

Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal

LA TENTATION DU HASARD

Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés, Stéphane Mallarmé, 1897

ELEMENTS OF CHANCE

All Thought expresses a Throw of the Dice, Stéphane Mallarmé, 1897

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PRÉSENTE

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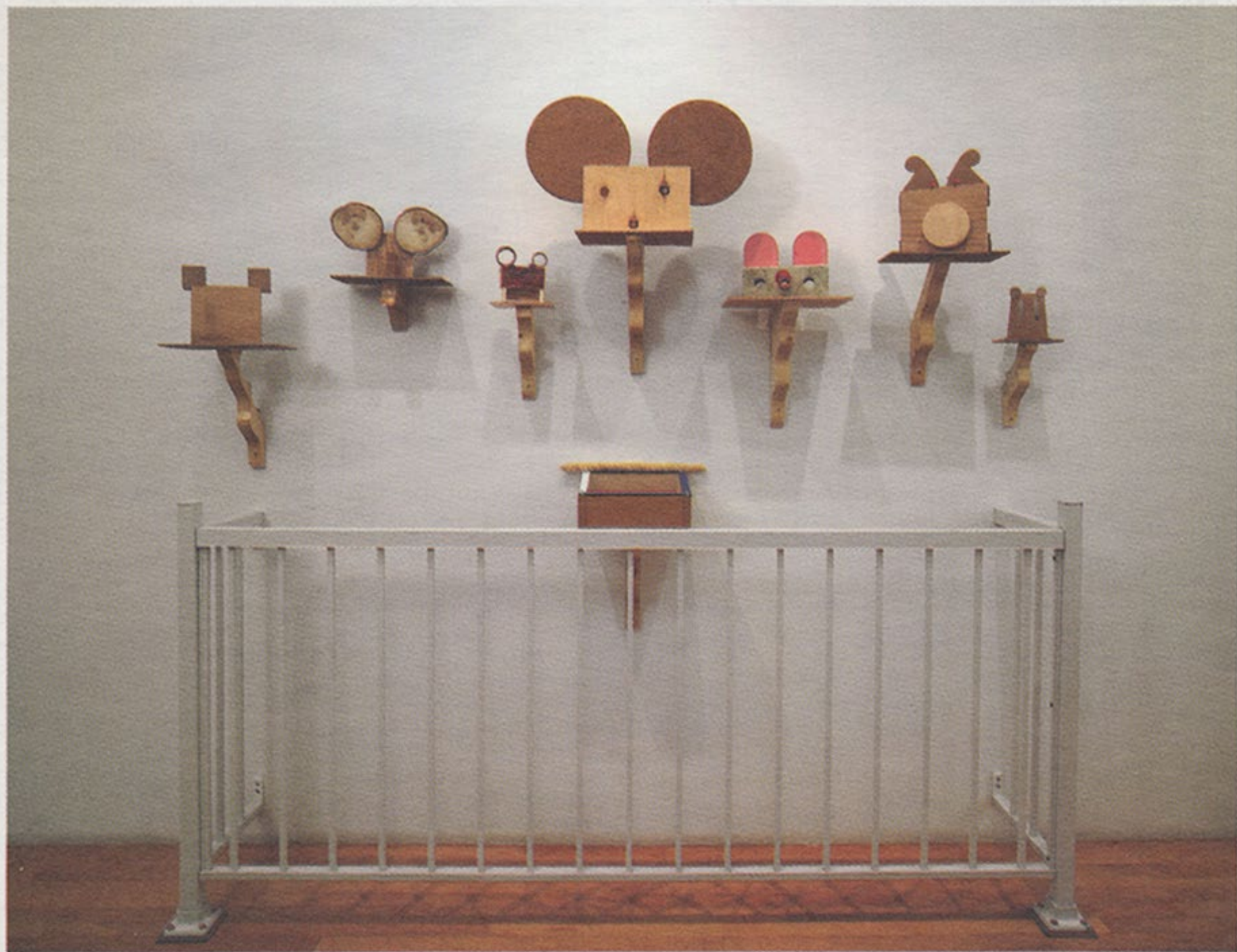
Tout dans l'univers est une question de hasard et de probabilité



Lois Anderson *1,000 catastrophes*, 2009. Cloche antique, bois, électronique sur mesure, papier bible, 180,3 x 64,8 x 64,8 cm.

