

Book Review

Frank Hiddemann, *Site-specific Art im Kirchenraum* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2007).
Reviewed by Craig Atwood.

There is a long and rich tradition of art in Christian worship that dates back at least to the catacomb drawings of the 2nd century, but in modern times there has been little interchange between the arts community and the worshiping community. This has been due, in part, to Protestantism’s suspicion of visual arts in worship, particularly art that does serve a clear didactic purpose. But the artistic community also left the churches in order to pursue “art for art’s sake.” The desire for autonomous art inspired artists to explode boundaries of style, theme, and composition. Rather than producing icons or stained-glass images for sanctuaries or illuminated manuscripts for private devotions, artists produced paintings and sculptures intended to be displayed in galleries and museums. Art in the 20th century was generally presented in “white cubes” so that the viewer’s focus was entirely on the art.

Frank Hiddemann is a young pastor in Germany who was engaged in an effort to reconnect the artist community and the churches as part of his doctoral studies. Drawing heavily on the theology of Paul Tillich who saw modern, expressionist art as revelatory, Hiddemann argues for the importance of bringing contemporary art into sacred space both for the sake of worshipers and artists. He proposes that “site-specific” art, which was pioneered in America by Richard Serra and others, offers the potential for positive engagement between contemporary artists and congregations. Urban church buildings can provide opportunities for “site-specific” installations that connect the gospel with the existential concerns of the local community.

With funding from governmental and ecclesiastical agencies, Hiddemann was able to bring in various artists to set up installations in a number of churches in Erfurt, Weimar and Neudietendorf. His book recounts the history of these installations and some of the difficulties he encountered in bringing together artists, pastors and worshipers. One installation that included whispered confessions of an erotic nature was deemed inappropriate for the sanctuary and was moved to the church tower. Hiddemann concluded that there are indeed limits to the use of art in the chancel area. The liturgy itself is an art form that must be respected.

His most successful installation was in the Moravian Saal in Neudietendorf. The artist Hannelore Landrock-Schumann turned the sanctuary itself into a new piece of art. Like all Moravian Saals, the sanctuary is white with white pews. She placed red and green fluorescent lights under the pews. At times the sanctuary was red symbolizing the active passion of the heart. At other times it was green,

symbolizing the heart at rest. It could even be a combination of red and green symbolizing the pulsing between active and contemplative aspects.

Hiddemann organized a three-day conference in November 2003 on the theme of the heart, which included a paper on Zinzendorf's theology of the heart. The sanctuary was different colors for the different presentations. On Saturday night, there was a musical concert. After each piece, the room went black and then was light in a color appropriate for the next selection. Hiddemann reports that there was a lively discussion after the event among the participants. On Sunday morning, the sanctuary was lit in red for worship. The initial hesitancy among the congregation was quickly overcome.

Hiddemann theorizes that many factors contributed to the success of the installation in Neudietendorf. One was better communication between the artist and the pastor leading up to the installation. He had learned from his previous efforts. Secondly, the artist was more engaged with the sanctuary as a site for both art and worship.

The most important reason, though, was the Moravian Church has such a rich tradition of art in worship. The pastor understood that Zinzendorf promoted artist expression as a form of spirituality. Moravian "theology of the heart" lends itself to non-didactic art, such as that created by Landrock-Schumann. Hiddemann's experience indicates that there can be a place for contemporary creative art in worship if pastors, artists and worshipers work together and communicate clearly.