

The taxi dropped me off at the waterfront with the futuristic skyline that became the Shanghai hallmark. It looked like a sloppy giant had randomly scattered the skyscraper spores on the river bank and all kinds of architectural whims ever conjured by science fiction spurted out of the spawn. The driver waved a hand up the street, where the hotel was supposed to be. ‘Up the street’ swarmed with seething crowds, literally one endless human traffic jam.

I squeezed in, clumsy with luggage and drawing tubes. From the outside, the endless river of human heads seemed to crawl slowly and uneventfully, like all that time spent in the kindergarten waiting for the parents. But once inside, the crowd overwhelmed. My ears rang from the street cacophony. Double-decked tourist buses, besieged by hordes of mopeds, scooters and carts, signaled incessantly like bellowing wounded beasts. Loudspeakers blared from each doorway. A food court entrance was occupied by a well-trained employee, twisting a couple of ear-splitting ratchets and stopping only to yell into a megaphone. The smells literally knocked me off my feet and defied identification.

In this hustle and bustle, people managed to eat their takeaways with chopsticks on the go, smoke and engage in conversations, beating the level of noise with their voices. The girl in front was sipping a steaming blue potion, pulling a spectacular stunt of taking numerous selfies in all of this kaleidoscope, exhaling puffs of blue smoke against red double-deckers and garish shop windows. A mother was maneuvering the crowd, pulled violently forward by a child on a leash, who swiftly skittled to the megaphone-equipped counter with ominous black ice cream. Tourists shuffled by, clutching their backpacks in front of them for fear of pickpockets. I couldn’t care less – young ladies armed with parasols in the midst of such a crowd seemed a far greater danger to me. I kept dodging the spikes, anxious to preserve only my eyes and hair, to hell with the thieves. Mostly, I saw legs, many legs.

It took me about twenty minutes to get to the hotel, although the entrance was just on the other side of the building that the taxi pulled by. Having dragged the suitcase through the revolving door, I landed in a parallel dimension – it was empty, cool, spacious, and inhabited only by a huge ikebana of breathtaking beauty atop a weird ziggurat constructed of mirrors. After the outdoor terrorist attack on all senses, silence seemed deafening as the sound of one hand clapping.

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Still bewildered by the abrupt change in the environment, I encountered a huge pink mouse – an Asian girl, two heads taller than myself, with an incredibly squeaky voice (“Everyone here calls me Minnie Mouse, because of the voice”). Indeed, she squealed in a high-pitched manner that’s usually used for a mouse voiceover in cartoons. Minnie Mouse wore long pink hair, pink glasses, pink overalls and sat behind the mirror ziggurat on a pink pig-shaped pillow (a plush horn protruded from the pig's head), taking selfies with numerous pink reflections of herself, using a pink phone.

Minnie Mouse is finishing the residency and as an old-timer was entrusted to meet the newcomer, show me around the artists' floor, and explain how things work here. She is into “pink visceral art”, whatever that is. I didn't enquire – was too busy staring her in the mouth, trying to figure out how she emits those uncanny sounds. She had a complex mouth: her lips unfolded petulantly out of the corners like petals, and remained slightly parted even when she wasn't talking. Everything about her had a drowsy, blasé feel: unreadable and immobile expression, eyes semi-closed under heavy eyelids and head slightly tilted in languorous boredom of a Pre-Raphaelite maiden, feeding cherries to peacocks by a mildewed fountain in idle eternity. Somewhere inside this sleepy kingdom of a pink woman there nestled a voice one could patent as an alarm clock.

- Laundry room is over there, at the end of the corridor, behind the library! – Minnie Mouse announced in her alien voice, walking me through the deserted artists' floor, which looked like a huge snake had crawled through it, and a corridor had been laid in its trail. The walls were strewn with nondescript contemporary paintings, that had been donated to the residency by the previous guests and hung there like a huge framed reserved place cards for some real art in the future. They usually show this type of art in the movies on the walls of posh hedge fund offices, as if saying ‘never mind, this just hangs here to symbolize status and culture’.

- Here's the meeting room. There're stairs to the rooftop bar! This is a shared kitchen! - Minnie Mouse's voice echoed in the serpentine corridor, like in a stalactite cave. Goosebumps flooded my skin, as if someone kept hitting a tuning fork. The squeak gave her sentences an exclamatory tone and created an odd hypnotic dissonance with her sleepy gaze, frozen expression and monumental figure.

- Here's the coffee machine! Water cooler! Stove and oven fully functional! You can cook!! Everyone has their own little fridge, here's yours – see, with your studio number on it? The big fridge is shared! We keep there all the leftovers and special treats for everyone to try! Help yourself – you've missed the breakfast, haven't you?!

Six chicken heads on a round wooden board stared at me from inside. They shared the refrigerator with celery and a basket of unrecognizable hairy fruit. Minnie Mouse's phone rang again. She had dropped a couple of calls back in the snake corridor, and by now I was sure that she wouldn't answer so as to conceal her real voice, just for the kick of continuing to play this weird toy talk trick on me.

- Go ahead, answer it, – I said, shutting the door on the chicken heads.

- Can I? Sorry, this is rather impolite towards you, but this is my curator calling about today's gallery event.

Minnie Mouse pulled a pink invitation from the bowels of her unicorn pig, which turned out to be a handbag. She was giving a gallery artist talk in the evening. I nodded a promise to come. She chirped into the phone in Chinese, and again I stared impolitely into her mouth, that kept relentlessly pouring this miraculous speech. She looked like an exotic musical instrument – an Aeolian harp or a stalactite organ – in the form of a large, sleepy pink woman.

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I walked up to the windows to stop staring. They overlooked the river and the skyscraper spawn. Motley colors, sparkling neon hieroglyphs, LED screens with running ads and a huge mauve lollipop of a TV tower gave this Chinese Gotham City the festive look of a futuristic amusement park.

Next to the window there was a table with tall stacks of plastic tableware. I tried to pick a plastic cup from a stack and get some water. The cup wouldn't budge.

