but who ultimately comes out ahead?

Li's explorations of Singapore reverberate with an echo of institutional critique, as if the nation were a museum to be mined for ulterior motives. Viewers may all but pass over the textual component of the exhibition, *Picnic at the Stadium*, 2016. In this novella, displayed on a plinth in the gallery, the protagonist participates in a political rally and has ambiguous conversations with various people on the street. Speakers include representatives from Singapore's various "tribes." The gathering seems to have come about rather abruptly, an impromptu insertion of the public sphere into the personal realm of the picnic. The most significant work here, *Same Old Crowd*, 2016, unexpectedly departs from documentation of the city and enters an ambiguous time frame. In this four-channel video, Li uses staccato sounds and fast camerawork to achieve a high level of tension. The artist positioned amateur actors in highly stylized surroundings that nevertheless remain temporally and spatially ambiguous. It is impossible to determine the identities or time period of the characters; they are deprived of language, stripped of everything but exaggerated expressions and emphatic gestures. *Same Old Crowd* can be seen as a type of anthropological theater examining performance studies, and in this sense it recalls the artist's earlier video *Beyond Geography*, 2012, but the premodern body depicted here evokes a more visceral and emotional sensation.

Like manifestations of a psychological symptom that lurks forever in our unconscious, the characters that populate *Same Old Crowd* are consistently intruded upon by elements residing outside the picture frame. The work directly, even crudely, conveys the anxieties of a more primitive awareness. Like a group of savage outsiders, its subjects exist on the margins of history and seemingly have never been colonized. Or perhaps they serve as physical embodiments of the anxiety that accompanies artistic production, or of all lived experience—

a tension that can only be temporarily allayed, never fully displaced.

—Yang Beichen

Translated from Chinese by Lee Ambrozy.

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