

# ***Hortus Semioticus***

**Eleni Alexandri<sup>1</sup>**

**Tuuli Pern<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract.** The article takes a retrospective look on the history of the online periodical *Hortus Semioticus* from its inception in 2005 to the present day as the journal celebrates the publication of its tenth issue. We draw on the editorial staff members' reflections on their experiences while contributing to the publishing of *Hortus Semioticus*, as well as their hopes and aspirations for the journal's future.

**Keywords:** history of semiotics; semiotic periodicals

## **1. Introduction**

*Hortus Semioticus* is a peer-reviewed academic online journal of the University of Tartu. It is a publication run by students for students and young academics with the goal of encouraging and inspiring creativity and experimentation within the academic community. The editorial staff of *Hortus Semioticus* is currently in the process of preparing the journal's tenth issue, and for that joyful occasion, which incidentally coincides with the celebration of the publication of the fiftieth volume of *Sign Systems Studies*, a reflection on the journal's history seems fitting. The present account, which serves to connect the journal's past and present, was born thanks to the collaborative effort of Tuuli Pern and Eleni Alexandri, that is, one of the editors of the very first issue and the editor-in-chief of the most recently published, i.e. ninth, issue of *Hortus Semioticus*, respectively. For the purpose of this article, brief interviews were carried out with the core members of the journal's team through time, in which they shared their perspectives on their participation and experiences in working for the journal, as well as their visions and goals for its future.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu, Jakobi 2, 51005 Tartu, Estonia; e-mail: eleni@ut.ee.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu, Jakobi 2, 51005 Tartu, Estonia; e-mail:tuuli.pern@ut.ee.

## 2. The beginning of *Hortus Semioticus*

It all started in a garden in the summer of 2005, although maybe the beginnings of *Hortus Semioticus* should be traced back to earlier times and many different places – auditoriums, offices, libraries; that is, to whenever and wherever instructors read and reflect on students’ term papers and essays and think what it would take to make them ready for publication so that the inspirational ideas in them could gain the audience they deserve. This was the driving force behind the genesis of the journal.

Essays written by students often include brilliant ideas, yet, sadly, in many instances these ideas and arguments wind up being filed away in a desk drawer. They are read with the sole purpose of evaluation, after which they are forgotten, and their content will never become complete, i.e. be given a finished, publishable form. In 2005, Kaie Kotov (now Koppel), Katre Pärn, and Riste Keskpäik were all doctoral students at the Department of Semiotics, and resolved to provide students with an opportunity to participate in and experience the publishing process, both as authors and editors, in addition to offering them an outlet for their creativity in conducting research. The project received enthusiastic support from Kalevi Kull, at the time an Associate Professor of Semiotics. So the idea took a definite shape! *Sign Systems Studies* and *Acta Semiotica Estica* were to have a seedbed journal called *Hortus Semioticus*.

In the summer heat of 11 July 2005, the idea of the journal was animatedly discussed in Kalevi’s garden. The discussion lasted late into the night, as Kaie and Riste together with Leene Korp, Tuuli Raudla (now Pern), and Kalevi sat around a table eating strawberries, while debating and settling upon the purposes of the journal, the composition of its editorial board, and of course its name. Although the idea of the journal was conceived by Estonian students, Kalevi stressed that the name of the publication should be understandable also in languages other than Estonian. For that purpose, he proposed Latin, following the example of the already existing *Acta Semiotica Estica*. As the discourse in that evening had been revolving around a trope deriving from gardening – Kaie had made a comparison between the prospective student authors and editors and new seedlings that needed a good, fertile environment to develop and gentle coaxing in order to thrive – it seemed only natural to give the journal the title of *Hortus Semioticus*.