PHOTO Michael Cullen. Courtoisie de l'artiste et Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto.

Elements of Chance



COZIC *Autel des petits Mickey*, 2003 /2004. Matériaux variés, 195 x 220 x 39 cm. PHOTO Daniel Roussel. Courtoisie Galerie Graff, Montréal.

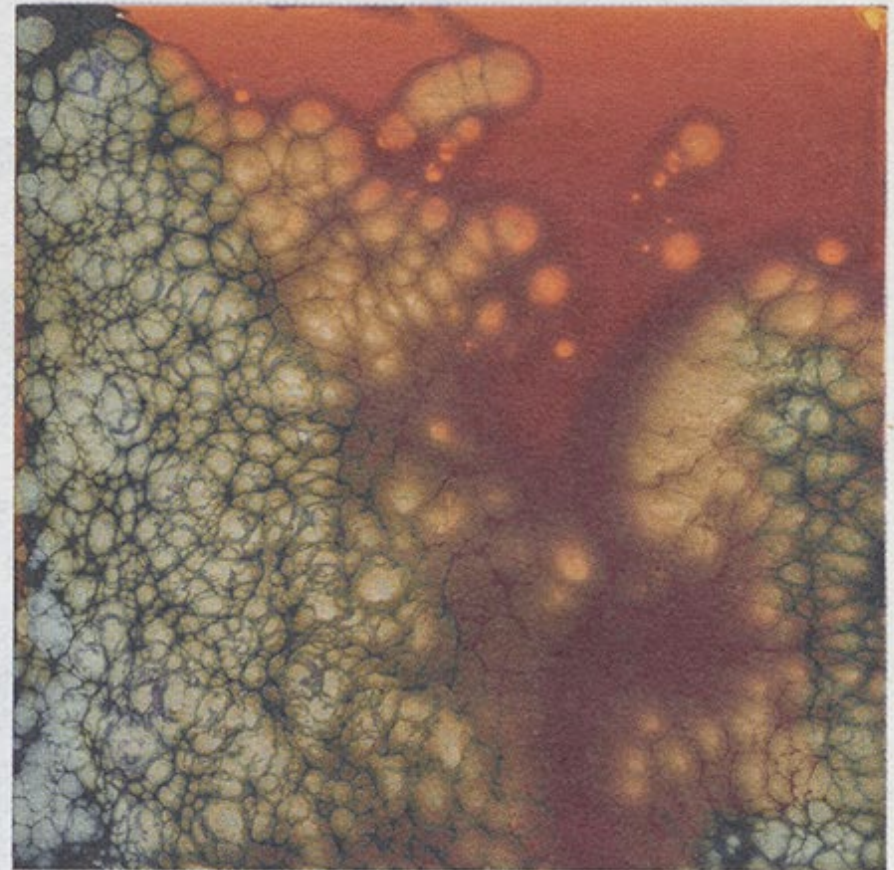
THE ARTISTS LOIS ANDISON (CANADA/ONTARIO) / DAVID ARMSTRONG SIX (CANADA/ONTARIO/QUÉBEC) / GILLES BARBIER (FRANCE) / JÉRÉMIE BENNEQUIN (FRANCE) / JEAN-PIERRE BERTRAND (FRANCE) / WALEAD BESTHY (UNITED STATES) / JOHN BOCK (GERMANY) / MICHAEL CAPIO (UNITED STATES) / SYLVIE COTTON (CANADA/QUÉBEC) / COZIC (CANADA/QUÉBEC) / JEAN DUBOIS (CANADA/QUÉBEC) / JEAN DUPUY (FRANCE) / RODNEY GRAHAM (CANADA/BRITISH COLUMBIA) / KARILEE FUGLEM (CANADA/QUÉBEC) / KRISTIINA LAHDE (CANADA/ONTARIO) / SCOTT LYALL (CANADA/ONTARIO) / STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ (FRANCE) / MICHAEL MARANDA (CANADA/ONTARIO) / AMIR MOGHARABI (UNITED STATES) / GUIDO MOLINARI (CANADA/QUÉBEC) / GARETH MOORE (CANADA/BRITISH COLUMBIA) / NADIA MYRE (CANADA/QUÉBEC) / WERNER REITERER (AUSTRIA) / JEREMY SHAW (CANADA/BRITISH COLUMBIA) / DANIEL SPOERRI (FRANCE/ITALY/AUSTRIA) / DEREK SULLIVAN (CANADA/ONTARIO) / KEITH TYSON (UNITED KINGDOM) / IAN WALLACE (CANADA/BRITISH COLUMBIA) / CERITH WYN EVANS (UNITED KINGDOM)

