

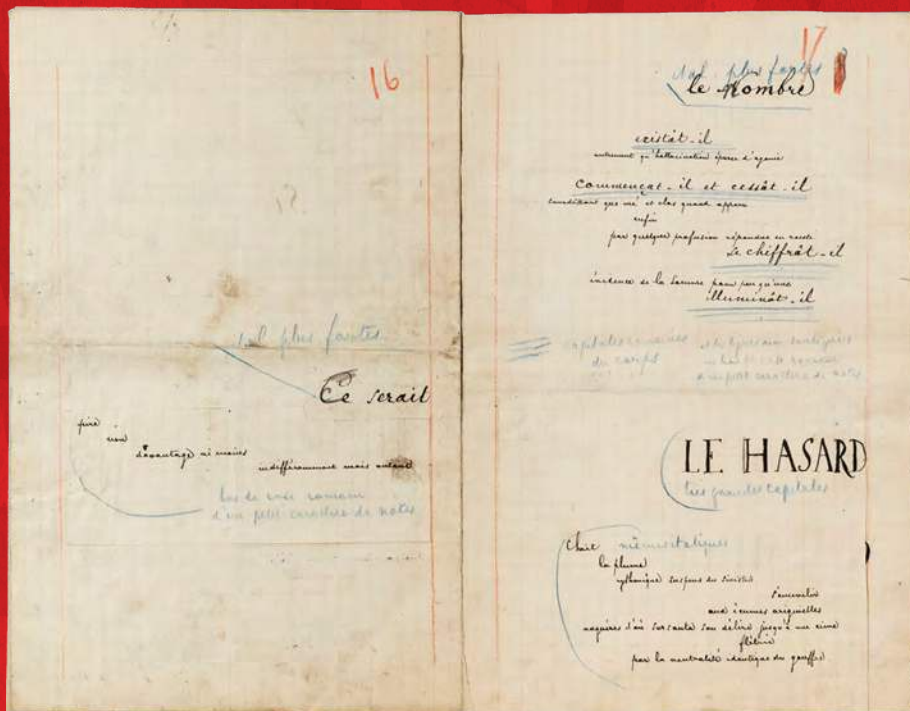
CURATED BY RICH DANA

**A ROLL OF THE DICE:
SYMBOLISM IN THE
SACKNER ARCHIVE**

MAIN LIBRARY GALLERY

UNIVERSITY OF IOWA LIBRARIES

JANUARY 21 – JUNE 27, 2025



Mallarmé's handwritten poem layout, 1896.



FROM THE CURATOR:

During my five years of work on the Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry at the University of Iowa Libraries, I have had the distinct honor of opening a Pandora's box of new challenges each day. Despite the complexities of this collection, one of the greatest rewards for an archivist is to make discoveries and to share those discoveries with researchers, students, and the public. Ruth and Marvin left the world a great gift. I have unwrapped that box anew each day and found something different within—sometimes sublime, sometimes shocking, but always remarkable.

In Ruth Sackner's 1986 essay, "The Avant-Garde Book: Precursor of Concrete and Visual Poetry and the Artist's Book," she wrote: "Particularly in 'Un coup de dés,' the work of Mallarmé exemplifies visual poetry and musical scoring sensibility." For the Sackners, this groundbreaking poem was at the headwaters of the artistic and literary movements that became their obsession. Based on their writings, curatorial notes, and catalog entries, I realized that, as it was for Ruth and Marvin, Mallarmé's work could be an entry point for the uninitiated to gain understanding of the contents of their archive.

This exhibition aims to construct a timeline of works that illustrate Mallarmé's influence on the 20th and 21st century Avant-Garde art movements while simultaneously helping newcomers make sense of concrete and visual poetry.

RICH DANA

Project Coordinator Librarian

Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry

There is no better time to read

“Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard”

than

IN THIS MOMENT.

IN THIS ERA of digital mediation and artificial intelligence, our society increasingly accepts virtual fantasy in place of physical reality, and viral memes in place of individual thought. The field and ground blur and the map becomes the territory. Yet at the heart of this plethora of hyper-reality, there are only ones and zeroes—a binary code which strives to replace chance with a narcotic simulation of absolute certainty.