- Don't touch! - squeaked Minnie Mouse, covering the phone with her hand. I flinched in surprise. The stack tumbled down smack on the table and, like in a domino game, toppled several other stacks, that were precariously balanced on top of some boxes and plates. Two rubber snakes lay on a round cardboard tray. One of them had a ping-pong ball pushed into its wide-opened mouth and had the discouraged look of a creature that died not so much of suffering, but rather from surprise. When hit by the tallest pile of plastic cups, the rubber snake bounced and hit the floor, dropping the ball.

Minnie Mouse clutched her head and jabbed a finger at a cork board over the table. It was densely pinned with notes and pictures of skyscraper spawn. The large picture in the center was captioned "Pudong Trash Installation". Notes were stuck to each building. I learned things from a yellow sheet next to the lollipop TV tower:

If architecture is music in stone, then the Oriental Pearl Tower embodies the sprinkling sounds of a pipa lute, described in a Tang dynasty verse as "large and small pearls falling softly onto a jade plate".

The spheres adorning the tower symbolize pearls, the surrounding park evokes the green shades of jade, and the two bridges over the Huangpu river on either side of the tower represent dragons playing with a pearl, an ancient imperial motif in Chinese art.

Too bad. I wrecked an artwork! I picked up the glued stacks of paper cups and tried to arrange them back into a semblance of the 'skyscraper spawn' on the messy table. Minnie Mouse finished talking on the phone and with a rather indifferent eye watched me torture a snake, frantically trying to stuff the "pearl" back into the "dragon's" jaws. She made no attempt to help the restoration, and her expression defied any guesses as to how badly she condemned me, but while I kept messing with stuff, she was graciously answering my questions.

The recently destroyed art was an unfinished fruit of labor of Leon and Jesus, an artist couple from Argentina, "who are into trash sculpture and eco art". Well, at least it's not *her* work, I thought. The installation depicted the Shanghai skyline, construed from plastic, cartons, disposable chopsticks and such like: "Don't throw anything like that away! They own all our trash!". Leon and Jesus also made tapestries out of supermarket plastic bags: "Don't throw them away either! They own our bags! They stitch them together into huge panels, embroidered with eco-statements!" "I see," said I.

I did not really see anything. It was all too confusing.

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Minnie Mouse had to prepare for the event, but if I needed anything else ... No, nothing, I'm all looking forward to hear her artist talk tonight, and isn't it great that she has a gallery event! Does that, incidentally, happen to all artists at the end of the residence?

- Why, no! Only if a gallery develops an interest in you! Few make it.

- Oh? So how did you make it? – I was genuinely interested.

- As usual! One shows up at the openings and talks and all the right places, one gets the art crowd to remember one's face, one gets noticed by a gallerist or a curator! First they get used to seeing you around, like, "oh, there's a familiar face!", you get introduced to each other and keep bumping into one another at art events, and then, in some confidential small talk, as if by chance, you mention you are an artist!

- Wow, that sounds like a very sophisticated courtship. I thought one just picks a gallery that specializes in the stuff one is doing, one makes an appointment...

- Why, no! – Minnie Mouse has even widened her sleepy eyes. - Sorry, that is rather impolite! One cannot approach a gallery on one's own!

- Ah... Well then, so what happens after one finally confesses to being an artist during this idle conversation over wineglasses? One offers to show one's work?

- Nooo! One shouldn't offer anything to the galleries, never ever! One should pique their interest first. That may take quite some time. But if one is lucky, a gallery might grow an interest to see the studio! And then – only if they like it – they may extend an offer themselves!

Although her face remained unreadable, Minnie Mouse spoke about the artist-gallery mating ritual somewhat hastily and with the diligent despair of a child forced to memorize a poem and recite it on stage. Obviously, the topic excited her way more than trash art. I was genuinely curious too. After all, I had never been this close to Free Artists before and craved to learn how their world ticked. "Openings", "artist talks", "curators" – these words sounded sweet and mysterious, like candies in an unopened chocolate box. However, the path she had outlined looked dubious and unreliable to me.

- But what if one just shows up at the gallery with a bunch of one's works, in the old tired way, you know? – I asked hopefully.

- It's pure violence! Sorry, but this is rather rude towards the gallery! One shouldn't deprive it of the greatest prize and pleasure! A gallery wants to discover new names itself! One has to wait to be *discovered*. That's the whole point!

Wait to be discovered ... It's the other way round – me being the box of chocolates! Anyway, my first encounter with a Free Artist wasn't going smoothly – I've ruined a piece of art and demonstrated an embarrassing ignorance of basic etiquette in dealing with galleries, but alas, that did not stop me:

- So, then what? After one is "discovered"?

- An exhibition!

- Perfect. Does that mean money?

- Why, no! But of course, not!! The number of artists making money from exhibitions is miserable!

- Then why bother with an exhibition?

- So that more people discover you!

- Why?

- So that there are more exhibitions, even more prestigious! Yet more people will discover you!

- And then, finally, that means money?

- Maybe. But as a matter of fact, one shouldn't count on it!

- Well then, what should one count on? How does one make ends meet?

Minnie Mouse suddenly covered her face with her hands and tossed back her head as if her nose was bleeding. I just stood there, perplexed, until she broke into peals of high-pitched sounds. She was laughing.

- Tee-hee-hee-hee!! Not at the expense of art, definitely! To engage in art, one needs to be free!

And so she left, amused and trailing tittering bell sounds, while I remained standing there gawking, like a discombobulated snake – as if someone had stuffed an invisible tennis ball inside my mouth, instead of candy.

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I spent some time shuffling at the window of my studio, looking down at the crowds. The studio was a simple yet spacious brickwalled room with light bulbs hanging from the ceiling, that gave it a newly-renovated look. It was equipped with a large working table, wall cabinets and shelves for materials, a sink and a couple of chairs. A part of the room by the window was separated for a bedroom and contained regular hotel set – a bed, a couple of nightstands and a wardrobe. The window overlooked the façade of a magnificent art deco hotel. The stark geometry of window rows was broken by a half-naked smoker, leaning out the window real far, almost falling out, to prevent smoke from penetrating the room. The human traffic jam below still looked intimidating.