Our lives are governed by two unsettling, unavoidable conditions: mortality and uncertainty.

Even as we may be conditioned to avoid risk we dwell within a culture of uncertainty, of forces and factors relinquished to chance. Elements of chance very much shape our personal experiences, our behaviours, our social and economic policies; our identities. Lottery tickets, gambling, games and sports, the stock market, our economic and political systems, our health and our relationships, our savings plans and all of our plans; our futures, from the next minute to the next millennium, exist within the realm of a great, unknowable void. As French poet Stéphane Mallarmé observed in his groundbreaking poem of 1897: *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (*A throw of the dice will never abolish chance*).

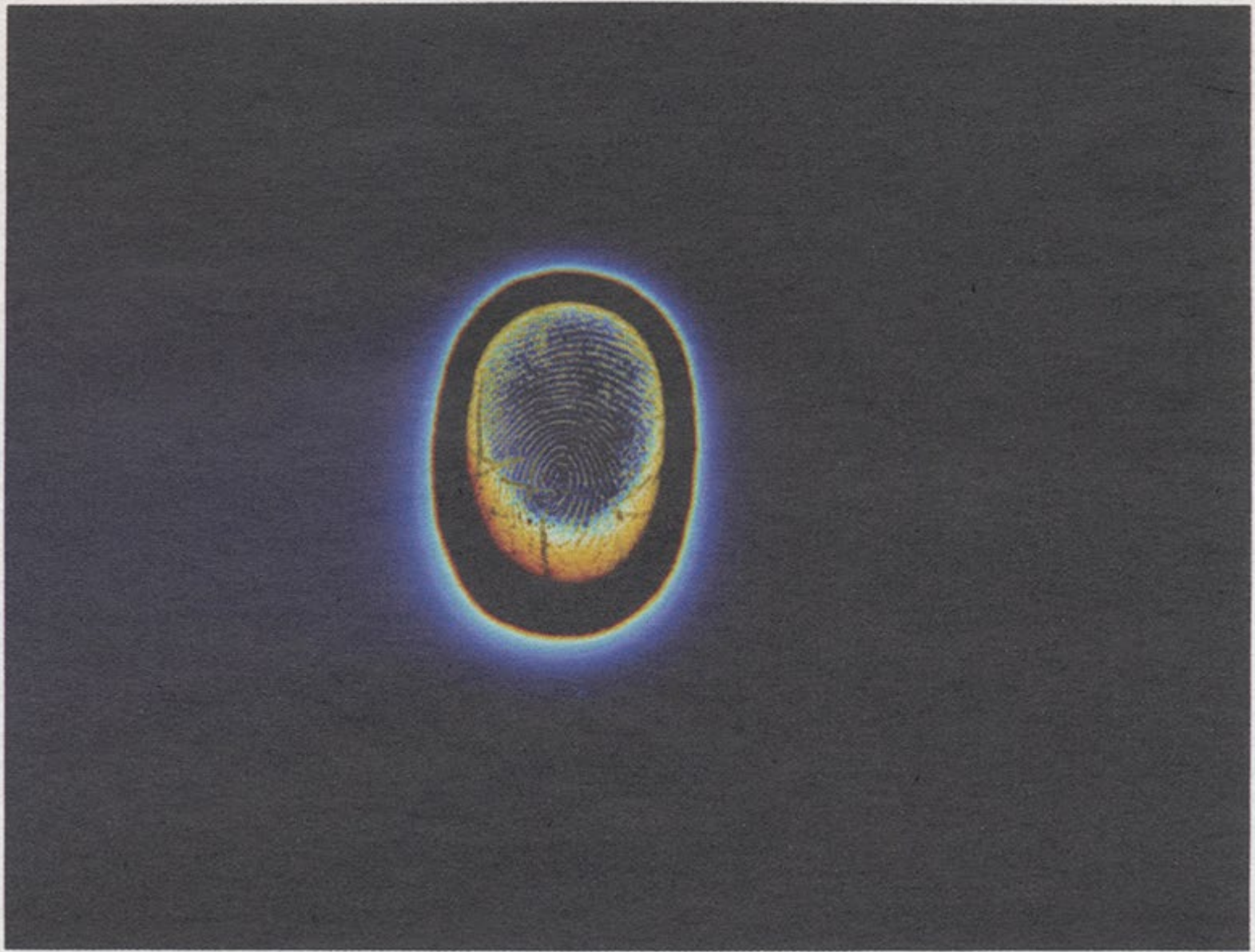
In order to live our lives we must take chances, play the game, roll the dice. We tempt fate always. The stakes are often high and fraught with risk. Outcomes, favourable or not, are subject to circumstance and infinite variability and can be irrevocably determined in an instant or only fully comprehended over time. Of course, our lives would be unimaginably dull, mundane, reduced to mechanical function if the consequences of our actions were transparent and predictable. The uncertain, the mysterious, the opaque, the elusive and the ephemeral inspire us to seek knowledge, to create structure and meaning. Across time, geography and cultures, entire cosmologies have been fabricated and imagined, driven by our instinctive will to mitigate or influence that which we cannot predict; convincing ourselves somehow that we have a hand in controlling our lives and destiny.