In the late 19th century, another era of great technological, scientific, and political upheaval, the French Symbolists attempted to think beyond the increasingly rigid capitalist values and moralist narratives of the Industrial Revolution’s popular literature. In “Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard,” Stéphane Mallarmé created a symbolic poem-map, a kind of analog virtual reality that challenges the reader to tour human existence in its unfiltered imperfection and un-curated complexity, and to acknowledge the emptiness of the space that surrounds and ultimately defines it.

In her 2016 *New Republic* article “The Poem that Foretold Modernism,” Ellen Handler Spitz wrote:

“Mallarmé’s transcendence of conventional poetics, his spatio-temporal gyrations, his yearning efforts to collapse signifier and signified, his wish to erase all boundaries between word, idea, and object, as well as between art and life, paved the way for innovative Modernist thought and practice in literature, music, visual art, philosophy, modern physics, and even prefigured aspects of today’s digital era. It’s precisely the poem’s difficulty that makes its influence so enduring.”

“Un coup de dés” has continued to resonate with artists, poets, philosophers, and musicians since its first publishing in *Cosmopolis* magazine over a century ago. For

example, Ernest Fraenkel, a German Jew who escaped the Holocaust and later settled in Paris in the 1950s, created a groundbreaking series of visual adaptations of the poem by obliterating the words and reimagining their meaning as temporal maps or cosmic constellations. Fraenkel's work as a translator of Sigmund Freud and a professor of aesthetics at the Sorbonne led him to write:

“A throw of the dice – it is a throw of thought; it is a thought among the innumerable possible thoughts. Because: every thought emits a throw of the dice, every concrete thought represents a combination of thinkable elements... postulated by mystical mathematics... [the thinker] will therefore never know if the thought he has emitted corresponds to the structuring law of the Cosmos, of Man and of Being, if there really exists such order, harmony and beauty which would guarantee the consistency of Being and the solitude of Man – of Man who navigates on the chaotic ocean and who is, in this situation, deprived of a compass; any hope he might entertain of discovering a true orientation is in vain, he will not be able to escape the final shipwreck nor the perdition...”

And how are we to interpret “Un coup de dés” today?

In 2022, Jaren Marcel Pollen wrote in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* that:

“... Mallarmé intuited that the author’s storytelling responsibilities would be diffused to the rest of society, which would collectively take up the task of assembling narratives for itself, an all-inclusive process he described as ‘an immaculate grouping of universal relationships come together for some miraculous and glittering occasion’—a line that could easily be plucked from Guy Debord’s diagnosis of modern culture as a collection of mediated spectacles. What this means is that authorship as we know it—that is, singular, capital-A Authority—will become narratively obsolete. It won’t die, or disappear, but merely get integrated into a massive hive mind, a great narrative-making ... The time Mallarmé lived in was one of increasing specialization, and he was foreseeing a future in which craftsmanship would be unable to match the critical mass of an entire society participating in cultural events as they unfold, and in which this participation becomes part of the event—indeed, becomes the event itself. ‘It terrifies me to think,’ Mallarmé wrote, ‘of the qualities which the author of such a work will have to possess.’”

“HOME SWEET MUSEUM”



Ruth and Marvin Sackner in *Vogue Decoration*, Oct.–Nov. 1991. Special Collections and Archives, University of Iowa Libraries.

Who were the Sackners, these wonderfully enthusiastic collectors who helped define one of the most important artistic and literary movements of the 20th century?

Marvin and Ruth were both born in Philadelphia in the 1930s. They met in college and married in 1956. They moved to Miami Beach, Florida, in 1964, where Marvin became chief of pulmonary diseases and director of medical services at Mount Sinai Medical Center. Together, Ruth and Marvin raised three children.