Minnie Mouse said it's always like that ("Nan-jin! This is Nanjing street! One of the main arteries of the city!"). If the streets were real arteries, here's where Shanghai would have an occlusion and a heart attack. "This is not just downtown area, but the most touristy part of it! For local tourists, that is," - explained Minnie Mouse. There was a pedestrian consumer paradise of shopping malls and cafes somewhere up the street. She said something about trying the neighboring streets for an easier way out.

Up until the evening I had all the time on my hands. Should probably go fetch me some food local money? Forgot to ask Minnie Mouse about simple mundane things in all of that lofty art talk. I went down to the reception.

- Can I help you, madam? - asked a stately clerk in a formal suit.

- Yes, thank you. Where can I buy some food around here, please?

- What kind of food would you like to buy, madam?

- Well, you know... bread, cheese, yoghurts, snacks...? Nothing special.

The clerk put on a poker face and quickly looked away.

- There's a supermarket up the street, madam. In the shopping mall, downstairs. Please, take this brochure, madam. – He reverently handed me a thin book the size of a credit card, with both hands, like a gift of the magi. – All listed here: supermarkets, banks, mobile operators, subway stations, gyms, restaurants, art supply stores and so on. There's the hotel address in Chinese typed on the back of the brochure, madam, along with the request to the taxi driver to return you to the hotel, madam.

- Mmm... why is that?

- Please, keep it, madam. No one speaks English around the city. If you'd need to go back before you get your subway card, just show the taxi driver this text, madam.

- Taxi drivers don't speak English?

- Extremely rarely, madam. – By now his poker face was locked, as if I had carelessly stepped on a number of mines, and he is obliged to conceal his horror behind deadly politeness. Confused, I thanked him and even bowed, pressing the brochure to the heart with both hands. What's going on here?

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The first ten minutes out of the hotel, I almost died.

It seemed like I trod the way to the nearest intersection with all of the one-point-four-billion people of China. I turned the nearest corner and, true enough, of the kind was happening at the neighboring crossroad. When the lights turned green, I moved forward and almost toppled and fell – a crutched stick hooked my shoulder and jerked back sharply. Immediately, mere centimeters away, a scooter flashed by, followed by a whole swarm of mopeds and bicycles.

There was laughter behind my back. I turned around. An old man in pajamas lifted the stick off my shoulder and, raising it over his head, spoke in Chinese. He looked exactly like a kung fu master from a Hollywood movie: a long white beard, hair tied up in a bun at the back of his head, and sensei's discerning gaze beneath thick white eyebrows. The audience at the curb nodded and laughed, like in a theater.

I understood their laughter after spending about a quarter of an hour, just standing at the traffic light and watching the deadly swarms rush by. A fresh foreigner at a Shanghai crossroads is like a beast released from a zoo into the wild. His ignorance borders on the suicidal: the spoiled character thinks that if the light is green, one can go ahead! Funny, that.

A step away from the main 'arteries', local roads were get filled not with cars, but with scooters, cargo carts and bicycles, which care nothing for the traffic lights. A tricycle or a cargo scooter is a way of life. People carry the world in it – baskets, cardboard, bottles, bags, children, trash, wedding garlands, houses, cities, seas, planets and stars.

Streams of pedestrians trickled around me, regardless of the traffic light, just like the tricycles. They just knew when. And I just froze there, unsure of anything, looking around helplessly. At some point, my eye was caught by the familiar figure in pajamas. The kung fu master was dump digging with his stick, fishing for plastic bottles. I hadn't drawn the local money yet, but I did have the change from the taxi driver, so I went over and held it out to him. The old man looked up from the garbage, glared at the money and abruptly swung up

his stick, yelling what must have been unspeakable curses in Chinese. I ran so fast I didn't notice how I crossed the street, in spite of the tricycles.

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I forget why I went out.

Everything around had that acute dreamlike feeling of reality being hastily concocted around the corner, which you get when you don't know what to expect and what you might see next. It's like the world is being haphazardly assembled in real time, and the moment you make a turn it's coalescing into, say, water, a wedding on a bridge, a high rise or, say, a narrow courtyard and a woman fetching laundry from a rope with a tall bamboo stick. In great hurry, dream architects just pile stuff at random: a single facade can parade an antique wooden balcony with carved phoenixes, a sickle-and-hammer mosaic, an amulet against evil spirits, a buddha, flycatchers and a carpet depicting kittens playing with butterflies among roses. This city seems "as beautiful as the chance meeting, on a dissecting table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella."

Well, I was planning on a "scheduled meeting of an ATM and a supermarket", wasn't I? I approached a random policeman for help. The police should be speaking English, right? Not only he did not speak any English, but gave me such a hard look to boot, that I could hardly imagine what would have happened, if he had a crutched stick...

I soon realized that here stuff counts in streets: a street of nail polish stuff, a street of wig shops, a street of fast food with octopuses... and a whole street of art supplies! I brought my favorite brushes and paints from home, but the watercolor paper was way too cumbersome and weighty to carry across the world. I went looking for it. No watercolor paper whatsoever, but there was rice paper galore – in rolls, albums, scrolls, fans and folding calligraphy books... It was a calligrapher's paradise, a garden of earthly delights, where brushes of all possible shapes and sizes grew in resplendent abundance: from huge witch broom-like brushes, hung from the ceilings, to tiny, hair-thick brushes the size of a grasshopper's leg, which were sold by the bunches like greens at the street market. Precious ink caskets, bejeweled red wax boxes, delicately carved jade seals, phials with ink crystals – a lifetime wouldn't be enough even to try such an amazing wealth of treasures! I lost track of time, lurking around the corners of the shops like Koschei the Deathless (explain or find analogue in western fairy tales), pining away over his gold. What a shame I had no local money yet... And what luck I had no money on my hands yet!

And yet, I could not leave empty-handed. I was suddenly seized by the panic of a compulsive buyer: if I leave now, just like that, the jewels will turn into shards, treasure caves – into mere mirage, and I will never find my legendary golden city of El Dordado again, ever! I still had change from the taxi and *had to* buy something.