Some of the earliest attempts to influence outcomes and destiny are apparent in dice-like objects found in Egyptian tombs dating back to 6,000 B.C. and in astronomy and astrology charts traced to Babylonia circa 1600 B.C. The *I-Ching*, or *Chinese Book of Changes*, is a divination system believed to have originated sometime between the 4th and 2nd century, B.C. In Roman mythology destiny was associated with the Goddess Fortuna, daughter of Zeus, in later cultures known as Lady Luck. During the Middle Ages the outcomes of thrown dice, stones and animal bones were interpreted as signs from a Divine force and used to decide inheritances, settle disputes and choose leaders. Nostradamus' almanac of predictions, *The Prophecies*, written in 1555, has never been out of print since it was first published. There are rich histories and mythologies associated with chance, gaming and gambling in Aboriginal cultures. The fortune teller and the stockbroker are one and the same.



Keith Tyson Nature Painting, 2005. Technique mixte sur aluminium, 610 x 610 mm.
Courtoisie Keith Tyson Studio et Galerie GP & N Vallois, Paris.

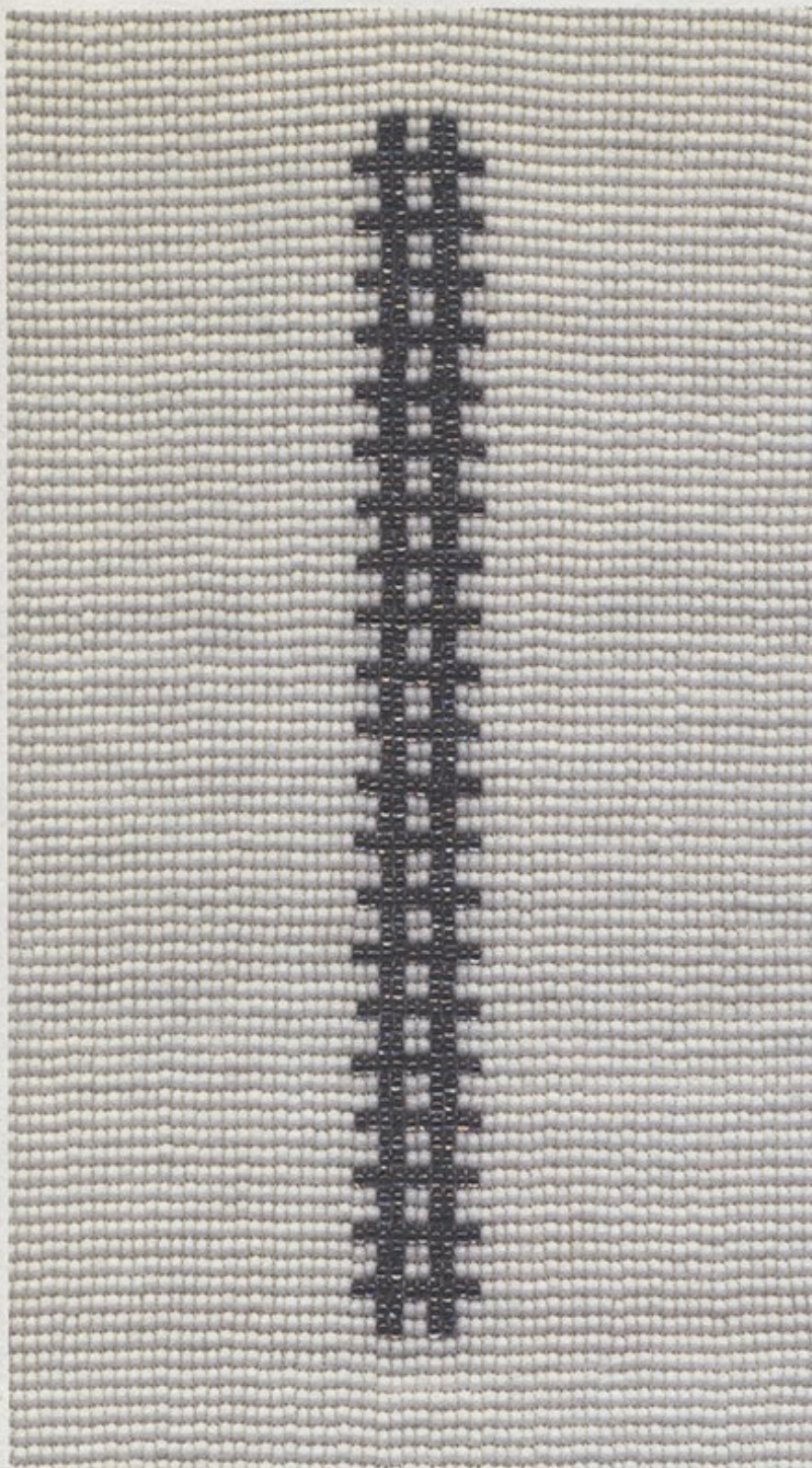
Chance and uncertainty are embedded within our genetic and psychic makeup and our understandings of these characteristics and principles are themselves subject to variable, unpredictable conditions and circumstance. Significantly, during the latter part of the 19th century, parallel theories in science, psychology and the arts emerged that refuted certainties associated with Divine cause, reacting against the predictability of burgeoning technological rationality and mechanized repetition spawned by industrialization. Kierkegaard introduced the idea of subjectivity suggesting that reality and truth are subject to the perception and interpretation of the individual. Quantum physics recognized the principle of uncertainty and mathematical probability and from that Einstein theorized that time was relative, not absolute. Freud's development of free-association techniques revealed the role of the unconscious mind, further building upon notions of subjective experience.