Marvin loved collecting and became interested in art after being introduced to the works of the modern masters. After patenting several successful medical devices, he could afford to start collecting art. Ruth’s love of literature and libraries provided a perfect counterbalance to Marvin’s fascination with modern art, and her design aesthetic created the framework that eventually transformed their Miami Beach condo into, as she called it, “**Home Sweet Museum.**”

Ruth and Marvin traveled extensively, meeting, befriending, and promoting some of the world’s most original creators of visual and concrete poetry and compiling what became the largest collection of its kind. The fondness that many artists had for the Sackners is illustrated by the inscription in the fifth edition of Tom Phillips’s magnum opus, *The Humument*: “**For Ruth and Marvin Sackner, patrons, friends, who guard my work between them like bookends.**”

Ruth and Marvin remained an inseparable team until their passings, Ruth in 2015 and Marvin in 2020.

For the Sackners, “Un coup de dés” and the work of the Symbolists held particular significance as a starting point for understanding the avant-garde approach to concrete and visual poetry.

“For the Symbolists—Mallarmé above all—language was endowed with a mystery of meaning that increased with the number of different directions in which each word could point.”

- Ruth Sackner, *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, Vol. 2 (Summer–Autumn, 1986)

OBJECTS ON DISPLAY:

INSIGHTS FROM THE CURATOR

Unless otherwise noted, all works on display in this exhibition are from the Ruth and Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete and Visual Poetry, Special Collections and Archives, University of Iowa Libraries.

GRAPHIC TAKES AND OBLITERATED TEXTS

- 1 André Masson
b. France, 1896–1987
Selections from *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (1961)
Paris: Les Amateurs du Livre et de l'Estampe modernes
Lithograph, edition of 102 copies
- 2 Stéphane Mallarmé
b. France, 1842–1898
"Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard"
Published in *Cosmopolis* magazine, May 1897
London, England
- 3 Marcel Broodthaers
b. Belgium, 1924–1976
***Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard: Image* (1969)**
Offset printed, edition of 90
- 4 Michalis Pichler
b. Germany, 1980–
Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard (SCULPTURE)
Berlin: "greatest hits," 2008
Edition of 90
Offset and laser gravure, perfect binding
- 5 Eric Zboya
Canada
***Vecteur: Un Coup Des Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* (2010)**
Calgary, No Press
Ink on paper, edition of 120
- 6 Ernest Fraenkel
b. Germany, 1905–?
***Les Dessins Trans-conscients de Stéphane Mallarmé: à propos de la Typographie de Un Coup de Dés* (1960)**
Ink on paper

These are several very different takes on the visual aspects of "Un coup de dés." In the bound edition of *Cosmopolis*, we see the first published version, the typography of which attempted to convey Mallarmé's original idea yet purportedly met with his disapproval.

The colorful interpretation by French Surrealist André Masson (a major influence on Jackson Pollock) maintains the presence of the actual text while adding bold gestural elements that evoke the beauty of the sea and the chaos of the shipwreck.

Ernest Fraenkel was the first to obliterate the text to unlock cartographic and astrological meanings in the shapes created. Michael Broodthaers and Michalis Pichler iterated Fraenkel's ideas by further redacting the text and deconstructing the page. Finally, Eric Zboya algorithmically translated the text using non-Euclidian geometry to map the coordinate of the text on the page.

CONTEMPORARY BOOK ARTS

7 Johanna Drucker
b. USA, 1952–
Heavy Breathing (1991)
Vellum, lead, wood

8 Johanna Drucker
The Word Made Flesh (1989)
Letterpress

Johanna Drucker is a leading theorist in the field of art and communication, as well as a pioneering book artist. The book *Heavy Breathing* is “an edition of one” created for the Sackners’ 1992 *Beauty in Breathing* exhibition for the American Lung Association, of which Marvin was a board member. Here, Drucker explores not only the presentation of words on a page, but the physical and ephemeral lifecycle of material and the human experience of it.

