imby. (in my back yard)

Art and about: Nature, Power, and Connectivity

by John Isaacs

Video still from STREAMING II (for Nikola Tesla) by Daniel Rothbart and Milica Lapčević with music by Patrick Grant

Sunday, July 10 was the 160th anniversary of the birth of the physicist Nikola Tesla, by any reckoning one of the most important and influential, not to mention intriguing figures of modern times.

The evolution of electric power from Michael Faraday's discovery, in 1831, of the principles of electromagnetic induction, to the initial installation of the Tesla polyphase system in 1896, underpins the vast majority of technological innovation up to and including our own times.

It can accurately be said that Tesla's and George Westinghouse's collaboration, in 1893, to build the world's first alternating current hydro-electric power plant in Niagara Falls started the electrification of the world.

The controversial, highly eccentric, supremely dapper, precisely regimented, and very tall and very thin Serbian-American scientist was never, curiously, awarded the Nobel Prize. But he was well-known in New York social circles, famous for dining alone at precisely 8:10 pm at Delmonico's restaurant at the Waldorf-Astoria and for his obsession with pigeons, about which he wrote:

"I have been feeding pigeons, thousands of them for years. But there was one, a beautiful bird, pure white with light grey tips on its wings; that one was different. It was a female. I had only to wish and call her and she would come flying to me.

Isaacs, John, *Art and about - Nature, Power, and Connectivity, IMBY*, July 12, 2016.

I loved that pigeon as a man loves a woman, and she loved me. As long as I had her, there was a purpose to my life." Tesla died, after living for some years on only milk, bread, honey and vegetable juices, in 1943, at the age of 86, alone in Room 3327 of the New Yorker Hotel nearby Penn Station. Two thousand people attended a state funeral at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

He is, of course, now also celebrated, appropriately, in a brand of electric cars destined to again transform society by fiercely and urgently addressing one of the underlying causes of climate change.

This extraordinary figure is further immortalized in the beautifully poetic and elegant video piece, "STREAMING II (for Nikola Tesla)" by Brooklyn and Hudson-based artist Daniel Rothbart, shown on Sunday at The Frank Institute's CR10 art centre in Livingston.

In his eleven-minute elegy, Rothbart blends early archival footage of Tesla's Niagara Falls power plant, with his own exquisitely photographed and rendered live imagery of Niagara Falls now, in deepest winter. The juxtaposition of the original footage, which pre-dates but is so evocative of Fritz Lang's "Metropolis", and the artist's contemporary depictions, whose icy lyricism is redolent of the forces, natural and spiritual, that are the foundation of mankind's constant drive to harness and distribute Earth's energy—hopefully, in future, as efficiently as possible—is further complemented by Patrick Grant's enchantingly appropriate score.

The screening took place simultaneously in Wardenclyffe, Long Island (where Tesla's 1901 transmission tower, the basis for a worldwide wireless system, while revolutionary, was ultimately eclipsed by Marconi's system); at the Nikola Tesla Airport in Belgrade, Serbia, at the Ozalj and Jaruga hydroelectric power plants in Croatia, and at the University of Maribor Library in Slovenia.

Which just shows how far we have come.

STREAMING II (for Nikola Tesla) by Daniel Rothbart and Milica Lapčević, music by Patrick Grant, 2016, HD video, USA, 11:54