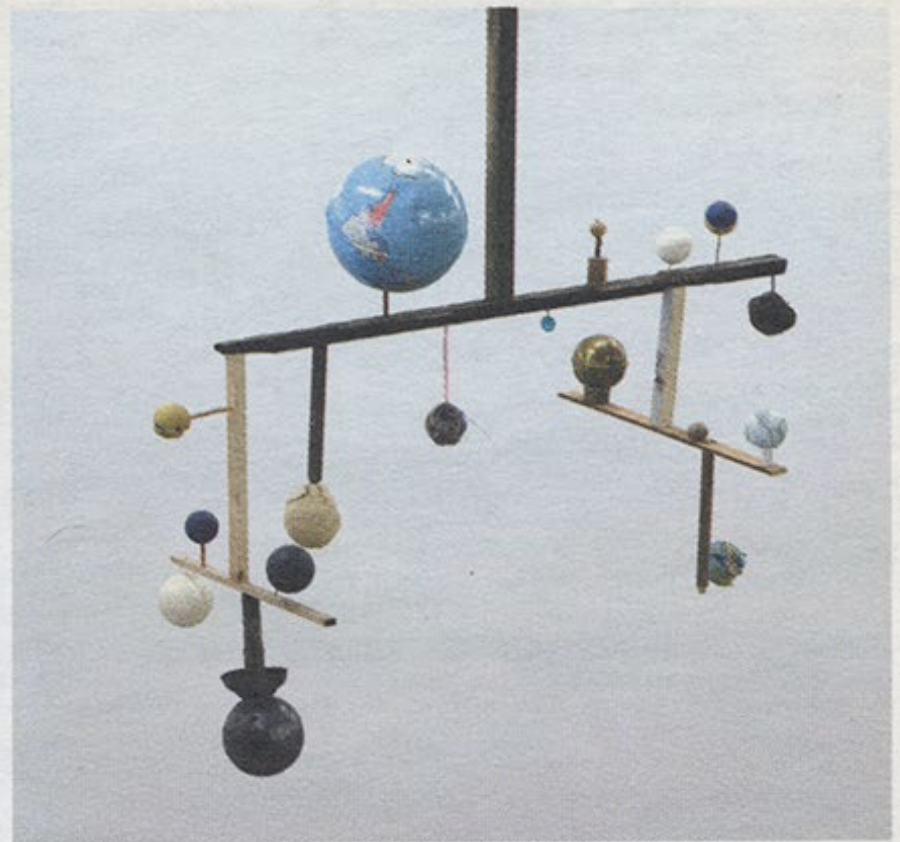
Jeremy Shaw *Transcendental Capacities (Donna Summer – I Feel Love [Patrick Cowley Megamix], 1982)*, 2010. 7,3 x 9,5 cm. Courtoisie Blanket Contemporary Art, Vancouver.

Concurrently, art during this period began to shift away from realism, leading to Post-Impressionism, apparent in the paintings of Van Gogh, Seurat and especially Cézanne, and later in the multi-faceted perspectives of Cubism. All of these developments revolutionized the entrenched social and cultural values from which Modernism emerged. Liberated from prejudiced constructs of time, space, language and expression, the imagination opened to new frontiers and possibilities with far-reaching impact.

Engaged with these resonant discourses, in 1897, French poet and critic Stéphane Mallarmé wrote *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, a text poem constructed upon chance associations of words and phrases that directly influenced subsequent literary and artistic practices throughout the 20th century.



Nadia Myre *Sans titre* (de la série *Scar Project*), 2006-
Médias mixtes sur toile, 20 x 20 cm. Courtoisie Art Mûr, Montréal.