SCHOLARSHIP

9 Brian Coffey (translator)
Dice Thrown Never Will Annul Chance (1965)
Dublin, Ireland: Dolmen Press

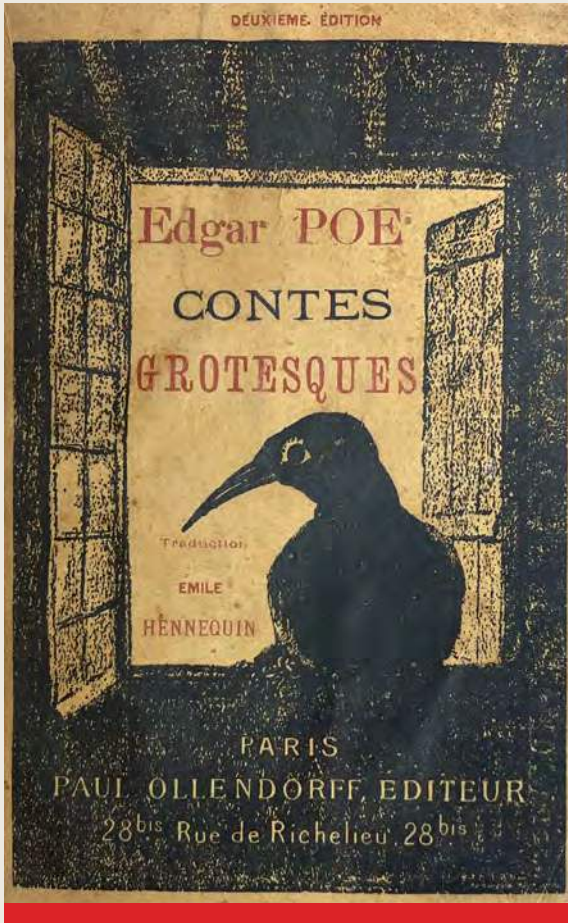
11 Robert Greer Cohen (dissertation)
Mallarmé’s Un Coup de Dés: an exegesis (1949)
New Haven, Connecticut: Yale French Studies,
Yale University Press

10 Daisy Aldan (translator)
Un Coup de Dés Jamais N’Abolira Le Hasard
(1956)
New York: Tiber Press

12 Wolfram Eber (translator)
*Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard / Ein
Wurfelwurf* (1980)
Munich, West Germany: D.P. Druck und
Publikation

Many scholars and translators have worked to interpret the poem and accurately convey its meaning in other languages. The differences can be seen in looking at American Daisy Aldan’s translation alongside that of Irishman Brian Coffey.

The German translation of “Un coup de dés” is illustrated with geometrical drawings by Erber, which are intended to reflect the mathematical and precise construction of the poem. The colophon states that there are 300 numbered, signed copies, but this copy must be out of series since it is unnumbered and unsigned. Source of annotation: Marvin or Ruth Sackner.



[ITEM 16] *Contes grotesques* / par Edgar Poe, 1882.

The poems of American writer Edgar Allan Poe were particularly influential for the French Symbolist poets. Their predecessor, Charles Baudelaire, was the first to translate Poe into French (with illustrations by Odilon Redon, who later illustrated “Un coup de dés.”) Poe’s rich use of symbols to express hidden meaning and deep emotion inspired Mallarmé, Verlaine, and others, and “Un coup de dés” was later to inspire T.S. Eliot’s masterpiece, “The Waste Land.”

Mallarmé translated Poe’s dark and atmospheric 1845 classic “The Raven,” and “Le Corbeau (The Raven)” was published in a deluxe edition in 1875 with illustrations by Édouard Manet.

Jirí Hynek Kocman’s 1984 interpretation of “The Raven” relies on the color, textures, and shapes of the pages of the book to convey Poe’s atmospheric text and embody the phantasm tapping on the narrator’s chamber door.

MUSIC

19 Nelson Howe
“Fur Music”

Source: Music of the Avant Garde. No.9 (1971)

Offset printed, synthetic fur, includes two
33rpm vinyl records

Mallarmé’s work inspired Early Modern composers like his friend Claude Debussy, but that influence continued into the 20th century with avant-garde composers who presented work that engaged the audience in multi-sensory experiences. In “Fur Music,” Nelson Howe created a score that departs from traditional notation in ways that harken back to the typographical experimentation of “Un coup de dés.”