During the course of developing and shaping the journal, the founders of the journal Kaie, Riste, Katre and Kalevi had three primary goals in mind. Firstly, they desired to acquaint students with the publication process and provide them with the opportunity to follow the life of an academic text after the author has proclaimed it to be finished. Of course, at that point the text is actually far from

being complete in terms of being ready for publication. As a consequence, giving students an opportunity to publish their work in *Hortus Semioticus* would offer them a valuable hands-on experience of the revision, editing, and proofreading stages of their manuscripts. In a similar fashion, the students who volunteered to become members of the editorial team would gain the knowledge of this process from a different perspective: they would learn how to plan a timeline for the publication process, how to communicate with authors and reviewers, edit the texts, and prepare the final version of an issue. And last, but not least, students' writing would no longer remain hidden or be forgotten, but earn its own readership and life within culture.

So this is how everything got going. Tuuli and Leene, who were second-year students in the bachelor's programme at the time, offered their services as editors of the very first issue of *Hortus Semioticus*. The intention was to compile the publication from the essays written for the lecture course on the semiotics of the Own and the Alien that had been taught by Kalevi during the spring term of that year. Undoubtedly, there were academic principles that the team, consisting of bachelor's students and novice editors, was unaware of, while it is possible that some of the criteria would have been difficult to enforce when dealing with student articles. Academic researchers are expected to submit manuscripts that are the result of rigorous work that has been carried out over an extended period of time, that is painstakingly written, thoroughly thought through, and that is subsequently revised and finalized to the best of the author's abilities. On the other hand, student papers handed in to lecturers for evaluation frequently represent the outcome of the work of a single restless night; they can end up in a fine shape, but in the vast majority of cases the authors decide that the work is finished without scrupulously checking it for errors and inconsistencies first. As a consequence, Tuuli and Leene found themselves surrounded by essays that were a combination of brilliant ideas on the one hand, and typos, non-sequiturs, and unfinished arguments on the other hand. On top of that, Kalevi was adamant that every text submitted should be brought up to a publishable state, and that no essay should be excluded from the impending issue.

Thus, the editorial procedure for the very first issue was, in the end, not precisely similar to that of the academic journal which *Hortus Semioticus* grew to become. In general, editors can often have a difficult time getting the authors revise their submitted manuscripts in time; however, in the case of this first issue it seemed as though there was no prospect whatsoever of making the writers revise their work as it was already summer, the term was over, and nobody was eager to return to their "finished" and graded texts. The editors were able to sift through the texts, edit and format them, while attempting not to stray from the writers'

initial vision, despite the minimal cooperation from the authors. After that, they forwarded the manuscripts to Kaie, Riste, and Katre, who assumed “the role of responsible adults” as Kaie put it. They proceeded to review the articles, proofread each text, and amended the many details that had slipped the editors’ notice. Katre, who is currently an academic staff member at the Department of Semiotics at the University of Tartu, along with Nelly Mäekivi, a mentor of the current editorial team of *Hortus Semioticus*, took on the position of the journal’s webmaster as well. Having some expertise in online design and web programming, she was able to set up the first website for *Hortus Semioticus*, a “hand-written” HTML page, which certainly was a remarkable contribution, especially considering the world of web design in 2005.

Finally, the first issue of *Hortus Semioticus* was published online in 2006,<sup>3</sup> and it did indeed include all of the essays written for the course on the semiotics of the Own and the Alien. The course title became the title of the issue, and it was accompanied by a foreword written by Kalevi Kull, demonstrating his support of the new scholarly publication appearing at the University of Tartu, and his encouragement to this new endeavour – a journal run by students, for students and young academics.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Evolution, intermission, and the return of *Hortus Semioticus*

The second issue of *Hortus Semioticus*, published in 2007, was a one-of-a-kind publication consisting in Anti Saar’s Bachelor’s thesis, *Possibilities of Preiconographic Intuition*. The abstract, which can be found on the archive page of the official website of *Hortus Semioticus*,<sup>5</sup> is original and enticing, encouraging readers to delve into the analysis, which emerges from Erwin Panofsky’s studies on iconology, goes on to examine the use of homonyms to approach the subconscious production of meaning in artworks, and finally emphasizes the ultimate goal of art to transcend the spatial and move towards a temporal state of timelessness. The original printed version of the thesis was, with the help of Katre, designed in such a way that it offered the possibility of reading it along two different trajectories: one following

<sup>3</sup> The publication received a good media coverage in the leading Estonian newspapers (Põhjala 2006; Anonymous 2006).

