Rites of Passage for Contemporary Art Prizes on the Internet: The experience of Celeste Network

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ABSTRACT

Celeste Network is an online community for contemporary artists, established in response to the growing needs of a platform to showcase artists to a wider audience on the internet. The network organizes international prizes every year, including the Celeste Prize, for arts (since 2006), Visible White Photo for photography (since 2012), and Premio Celeste, which is dedicated to work by Italian artists (2004-2014). The online network successfully moved its activities to real-world exhibitions in major cities like London, New York, Berlin, Rome, Venice, and Milan. Since its establishment in 2007, the online community has gathered more than 70,000 members, including artists and arts professionals, and maintained a stream of 8000 visits from art enthusiasts daily. This paper is the founder's reflection on the philosophy, key milestones and factors behind the successful establishment of Celeste Network. By setting a strong shared interest, maintaining virtual credibility and real-world presence through exhibitions, the network sustains and continues to grow as the fastest-growing and the largest online community for contemporary artists to date.
Keywords: Arts prize, Celeste Network, Contemporary artists, Online network

1. INTRODUCTION

The Celeste Network[1] began with wondering why there were not more social networks for contemporary artists on the internet. Of course, there are many art information and news websites dedicated to contemporary art, as there are many art gallery and artist websites, or fair and festival websites, which propose and discuss artwork and share activities, but they are fragmented into specific geographical or interest-groups within the art world. The idea of placing an equal emphasis on the artist as a person with what he or she creates and does *per se* in the art world in a single website which welcomes all artists, seems to have little interest for budding web entrepreneurs. Perhaps such websites would be perceived as less useful to the public, or too costly to go it alone, and web platforms which put artists' work in relation to an event, or an exhibition, or a happening, or a meeting, or a museum or a collector are preferable, and as it were, kill two birds with one stone.

The number of social networks or artwork networks which treat artists' work and their persona in a serious and effective way, is limited. Among the major networks (which often treat graphic designers' or illustrators' work as much as they do the work of artists or photographers') can be counted on one's fingers: behance.net, deviantart.com, 4art.com, and of course, celestenetwork.com. In general, fine artists are particularly resistant to publication of their work on the internet. This may have to do with existing agreements with their galleries or dealers, or perhaps with a particular attitude artists have about the singular nature of their work and thinking behind the creative process which is not appropriate for the easy, rapid, and non-physical consumption of their work via internet.

The Celeste Network aims to exhibit artwork by its members, promote their activities and their creative content, and be an effective place of meeting where serious, like-minded professionals can start-up art projects. Celeste Network does not receive funding from public institutions or from private donors to operate. The network sustains through the redistribution of income, received from prize subscriptions and other online activities, to artists who win prizes organized by the network.

2. THE GELLING FACTOR

My personal experience as a private, industry operator, who founded Celeste Network in 2007 and is working to make the community one of the fastest growing artists networks worldwide (70,000+ signed-up members each with a personal page and 8,000 visitors per day), suggests that large groupings on the internet can develop when a specific or commonly shared interest is at stake. In Celeste Network's case, it was an art prize. Celeste Art Prize[2] thus provides an example of a motor and the necessary glue to form a global art network. Of course, there can be other motors which could help create other networks. The Celeste Prize became the artists' *raison d'etre* for being present in the network, to view artworks submitted to the prize, and to follow the selection and adjudication processes in an open and participatory manner. The Network simply brought together what visitors to the website expected to see. As organizers of the prize the Network responds to the prize's terms and conditions by 'showing' in a real way (albeit virtual on the internet) every stage of the prize's advancement as it moves from launch date, to submissions deadline, through selections, prize-giving, and exhibition (Figure 1).

