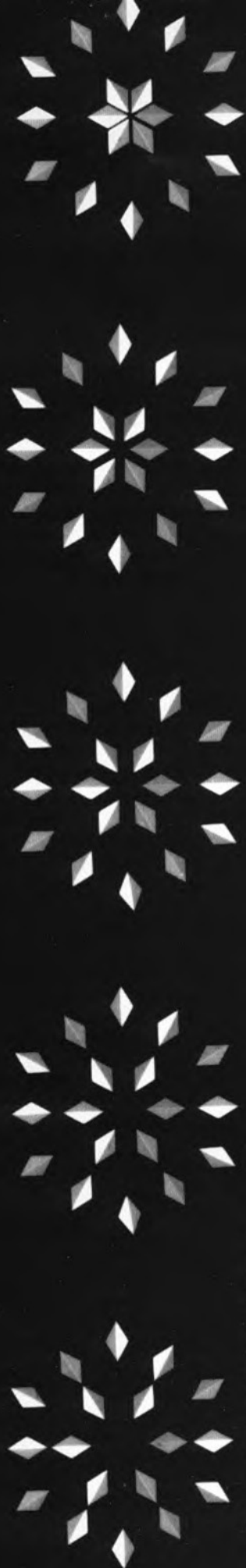


René Jodoin



Philosopher Fonctionnaire

By Chris Robinson

You could win a trivia contest by asking the following question: Who made films in the 1940s with Norman McLaren, started the National Film Board's French animation studio and shepherded the development of computer animation in this country? René Jodoin, the artist who accomplished these and many other things, is a figure who clearly deserves rescuing from the anonymity of abandoned NFB catalogues and newsletters. Like Colin Low, Wolf Koenig and Tom Daly, Jodoin allowed his natural humility and love of the early ideals of the Film Board to obscure his genuine contributions to Canadian film. And like many of his filmmaking colleagues, Jodoin deliberately downplayed his own reputation in order to work better as a *fonctionnaire*, a civil servant, who could produce artistic films for educational purposes.