<sup>4</sup> It should be mentioned that there are also some other semiotics journals in the world that have been established and edited by students, like *Semikolon* in Aarhus, Denmark, established in 2000, and *Cygne Noir* in Montreal, Canada, established in 2012 (see Kull, Maran 2013).

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.hortussemioticus.ut.ee/hortus-semioticus-2-2007/>.

the order of the chapters, and another one observing the author's colour-coding of the components. Due to the hypertextual possibilities of an online journal, the dissertation was a "natural fit" in the environment of *Hortus Semioticus*.

The following issue, edited by Marina Grishakova and Katre Pärn, appeared in 2008 and was a thematic one, titled *Intermediality and Storytelling*. It contained a selection of papers from the postgraduate workshop of the same title that had been held in Tartu in 2008. The 2009 issue, that was edited by Priit Põhjälä, did not have a central theme, yet the majority of the articles focused on cultural semiotic studies, including semiotics of film, advertising and marketing, the self and the other. The fourth issue of *Hortus Semioticus* might be viewed as a new developmental milestone. After having gained experience in the publication process and having published three successful issues, the editorial team increased the emphasis on inclusivity by introducing and establishing a new section titled "*Meditationes Semioticae*". As Katre explains: "*Meditationes*' was meant as a space where the authors could express their ideas in a 'thinking piece', without the constraints of conventional forms of academic papers." The fourth issue also provided an overview of student research papers defended during the 2008–2009 academic year. That way, *Hortus Semioticus* fulfilled its promise and furthered the founding objective of the journal, which was to create a forum where young academics may openly express their thoughts, enthusiasm for their field of study, innovative ideas, and exploratory research.

After the publication of the seminal fourth issue, the "*Meditationes Semioticae*" section was included in the succeeding fifth and sixth issues of the journal, both of which appeared in 2010. The fifth issue, which was edited by Katre Väli and focused on the Semiotics of Crisis, was thematic again, and employed the Great Recession of the 2000s as a springboard to extend the concept of crisis into a larger framework of sociopolitical and cultural changes analysed through the prism of semiotics. As for the equally intriguing sixth issue, its main theme as well as title was *Semiotics of Nature*; it was edited by Riin Magnus, Nelly Mäekivi, and Morten Tønnessen, and featured a collection of papers focusing on the semiotic aspect of nature.

Despite the progress in the journal's development and two successful issues in 2010, a lengthy pause began for *Hortus Semioticus* that same year. Some of the students who had been running and editing the publication eventually moved on to other endeavours, and consequently the team dispersed, which meant that the publication had to go on a hiatus. The abrupt cessation of *Hortus Semioticus*, which at first appeared to be temporary, turned out to be a ten-year absence from the scene of semiotic journals. During these years, Katre constantly pondered the revival of the journal, particularly after joining the staff at the Department of Semiotics and rediscovering the significance of, and need for, a forum that would

welcome the innovative and creative research of young academics and showcase to a broader audience papers which would otherwise be left on the hard drives of laptops, read only by professors.

“And then I found a like-minded person in Nelly who was willing to help with restarting the journal. I do not remember there being any special situation besides Nelly saying one day: let us do it now,” Katre says, recalling the revival of *Hortus Semioticus*. Nelly, a semiotics researcher at the University of Tartu and a current mentor of the *Hortus Semioticus* editorial team, had been connected with the journal as one of the final editors before its suspension. In her interview, Nelly echoed Katre’s sentiments regarding the journal’s unfortunate suspension and the ensuing loss of an environment that had encouraged and motivated students to publish and communicate their research, regardless of how creative, eccentric, or even experimental it was. She firmly believed that reviving the journal was essential because it would facilitate academic research by students and acquaint them with the publication process.