LOCAL ARTISTS

- 20 Jim Clinefelter
b. USA, 1958–
A Throw of the Snore Will Surge the Potatoes: John M. Bennett meets Stéphane Mallarmé (1998)
Laser print on paper

Jim Clinefelter’s absurdist mash-up mixes Mallarmé’s work with that of Chicago experimental poet John M. Bennett and images culled from old Sears & Roebuck catalogs. The images are clever stand-ins, filling the spaces intentionally left blank by Mallarmé.

- 21 Poojana Prasanna
b. India, 1998–
UN COUP DE EH?? (2023)
Photocopied zine

- 23 Margaret Yapp
b. USA, 1993–
Green for Luck (2024)
Rochester, Massachusetts: EastOver Press;
on loan from Rich Dana

- 22 D. J. Kime
b. USA, 1993–
The Loneliest Dice (2023)
Laser print on paper, 2 copies

Humorous takes and parody are also a part of the tradition of riffing on “Un coup de dés.” The first recorded example of an “Un coup” parody is Australian poet Christopher Brennan’s 1897 *Prose-Verse-Poster-Algebraic-Symbolico-Riddle Musicopoematographoscope*, which remained unpublished until 1981. (Visit Special Collections and Archives at the University of Iowa Libraries to see this book: x-Collection, FOLIO PR6003.R357 P7 1981.)

This display features work by graduate students from last year’s University of Iowa Center for the Book’s Topics in Material Analysis course taught by exhibit curator Rich Dana. D. J. Kime designed a pair of Dungeons & Dragons dice using the poem as well as Ernest Fraenkel’s graphic version. Poojana Prasanna created a zine which ponders the meaning of the poem from the perspective of a perplexed student reader.

Also featured is Iowa Graduate Fellow Margaret Yapp, who plays with space and typography in her debut volume of poems, *Green for Luck*.

LINGUISTICS AND VISUAL POETRY

24 Albert Dupont
b. France, 1951–
*Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard / Désir-
hasard-dés* (1995–2000)
Wooden box, folio, printed works, screen print
on transparent polyester; edition of 41 copies
SACKNER [N7433.4. D86 M23 1999]

25 John Furnival
b. UK, 1933–2020
Hommage a Mallarmé (1993)
Ink on paper

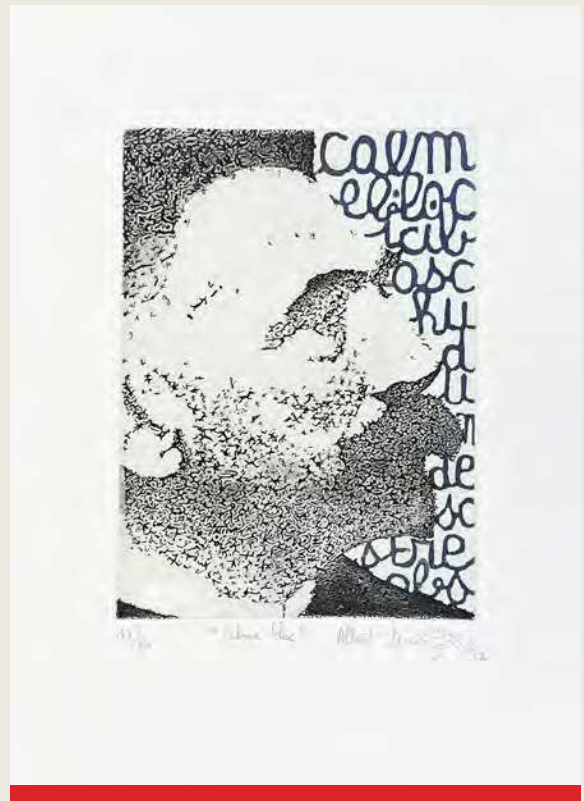
26 Tom Phillips
b. UK, 1937–2022
*A Throw of Dice Will Never Do Away with
Chance* (2003)
Acrylic cube

Mitsou Ronat was a French linguist and devotee of Noam Chomsky, who posited that the number twelve is the key to unlocking the mystery of the poem. She compiled a folio of visual, poetical, and scholarly interpretations of “Un coup de dés” along with Hungarian poet and scholar Tibor Papp, who contributed a map of Déville (“Dice-town”) which plays with the cartographic nature of the poem.