Gareth Moore *Crown Compass* (from *Uncertain Pilgrimage*), 2009.
Globes terrestres, balles, peinture, rebuts, 262 x 57 x 137 cm.
Courtoisie Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

As articulated in his Preface, the fragmented syntax and spatial structure of the text were intended to emancipate language and linguistic structure, opening the reader's mind to numerous combinations and possibilities of free association and subjective interpretation. Words and phrases are scattered in apparently random groupings across the pages. Font sizes vary, as do the use of upper and lowercase letters. Dynamic interplay between groupings of words and the irregular "empty" spaces of the page disrupt the conventional narrative flow, producing lyrical beats, rhythms and measures analogous to a musical score. Equal meaning is thus ascribed to both text and space. The emptiness of the page also allows space and time for the imagination of the reader to engage and project individual thought and meaning. The poem is nevertheless rich in metaphorical allusions around the central motif of a shipwreck plunged into the abyss by turbulent, uncertain forces *in which all reality dissolves*. Outcome, meaning and truth are fluid, beyond control of the author. The poem functions as an aleatoric mechanism, a method of generating multiple outcomes and meanings through principles of chance and randomness. Through typographical innovation language and text are transformed into material image; concept and structure become content. *Un coup de dés...* precipitated a revolutionary shift in representation in art, literature and theory.



Jean Dubois *Radicaux Libres*, 2006.
Installation médiatique in situ, Grande Bibliothèque du Québec, Montréal.
PHOTO Jean Dubois

Evolving from this shift, Marcel Duchamp challenged conventional definitions of art as an interiorized act of aesthetic invention, suggesting otherwise that artistic value was dependent upon contact with the external, everyday world, upon the perception of the viewer, upon chance and arbitrary circumstances beyond the artist's control.

The Dadaists were also inspired by Mallarmé's poem, incorporating elements of chance and randomness in their art, literature and theatre, as did the Surrealists in their automatic writing and unexpected juxtapositions of imagery. In the 1940s in the United States, experiments in art, music and design at the influential Black Mountain College incorporated procedures of chance and aleatoricism. In the mid-1940s, Jackson Pollock's action paintings signalled a complete break with objective representation, incorporating chance and unconscious gesture in his "drip" technique, claiming that content lay beyond his fully conscious control. These famous works developed from earlier drawings that he was encouraged to produce during psychoanalytic treatments he was receiving for his alcoholism. Pollock's breakthrough, of course, significantly altered subsequent artistic developments leading especially to the emergence of Abstract Expression in the 1950s, and also around that time, influencing seminal works in the music compositions of John Cage, in dance by Merce Cunningham, and the "cut-up" writings of 'Beat' authors Brion Gyson and William Burroughs. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, principles of chance, automatism, of encounter with the everyday contributed to the origins of performance art and the Fluxus movement, and also to the foundations of Conceptual Art in the 1970s. These developments also impacted social, cultural and artistic evolutions in Québec, particularly evident in the works of Paul-Emile Borduas,



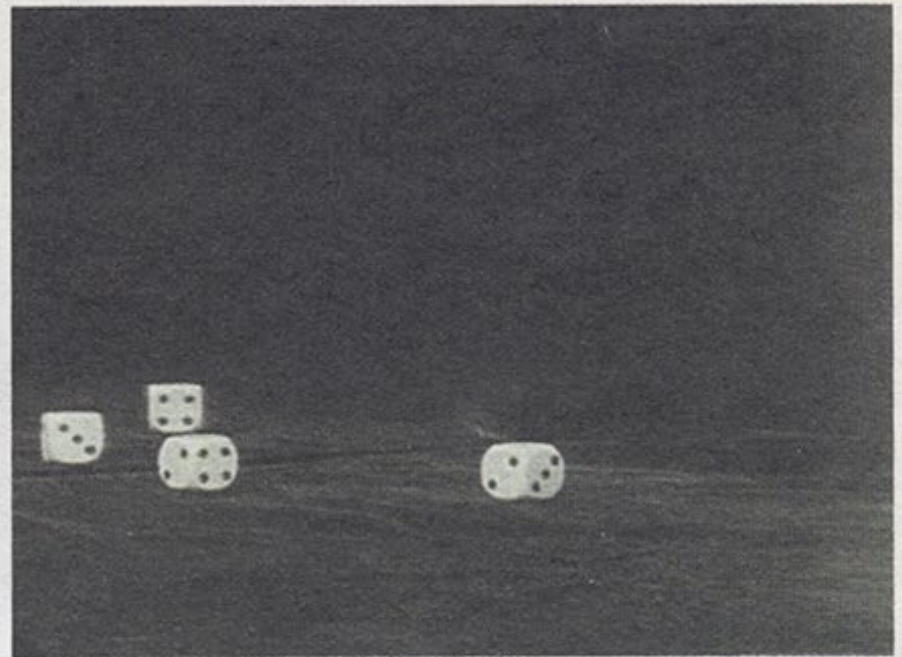
Derek Sullivan *Endless Kiosk*, 2005 (détail).
MDF (panneau de fibre de bois), Gatorfoam, peinture, publicités.
Hauteur variable, circonférence en expansion constante.
PHOTO Luke Sandler IV. Courtoisie Jessica Bradley Art + Projects, Toronto