The prize online gathers a momentum of 'users', hungry to know and to 'follow' with the use of internet's social functions: what is happening, who submitted which works, who is benefit-
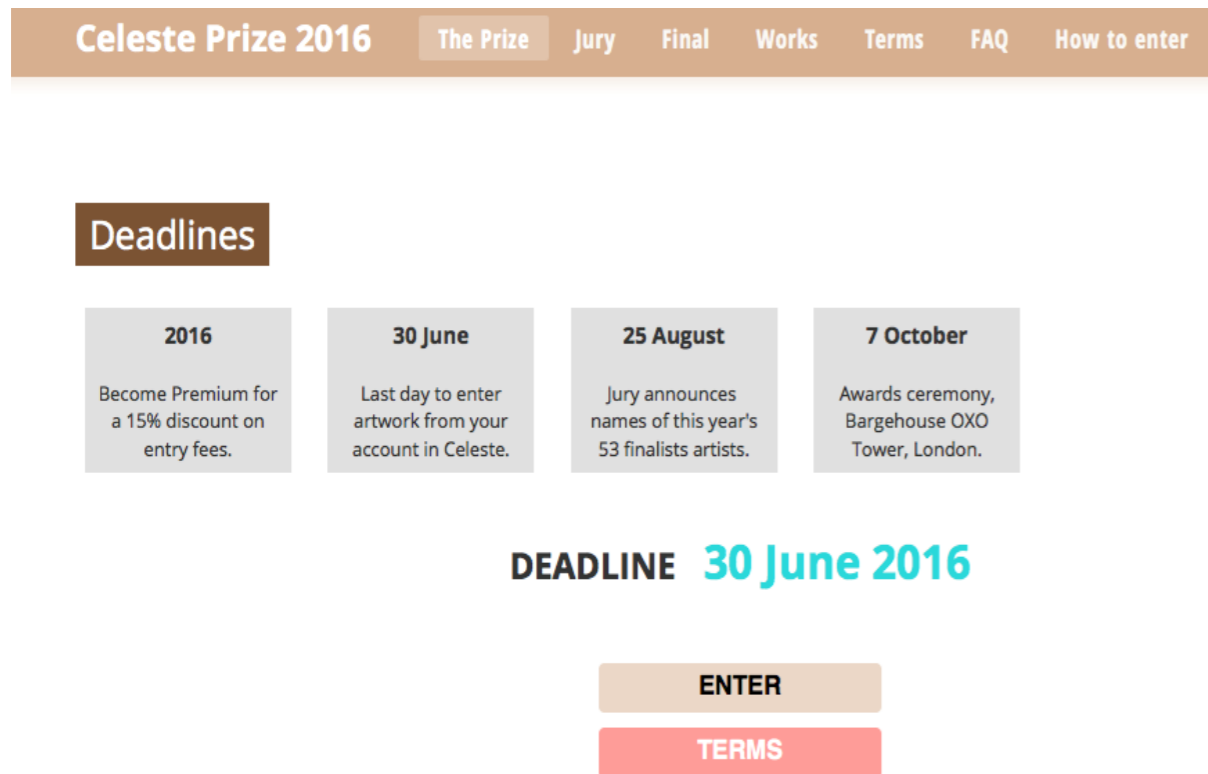
Figure 1. The Network shows each stage of the prize's advancement to create momentum for users
Source: Celeste Prize, 2016

ing from the awards, and what is happening in their careers. These are all questions which find answers in active participation in the network's daily life.

The multiple aspects of 'sociality' we have on the internet today to share content and promote culture are at the heart of the use of super-smart social functions, all cut-in at a later stage of network development on the internet. But today, they are undeniably important pillars which support our community's growth and recognition. Social functions on the internet allow the network's members to reach out from the community, to help themselves and make contact, yet they also help us to become known to new users as organizers of an artists' community. Of course, the quality of content, in this case the artwork,

can vary hugely, but a successful community will only grow if good work is seen more than bad work. This drives the network to the use algorithms, a tool often considered anathema in artists' minds. Algorithms allow the organizers of a web community to give intelligent priority to certain content, whether such content consists of images of artwork, comments, profiles, blogs or events, according to the specific interests and profiles of each user.

2.1 The Key Success Factors

Starting an art prize in the age of internet is in relative and historical terms a simple and speedy affair with a relatively good chance of success. In fact, art prizes are born every week around the world as established and non-established art industry operators take to the story-boards to

work out details. Founding art prizes is a busy activity which likely will continue to grow for the foreseeable future as the technologies to show, promote, and share artwork globally over the internet, blossom.