As a result, in 2020 Nelly and Katre reignited the engines and revived *Hortus Semioticus*. A group of eager students formed a new editorial team to be guided through the publication process. Both mentors placed a high value on having students from the bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral programmes in Semiotics participate, so that all academic levels would be represented. After ten years, *Hortus Semioticus* needed a substantial revision and advertising to reacquaint the journal’s longtime readers with its purpose and scope and introduce it to the department’s newest recruits. “*Hortus Semioticus Blog Section*”, an initiative proposed by Ph.D. student Oscar Salvador Miyamoto Gomez, was added to the redesigned official website, in a way replacing *Meditationes Semioticae*. This revision was made in order to let the students have an even more open venue where to discuss semiotics, disseminate information about their work, reflect on their academic experiences, and find a creative outlet for their ideas and inspirations. Now students can introduce themselves in the online environment via video recordings, or present a colleague by briefly commenting on their current work and the overall field of interest; explain complicated theories and concepts in straightforward terms, opening the door to further discussion or alternative interpretations; recommend and discuss helpful software (which can, for example, be related to referencing lists and bibliographies); and much more. Oscar’s goal in creating and organizing the blog section was offering an even more open forum for students and young academics who might feel too constrained or intimidated to participate in other communities and publications, and for this purpose, he made good use of his journalistic background. As he sees it, the worldwide semiotic community is expanding at a speedy rate, necessitating the creation of a setting – a virtual hub –

capable of meeting the scholars' desires and needs for open communication and collegial exchange. Thus, Oscar hopes that the blog section of *Hortus Semioticus* will grow to become that kind of a novel platform that could replace the earlier genre of a newsletter and be open to semioticians everywhere.

The new era of *Hortus Semioticus* began with the publication of its seventh issue in 2020. Andrew Mark Creighton, then a new member of the editorial team who has by now become an integral part of it, oversaw the zoosemiotics-themed issue under the direction of the mentors Nelly and Katre. The issue, which also brought back the journal as a whole, included a wide range of papers including literature overviews, articles on cognition and societal changes seen from the perspective of zoosemiotics, and transdisciplinary articles employing economic and anthropological theories. In his interview, Andrew described how demanding and gratifying it had been to organize the seventh issue of the journal without any prior experience, even though he did receive a significant amount of help and support. In addition, he noted how team members grew closer and began to influence one another during moments of stress and confusion. "I think people colloquially call this 'becoming friends', and I have really learned a lot and became a better academic because of it," he added.

In the following year, 2021, the eighth issue of *Hortus Semioticus*, edited by Andrew and Leticia Vitral, was published. This general issue covered a variety of topics, from poetry and music to psychopathological subjectivity in film, and featured a number of highly intriguing examples of semiotic analysis of artistic texts. After the completion of the issue, the excited members of the editorial team, full of ambitions and aspirations, began preparing the next publication in the hopes of reaching a new milestone. It appeared to be time to attempt even broader outreach to semioticians at other universities and institutions throughout the world with a call for papers in an effort to grow the *Hortus Semioticus* community. As an academic journal (and an online platform, as regards the blog section) operated by students and intended to provide students and young academics the opportunity to showcase their work, *Hortus Semioticus* is undoubtedly a publication that could attract more aspiring writers and readers.

Thus, a call for papers for the ninth issue with the main themes of *Pop Culture, Media, and Transmediality* was sent out to over twenty universities throughout the world in an attempt to form bridges with the international academic community and promote our scholarly publication. It was decided to make Spanish an additional accepted language for the articles in a list that already included Estonian and English. The editing staff received a variety of high-quality articles from foreign institutions of higher education, whose response was encouraging. However, the new exposure and expansion of the journal brought a new concern

to the attention of the editorial team – a concern regarding the question of striking a balance between the journal’s development and maintaining its identity as an Estonian academic publication. Andrew also mentioned this problem in his interview, noting that perhaps one of the aims should be to “maintain some sort of culture that pushes for experimentation in academics, as well as one that balances local Estonian academics with international (here in Tartu and globally) ones”. Eventually, the ninth issue, that was published in 2022 and edited by Eleni Alexandri and Andrew Mark Creighton, proved to be a successful endeavour. The collaboration with international students from foreign universities was thrilling and rewarding, and the feedback to the collaboration heart-warming and motivating.

