Document generated on 04/23/2024 7:25 p.m.

ETC MEDIA

The City on the Edge of Forever: The Digital Environment of Paul-Emile Rioux

James D. Campbell

Number 103, October 2014, February 2015

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/72970ac

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

2368-030X (print)
2368-0318 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Campbell, J. D. (2014). The City on the Edge of Forever: The Digital Environment of Paul-Emile Rioux. *ETC MEDIA*, (103), 89–92.

Tous droits réservés © Revue d'art contemporain ETC Media, 2014

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/

érudit

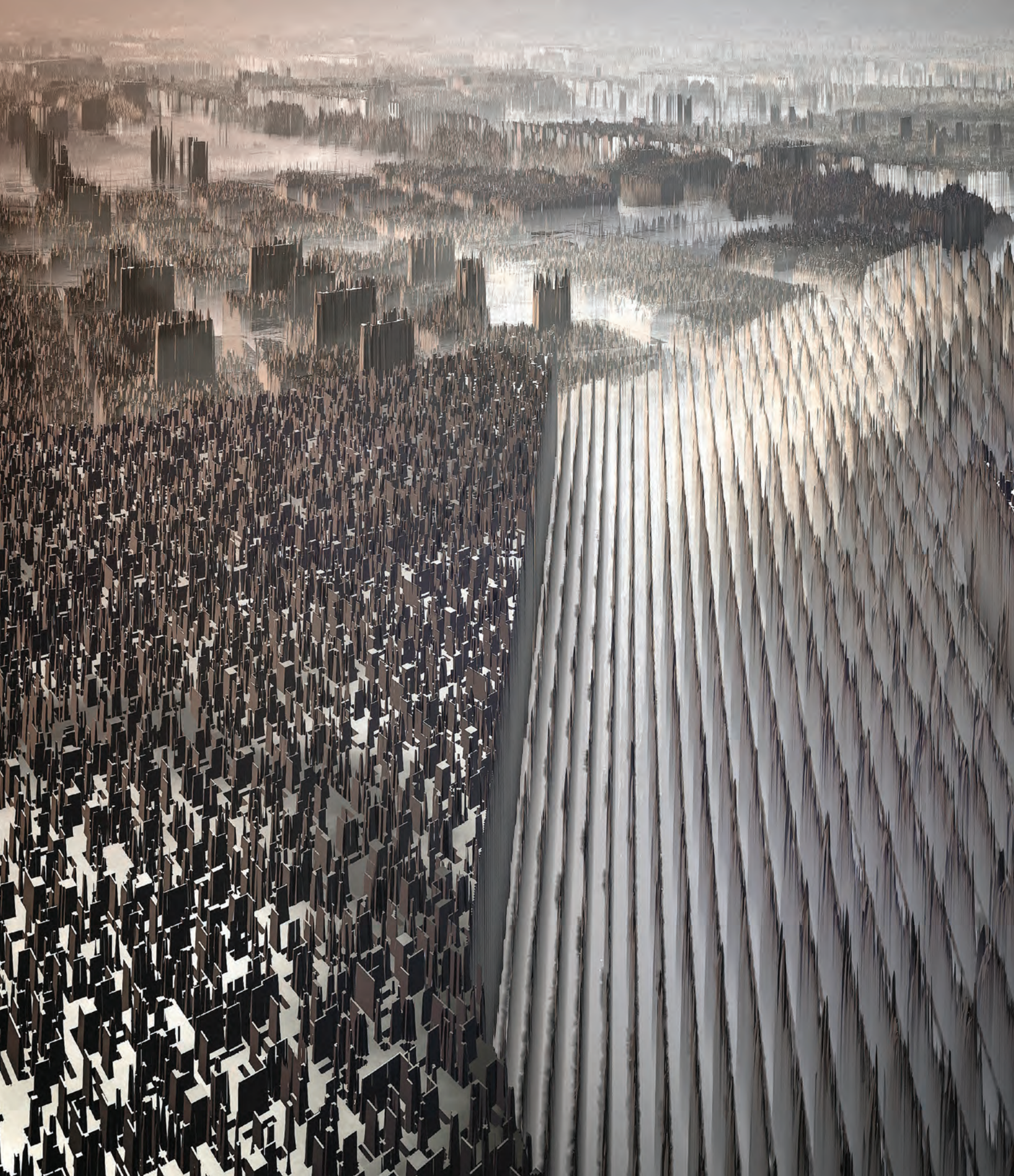
This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

