The King Has…

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ABSTRACT
The installation The King Has... grew out of a desire to explore the ways in which people react to knowing the secrets of others, and if anonymity were guaranteed, the kinds of secrets people would choose to make public.

Secrets were gathered from individuals via SMS messaging, printed on wood panels, and mounted at two installation sites, creating ever-growing fields of text.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
J.5 [Computer Applications]: Arts and Humanities - Fine arts.

General Terms
Design, Experimentation, Human Factors, and Theory.

Keywords
Secrets, catharsis, interactive, SMS, slab printer.

1. ARTISTIC MOTIVATION
1.1 Catharsis
The installation The King Has... gave individuals the opportunity to unburden themselves of kept secrets, kept secrets being a source of stress relieved through disclosure. The project explored the types of secrets individuals would be willing to reveal under the veil of anonymity. At what point is sharing something private with the world more important than the risk of being discovered?

1.2 Public Space
Critical to our installation was the idea of activating a public space to engage as diverse a population as possible. With a homogenous population we were worried that individuals would be excessively concerned about being discovered, resulting in fewer, safer secrets. By mounting our secrets on building façades and in turn engaging the street we were guaranteed a diverse audience and correspondingly braver submissions.

1.3 Materials
Submitted secrets were printed on uniformly cut panels of wood. Key to the decision to print on wood rather than paper was the depth and weight wood gave the submissions: wood panels made each secret an epitaph.

For our construction site installation panels were cut as large as our printer would accommodate (US letter) to block surrounding advertising and create a halo of focus around each secret. For our building façade installation panels were cut to the size of the structure’s bricks, giving the impression that secrets were gradually enveloping the façade, revealing hidden life.

Figure 1. Installation, Westwood, Los Angeles

1.4 Conclusion
Prior to developing The King Has... 50 people were surveyed in an effort to understand whether or not they would be comfortable revealing repressed secrets anonymously in a public space. Many were, however our choice of installation sites and our decision to seed our sites with our own secrets were the result of trying to make people as comfortable as possible to ensure the success of the installation.

The most gratifying aspect of the installation was witnessing firsthand the reactions of those engaging the piece. Numerous people stopped to point, read, and share text, touch the panels, and submit their own secrets, validating decisions made about installation location and materials.

2. RELATED WORKS
The King Has... takes its name from an Irish fable in which an individual whispers a secret to a tree as an act of catharsis [1]. Initial inspiration for The King Has... came from Wong Kar-Wai’s In the Mood for Love. In the movie’s final scene Chow Mo-Wan whispers the secret he has kept throughout the movie into a hole in a wall at the ruins of Angkor Wat. Chow carries his secret until the pressure becomes too great and he is impelled to reveal it in a public space [2]. The King Has... offers individuals a similar opportunity for catharsis via SMS.

Another film, the documentary Secrets for Sale by Elodie Pong has individuals donning costumes to anonymously reveal personal secrets to the filmmaker. Again, it is anonymity that allows individuals to speak freely in a public forum [3].

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Related to *The King Has*... is Troika’s *SMS Guerrilla Projector*. Troika’s all-in-one device receives text messages and projects them onto any surface. While not designed solely for the revealing of secrets, Troika’s project reel highlights secrets being projected in public spaces [4].

**SMS Chatwall** is commercial software and hardware that allows individuals to create SMS-driven interactive chat environments [5]. **SMS Chatwall** has been used for artistic applications, including Matthias Haase’s *Bote*, an interactive installation that creates a projected sculpture from solicited text messages [6].

Crispin Jones and Stefano Mirti’s *Human Screen* is similar to *The King Has*... in that it explores the junction of digital and analog at an architectural scale. Individuals orchestrated by computer manipulate large panels to create pixilated images. [7].

### 3. TECHNICAL DETAILS

#### 3.1 Installation Sites

For the Los Angeles launch of *The King Has*... two installation sites with heavy foot traffic were chosen. The first installation was mounted on building scaffolding at a construction site in Downtown Los Angeles—as urban as the city gets—with the second mounted on the façade of a UCLA building in pedestrian-oriented Westwood.

Specially colored panels were produced with instructions on how to submit secrets. Installation sites were also seeded with 4 true secrets to help jump-start submissions.

Each installation site engaged a different audience. The Downtown site engaged a largely working-class Latino community including many children high school-aged and younger. While we received a minimal number of messages from this audience we witnessed numerous individuals touching the panels, validating our decision to use wood as our medium.

The Westwood site was visited by a number of college students as well as UCLA faculty and Westwood professionals. Passers-by took the time to stop and read the panels, with many subsequently contributing their own secrets.

#### 3.2 Receiving Secrets

We decided that forcing individuals to enter secrets via a Web site was a bad idea for four reasons:

First, doing so would have allowed those who had never visited the installation sites the opportunity to submit secrets. The project was about omni-directional sharing: we thought it critical to engage passers-by as they were reading the secrets of others.

Second, we wanted people to submit secrets spontaneously, rather than having to copy a URL, return home, and craft a statement.

Third, we wanted people to exert a small amount of effort in sending secrets to discourage spamming and casual secret fabrication (of course secrets were submitted anonymously so it was impossible to truly distinguish fact from fiction).

Lastly, we wanted to give people who did not own a computer or have access to one the opportunity to engage the installation.

For these reasons we decided to use SMS messaging—a service available to virtually every cell phone user—as our secret sharing mechanism.

Our SMS system consisted of a pay-per-use cell phone with Bluetooth and custom software written in Perl and AppleScript. The application BluePhoneElite was used to pull secrets off of the cell phone via Bluetooth as they were received. Pulled secrets were formatted to fit the size of the wood panel specific to the installation site. If a secret fit the panel size a reminder SMS was sent to the sender with the location of the installation site, otherwise an SMS was sent to the sender requesting a shorter submission.

Successfully formatted secrets were automatically saved to PDF and e-mailed to an installation-specific e-mail account for printing. Secrets were also converted to JPEG format and archived online at http://www.thekinghas.com for perusal by those not able to visit the installation sites.

#### 3.3 Slab Printer

New secrets were printed nightly on a slab printer built from 3 identical HP inkjet printers. Red ink was mixed by hand to aesthetically complement the color of the wood panels.

To create the slab printer the bottom of one of the printers was removed and mounted on a wooden bed. Stepper motors from the other two printers were mounted at opposite ends of the bed, with a belt stretched between them acting as a conveyor. The modified printer was capable of printing on panels up to half of an inch thick at page sizes up to US letter (8.5 in. x 11 in.).

### 4. REFERENCES


