

The Studio

EPISODE // CREATING AN ART INSTALLATION

An art installation is a unique form of sculpture. It's unique because an art installation is a temporary artwork created with location and occasion in mind. This is distinct from, say, a sculpture created in isolation in an artist's studio that can then be sold and set on any old pedestal in anybody's house. Rather, an art installation is site-specific. It's like the artwork is self-aware of the space it is inhabiting. It is perfectly sized and shaped for a particular space, and it transforms that space into something new.

An art installation is less like something to look at and possess and more like something to enter into and experience. And like I said, it's temporary, it's designed for a particular moment. An art installation is assembled on-site, engaged by an audience, and then it is disassembled or destroyed. An art installation can be particularly useful in the context of a worship service, because it helps reorient the mind and heart of a churchgoer by interrupting their body. What I mean is, the more familiar or repetitive something is, the less conscious of it you become.

Let me give you an example: to use the photocopier in my office, I have to enter a four digit password-- let's pretend it's 3821. I memorized that password and successfully typed it in without any trouble for two years. Until we got a new photocopier this year. And the buttons were different. They were a different shape, and a different size, and a different texture--which doesn't seem like a big deal--but it was! No matter how many combinations I tried or how many hours I sat there thinking about it, I absolutely could not recall my password on this new machine. Because two years worth of familiarity and repetition pushed 3821 out of my consciousness. Instead, I had been entering my password as a hand gesture that I didn't even have to think about. And I didn't realize I had done that until my fingers--my body--were interrupted by those strange new buttons. And that's what I'm claiming an art installation can do for a believer. It can interrupt and revive important aspects of their spiritual walk that have fallen out of consciousness. That's what's at stake, here. An art installation has the power to expose whether or not you truly know and believe things, because it confronts you with those things in fresh ways.

So here's three specific things an artist should keep in mind when designing an art installation.

- ✦ **Make the familiar strange.** When considering your medium, choose materials or objects that your audience is familiar with, but present them in a new way. I've built art installations out of tape measures, balloons, plastic cups, plants, spices... Take something people understand, and use it to explain something they don't understand. It's like Jesus and his parables, he used material realities like bread, and mustard seeds, and lost sheep, to explain spiritual realities. When you make a familiar thing strange, you beckon the audience to consider that thing in a new way--hopefully, a spiritual way.
- ✦ **Interrupt the body.** Your artwork should be something that the audience must walk on, walk over, walk under, walk around, or walk through. But it must not be something they can walk by. Use the art installation to transform the way people travel through that space. Because, like I already said, if you can wake up someone's body, you just might wake up their mind and heart.
- ✦ **Consider all five senses.** The more senses you can get involved, the more powerful and persuasive your artwork will be. Sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing. Just because it's art doesn't mean it has to be purely visual. Consider incorporating sounds or fragrances. One of the most effective art installations I ever created for a church was a pattern of powdered spices on the steps outside the church. As the

congregation was leaving after the service, they were invited to walk on the spices. The spices smelled really good--they were cinnamon, mint, and myrrh. And what this art installation did that the sermon could not do, was fill the people's nostrils and anoint the people's feet with a sweet aroma that they would carry with them as they departed from the church. It was a visceral reminder of the spiritual reality that the gospel is good, sweet-smelling, news and we take it with us everywhere we go.

I am an advocate for strange church. I don't mean that I believe church should be chaotic or alienating; rather, I believe that church should be good at interrupting congregants' ordinary loves and lives. I believe that strangeness can create paths to spirituality; that is, it can provide detours around cultural obsessions and small talk. An effective art installation is one that is intriguing and demanding enough on the viewer to interrupt, "life as usual," or better, "religion as usual."