The Man Who Invented the 20th Century
Henry Jesionka

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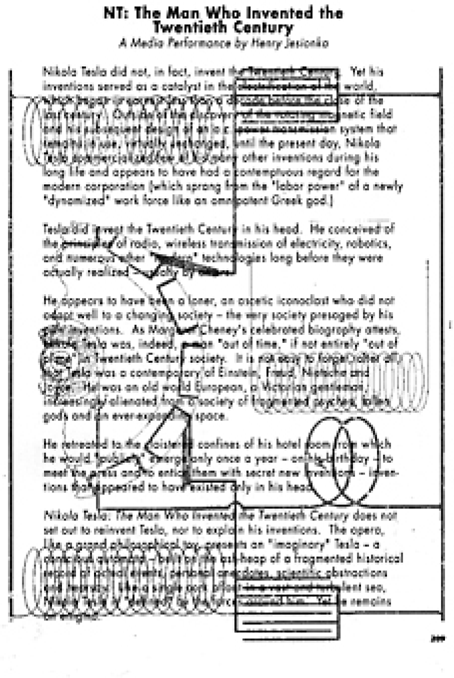

NT: The Man Who Invented the Twentieth Century

A Media Performance by Henry Jesionka

Nikola Tesla did not, in fact, invent the Twentieth Century. Yet his inventions served as a catalyst in the electrification of the world, which began in earnest less than a decade before the close of the last century. Outside of the discovery of the rotating magnetic field and his subsequent design of an a.c. power transmission system that remains in use, virtually unchanged, until the present day, Nikola Tesla commercialized few of the many other inventions during his long life and appears to have had a contemptuous regard for the modern corporation (which sprang from the "labor power" of a newly "dynamized" work force like an omnipotent Greek god.)

Tesla did invent the Twentieth Century in his head. He conceived of the principles of radio, wireless transmission of electricity, robotics, and numerous other "modern" technologies long before they were actually realized – usually by others.

He appears to have been a loner, an ascetic iconoclast who did not adapt well to a changing society – the very society presaged by his own inventions. As Margaret Cheney's celebrated biography attests, Nikola Tesla was, indeed, a man "out of time," if not entirely "out of place" in Twentieth Century society. It is not easy to forget, after all, that Tesla was a contemporary of Einstein, Freud, Nietzsche and Joyce. He was an old world European, a Victorian gentleman, increasingly alienated from a society of fragmented psyches, fallen gods and an ever-expanding space.

He retreated to the cloistered confines of his hotel room from which he would "publicly" emerge only once a year – on his birthday – to meet the press and to entice them with secret new inventions – inventions that appeared to have existed only in his head.

Nikola Tesla: The Man Who Invented the Twentieth Century does not set out to reinvent Tesla, nor to explain his inventions. The opera, like a grand philosophical toy, presents an "imaginary" Tesla – a conscious automaton – built on the ash-heap of a fragmented historical record of actual events, personal anecdotes, scientific abstractions and fantasy. Like a single cork afloat in a vast and turbulent sea, Nikola Tesla is "defined" by the forces around him. Yet he remains an enigma.

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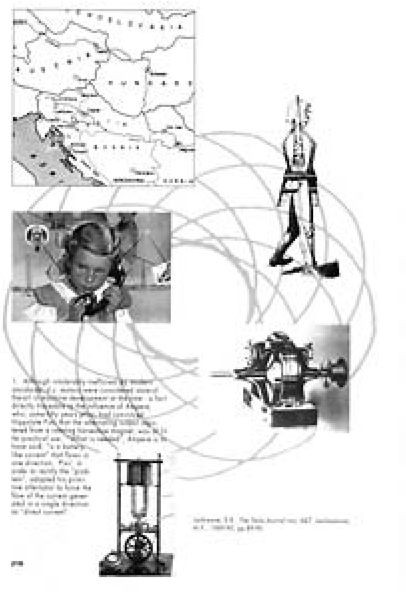