#### 4. The future of *Hortus Semioticus*

The idea of the “garden of semiotics”, or *Hortus Semioticus*, was conceived in the garden of Kalevi Kull and is intended to assist students’ academic blossoming. In addition to just being an online scholarly publication, *Hortus Semioticus* is rooted in the academic traditions of the Department of Semiotics: for instance, in the belief that a semiotician is, in principle, a *homo scribens*, as Katre pointed out, referring to the opinion held by Peeter Torop, a former head of the department. In a way, it also continues the efforts of Silvi Salupere, who would publicize exceptional student papers on her personal website long before the journal was established. Katre’s own dedication and perseverance are amply mirrored in *Hortus Semioticus* as she has been involved with the magazine from its inception and has taken on several volunteer positions. The rebirth of the journal is just a part of what Nelly and Katre have made possible via their collaborative efforts and dedication to a shared vision. As mentors, they have been patiently imparting their knowledge, and they maintain their commitment to the journal to this day. According to Nelly, she had expected to be able to show the new members the ropes of managing a journal so that they could slowly take over, adding that new team members should have fun, make friends, and create memories while working on *Hortus Semioticus*, but never forget their part in carrying through the obligations related to the journal. Katre added that “each generation – and each editorial team – has to find their own vision for the journal. And the new team has done that: *Hortus* has grown and changed into a more dynamic space.” Indeed, many of us new members of the editorial team have found our time at *Hortus Semioticus* to be quite educational, allowing us to polish our skills in journal administration, peer reviewing, and article composition, while it is also a place where we can make friends and establish bonds that will hopefully last a lifetime.

The new editorial staff is proud and happy to carry on the journal's traditions and contribute to its future growth. We hope to see *Hortus Semioticus* expanding into new regions, with contributors working together to help young scholars from all around the world disseminate their research. We want to maintain fostering an environment where novel ideas can develop by supporting academic freedom and exploration. Andrew Creighton is right in that we need to find a balance between being an Estonian journal that gives the national language a prominent place on its pages and expanding our reach to an international audience. We are always thinking about ways to improve the journal together with the blog as a whole under the name of *Hortus Semioticus*, to keep promoting open-access publication and academic discussion, and, most importantly, to keep this place available for students and young academics. In the end, we want to live up to our predecessors' standards and when the time is right, pass the torch on to the next generation with the same ethics, passion, love, and respect for our work, the same way we were taught.

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## Hortus Semioticus

Το παρόν άρθρο αποτελεί μια αναδρομή στην ιστορία του *Hortus Semioticus*, από την ίδρυση του ακαδημαϊκού περιοδικού το 2005 έως σήμερα καθώς γιορτάζει το δέκατο επετηακό του τεύχος. Ενθυμούμενοι τη συνεργασία με το περιοδικό, μέλη της συντακτικής ομάδας εξιστορούν τις προσωπικές τους εμπειρίες, και μοιράζονται τις ελπίδες και προσδοκίες τους για το μέλλον του *Hortus Semioticus*.

## Hortus Semioticus

Artikkel on tagasivaade ajakirja *Hortus Semioticus* ajaloole alates selle asutamisest 2005. aastal kuni tänaseni, mil ajakiri tähistab kümnenda numbri ilmumist. Meenutades koostööd ajakirja juures, räägivad toimetuse liikmed oma isiklikest kogemustest ning jagavad lootusi ja ootusi *Hortus Semioticus* tuleviku suhtes.