Jean-Paul Riopelle and Les Automatistes in the late 1940s, Les Plasticiens in the mid-to-late 1950s, and in the early 1960s in the painting practices of Claude Tousignant, Fernand Leduc, Guido Molinari and others.

In 1969 Belgium artist Marcel Broodthaers rejuvenated artistic interest in Mallarmé's poem, creating a version in which he blackened-out the text, reinforcing its visuality and its relevance to the conceptual art that was emerging at the time. Today elements of chance and subjectivity are accepted within the lexicon of contemporary art practice and discourse. Indeed, numerous artists claim influence and pay homage to Mallarmé, and several exhibitions organized around themes related to chance have been held within the last decade.



Gilles Barbier *The Dice Man 1*, 2011 (détail).
Encre et rehauts blancs sur calque posé sur fonds de canson de couleur
28 éléments. Chacun 30,5 X 25 cm (sujet 16,5 X 12,5 cm) Pièce unique.
Courtoisie Galerie GP & N Vallois, Paris.



Jean-Pierre Bertrand *Playing Dices*, 1975-2005.
Film 16mm transféré sur DVD, noir et blanc, muet, en boucle, 4 min 7 s.
Courtoisie Galerie Michel Rein, Paris.

Towards the end of the last century the certainties that became entrenched in Modernist paradigms and utopian ideals dissolved into the complexities of the fragmented, pluralistic perspectives of a Post-Modern era. As this new century unfolds, our understanding of the uncertainties of our existence and the role of chance in our lives have shifted to an entirely different circumstance and context, transforming again our experience of ourselves and the world around us. The fluid, fragmented, unpredictable conditions of globalism, of migration, interculturalism, consumerism, electronic communication and information technologies, social interactions and behaviours, our very lifestyles, seem uncannily reflective of the dynamic elasticity embedded within the structure of Mallarmé's poem.

Inspired by the historical influence of chance and its relevance today within contemporary art and within the broader culture, and specifically referring to the enduring significance of Stéphane Mallarmé's seminal poem, the exhibition *Elements of Chance* presents a highly diverse selection of works by artists that in various ways incorporate chance-related strategies into the conception, production and display of their work. While familiar iconography associated with chance, such as dice, and specific references to Mallarmé are included, the exhibition as a whole is intended to probe more broad and elusive chance phenomena that affect our apprehension and understandings of objects, artworks and our surroundings. Elements of chance related to time, space, language, materiality, aleatoricism and encounter are embraced and explored by local, national and international artists in media ranging from the traditional to advanced technologies.

By favourable circumstance and chance, the principal site of La Biennale de Montréal is housed within the historic Ecole-des-beaux-arts, built in 1922 during a period in which Modernist thought was infiltrating Canada. Composed of a complex labyrinth of rooms of varying size and character connected by circuitous staircases, the interior architecture is particularly conducive to provoking chance encounters with the artworks in ways quite unlike a conventional gallery or museum setting, even perhaps mimicking the fragmented dynamism of Mallarmé's poem. Experiencing the exhibition we relinquish ourselves to chance; we place ourselves at the exhilarating precipice of possibility, poised breathless between the limits of what we know and the void of uncertainty. As always, we play the game, take chances, roll the dice.

DAVID LISS curator BNL MTL 2011