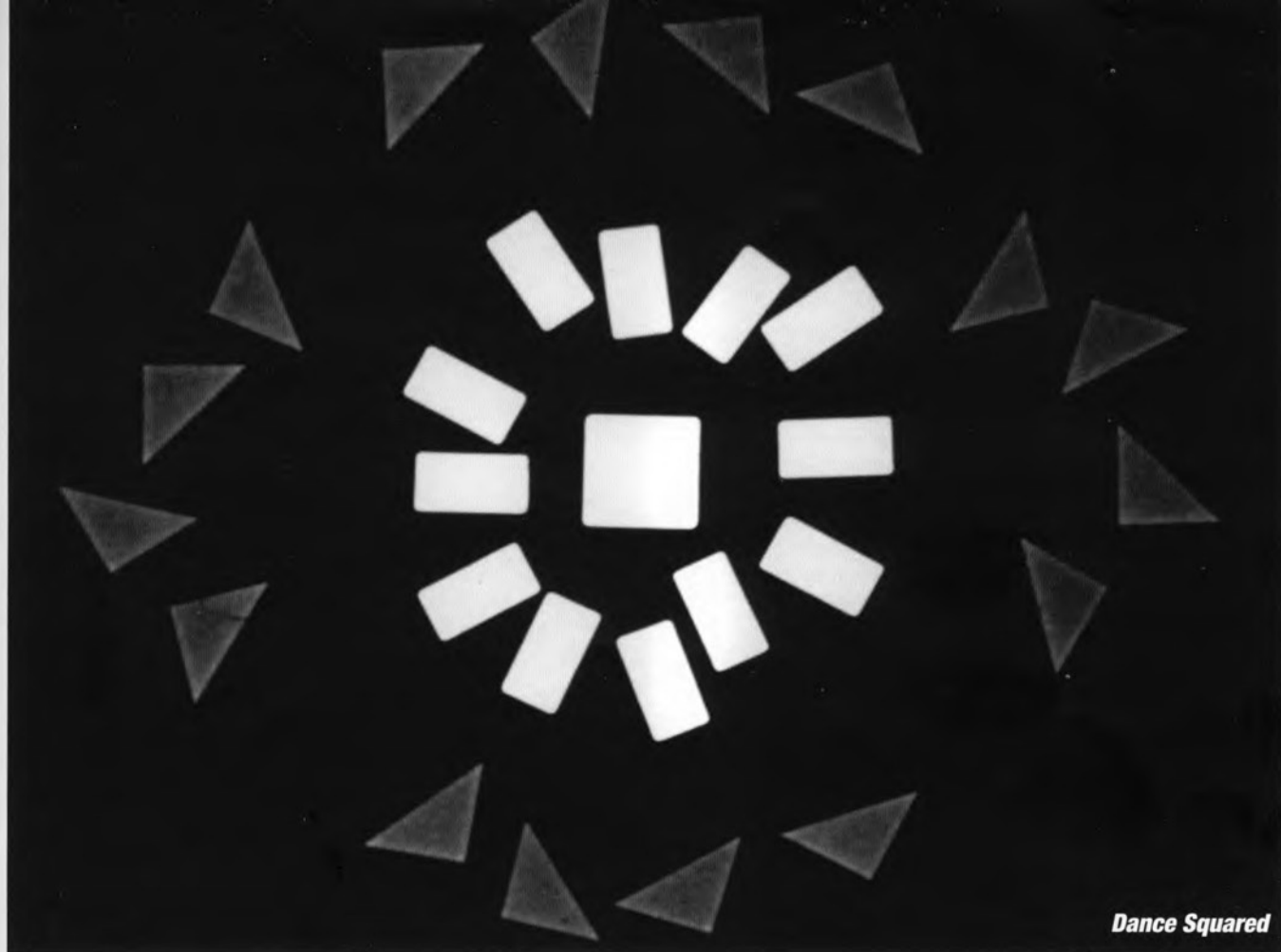
Jodoin's willingness to experiment, inherited from his days working with McLaren, revolutionized the NFB in the 1960s and solidified its reputation as the leading producer of intelligent, challenging and diverse animation films. During those years, he discovered or nurtured such talents as Pierre Hébert, Co Hoedeman, Jacques Drouin and Paul Driessen. Fighting the good fight for sexual equality, Jodoin gave directorial jobs to many female animators including Caroline Leaf, Suzanne Gervais and Francine Desbiens. Jodoin also brought computer systems into the Film Board, allowing Peter Foldès to start the process that has changed animation in the past two decades. And, through it all, Jodoin remained an animation director who always enjoyed creating his own abstract and complex films.

Jodoin's initial work for the NFB in the 1940s involved the designing of titles, maps and diagrams for a variety of documentary and war films. For a while Jodoin was in charge of the title department, but was soon pulled away to produce a series of folk songs called *Let's Sing Together*. Jodoin's contributions to *Let's Sing Together* included "Home on the Range" (which features a slow pan across a prairie landscape), "Square Dance" (featuring very simple figures dancing) and "Alouette," which was codirected with Norman McLaren. This cutout film consists of two parts. In the chorus, a bird "bounces" back and forth to the music. During the verses, the text of the song appears in various corners of the frame. "I always thought that part of the game was to use the text in an interesting way," notes Jodoin. By highlighting the text, the films actually encouraged active participation from the audience. On the whole, *Alouette* is awkward and primitive, however the experimental choreography of the lyrics remains quite striking and provides a momentary hint of Jodoin's later, more accomplished work.

Following the war, all or most of the people Jodoin admired and learned from were gone. John Grierson was in the United States,

Notes on a Triangle

All images courtesy of the National Film Board



Dance Squared

McLaren was in China and after failing to get a scholarship to attend a film school in France, Jodoin and Grant Munro decided to travel to Mexico. Jodoin and Munro had met a man named Castro Leal who was setting up a Mexican film board in the NFB's mould, and he invited the two to Mexico to help him get things started. However, when it came time to work at the Mexican film board, the two found it was largely occupied by business types who were not totally convinced of the NFB's artistic ways. Things didn't quite pan out. So after turning down a job to do live-action editing, Jodoin and Munro spent another year travelling around Mexico painting before Jodoin returned to Ottawa.