Anyway, a sketchbook wouldn't hurt. One can't do without it. I walked past a rack of fancy calligraphy books for calligraphy, bound in cloth and embroidered with scarlet dragons (I ignored them, stone-faced, as if they were dangerous sirens luring me to my peril) and picked up a plain hardcover sketchbook. The cover was embossed with golden letters – "The Book of Momery, made in China". Must be something in between memory, motherhood and Mormons, made in China. Suits me. Something made me pull another sketchbook off the shelf. This one was called "Mu Love It's Offthe". On love that has gone wrong, apparently. I pulled out a few more. They varied in color and size. For example, "A Tooth From" was significantly thinner than "Dwarf Bravery", while "Liquid Male Scholar" was inferior to

“Dainty Protagonist” in paper quality. The largest sketchbook was appropriately captioned “How Depressing”, and the smallest was called “Become Door #56”.

I took the Book of Momery and that other one, with the cryptic message “Become Door #56”, to the checkout. The seller in an undershirt reluctantly broke away from the Japanese war flick on TV, carelessly tossed the notebooks on the scales and poked at the price on the display. Sketchbooks by weight? Seriously? They cost accordingly, like potatoes in the market, so my taxi change even proved enough money for that.

Having hardly escaped the snare of the art supplies street, I found myself on a bookstore street. I stared at the window displays of calligraphy books like a hungry ghost for quite some time, then literally pulled myself out of there by the hair, like Munchausen, and headed in the direction of the nearest skyscrapers. I needed an ATM! Walking down such a street without money was a Chinese torture. Before leaving however, I found the name of the street in a little brochure that the deadly polite clerk with a complicated face had given me. Indeed, Fuzhou Road (the former street of brothels, as specified in the booklet) was a mecca of art materials and books. Former brothel street, egads! Think of it, it still crucially remained a street of outrageous lust. Now. ATM. And a supermarket. I hadn't eaten anything since yesterday, and now I “found it difficult to survive a hollow in my stomach,” as Pu Songling put it in his “Strange Stories”, which I'd been reading on a plane, trying to tune in to... whatever's in store. Futile efforts. ‘Strange’ didn't even start to describe it.

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While ATM proved to be reasonably easy, things were much more complicated with food. I spent a meaningless hour roaming the supermarket full of unimaginable and unrecognizable food. Hard to tell what one could eat at all. Packages were of little help: impossible to tell, was it dairy or fish? liquid or, say, cabbage? salty or pineapple-flavored? Smoked Cthulhu and dinosaur thighs hung from the ceiling, and the counters were bright with colorful sweets (?) that looked either like jewelry or playdough food for aliens.

Finally, in one remote corner, I came across a glass cabinet, locked up like a jewelry case in posh stores. Inside, a few packages of toaster cheese and sliced bread were lit up solemnly like a Cartier wrist-watch. Oh, I get it. Now I get that poker face the deadly polite clerk gave me, when I enquired about “bread and cheese, nothing special...” This was very, very special, not ‘regular stuff’ at all, luxury products for foreigners. With the money they cost, I can buy a cargo tricycle load of sketchbooks by weight.

At the supermarket exit, I got stuck at a street counter of kraken vendors. There were two of them. One was deftly stringing live baby octopuses onto sticks, while the other roasted the stuff until the creatures froze in broken, sprawled-out poses – and then briskly handed those prickly kebabs out to pleased-looking customers, who formed a rather long line. People ate the krakens right at the counter or on the go. Girls with pretty LED-fox ears and parasols took selfies with the octopuses galore.

There was a pretentious café at the next shopping mall entrance, that served cappuccinos at a depressing price, if calculated sketchbooks. I bought one anyway and sat down at a table outside. Evidently, I was in those pedestrian quarters of a consumer paradise, that the crown under my hotel was so eager to get to. Loudspeakers wouldn't shut up from

every corner. I was in the midst of stores, restaurants and snack-bars of all kinds – from pompous dining halls with ornate red lanterns and plump buddhas at the entrance to street carts fast foods. And all that plethora of choices had nothing in it that I could readily eat or, at least, identify. Except for octopuses. But even though by now the ‘hollow in the stomach’ was blinding me, the mind stubbornly held its defense against octopuses.

Hunger aside, one could spend whole day here just looking around. Right in front of me, a mesmerized kid was watching a manga-bear dance to the deafening music from the speakers at the toy store entrance. Neon ad and motley signs climbed the buildings all the way to the sky. In the distance arose wild science fiction skyscrapers, topped with spires, crowns, flying saucers, and one particular high rise – with horns. A joyful pink train, packed with happy tourists, circled the square. Crowds of well-dressed consumers strolled by. Above them shone a neon Olympus, where huge, sparkling gods and goddesses on luminous screens painted their lips with expensive lipstick, laughed exhilaratingly in air sneakers and held up expensive watches to aristocratic faces.

Eyeing the palisade of hieroglyphs, I suddenly recognized the familiar giant yellow letter M. Oooh, the vile demon of globalization, you are saving my life! I quickly finished my coffee, left the change on the saucer and rushed to the coveted hamburger. A couple of minutes later, someone grabbed me painfully by the shoulder, bruised by the kung fu master's stick. A breathless waitress had chased me for nearly a block to return the tip. She was crying. I started mumbling excuses, but she just slipped me the money angrily and ran for her life, as if I were the plague.

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I entered McDonald's, wistfully counting the number of nice people upset with me during this day. There were a lot of customers inside, but not a single counter. People just went up to the touchscreens, poked the menu, paid though a QR code with a phone, and then waited for their order to slide down the chute. Everything automated! A solitary staff member was the cleaner, and you could tell by his face he, too, was doomed to be replaced by a robot, and knew about it. In short, China had stepped into a distant future, which was inaccessible to me, because I had no local phone. Obviously, I needed one.

I bought something called “emerald pearl tea” from a nearby grocery with qilin chimeras guarding its entrance. The stuff was cyanide blue and tasted like iced milk tea. Rather drinkable, once you get used to the idea any moment a caramel ball the size of a pearl might rush up your throat through a wide straw. The first ‘pearl’ I choked on was such a surprise, that it sent me up a dubious alley for the sake of discreetly mining it from the nose.

