The King Has...
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Synopsis

"The King Has..." gives individuals the opportunity to anonymously unburden themselves of secrets they are otherwise unable to divulge over the course of one month. Focused around the 7th Street area of Downtown Los Angeles, the piece encourages individuals to text message their secrets to a central server where they are printed on panels of wood using a slab printer. These panels are mounted as they are printed on the side of a building in a high foot traffic area, creating a growing forest of text reflecting the innermost thoughts of individuals in the community.

Production

Production of the "The King Has..." can be broken down into 5 parts:

1. Scouting an appropriate location for the installation. It is important the site of the installation have high foot traffic and be frequented by members of the surrounding community (i.e., it is not solely a tourist destination). It must be a location where individuals can stop and absorb the content of the piece without extreme distraction.

2. Creating the server infrastructure to receive SMS messages, format the text of those messages, and send the formatted output to a slab printer.

3. Procuring the wood onto which the secrets will be printed and preparing it (via sanding, oiling, etc.), as well as procuring the ink required by the printer.

4. Preparing the installation wall by selecting an appropriate mounting technology that will keep the panels in place over the life of the installation, while at the same time making it easy to mount new panels on a daily basis.

5. Producing fliers with tear-off tabs announcing the project and advertising the phone number to which individuals should SMS their secrets. These fliers should graphically reflect band xeroxes, lost pet fliers, and guitar lesson advertisements commonly stapled to telephone poles. The style of the fliers reflects the project's community focus; fliers will be placed in areas within reasonable walking distance from the installation site.

Timeline

Scout appropriate installation sites: 1-2 weeks
Locate local vendors for materials (wood, installation hardware): 1 week
Develop visual aesthetic for installation: 1 month
Develop robust system for handling SMS messaging, design, and printing: 2 months
Develop strategy for engaging the public (develop flier designs, scout advertising locations, create Web site with privacy policy to assure contributors that they will remain anonymous): 2-3 weeks
Procure and prep materials for installation: 1-2 weeks

Concept

The title of and concept behind the installation "The King Has..." is taken from a traditional European story about a king with donkey's ears. Only the king's barber was aware of the king's secret, and the king threatened to kill him if he revealed it. In order to unburden himself, the barber told the secret to a tree. Later, the tree was cut down and made into a harp that when played seemed to whisper "The King has donkey's ears."

The installation "The King Has..." strives to create an environment where people can anonymously unburden themselves of secrets that act as unnecessary sources of stress. In addition, through the revealing of these secrets a larger community discourse can take place about the content of the secrets, and at a macro level, why
the secrets were "secret" in the first place.

Over the course of one month individuals will be allowed to anonymously text message (SMS) their secrets to a server. As the server receives messages, it formats the text of those messages for printing on a piece of wood, facilitated through the use of a slab printer. Once a day, the output of the printer will be added to a wall located in an area of high foot traffic in Downtown Los Angeles. Over the life of the installation a forest of text will appear on the wall. The installation will encourage individuals to stop and read the secrets on a daily basis.

There may be some concern that anonymity will encourage individuals to use the system for publishing offensive statements unrelated to the theme of the project. However, anonymous collaborative publishing systems (e.g., Wikipedia) have been shown to have extremely high signal to noise ratios. A cursory examination of each panel as it is printed should weed out nonsense from substantive content. (It is, of course, important not to censor text that is in keeping with the theme of the installation.)

The aesthetic sensibility of the installation will be a reflection of the story that inspired it. The use of wood references the tree the barber spoke to; the placement of the wood panels will suggest an abstract forest growing over the course of a month. The wall on which the panels are mounted must not fight this aesthetic (e.g., it would be inappropriate to mount the panels on the black granite wall of a corporate building).

An important focus of the installation is community. While the project hopes to engage the entire city, the advertising strategy for soliciting content will target areas surrounding the installation site. The goal is to create an attraction that draws the immediate community first, creating a central rallying point for people as they run their daily errands and engage in social interactions; outlying Angelenos second, attracting those that might pass the site during their commute or while en route to a restaurant or event; and tourists third.

Upon completion of the installation, the panels will remain installed and the general public encouraged to take remove them. Each individual (first come, first served) may choose a panel to keep; it does not matter whether the panel's secret is theirs or not. The act of distributing the panels is a gesture of release that represents the dissemination of the secrets into the community and the associated dilution of social stresses.