While Jodoin did not officially return to the Board, he did begin making a film with McLaren. "Norman and I met and discussed ideas many times," says Jodoin. "We came up with a simple but attractive idea. If the two of us were doing motion, what would be the natural next move? It was a bit like a mime and then we applied this to the structure. We were shooting under very primitive conditions. It was an old building, even the old title stand was shaking. We found it rather boring. The song was to be done directly on the film. We worked on that for a while, but decided to leave it." Some years later McLaren finished the film, which was called *Spheres*, to the accompaniment of Glenn Gould.

After *Spheres*, Jodoin moved to Toronto where he freelanced for various production houses (Audio Pictures and for a time he worked out of Graphic Associates, owned by former NFB colleagues George Dunning and Jim MacKay) before finding a permanent job as the art director for Current Publications, a

publishing firm that put out medicine and health journals. In 1954, Jodoin, bored by his work at Current Publications, accepted an invitation to return to the NFB, this time as a director in the NFB-sponsored film division. Jodoin's first works were a series of training films for the Royal Canadian Air Force. Taken as a whole, these films, with such lively titles as *Introduction to Jet Engines* and *Antenna Fundamentals*, are quite dull. Nevertheless, there are some striking scenes that seem more tailored to an abstract film than an industrial film. In *Jet Engines*, for example, a scene demonstrating the interaction between gases and blades resembles a bizarre Busby Berkeley sequence as interpreted by Oscar Fischinger. In *Antenna Fundamentals*, radiation wave patterns are demonstrated through a dance of blue and red circles which expand and interact. In both films, the use of colour, shape and movement is quite extraordinary and lays the groundwork for Jodoin's more detailed explorations of geometrical figures in his personal films.

In 1961, Jodoin finally had the chance to make his own film. "I wanted to make a film about something that didn't have pictures. I jumped onto it. I needed sound and square dance music was ideal. I asked Maurice Blackburn if he would find me something. He found some old square dance music that was recorded at a party in Ottawa with all sorts of noise. He cut all of that out and restructured it for the film. I had to do this in a basement with a kind of Rube Goldberg arrangement. I couldn't move the camera for any changes. I had to cut huge copies of the square. It was in the same room where *Universe* was being shot." The result was *Dance Squared*, an intriguing,