I smoked a cigarette on a bench overshadowed by the neon gods. The manga-bear finished dancing, turned off the music and took off the mascot head. That huge discarded head revealed a tired, sullen, greasy-haired character with week’s stubble on a viciously ghoulish face. He limped to the bench, dropped down, exhausted, and gestured for a cigarette. I offered one. The crowd at the toy store dissolved in the nick of time, but the kid remained standing and looking at the smoking manga-bear-turned-ghoul. The ghoulish sat there, hunchbacked and gloomy, gazing at the kid with unseeing eyes. The boy's face had that subdued and slightly absent expression that children have when they are processing large amounts of new information. The bear-ghoul suddenly went into a fit of crazy coffee machine noises, and, finally, gave birth to a huge, joyless spit at his feet. The kid lifted his head up to the sky and burst into tears.

I knew how he felt. A dancing teddy bear, bursting with joy, turned out to be a spiteful bugaboo, battered by life. I imagined things differently too, and I was over forty, by the way. My first day in Shanghai was exactly like this manga-bear – with a false front: food you can't eat; green lights you can't trust; trash you can't touch, because maybe it's art... but most importantly, what's wrong with that kung fu master? I was haunted by this mystery. What did I do wrong? How is it that I offended an old man, who saved me from the demons on wheels? Maybe he isn't poor? Maybe he's into trash-art too; and was dump digging for installation material? Or did he think I was paying him for saving his life? Then, perhaps, that was somewhat low... Or could it be that the local poor are too proud for charity? Or waiters, too proud for tips? Everything is different here, and "owls are not what they seem."

I sat there, choking on pearls from time to time and thinking about the tribes who used to stick a sacred pillar in the middle of the village – something like a router to establish a wifi connection to the deities. If an enemy tribe stole the pillar, the villagers completely lost their bearings – they didn't know where to hunt or fetch the water. Their entire habitual life collapsed, and the tribe died out on its own, without any bloody massacre. Oh, now I get it. I get just how they felt. I did not have the pillar.

Towards the evening, in a vain quest for recognizable food, I wandered into a street of violin makers. A whole street load of violin workshops! I was too awestruck to go inside and just stared through the windows at rows of cellos, fiddles at various stages of readiness and sad girls, varnishing violins.

At one of the windows I got noticed and called in. There were three Chinese men inside. One was sitting at a picturesque table strewn with spare parts of the future magic – apparently, the master. The second one – probably a customer – was trying different violins. The violins made obscene sounds, as if they were being deflowered. And a third man just drank and smoked on the couch.

They poured me some wine, and we engaged in a conversation. It was crystal clear from the reactions on both sides that no one understood a word of it. The violinists uttered all the foreign words they knew in the hope that I would understand anything that was not in Chinese. I recognized French, Spanish and Russian words. Not helpful. To wit, it was obvious to everyone that we do not understand each other. But we still pronounced phrases. We talked for about half an hour.

To me this seemed a perfect illustration of human communication, the way it was conceived. This is exactly how it works, even if people speak a common language. Perhaps, if a third, omniscient party had overheard our conversation, he would have found out that we were talking about ping-pong, wood cutting or prudence of family life. But I think we were talking in tongues. We spoke Enochian – that divine language that people sometimes understand in their dreams and instantly know they have learned some crucial truth. A person writes it down on the bedside table, only to discover a meaningless set of words there in the morning. That's the very blueprint of how human communication was initially conceived – the unconscious speaks directly to the unconscious, regardless of the actual words pronounced. Say, our conversation could have been something like that:

- To smithereens...?

- Sure, nose of the book!

- Nose of the book and stupefying grinding of socks.

(Everyone nods and smiles. The Customer deflowers another violin.)

- Ah yea, schizophrenic wind in oil. But what of nostril of a mediocre life?

- Toss a nail across a crocheted river!

- Maybe, one thousand six hundred and eighteen?

- Cold wittles.

(The Master eagerly refreshes everyone's glasses.)

- Ceiling dogs!

- Beef comet!

- Retreat the butterflies!

(Everyone drinks, very happy.)

- Like, turn a hairy crab on the young dust?

(The visitor nods and plays Bach.)

- Toad of utter dissent? But a pumpkin? Literary critic in a pendant!
- Feathers of tears, feathers of tears! No tights?
- No tights.

(Everyone drinks some more. Hearts singing, atmosphere festive.)

- Laced oxygen. Aloud.
- Naked gram. Tutu carrots!

(Everyone nods and rather agrees.)

- Hiccup on a grasshopper.
- Sure. Why manicure politics?
- Lithium.

(Everyone laughs. I take out the Book of Momery and show them the sketches of the manga-bear from the neon Olympus square and a girl polishing a violin in the window of a nearby shop. The violinists issue vowels of approval. We drink some more.)

- In spite of gladiolus!

(I get up for goodbyes.)

- Chewing atmosphere? Put the beast in your hat!

(For some reason, we exchange phone numbers. Probably, we are rather taken with each other.)

- Compote!
- Compoooto! Clavichord...

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Dusk was falling on the streets. Birds were singing like crazy at a day's end. I was a little unstable from all that wine drunk on an empty stomach, and most of all I wanted to grab a coffee back at that square with the manga-bear and kraken vendors. However, if I wanted to make it to Minnie Mouse's gallery event, I had to hurry up. I opened google maps on the phone, entered the address from the pint invitation ...and the battery died.

Well, no luck. I walked briskly in the direction of the hotel, but very soon realized I was clueless as to which direction that was. I immediately ceased fearing to die under the wheels of a cargo tricycle, and began fearing death from mere misery – it was evident to me, that without maps, network and language I was bound to get utterly lost in an endless Chinatown, had no chance to find my hotel whatsoever, was doomed to spend the night on a park bench, and would probably end my days dump digging in the garbage with a crooked stick, fishing for plastic bottles.