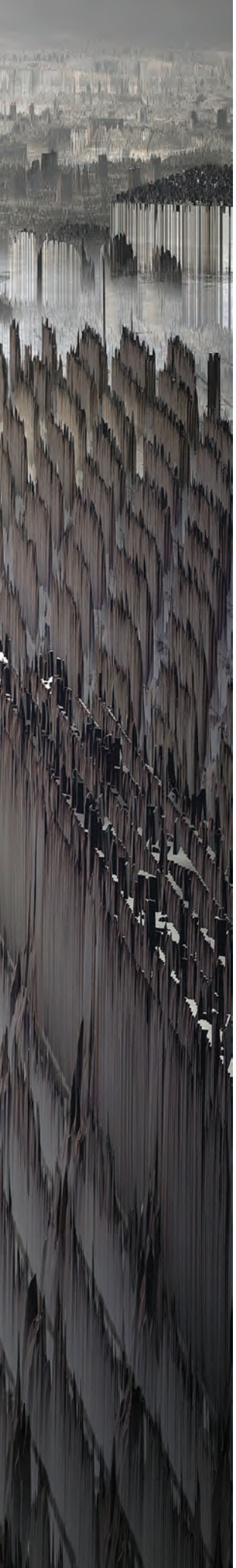
Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

https://www.erudit.org/en/

Paul-Émile Rioux,
MYC23.

THE CITY ON THE EDGE OF FOREVER:
THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT OF PAUL-EMILE RIOUX





Paul-Émile Rioux, *Suburb.*

In "The City on the Edge of Forever," the penultimate episode of the first season of the American science fiction television series *Star Trek* (broadcast on April 6, 1967), the crew of the starship USS Enterprise discover a portal through space and time, a living time machine called "The Guardian of Forever." Captain James Kirk and First Officer Spock are permitted by the machine to pursue a crazed Dr. McCoy through the portal in order to repair the timeline that he has breached, accidentally altering history and murdering their collective future. Kirk and Spock arrive in New York City during the 1930s Great Depression, make the repair and return through the portal. The Guardian then says, "Time has resumed its shape. All is as it was before. Many such journeys are possible. Let me be your gateway."

Montreal-based digital artist Paul-Emile Rioux repeats the Guardian's mantra in his recent *Landcuts* images (comprising the interrelated *City*, *Downtown* and *Suburb* sequences): "Let me be your gateway." Our destination and itinerary: posthuman cities of the future that read alternately as utopian and dystopian. They form remarkably holistic images: seamless, dimensionally rich and layered formal wholes into which we readily project. They are at once exhilarating and disturbing. They have a sweepingly alien cast that reminds us of the best speculative fiction about cities of the future. Upon first seeing them, I must confess that I thought, quite involuntarily, of surrealist Yves Tanguy's masterwork *Multiplication of the Arcs* (1956), although there are no stylistic similarities whatsoever.

Rioux's images demonstrate a sophisticated order of combinatorial play, and employ sundry devices from 3D models of topography and other sources harvested from the vast archive of the Internet. Indeed, the "cut" in "landcut" is a piece of land that the artist frames, constructs and grows by blending other cuts taken from landscape photography, product shots or 3D models of topography, all reinterpreted through digital techniques and upon which he has superimposed his own highly seductive surfaces. Here is the inner city understood as a legion of restless signifiers, not as a static singularity. His synthetic landscapes are profoundly multiple and profoundly destabilizing.

Rioux experiments with various maquettes in order to determine and calibrate the final result. He favours the panorama (up to 20 feet in length) as format and prints in his own studio. The resultant semiotic palimpsests are based upon a systemic deconstruction and reformulation of landscape, and are modular in the sense argued for digital objects—meaning they are made up of objects put together to form larger objects, and each piece maintains its independence as it accretes expansive and auratic sense to the whole.

One might suggest that our increasingly interactive relationship with media through the computer—the fact that we are more-or-less continually "plugged-in"—primes us for an ever-deeper and richer appreciation of Rioux's work: Google, Wiki, FB—all windows are simultaneously accessible on the desktop in a nanosecond. Rioux's images hearken back to the vast floating advertisements in Ridley Scott's prescient film *Blade Runner*—set in a dystopian future (2019) to which most inner cities have now caught up, given the ubiquity of digital signs and moving image advertisements—and forwards to the incarnation of Paul Virilio's *City of Panic*.