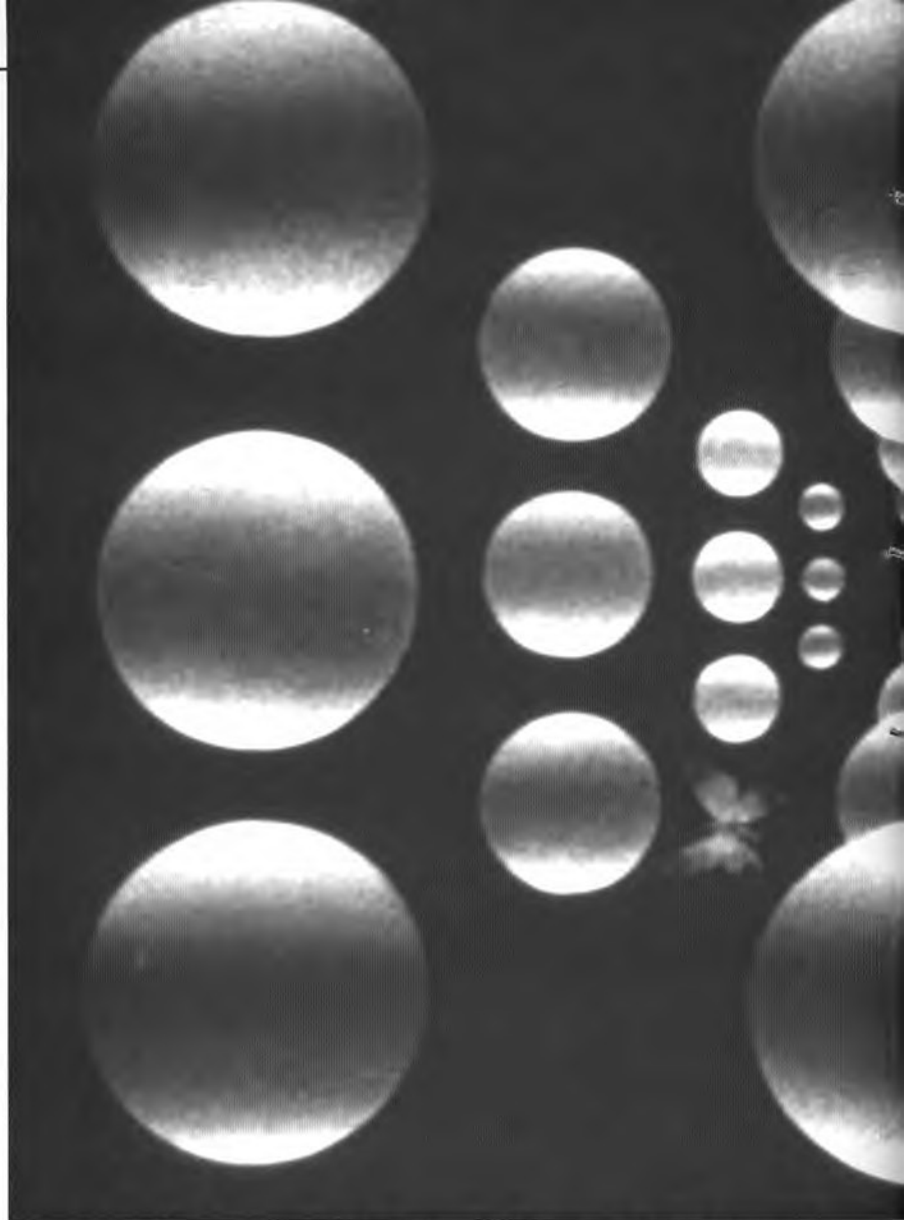
albeit primitive, film that explores the geometrical possibilities of a square. The film is at times too slow and deliberate; nevertheless, *Dance Squared* is unique in its attempt to integrate the pedagogical into an abstract field of expression.

Notes on a Triangle is considered by many to be Jodoin's masterpiece. An extension of *Dance Squared*, *Notes on a Triangle* examines the geometrical possibilities of a triangle. A single triangle splits and rotates into a variety of different shapes and colours. As with *Dance Squared*, the music plays a pivotal role in extending Jodoin's work beyond the pedagogical. The waltz-inspired fiddle music of Maurice Blackburn adds a lightness to the film which lures the viewer far from the very precise and logical constructs and into a world of seemingly random bursts of colour and shapes. It is this ability to display delicate morsels of complexity under the guise of visual and aural candy that makes Jodoin's work so magnificent.

One of the lauded moments of *Notes on a Triangle* is a brief zoom that occurs midway through the film. During this zoom, the shapes continue to expand and move about. "With computers today that would be trivial," notes animator Pierre Hébert, "but doing this with cutouts on an old camera is really an accomplishment." Says Jodoin, "There was a notion of something going on forever. There were maybe two zooms, but you are conscious of one. The whole thing was designed exponentially so that you compensate for the fact that you are approaching a flat thing. You are actually moving in space."

After the Film Board moved to Montreal in 1956 and set up a French-production division, there was pressure to establish a French-animation unit. "A few years after the move to Montreal," says Jodoin, "there was an influx of young people who wanted to do animation. I wasn't particularly keen on it, but you had to put yourself in the position of all these younger people and that's how we all got together and proposed the idea. The whole of French production were enthusiastic about it, so when I presented it to the director of production he said, 'Yes, on one condition, that you do it.'" So in 1965, Jodoin became the director of the French-animation unit.