Asking for help was of no use. Sure, the deadly polite clerk had warned me that no one spoke English. But he did not specify that “nobody” is nobody! Damn courtesy. Neither police, nor sellers, nor waiters, nor bank employees, nor taxi drivers... Taxi drivers! He did say something about the request to a taxi driver, typed in Chinese on the back of the

brochure. He also insisted that I take it. Oh, deadly polite person, you are saving my life! I'd have to thank him again.

Waving a taxi turned out to be a tricky business: you had to find a place where the end lane was not occupied by an endless stream of cyclists, scooters and carts. I tried several streets until I found the right place. Most of the taxis were occupied, and those that did stop, left the moment the driver found out that the client didn't speak Chinese and one had to look at brochures, read things, turn on the lights... – duh! No time for any such things. I tried to say the hotel address in English, but the drivers just shrugged and waved me away.

After a dozen attempts to persuade a driver, desperately poking at the Chinese inscription and at the same time trying to rescue my head from the slamming door, I felt stupid and went to a bench for a smoke. Up across the street, a child on a leash was playing with shed tree bark, squatting under a streetlamp. A janitor, wielding a willow broom nearby, indifferently swept the bark from under the kid's nose. The kid went into a heart-rending tantrum.

I scrutinized the impenetrable Chinese spell. There was something underneath it in small print, but hard to tell in the darkness. I walked over to a brightly lit butcher shop. Three vacuum-sealed pig heads goggled at me from the shop window with glassy eyes. I goggled back at them, trying not to wonder what led us to this encounter. The three little pigs seemed to smile in a kindly piggy way and raise eyebrows, somewhat incredulous, as if saying: “Hey, there are destinies way more complicated than yours. Just look at us! They cut off our heads, took off our skins, pressed our heads into neat pancakes, and now we hang here like big funny masks for carnival in the land of giants. There. Now you tell us your troubles... Get a grip!”

The drunk and hungry part of me wondered how on earth are you supposed to cook and eat that? But the voice of Jewish ancestors commanded to turn away, so that the light fell on the brochure. Indeed, under the hieroglyphs there was a transcription of the spell in English letters. And then I had a hunch. To test my hunch, I reached into the bag for Minnie Mouse's invitation and studied it carefully. Right. Here, too, there was the transliterated invocation for the taxi driver, in fine print. Apparently, everyone was in on the problem, except me.

I rehearsed the abracadabra several times in front of three little pigs, who (still smiley and eyebrow-raised) regarded me with a trusting, joyful attitude of a dopey audience, anticipating the end of an anecdote to break into roaring laughter, regardless of whether it's funny. Repeating my mantra, I headed to the road. The very first taxi driver let me in as if by password. I surreptitiously waved at the surprised pigs out the window from the back seat, mentally thanking them, as if they were foreign idols that brought me luck.

We immediately got stuck in a traffic jam. The driver lit a cigarette and smoked out of the window. With the dead phone, I had no idea what time it was or if I was late for the artist talk. It was pointless to ask in English, and my internal clock, after a day's flight, told me: “Time is an illusion, it doesn't exist.” My feet were buzzing from endless walking. I focused to stay awake. On a transparent partition between me and the driver, there was a long text in two languages. Taxi rules, among other things, stated that “drunkards and psychos without guardians are strictly prohibited” and ordered to “fasten your seat belt and prepare for an accident.” Fine.

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I abruptly woke up, because a Chinese man was shaking me by the shoulders and yelling something. I was scrambling out of such bottomless sleep that it took me a while to restore the reality I had dropped out of and decide from which moment to start living now. I'm in the car. This is a taxi driver. He is Chinese. I'm in Shanghai! The entrance to the gallery pulsed through the window in acid-pink neon. Oh, I'm going to a meeting with Beauty!

The food tables in the gallery hall, to my chagrin, were already empty. Mingling over drinks had apparently ended, but the artist talk proper was just starting. I went in the direction of the hum of voices. The gallery was packed full. Minnie Mouse was standing at the table with a projector on it. She wore an exquisitely ragged pink dress with a vignette of burgundy-colored guts that lovingly framed the words "Visceral Conceptualist" on her chest. She seemed taller than everyone in the room and, looking down, was talking to a small, middle-aged lady with a bowl haircut. Everything about that lady shouted 'gallerist!' – large red cat glasses, egg-sized earrings, and a dress with a huge Andy Warhol portrait, with a shock of white ostrich feathers for his notorious hair. Overall, the scene looked like Minnie Mouse was scolding a giant Warhol Head on two little feet.

All seats were taken, and many a lover of Beauty propped up the walls. I, too, propped a wall, hung with small pictures of bird eggs, and considered the public: mostly foreigners, bored wives of expats, and artists, stealthily stalking game among gallerists and curators.

Right in front of me sat a fragile European girl with an elf haircut. She was holding a pen in her hand and a notepad on her lap and had an intent, fixed look of a person, determined to extract the maximum amount of spiritual enrichment from a meeting with Culture, no matter what. She opened the notebook the moment the gallerist took up the microphone, and, somewhat intrigued, I read the last entry over her shoulder: "...of spatial semantics, the contemplation of which reveals the tension between the inner and outer world. The artist disrupts the familiar unifying concepts behind thoughtforms..." I recognized artspeak – a variety of speaking in tongues – ritual spells that turn anything into art as soon as "anything" lands in the gallery. Probably, an art critique student.

- Hi! I'm Steve!

I turned to a voice with an American accent. A sinewy, jug-eared guy in frayed jeans and a faded T-shirt was squeezing his way along the wall, stepping over bags and empty wineglasses.

- I'm Steve! – he repeated, jabbing himself, - we live in the neighboring studios. I dropped by to pick you up, didn't catch you.

Steve smiled and suddenly miraculously turned from a plain, big-eared dude into a dangerous heartbreaker. I have always envied people, capable of such complete transformations, in a mere instant, with the help of a mere smile.

- Steve! But ... how did you recognize me?

- Oh, your face is stamped with the 'first-day-in-Shanghai' trials and tribulations.

- Really..? That obvious? – I instinctively touched my face.

- Kidding. – Steve nodded at the hotel brochure and an invitation, which I was still clutching to my chest, like a treasure map.

- Ah, I see. Well, my phone died, and it's my only guiding thread back to the hotel.