A combination of 'virtual credibility' and 'boots on the ground activity' is the key to sustaining the growth of an online network. To obtain 'virtual credibility' which stands you in good stead over time with users, all activities proposed by a network should be open and accessible to users, while at the same time be accountable and legitimated. This can only occur in a lasting manner, when online participation is clear and relies for its success on the constant and changing input of industry-recognized, peer professionals. In parallel, online initiatives being proposed by a network should always end up having a practical connection with the real world: an exhibition; connection with art institutions; presence at art events, talks, reviews of artwork, the disbursement of economic awards which help artists invest in materials, equipment, travel or research, and introductions to peers or other professionals.

2.2 The Evolution of the Network

First, the affirmation of Celeste Prize is an important award for emerging and mid-career artists who are prepared to recognize the internet as a valid place in which they can further their career interests and knowledge of contemporary artwork. Second, the network has the ability to present a credible social network environment which is particularly sensitive to the needs of artists, by using all the programming and graphics presentation necessary to show artwork in the best possible way (not necessarily the fanciest technology). Currently, we are using a dedicated server in OVH's international web farm as base for programming Celeste Network. The web server software which publishes the web pages is APACHE, which in turn uses the LINUX platform. The web language is PHP

and database is MYSQL. Celeste Network has been custom developed by our programmers at TNX in Italy, meaning that no pre-developed websites are being used. To reach out globally at higher speeds we use CLOUDFLARE'S CDN. Third, we realize that the initiatives we organize in the network have to be pertinent and relevant to the issues and creative practices which artists are interested in. Fourth, we collaborate with credible partners, be they art galleries, curators or institutions, always in the right number with the relevant depth, neither too little nor too much.

2.3 Issues of Positioning and Promotion

Celeste Network is very concerned about the infringement of artist copyrights. Of course the premise for an artist wishing to join an open community on internet is that he or she is willing to share viewing of artwork. In the best case, the work will influence the thinking and creating processes of other artists as they learn from what they see. In the worst case some could attempt to emulate the work seen, potentially leading to outright plagiarism. All new registrants are asked to formally accept copyright rules in the Network's 'Terms of Service' before they receive the free service, their personal page. The community also has functions which allow members to upload artwork or content in low-resolution if they wish. A sample of an artist's portfolio is provided in Figure 2.

With all the images being shared and seen worldwide every day, a good artist should be looking forward and working to create his or her best authorial representation, and not looking backwards at what others are doing or might be doing with their past images. It is very difficult to attribute complete and total originality to the content of a single work in all its aspects. Our era is one of enormous image production, which is both eclectic by nature and borrowed by vocation. Too many alleged cases of plagiarism fall apart on details.