Rioux's cities on the edge of forever possess unusual gravitas, breathtaking vistas and epic sweeps. They embody an iteration of simplicity upon which all modern computing is based. Indeed, their endless structural facades emulate the extraordinary computational power of electrified binary numbers. Here, untold legions of busy nanobots seem to be at work building and testing existing definitions of place, space and emplacement. Indeed, the "building blocks" inside these serial cities replicate until a certain threshold of density has been reached in their matrices. At that point, a tuning-fork-like vibrancy builds inside the restless core of the work and spreads outwards as aura. I say "restless" because the core itself seems to be digitally morphing into myriad equivalences and disparities even as we view the artwork as its own uniquely worked, unfettered whole.

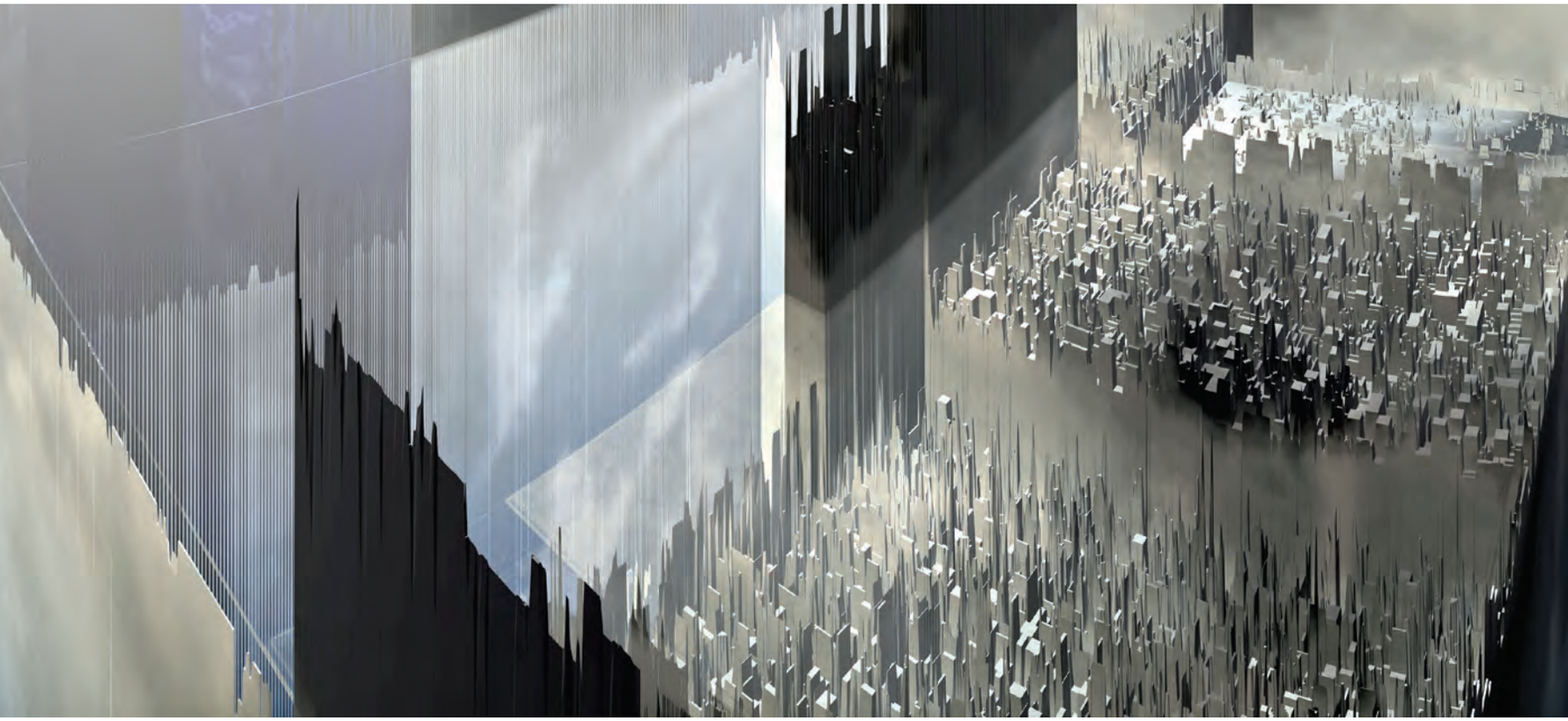
All three recent series highlight what I call their status as "immanent structures," in the sense that French philosopher Gilles Deleuze means it.[1] As a formative value, he uses the term to indicate a pure immanence, a phenomenal embeddedness, and it is most useful to consider it in terms of Rioux's work wherein the pure plane seems synonymous with an infinitely unfolding field or quintessentially smooth space without inflective division; here is a rhizomatic entity with innumerable tendrils that reach up and over the threshold of eternity like weeds, spreading throughout hyperspace like wildfire. In his final essay entitled "Immanence: A Life," Deleuze writes: "It is only when immanence is no longer immanence to anything other than itself that we can speak of a plane of immanence."[2]