I stuffed the papers into my backpack and asked him about the other residency artists' whereabouts. Steve waved at the first row – like, over there, right next to the gallerist, rubbing it in her face. Him – no, he's already part of the in-crowd and has just performed as an opener for Minnie Mouse's talk. Steve is an atonal musician, collects all sorts of weird sounds, like construction cacophony, unusual laughter, hospital noises, and composes music from them. For instance, tonight he performed zombie music here, meaning not the 'music of the living dead', but 'music that had died and became a zombie itself.' Whatever it was, I was sorry to have missed that.

Minnie Mouse was trying to catch Steve's eye all the time. When she finally did, Steve gleamed his impossible smile and blew her a kiss across the gallery. Minnie Mouse flushed and buried her face in her hands. I asked if they were together? Steve said "kinda".

Meanwhile, the gallerist was presenting Minnie Mouse to the art crowd, waving her hands in welcoming gestures and causing Andy Warhol on her dress jolts of pain, judging from his distorted grimaces. "We first met two years ago, here, in the gallery, at an absurdist yoga performance," - she raised both hands in the tree pose, Warhol Head cringed with disgust. – "I saw this girl with the pink hair and thought to myself: 'Pink hair! Why does she have pink hair? Why, this is so intriguing!'"

The elf girl in front wrote in her notebook: "Consider dyeing hair in an unusual color." Poor thing! Wants to become an artist! Just like me...

The microphone soon passed to Minnie Mouse, and she instantly charmed the room into such spellbound silence, that you could hear her pressing a button on the projector's remote control. Pink things flickered on the screen, but no one looked at them. Everyone was staring her in the mouth that emitted signals from the Martians.

I tried to watch Steve without him seeing. I might just as well have gawked at him – he beamed at Minnie Mouse with an ecstatic smile of a person in awe. An atonal musician and a visceral conceptualist – in a relationship! How weirdly human pairs are shuffled up. A little guy with a passion for disharmony, enamored of a big woman with the voice of a toy squeaker.

I indulged in a disgusting adolescent habit of imagining people in bed the moment it turns out that they are a couple. "Say something more!" – Steve's stringent body heaves over Minnie Mouse's herculean frame, sprawled on a studio table. Minnie Mouse recites a bit of John Cage's "Lecture on Nothing":

The most amazing noise
I ever found
Was produced by
Means of a coil of wire
Attached to the
Pickup arm
Of a phonograph and then...

Steve moves faster. Minnie Mouse emits ultrasounds of a cartoon orgasm, two wine glasses on the table burst to smithereens. Steve speeds up some more. Minnie Mouse heightens the sound frequency. Light bulbs explode from the studio ceiling. Steve makes a abrupt movement and freezes, silencing her with a kiss. Minnie Mouse falls silent, and they

lie in the dark, motionless, scared to stir under the shards, that keep softly falling from the broken bulbs, and the blue devils embrace their damp bodies and seep into their blood through all the orifices, for, as the Greeks said, “every animal is sad after coitus”.

- Cool, ha? – Steve whispered.

- Sorry, what?

- I said cool, right? – he nodded at the projector.

- Yeah, right... – I emerged from the imaginary movie and focused on the screen.

The screen showed Minnie Mouse and Steve. They sat on chairs, facing each other in Egyptian poses, with ball gags in their mouths, and were stark naked, except for something like SM kneepad fetishes (pink, but of course). The kneepads flourished an array of flexible brass plates, like in tear-off ads. When lovers moved their knees up and down, the plates touched and made rustling and ringing sounds.

- Pink Tickle Xylophone is a new musical instrument that can only be played in a pair! - Announced Minnie Mouse, sitting in the same stiff pose, as on screen, her hands folded in her lap. – But it’s not an art object! It’s not the instrument we are exhibiting! The Tickle Opera, our joint performance, will be premiered at the exhibition here in two weeks! To that end, we have invited genuine Chinese opera singers. But they will not sing! Just play the ‘tickle xylophone’ with their mouths gagged! As in the photo. This live performance will combine bodily issues with social and spiritual commentary in equal measure!

- How? – I whispered to Steve, but he just looked at me questioningly. – I didn’t understand, how will naked and gagged opera singers perform “social and spiritual commentary”?

- With their knees, - Steve whispered.

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Minnie Mouse was displaying her extensive collection of pink stuff, sorted into cupboard installations by shades of pink. There were toys, packages, underwear, lighters, chips, flowers, pearls, shoes, clothespegs, Cadillac models, pills, bulbs, dolls, dildos, airplanes, inflatable flamingos, mannequins, shower curtains, baskets, sweaters, thermometers, bags, sausages, socks, Jedi swords, umbrellas, water pistols, beads, candy, sails, ad nauseam...

The elf girl in front wrote down the name of the project - “Instinct of Possession”, and added below - “Beautiful. Very pink !!!”

Minnie Mouse sat in the same stiff pose and, without a single gesture, talked in exclamatory sentences about her passion to soak everything in pink dye:

- Once I painted a whole garden pink! – An acid-pink garden appeared on the screen, rippling with pink grass, pink bushes, pink flowers and pink trees on pink ground. – Then I did a project with pink carts at the Shanghai Biennale! They rode around the biennale and took people to the pink gallery called Artist for Half an Hour. Any visitor could become an artist for half an hour! Then I did the Pink Hypnoboath project! Sixteen booths installed in different cities! A visitor entered a pink booth, sat on a pink chair, put on pink headphones and listened to a hypnotic recording: “You are getting smarter! You are getting bolder! You are getting more creative! You are getting better!”

That moment she suddenly reached the end of the slides and, without moving a muscle, said with the same expression: “That’s all!”

The elf girl wrote down an invective in her notebook: “Just lists projects, doesn’t explain anything.”

The Warhol Head rose and clapped, and the audience followed suit. Then the little dried head of the gallerist on top of Warhol invited people to ask questions.