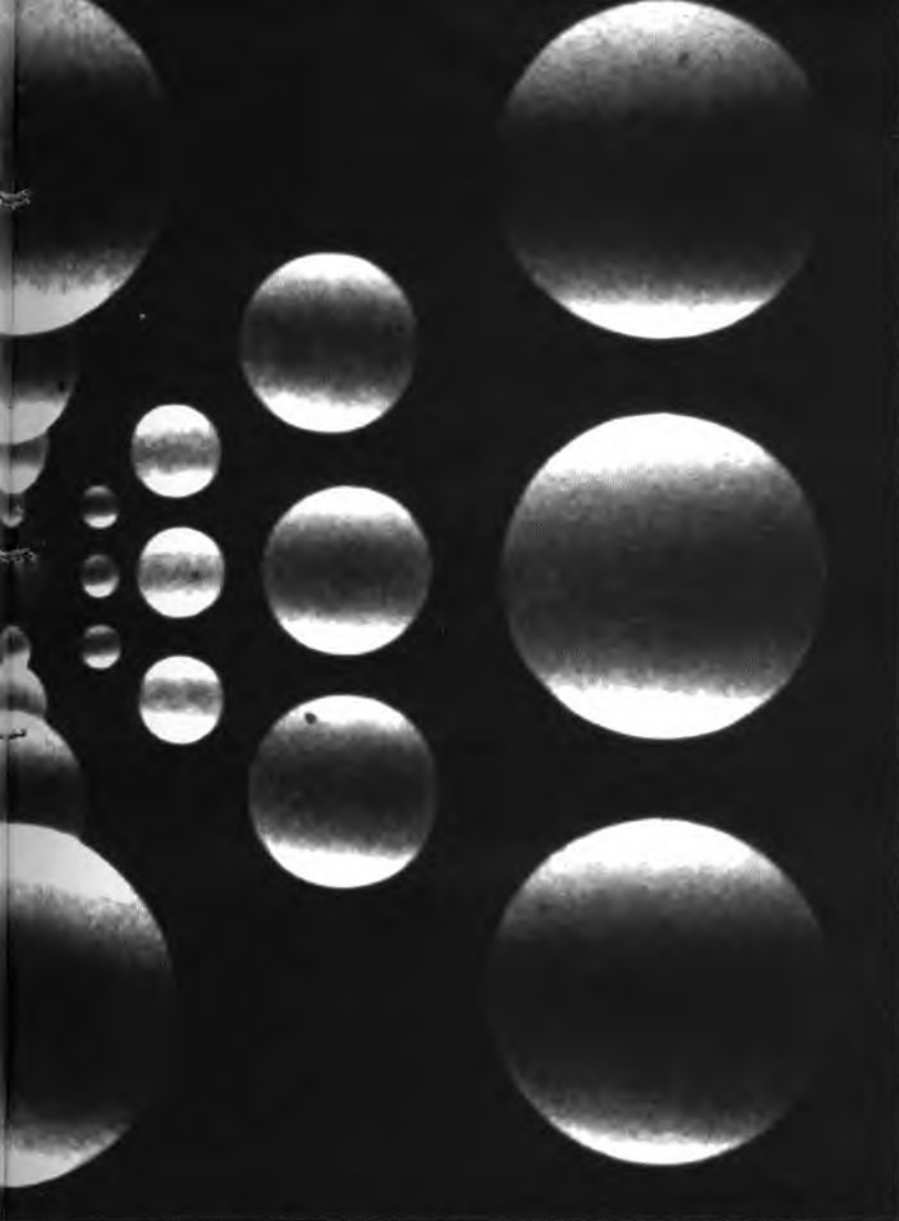
"It was primitive to begin with. There was very little money and no locale. Everyone (many of the new animators were already working at the Board in other departments) stayed where they were, and we rented a bus for people to work out of." In order to get both respect and money, Jodoin turned to his very roots as an NFB animator and proposed the series, *Contemporary Songs of French Canada*. The seed of the idea evolved out of McLaren's initial *Let's Sing Together* series, and it was a brilliant stroke. At once, the series enabled Jodoin to get more money for the department and, like *Let's Sing Together*,



Spheres: Jodoin's willingness to experiment, inherited from his days

provided an ideal training exercise for a number of young animators. "[The series] made it easier to get to the next step, which was getting a room to work in." "He knew," says Pierre Hébert, "that he had to prove something and knew he had to make something. He delivered the films with a limited budget and it allowed the studio to save money."

