

# Introduction

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**M**osaic 56.1 is a special issue grounded in the recent pandemic. It is guest edited by Xiaohui Liang and Claire Chambers, to whom I leave the task of introducing their expanded analytic in their opening essay, “Prevailing Pandemic: Vulnerability and Solidarity in Contemporary English and Chinese Fiction.” On the cover we feature an image from the work of Beijing-based artist Cao Fei. *Isle of Instability* (2020) was made by the artist while in lockdown with her family in Singapore. The video or reel shows the artist’s daughter kneeling in the limited confines of a makeshift set, surrounded by the minutia of what were then some of the mainstays of everyday life. Recorded on her iPhone 10, it is untypical, but not unrelated to the high production values of Cao Fei’s better-known film works, the complicated scenographies of the installations she often houses her film or video projects within, or, lastly, her works that hinge on the high-tech worlds of Virtual or Augmented Reality and the post-human condition. Science fiction is always a readymade object for this artist, whose Beijing studio in the Chaoyang district is situated in a once-modern movie theatre associated with the genre. If connected to speculative futures and the just past, *Isle of Instability* is also a very personal, straightforward, and pragmatic work. It is clearly a shoestring attempt to make do with what is ready to hand—the interior of an apartment, a screen displaying a wished-for outside, some plants,

rubber gloves, antiseptic, and her daughter acting, perhaps in the way she has precisely been passing her time. Such were the commonplace objects, habits, and details of life under Covid, a life under extenuating, extreme, and often catastrophic circumstances, that we all remember. These same prohibitions to working and living as Cao Fei would usually live and work without make *Isle of Instability*, or indeed our increasingly distant memory of that restrictive and isolating time, both a very natural thing as well as a very theatrical and performed thing. I think we can forgive her daughter for the latter, for she is acting in a role she has lived through. Unlike the monsoon winds in Singapore, the prevailing winds of modernity blow in only one direction. Or, to put this another way, *Isle of Instability* reproduces a situation that puts special emphasis on a mode of existence that precedes the life we lead. This practical, functional, constant “state of [constant] emergency” that “is not the exception but the rule,” as Walter Benjamin puts it in his essay “On the Concept of History” (392), requires reinventing the terms of life and living from scratch at each and every moment.

#### WORKS CITED

- Benjamin, Walter. “On the Concept of History.” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings. Volume 4, 1938-1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard UP, 2003, pp. 389-400.