The amount of questions people had about the pink color staggered me. First I thought they were asking all those questions on purpose – just to hear Minnie Mouse make some more of those incredible sounds. But pink turned out to be hotter than politics. Questions would not subside for over an hour. People wanted to know the history of the color, its geography and semiotics of its shades. They were interested, if pink was a respectable color or what? How should they treat now? People were concerned about gender aspects of pink, enquired about its healing properties in prison psychotherapy, and really wanted a comparative analysis of its effect on libido in different countries! A pack-full gallery of humans, so dead serious about pink, just beat me.

The room was getting stuffy – not like ‘people nonchalantly discussing pink’ stuffy, but rather like ‘third hour of sumo wrestlers grappling in the ring’ stuffy. I tried to surreptitiously sneak outside and accidentally knocked a picture of a bird’s egg off the wall with my backpack. Everyone turned, as if to a question. Minnie Mouse also looked at me, and with my inner ear I heard her telepathic rebuke: “this is rather impolite!”, so I said:

- Yes, ummm... I, too, have a question! About pink. About the pink booth... Ah, these hypnotized people? I mean, what happened to them? Did it help them? And ah, how did the color of the booth affect them?

Jeez, what am I saying? Meanwhile, Steve picked up the picture from the floor, adjusted it back onto the wall and whispered in my crimson ear:

- You broke an egg.

I turned around. Indeed, the picture depicted a broken egg. Steve relished:

- You are a bad person. Dropped art on the floor... Again!

Oh, I get it. Minnie Mouse has told him about the morning trash art incident. The whole residence must be in on it by now.

- And that’s why the booths were pink! – Concluded Minnie Mouse and looked at me questioningly. I had missed all of her answer and looked for clues in the elf girl’s notebook. It said “Pink hypnosis!!!”, thrice underlined. I said:

- Thank you! Pink hypnosis ah, that’s... fascinating!

When the questions, finally, ran out, the public resumed mingling, breaking into small groups. The Warhol Head was instantly surrounded by ‘plain-clothes artists’, careful to have their faces remembered, yet conceal their true identities for fear of impolitely robbing the gallerist of the discovery. Minnie Mouse, too, was besieged by people who couldn’t get enough of pink talk, the alarm clock of her laughter rang throughout the gallery nonstop. I craved fresh air. I craved food so badly, that even the krakens no longer seemed like something inappropriate. I quietly slipped out without goodbyes.

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I got hold of a subway card at the nearest station and, surprisingly, figured out the underground rather quickly. Gripped by the great power of art, I automatically marked everything pink – fonts, umbrellas, shoes, facades... Coming out of the train, I immediately noticed transparent pink booths. Several people from the train scurried to them.

I approached one of the booths. Inside was a glowing screen with a dancing man in leopard pajamas. A girl with a microphone sat in front of the screen on a bar stool, moving her lips... Karaoke! These are karaoke booths! People came in, one at a time, inserted a coin in the slot, and sang for a couple of minutes in front of the screen. Outside the booth nothing could be heard. Which means ...people are desperate. They *really* want to sing. They leave the train and rush to the booths with urgency. I was impressed.

And intrigued.

I entered the booth after the girl. I don't know who I feared – hardly anyone from my world could accidentally catch me indulging in low karaoke passions in the Shanghai subway, but anyway, I drew the burgundy curtains shut for privacy. I dropped a coin and hit a random bunch of hieroglyphs in the menu.

The peppy leopard man reappeared on screen. Maybe I pressed 'encore'. Surprisingly, he sang in English. The lyrics, however, had a psychedelic feel of texts in workbooks – when sentences are limited to words that are already familiar to pupils, and therefore sound bizarre, as if they describe another, dreamlike reality, where human interactions are so simple, it's scary: "Hello. I eat bananas, what about you?" "I don't eat bananas. You eat bananas. Goodbye."

The man in leopard pajamas sang like this:

I have a pen!
I have pineapple!
I have a pineapple pen!

He repeated that with a lot of attitude a hundred different ways to a simple electronic tune, dancing in a dazzlingly white nowhere. I silently watched him getting such a kick of his pineapple pen. In essence, how was this different from a hypnoboost? "I have a pen. I have a pineapple. I have a pineapple pen." - I whispered in lingering silence. That sounded like quite a hypnotic instigation, but its meaning remained indiscernible.

It was unclear, what to make of all these things. If I had daily news inside me, tonight they'd broadcast something like: "Today's Top News: Speaking In Tongues, Pink Color and Compulsive Singing. Stay tuned!" Where I am? In which reality? The skeleton of this world is standing on pink props and singing karaoke about a pineapple pen. I was experiencing strong feelings, hard to say which exactly.

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Hunger forced me out of the hotel past midnight. I bought the very first kraken kebab from the first street vendor I came across. The stuff turned out to be so spicy I cried. But I didn't care – all of my defenses fell. I greedily swallowed one baby octopus after another, sobbing crocodile tears on some parking lot, watching a slightly thinner and much dressier

night crowd, and thinking about this longest day of my life. It had started in the airport and ended up in pink hypnobooth.

Crossing the Chinese border early this morning, I had my fingerprints taken, like any foreigner. The queue for passport control was huge, like a dragon's tail, and was regulated by gloomy people with commanding faces. But I've realized long ago that all these airport procedures are nothing but nonsense and pretense.

There is a far stricter border, the crossing of which defines the whole trip. Every large city has its own, non-human, invisible customs office, which either lets a stranger in or not, at a whim. If this invisible department does not provide access to the city, then a person will not see anything but a vague facade and a set of lifeless decorations, even if they spend there a month. They would have terribly luck with the weather, thieves would rip off their wallet the first days of the trip, there would be a terrorist attack and half the city would be shut down by the police, whatever...

Shanghai was not like that. Shanghai didn't 'let in'. It simply swallowed a person whole, in one gulp, like a dragon, no foreplay, no simple joys of discovery, nada. Down there, in the bowels of the dragon, a guest is hit with a stick, run over by a cart, fed a kraken barbecue, and prodded with a pineapple pen into the bardo of a pink hypnobooth, so that he can be reborn smarter, stronger and better. to cope with all the novelty that has fallen on your head.

Instead of the usual tourist attempts to flirt with a new experience, you almost collapse from all the overwhelming novelty.