

Nam June Paik's *Electronic Superhighway* Aesthetic Questions



Images: Nam June Paik, *Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii*, 1995, fifty-one channel video installation (including one closed-circuit television feed), custom electronics, neon lighting, steel, and wood; color, sound, approx. 15' × 40' × 4'. Sources: Smithsonian American Art Museum. © Nam June Paik Estate and: Smithsonian American Art Museum YouTube Channel. "Nam June Paik's Electronic Superhighway—American Art Moments."


Overview

Nam June Paik is known as the father of video art because of his ability to transform video technologies into creative artworks. *Electronic Superhighway* is an example of **time-based media**—a technology-based physical artwork. Paik created it as a large-scale installation with flashing distorted videos on television screens and integrated sound clips. He designed *Electronic Superhighway* with repeating video content that tells a story about driving on highways across the United States and seeing fast moving images as they move across each of its states. *Electronic Superhighway* contains 336 television sets and neon lights that outline the state lines.

Electronic Superhighway requires a roomy exhibition space where people can closely examine its many parts. As with all time-based media artworks that use specialized technologies, *Electronic Superhighway* requires care by a specialized team of curators, conservationists, and technicians who conserve artworks by repairing or updating outdated technologies and equipment. Curators care for artworks in art collections. Conservationists have the scientific, technical, and ethical skills needed to care for and preserve artworks. Technicians understand the electronic components that make up time-based media.


Directions: I (the student) can answer the following aesthetic questions (McRorie, 1996) about Nam June Paik and his installation *Electronic Superhighway* in complete sentences. I can prepare for an aesthetic discussion about the qualities that make *Electronic Superhighway* an artwork and the roles of curators, conservators, and technicians working with time-based media.

Definitions of Art:


1. If Nam June Paik's *Electronic Superhighway* was turned off or no longer worked, would it still be art? 

Artist-Centered Issues:


2. Lee Jung-sung is an electrical technician who collaborated with Paik to create his time-based media artworks. Jung-sung explained: "I once asked Mr. Paik when he was alive, "What do we do if the TVs break down?" And he simply said, "When that happens, we'll just replace them with ones that work" (Lim, 2019, p.42).

Why would Paik think it was important to change *Electronic Superhighway*'s original TVs when they broke down? Do I think Paik would be concerned that new television sets would change *Electronic Superhighway*'s appearance? 


Audience-Centered Issues:

3. If I were to visit *Electronic Superhighway* at the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, would I expect it to be plugged in and working? How would I feel if some of the neon lights burned out or if a few of the television sets were off? Would I still have the same experience looking at the artwork? 

Cultural Context:


4. Paik created *Electronic Superhighway* in 1995. If curators, conservators, and technicians specializing in time-based media would update the artwork using today's technologies and video content, how would it be different? Do I think today's society would be more, less, or equally interested in *Electronic Superhighway* with these changes? 

Criticism and Interpretation:

5. Paik designed *Electronic Superhighway* as an installation—a large sculptural artwork that requires plenty of space for viewers to experience it. Would Paik's meaning about traveling across America's vast highway system change if it was a small artwork or if curators placed it in a space that did not allow people to look at it from a distance? 

Values in Art:

6. Paik encouraged modifications to his conceptual art rather than strictly preserving their original parts and outdated technologies. *Electronic Superhighway* incorporates new material, including LCD displays housed within the original television casing to maintain the artwork's sculptural form. Its digital files have replaced the original laserdiscs and cracked neon-lights have been exchanged with new ones.

Should curators, conservators, and technicians be morally responsible for following Paik's wishes to conserve *Electronic Superhighway* by replacing and repairing its parts? Would it be okay for them to add their own ideas or even make changes that an artist like Paik may not have thought about when creating a time-based media artwork? 

References

Lim, H. (2019). The man called 'Nam June Paik's hands'. *Koreana*, 33(2), 38–43.

McRorie, S. (1996). *Questioning the work of Sandy Skoglund: Aesthetics*.
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