worldwide, without limit of age or experience. Participation costs €30-50 (US$33-55) per work or €90 (US$99) per project of up to 10 works. More information on the Celeste Arts Prize could be found at www.celesteprize.com
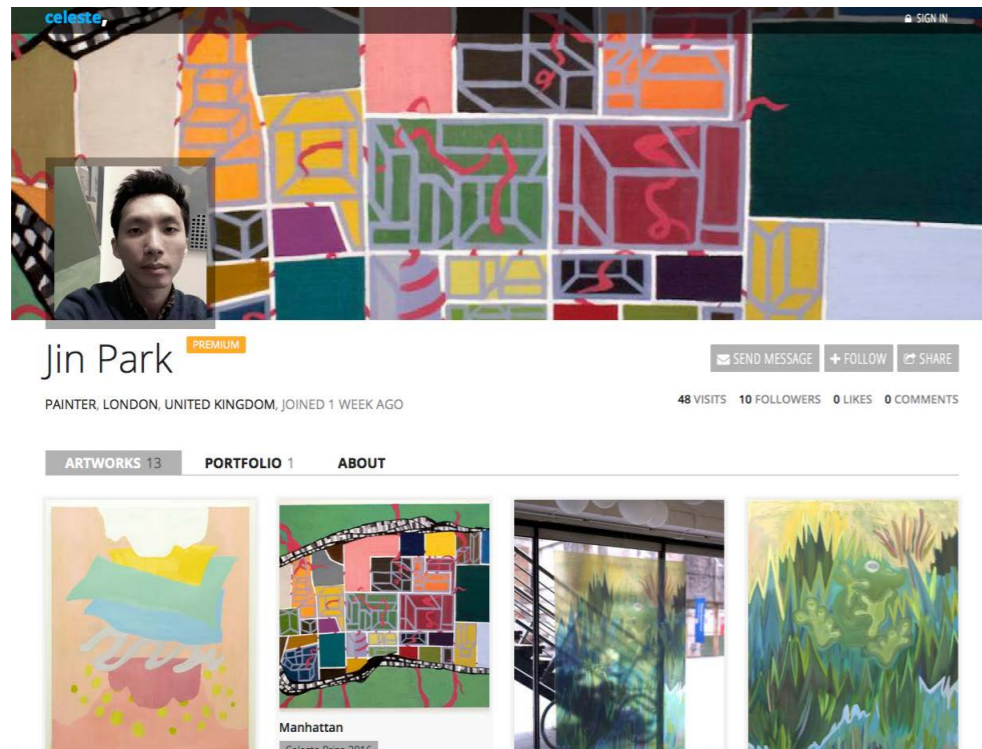
Figure 2. A sample of artist's online portfolio in Celeste Network
Source: Celeste Network, 2016

The promotional strategies to attract high traffic and attention from the art sector within its first 5 years of establishment are as follows:

(1) Communicate with artists in a manner that they share, understand how they work, their mind set, their priorities, and which types of engagement they are prepared to undertake.
(2) Make it clear to all participants in the art scene that the content provided is of interest and is accessible to everyone.
(3) Prefer to use viral techniques in social media to get a message across, rather than traditional marketing in journals, magazines, and newspapers.
(4) Develop, original and ground breaking ways of organizing events or people. In many instances, this involves reforming outdated practices or being the first to cotton onto a new idea.

3. LESSONS AND BEST PRACTICE

Celeste Network does not receive funding from public institutions or from private donors to survive. Instead, it has shown a way for independent art organizations desiring to use the internet to promote their cultural projects online. Thanks to the continued economic support of artists with entry fees and premium memberships, we are able to consolidate and plan new initiatives. In the coming month, the Network will be publishing the 'Shop', a new, free online area in which collectors and private buyers can make members' artwork their own. By putting artists at the center of the Network's benefits system: prizes, exhibitions, visibility, residencies, connections, we believe Celeste Network has contributed to the dissemination and visibility of good and interesting artwork by emerging artists across the world. A growing number of Celeste Prize artists, whether they be winners, finalists or participants, are developing important careers in art galleries, art fairs and with art collectors.

Over the last 10 years, more than 30,000 different artists have applied to Celeste's prizes, with single artworks or with projects which include several artworks. Celeste has organized on average three exhibition events annually for members, and hosts thousands of online events, blogs, and projects by artists each year.

The case of Celeste Network shows that being as inclusive as possible is beneficial for the network and its stakeholders. All members of the community can participate in the activities the Network develops online. This is combined with our very clear, stated, neutral position we maintain as 'organizers' of these events. While the network provides and pays for the opportunities to exhibit, to meet peers, to receive prize money, as 'organizers' we are never part of the selection processes which chooses winners or beneficiaries. Mixing roles is not conducive to long term success, though our *zeitgeist* gives much space to people who demonstrate multiple-roles often in conflict with each other. I believe the premises and tools which can be used to promote a new art prize online will always vary. Ours is a case of private enterprise which chooses to actively to redistribute entry fees to members through the benefits we create, but there are many other private, public, and semi-public examples of art prizes run on very different premises.

As we move forward, in order to remain at the top, leading cultural organizations will have to increasingly provide the necessary web interaction to successfully involve, organize, and inform their consumers in ever shorter intervals of time. A few carefully chosen objectives should be at the heart of each art project, and of course communicated in a simple, visible manner.

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