In Rioux's cities, such as *B1*, massive structures seem to walk on water, as though on huge stilts, floating against gravity in an aqueous space—like the aqueous humour located in the anterior and posterior chambers of the human eye—with all the grace of equilateral polygons in amazing fractal profusion. In *B3*, the multiplying edges of the structures suggest fractal geometries beyond our ken. These weird structures seem to mutate and spontaneously multiply like dividing cells across the broad array of the cityscape. In other works from the *City* series, the fractal dimensionality of silver and black monoliths reminds us of the omniscient icon of Arthur C. Clarke's and Stanley Kubrick's cinematic masterpiece *2001: A Space Odyssey.*

We have the sense in Rioux's work of an indigenous, progressively unfolding network of forces, architectonic clones, binary connections, myriad relations and endless morphologies. For instance, in *Suburb B3-1*, the fractal geometry of an infinitely mutating suburbia seems to extend way beyond the framing edge. In *B3-3* and *B3-4*, the long, rectilinear, structural expanses again palpably suggest an infinity loop, as though one could fold space into an entirely open, self-regenerative system. Somehow, the immanence in question folds back upon itself in algorithmic fashion.

Indeed, in this context we could cite Paul Virilio—cultural critic, architect, urban planner and former director of the École Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris—who argues in his seminal *City of Panic* that cities everywhere have been subjected to political and technological terror throughout the last century.[3] Virilio speaks eloquently of the construction of *identikit* places, the proliferation of gated communities, the progressively widening net of surveillance, the sheer cataclysm of the *now*. As we examine Rioux's works, we side with Virilio's belief that future states will not have to defend themselves against external threats, but against the internal threats proliferating within their own dense and multi-layered metropolises.

Virilio developed the notion of the "Overexposed City" as a radically intense and dynamic city, whose aspect is being continually



Paul-Émile Rioux, *Downtown*.

reconstructed by electronic screens. With this he alludes to one of his key themes: the dematerialization of the city under the impact of information technologies. According to Virilio, these technologies have altered how human beings perceive time. Chronological and historical time has given way to the real time of computer screens and television sets, where everything appears instantaneously. Real time annuls the notion of physical distance, since the faster we move around the world, the less we appreciate its vastness. Virilio discusses the disappearance of real space as running parallel to the disappearance of local or historical time, or rather that the "urbanisation of real space" gives way to "urbanisation in real time." This new form of creating a city is based on computing and television logic, and is characterized by an architecture constructed with materials that are highly processed and finishes that are extremely polished, shiny, like luminous skins.[4] Similarly, the complex modular architecture of Rioux's cities is being constantly deconstructed and reconstructed by software that mirrors the impact of information technologies. Consider *Downtown 1*, in which the tiered sentinels seem to be multiplying like binary code, blossoming like Mandelbrot fractals across the surface of the downtown core and far beyond.

Rioux's work is the manifestation of a future that has already arrived, in one sense, and one that is still being born, in another. It is a future that, like a proverbial supernova, is still accelerating and irradiating at warp speed across cyberspace. At the heart of our existential void, Rioux builds highly intricate digimorphic structures that investigate salient issues of being and dwelling, becoming and inhabitation. His work is interrogatory and genetic in the extreme. His "cities on the edge of forever" possess myriad dovetailed nodal points, signs and rhizomes, as well as a fractal dimensionality and a simply immeasurable aura. These semiotic palimpsests may well belong to tomorrow's dream worlds, but they are being bravely built in his studio today.

James D. Campbell

1 Deleuze, Gilles. *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life.* 2nd ed. Trans. Anne Boyman. Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2005. 25.

2 *Ibid*.

3 See Virilio, Paul. *City of Panic*. Trans. Julie Rose. London: Berg Publishers, 2007.

4 See Virilio, Paul. "The Overexposed City." *Zone 1/2*. Ed. Michel Feher and Sanford Kwinter. Brooklyn: Zone Books, 1993. 14-31, and "The Third Interval: A Critical Transition." *Rethinking Technologies*. Ed. Verena Andermatt Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. 3-10.