There is no denying Norman McLaren's immense role in establishing the Film Board's international reputation; however, it is foolish to underestimate the impact of Jodoin. While the English studio languished in producing narrative-driven cel animation, the French studio, in part because of a low budget, explored diverse avenues of expression. Under Jodoin's lead, the French unit attracted the likes of Co Hoedeman, Ishu Patel, Paul Driessen, Caroline Leaf, Pierre Hébert, Francine Desbiens, André Leduc and Jacques Drouin. The result was some of the most strikingly original films that the Board had ever produced. In achieving this, Jodoin consciously avoided hiring experienced animators. Instead, he encouraged young talent who were not yet formed as artists, let alone as animators. It was Jodoin's goal to train them on the job.



working with McLaren, revolutionized the NFB in the 1960s.

Even more remarkable was Jodoin's openness to women artists. It is a well-known fact that animation, especially cel animation, has traditionally been a male-dominated medium. It is a little known fact that Francine Desbiens was the first French-Canadian woman to direct an animation film. "At one time," says Desbiens, "there were more women than men. After Jodoin left the department, there were 10 years where not one woman was employed as a freelancer or as a permanent. He was way out in front of everybody." Jodoin's liberal attitudes also extended to an interest in developing computer animation as an artistic tool. "The National Research Council came around to visit and discuss their problems. They were working on a project with CBC and Radio-Canada," says Jodoin. "I wasn't too impressed with all that, but finally they asked the Film Board to cooperate. We went down to see what they were doing and we realized that we could animate line drawing." Unfortunately, the Film Board was never really in a position to follow through on its early computer exploration. "Things changed," notes Hébert, "because the NFB couldn't afford to keep up and the people doing the same in the U.S. were better funded." Indeed, Jodoin was not in total agreement

with the NFB's aim to be at the forefront of computer animation development. "René favoured lighter equipment that would be put in the hands of the animators," notes Hébert. "This is what he had in mind and of course, this is the way it is today. René was seeing things differently."

In 1979, Jodoin resigned from his position to work on his own films. "When René left," notes Paul Driessen, "I think it was a heavy blow to the department. After that the people in charge of the department were much more commercial and didn't really stand for anything." Between 1979 and his retirement from the board in 1985, Jodoin completed two films, *A Matter of Form* (1984) and *Rectangle and Rectangles* (1985). *A Matter of Form* is an intriguing and clever film, but is really just a variation on ideas previously explored. Three dots interact to form a line that expands from different points to create various shapes and colours. Echoing the thoughts of Heraclitus, *Matter of Form* presents a world in a constant state of change. More interesting is *Rectangle and Rectangles*, an almost violent film that assaults the viewer with an onslaught of colours, shapes and an incessant, disturbing flickering (the video comes with a warning that it may trigger epileptic seizures). "The aim was to show time. I tried to make a film with the absence of almost everything so that you could see time move and visually you can become interested through the play of colour and motion." It is a film that leaves one with impressions, not absolutes. There are traces of movement and colour, but nothing definitive.

Remarkably, Jodoin remains hard at work in his basement on a computer film he has tentatively titled *Traces*. The goal of the film, scheduled to be released in late 1999, is to try to evoke people's experience of music. It's like traces of things past and present. "I find it extraordinary," says Hébert, who is currently producing a video series to celebrate Jodoin's work, "that this man of 79 is still looking for things he had in mind in the 1940s. There is a strong sense of necessity in him that has a lot of continuity in what he did. I would like to be like that." It was Heraclitus who believed that the universe is in a constant state of change and that "the beginning and end are the same," but like the words of all great philosophers, they are little more than abstract musings. Jodoin has applied these words both artistically and institutionally throughout his life.

Oddly enough, Jodoin's determined exploration of the infinite is deeply rooted in a traditional belief (inherited from McLaren and ultimately Grierson) in the active function of the civil servant. In an age where we view the institutional as "dead weight," the work of René Jodoin, a man of the institution, suggests that perhaps we, not our institutions, have become stagnant and unchanging. ●

Philippe Desbiens
Fonctionnaire