French artist Albert Dupont’s homage to “Un coup de dés” juxtaposes a more traditional printing of the poem and portrait of the poet with a folio of transparent pages which mimics water and animates the many layers of the work.

27 Tom Phillips
*The Limits of My Language Are the Limits of
My World* (1999)
Acrylic cube

28 Mitsou Ronat
b. France, 1946–1984
Tibor Papp
b. Hungary, 1936–2018
Selections: *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le
hasard* (1980)
Offset printed folio, edition of 48 copies



[ITEM 24] “Calme bloc,” 1997, from Albert Dupont’s *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard / Désir-hasard-dés*.

The dice themselves are the central image for British artists Tom Phillips and John Furnival. Phillips, a prolific and multi-talented artist whose work is adjacent to 1960s pop art, was a close personal friend of the Sackners. Special Collections and Archives at the University of Iowa Libraries holds many of Phillips's most famous works.

MORE CONTEMPORARY BOOK ARTS

- 29** Reinhold Nasshan
b. Germany, 1949–
Würfelwurf: Fragmentarische Annäherung an Stéphane Mallarmé (Dice Roll: Fragmentary Approach to Stéphane Mallarmé) (1992)
Letterpress
- 30** sadé powell
b. USA, 1993–
wordtomydead (2023)
Laser print on paper
- 31** Emily McVarish
b. USA, 1965–
Was Here (2001)
Letterpress

Intentionally or unintentionally, many contemporary book artists are creating artwork with roots reaching back to Mallarmé. Letterpress printer Emily McVarish's use of typography and open space echoes "Un coup de dés," as does the typewriter poetry of sadé powell, whose cascading, layered text pushes the borders of the page.

Reinhold Nasshan extends the printed page into three-dimensional space, where Mallarmé's words overlap, changing from French to German: *tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre* ("everything in the world exists to end up in a book"); and *Das Buch ist eine totale Expansion des Buchstabens* ("The book is a total expansion of the letter").



[ITEM 29] *Würfelwurf: Fragmentarische Annäherung an Stéphane Mallarmé.* Reinhold Nasshan, 1992.

SCULPTURAL WORKS

On display in the front window case.

Wendy Wischer

b. USA, 1971–

A Bend in the River (2006)

Painted wood (1,000 letters,
punctuation marks, and six fish)

Astrid Furnival

b. Germany, 1940–

Un coup de dés (1987)

Sweater, hand-knitted

Astrid Furnival

b. Germany, 1940–

John Furnival

b. UK, 1933–2020

Lady Midnight (1991)

Collage mannequin



[FRONT WINDOW DISPLAY] *Un coup de dés*. Astrid Furnival, 1987.

John and Astrid Furnival were pioneering artists of the British visual poetry scene from its earliest days in the 1960s. Astrid, a textile artist, created several knitted works based on the poetry of Samuel Beckett, William Blake, and James Joyce. She created this Mallarmé sweater for Ruth Sackner, who often wore it to public events. The mannequin *Lady Midnight* was created by John to model the sweater. Ruth reported (with a chuckle) that it also frightened the Sackner grandchildren.

Wendy Wischer is an American intermedia artist focused on environmental issues. The Sackners displayed the work in the entryway of their apartment, filling an empty fishpond built by the former owners.

ON THE WALLS

John Giorno

b. USA, 1936–2019

Buddhas and Bodhisattvas Rainbow (1973)

Silkscreen on paper

Emily McVarish

b. USA, 1965–

Thick As Walls Line (1996)

Mixed media

Elisabetta Gut
b. Italy, 1934–
La Plume de Poete (1989)
Assemblage

Amanda Berenguer
b. Uruguay, 1921–2010
Mar (1976)
From Composicion de Lugar
Silkscreen print

Amanda Berenguer
Luz (1976)
From Composicion de Lugar
Silkscreen print

Mikhail Tarkhanov
b. Ukraine 1888–1962
MIMITA (1914)
Ink on paper

Mikhail Tarkhanov
AXAXAXA (1914)
Ink on paper

On the walls of this exhibition are larger works which illustrate a wide range of approaches to typographical experimentation.