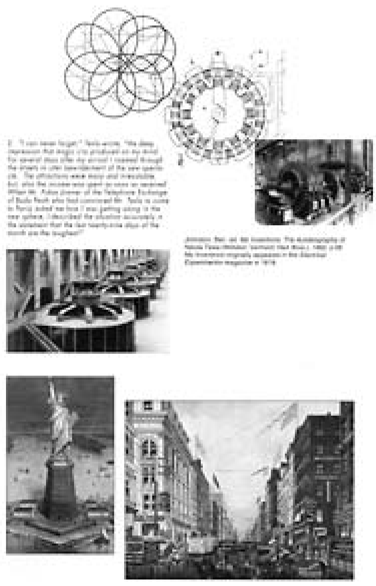

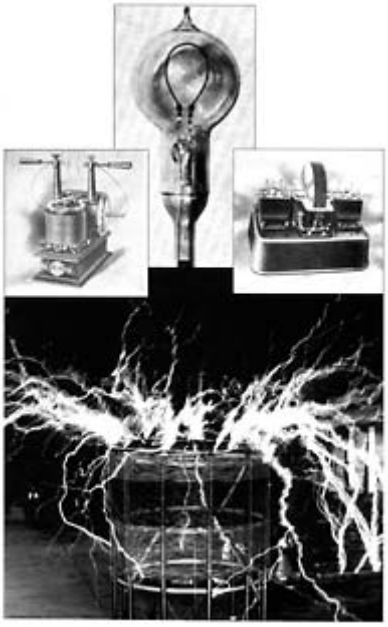

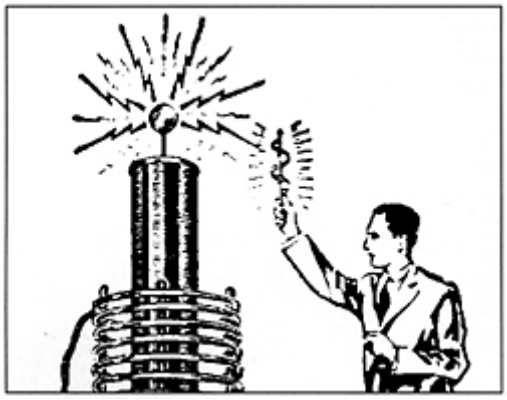

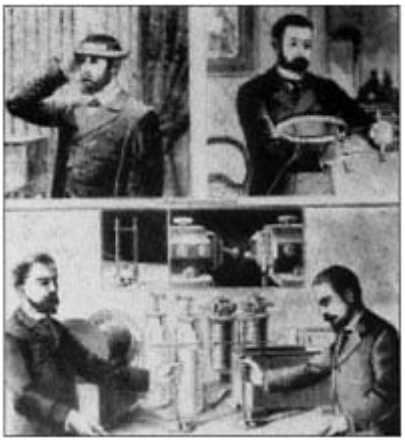

13. Although Tesla appealed to his old friend George Westinghouse for help, it was not forthcoming.

"Like Edison, George Westinghouse possessed many advantages in the contest for industrial supremacy: vast personal wealth, an expert engineering staff, and patents on hundreds of processes and devices, of which the most valuable was the alternating current system for transmitting electricity. But Westinghouse's company expanded too quickly; its sales rising nearly thirty-fold in its first four years of existence. In the depression of the 1890s George Westinghouse was forced to seek a loan of a half-million dollars. The titans of Pittsburgh offered to lend him the money, demanding in exchange the right to name the company's manager. Westinghouse stalked out of the Mellon bank and headed for the office of New York financier August Belmont, where he received the funds he needed. But in the 1908 recession "Westinghouse was caught again," as journalist Harvey O'Connor wrote in his Depression-era expose' of the house of Mellon. "The bankers took over his enterprises and gave the old man a nominal position from which he resigned in disgust, and the immense Westinghouse business marched on without George Westinghouse.