AN INTERVIEW WITH MOHAR KALRA
on semiotics and his artistic process

Interviewed by

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Introduction

Driven by the main themes of this special issue, on pop culture, media, and transmediality, the editorial team decided to conduct an interview with Mohar Kalra, a visiting researcher and artist at Tartu University. With a background in engineering and a strong passion for art, Mohar made the decision to broaden his horizons by gaining a deeper understanding of the field of semiotics. The American artist has a deep understanding and respect for a wide variety of artistic mediums and interfaces, and he employs them to provide his audience with engaging interactive experiences. His creations have a number of tiers and levels, and the only thing that's needed to unearth their hidden meanings is audience participation. Mohar explains how his engineering experiences have always guided him towards building new systems of meaning, governed by obvious but also hidden rules; in a way, he had been always using semiotics, but he was not aware of it. Throughout this conversation, he discusses his artwork, the people and ideas that have inspired and influenced him, as well as semiotics.

Interview

DS: *So to begin with, what led you to Tartu?*

MK: So I am from the States, I got my degree in electrical engineering, and I was hoping to build up a practice in media art somewhere abroad after graduation. I was wondering how I could use technology to change the way we perceive systems around us in our everyday lives. Like, how do we introduce

new feelings and new sorts of stimuli into the mundane? In my mind, this is very compatible with semiotics' approach to perception. Because I have a background in engineering, I felt that I understood fairly well the technological systems around us and the meanings that can be projected onto them. However, especially after COVID and the various recent catastrophic climate crises, I wanted to find a way of reconnecting to nature through technology in my artwork, but I knew very little about things outside the world of tech. I had heard a little bit about Estonia's experimentation with technology. A lot of what I had heard came from some propaganda you know — by the government, but still Estonia offers a different paradigm for relating to technology than what we have in the USA. There is experimentation happening here in civic technology administered by the government that could never exist outside of the profit-driven tech model in the US. As I did more digging, I learned that Estonia's environmental culture encompasses environmental folklore, which is a very important part of Estonian identity. Furthermore, the department of semiotics shows particular interest in ecosemiotics and biosemiotics, unpacking biological systems, ecological systems, and understanding how they are linked with each other. It is a great contribution on how we perceive and relate to ecology as a culture, or as different cultures, and also how other non-human organisms do the same. I felt that this was very important and interesting for my work, because it would allow me to fill in the knowledge gap I had regarding how we relate to ecology and systems outside of purely technological ones. And so, all of those factors contributed to my realisation that: "Tartu would be a really great place to land".

DS: *That is pretty interesting, and before coming here did you have any previous experience with semiotics? Perhaps even something about the Tartu-Moscow school?*

MK: I actually had not, but I had experience in fields that now I am learning have been historically very closely tied to semiotics. I had taken classes where we talked about cybernetics, and as I read a lot of interaction design texts now, there are a lot of references, implicit references, to Peirce and Uexküll. And so, coming here made me realise how semiotics is the foundation of the more technologically specific education that I had during my undergrad.

DS: *What about now, are you considering applying your semiotic knowledge in your artistic process?*

MK: Yeah, a lot of my work, until now, has been very much unknowingly influenced by a sort of semiotic approach to my own personal experience. For instance, regarding questions like: "I am feeling this when this happens, what

does that mean to me? What are the perceptual processes going on here? What are the meaning-making processes happening under the surface in my head? And can I bring those out and present them to other people?" So, trying to discover a sort of meaning-making process that leads the audience to different meanings beyond what they ordinarily would have. Now, I think what has been really useful, especially here in Tartu, is understanding formal methodologies of breaking down ways of dissecting that sort of meaning-making and then applying it to specific contexts. So, I can draw from texts about, for instance, indigenous languages in the Amazon or other systems that differently structure ways of relating to nature, and then ask myself "okay, this is how the meaning-making process is working for this community, can I pull something from that?"

DS: *What would you say is the relationship between semiotics and art in your experience? From your website, it is clear that you have a specific background and a very unique artistic style.*

MK: That is true, but I mean at the same time the engineering and the art are really not at odds in the way they might seem. I think at the end of the day, and it is not true for all artists, but for me art is a process of fabricating feeling and meaning. So, it is a process of design and engineering almost; scaffolding an experience. It is a very semiotic related process, because it all comes down to how the viewer will hopefully find some meaning in what you are presenting.

DS: *Speaking about your website, I went through your projects. One of them that caught my attention was* Close Up *(https://mkalra.me/Closeup.html), the interactive comic book. I found it brilliant how the mechanics do not let you close the book, once it is open, unless you go through all the pages, one by one.*

MK: Yeah, and I think this is probably one aspect unique to my process. I try to build a system; a system with specific rules if you will. The rules in this specific case - making you read every page in order to close the book - contribute to the meaning of the work. But, the rules, as part of a system presented to you, invite you to explore as a viewer, and decipher how the system functions. I would say that it is a process that relies heavily on active meaning-making processes on the viewers' part. Through the interaction the system reveals itself, and the viewer figures out what the rules are exactly. Even though the system does not necessarily operate in the same way as systems in the real world, there is definitely need for an internal conversation on the viewer's part, and a recollection of a kind of logic built and used in the real world.

DS: *However, we can see that your projects are quite different with each other, from comic stripes to a collection of different machines. Where do you draw inspiration from?*

MK: Usually it starts with a feeling. When I experience something and I think to myself "oh! That was weird. I did not really expect that" it makes my mind wander. Like once I was in a forest hiking and I noticed how the wind passing through the trees sounded like a door opening. It was this constant creaking sound, like doors constantly opening around me, and, being alone in the forest, it felt really creepy at the time. I remember wondering if there was really a house somewhere nearby. But it was also a very interesting experience, because it revealed a metaphor; a loose metaphor, where you can hear the echo of the final wood products from the living woods. The trees were actually recreating these familiar sounds that we hear everyday from a wooden door, a wooden drawer, etc., and so that made me want to replicate the feeling and the metaphor by creating a system; In order to have a feeling you need to create a sign system that will lead the viewer to ask certain questions and have an internal conversation to arrive at that feeling. But also, I want to scaffold this conversation through my art piece, because it is not necessary that everyone who will hear the creaking sound of trees will associate it with a wooden door without some prompting. So as I design the artwork, for me, it is important to emphasise this comparison between trees and the door, the built environment and the wild environment. So, this tends to be the process behind my work.

DS: *Would you say that there is a specific artist, or even an artistic movement that influences your work the most?*

MK: Yes! The fluxus movement, surrealistic cinema, and a lot of early media artists, like Nam June Paik, Jeffery Shaw, Christina Kubitsch, and others. They were people who showed a lot of interest in the emotional and cultural signs and the connotations of systems, especially technological systems. In the case of Nam June Paik for example, we see that he was making use of cameras and televisions, and things that are staples in our everyday lives, but he was creating art to raise questions on what they say about us and our society and what meaning they can create when placed in an unfamiliar context. For instance, one of his installations was a statue of Buddha watching a TV broadcasting a live-stream from a camera pointing back to him. So, this kind of work focuses on the metaphors built into a certain system and our interaction with it when these metaphors are placed in conflict with each other. There is a lot of experimentation with interfaces in these art pieces and they are very influential to me, especially the way they are scaffolding ideas around feelings.