[ON THE WALL] *Buddhas and Bodhisattvas Rainbow*. John Giorno, 1973.

Emily McVarish and Elisabetta Gut took different approaches to bringing poetry out of the two-dimensional realm. Gut’s hand-calligraphy and organic shapes contrast with McVarish’s cold metallic frame and stark industrial letterpress forms.

Russian graphic artist Mikhail Tarkhanov was a student of Vasili Kandinsky. His Futurist/Bauhaus letterforms reflect his skill as an illustrator and teacher of design. Ironically, his true passion was for his biomorphic abstract paintings, which were suppressed by Soviet censors.

Amanda Berenguer was an active member of the international literary avant-garde for over sixty years and a member of Uruguay’s highly acclaimed “Generation of 1945,” known around the world for their experimental approach to poetry. Two of Berenguer’s prints from the series *Composition of Place* are included in this exhibit.

John Giorno was best known as a spoken word poet who later discovered silk-screen printing as a medium for his message. *Buddhas and Bodhisattvas Rainbow* is an early print which echoes his call-and-response style. Both a committed student of Tibetan Nyingma Buddhism and an outspoken advocate for gay rights, Giorno later used his large poem/prints to bring attention to the U.S. government's lack of response to the AIDS crisis.

LOOK ABOVE

Michalis Pichler

b. Germany, 1980–

Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard

(SCULPTURE)

Berlin: “greatest hits,” 2008

Laser-etched plexiglass

Hanging above in the gallery you will discover a three-dimensional approach to “Un coup de dés” created by Berlin artist Michalis Pichler. The piece is based on the Marcel Broodthaers 1969 blacked-out version of the poem, which is also on display in this exhibit. Pichler reiterates the visual aspect of Mallarmé's typography by laser etching the text blocks into plexiglass panels, which invites the viewer to further explore the interaction of the positive and negative space.

Lauren Coghlan

b. USA

Un coup de dés (2025)

Vinyl

Around the perimeter of the gallery is the entire English translation of Mallarmé's “Un coup de dés.” Made by University of Iowa Libraries creative coordinator Lauren Coghlan, this installation piece features over 185 feet of black vinyl letters along with red circles that indicate the line breaks in the poem.



Portrait of Stéphane Mallarmé. Paul Nadar, c. 1890.

EXHIBITION CREDITS

EXHIBITION CURATION

Rich Dana

Sackner Archive Project Coordinator Librarian
Special Collections and Archives, University of Iowa Libraries

PREPARATION & CONSERVATION

Bill Voss

Conservator Technician and Exhibit Preparator

Giselle Simón

University Conservator

DESIGN

Lauren Coghlan

Creative Coordinator

EXHIBITION COORDINATION

Sara J. Pinkham

Exhibition and Engagement Coordinator

INSTALLATION

Bill Voss, Lauren Coghlan, Sara J. Pinkham, Giselle Simón, Rich Dana,
Sarena Gibson, Mary Alice Waite

MATERIALS ACCESS SUPPORT

Lindsay Moen

Lead Public Services Librarian, Special Collections and Archives

WEBSITE

Ken Clinkenbeard, Web Services Specialist

Sara J. Pinkham

COMMUNICATIONS

Anne Bassett

Senior Director, Strategic Communications and External Relations

Krista Hershberger

Communications Specialist

ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE

Natalee Dawson, Tim Shipe, Peter Balestrieri, Margaret Gamm, Eric Ensley

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Friends of the University of Iowa Libraries

DEDICATION AND SPECIAL THANKS

This exhibit is dedicated to the memory of Ruth and Marvin Sackner.

Thank you to the Sackner family and to all the wonderful student librarians who have chosen to work on the Sackner project. Intellectually adventurous, they help bring order to chaos while expanding their artistic horizons. Past and present student librarians include: Gianna Ceriotti, Taylor Cline, Calvin Covington, Emily Edwards, Claire Graham, Sara Johnson, Abigail Kellis, and Connor Lund, and graduate assistants Camille Davis, D.J. Kime, and Emily Wieder.

A ROLL OF THE DICE: SYMBOLISM IN THE SACKNER ARCHIVE

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