

My thirst for adventure boundless ambition within me and my provincial, academic, conservative, pedagogical, artistic Russian education, led to a significant amount number of (more or less) events through which a lot of talented people got involved through a fault of mine.

As a student I was silly enough to call my sketches “modern art” and organize one exhibition after another. I even dared to teach at the age of seventeen, without any understanding of what art was actually about. But I do not have any regrets. My former naivety simply makes me smile now.

Through my experience I discovered that, there will always be some grateful art lovers willing to share the joy of a long-discovered truth with the naïve artist. One day I realized that I could hardly say anything new to my audience, but that didn’t stop me from doing what I thought was right. I neither can nor want to do anything else. I like to refer to myself as a painter and I love the life I lead.

My life itself is an object the experiments which I have been conducting for years, working twenty-four-seven without so much as a break for a week-end or a national holiday. My office is an enormous blue sphere with an area of more than five hundred and ten millions of square kilometers. All the people in these office space are my colleagues, with whom I try to find a common language, or myriad of common languages. Even though I am completely aware of the fact that I am a mere mortal who will never be able to reach the complete understanding of the laws of the universe, I will still keep trying.

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OSEN' HALASO¹

Part 1

I used to teach painting to a group of Chinese students in the Voronezh Teachers' Training Institute. All of them were 'happy-go-lucky' bums constantly shirking school. Only one student was always present. It was Liu Gang. Once he came to my class just to tell me that no one was going to attend the class because they were preparing to perform a patriotic song about international friendship on the Dean's request. Liu Gang just tucked a pack of cigarettes into my pocket and went out singing with his comrades. He always gave me cigarettes although he knew I didn't smoke.

Liu Gang loved Russia, he had lived there for seven years. After getting his bachelors degree in Russia he decided to write his Ph.D. thesis there too. During these seven years he lived in the student dormitory and was the one who cooked Chinese dishes for all his compatriots. Every so often he would invite me to taste another culinary opus of his. I asked him once if he liked Russian cuisine. He nodded his head in agreement and said:

- Oh! Yes, it is *vely* tasty!
- And do you have a favorite dish?
- Yes, yes, - nodded Liu Gang, - it's mayonnaise! Mayonnaise is *vely gut!*

Once Liu Gang came to my studio with a Chinese man and introduced him as his teacher, Comrade Shen, a well-known painter from Chongqin city. As it turned out, the teacher had come to the Voronezh Institute to teach painting. However, he had signed some form of a contract in Russian and found himself as an exchange student instead. He was given a room in a student dormitory where he spent half a year. He

¹ "Vely Gut"

mostly contemplated Russia's beauty from his tiny window, painting from photographs. Sometimes, tired of his work, he would shoot at bottles standing near garbage bins with an air rifle.

On that occasion of Comrade Shen's first visit to my studio, he bought with him a pack of cigarettes. I offered him a glass of cognac and soon he became tipsy, lavishing praise on my watercolours.

-Oh! *Gut! Vely gut!*

He offered to help me organize my personal exhibition in his native city of Chongqin. Liu Gang told me that Chongqin was a large modern city and the Chinese would definitely be interested in my art and that it would sell well there.

I had painted those watercolours over several years whilst traveling through Europe and Russia. I always worked in an open space and near a source of water from which I always took a sample - from St. Petersburg to the Venice canals and from La Manche to the Atlantic Ocean. Taking those water samples was like a sacred ritual to me. All this was a very intimate experience and I valued those watercolours a great deal. Though I always felt pity over the need to sell them, the idea of keeping them in some dusty closet didn't cheer me up either. I hoped to exhibit them one day. Unfortunately, the number of experts in watercolour paintings in Russia is limited and it would be too costly to organize an exhibition of this art form, so I was glad to accept his proposal to make an exhibition in China, and we immediately agreed on feasible dates.

Before long Comrade Shen asked me to organize his personal exhibition in the Voronezh Museum of Fine Arts. I should mention that this museum is the best venue to exhibit your art in my city. It is a large museum with a vast collection of Russian and West European art, so it is a great honor for an artist to be displayed there. I too had a chance to work there when I presented a French-Russian joint art project and Comrade Shen knew perfectly well that I had good relations with the museum's management. However, making an agreement about his exhibition was not an easy task. The fact that Comrade Shen had to leave in three months made it almost impossible, considering that the museum schedule was already fixed six months in advance. Nevertheless the Museum director agreed to help us and very soon the exhibition was opened.

Shen thanked me often, presenting me with cigarettes and repeating that he was going to help me in China. We talked to him through interpreters. The only thing he learnt after six months of living in Russia was “*vely gut!*”

When he returned to Chongqin I started to prepare for my trip to China. I applied for visa, arranged my work leave and bought tickets for Liu Gang and myself. He actually agreed to accompany me as an assistant and interpreter. Comrade Shen promised to provide me with accommodation and to find a gallery to exhibit my watercolour paintings.

Four days before the departure Liu Gang advised me that Comrade Shen left China for some other country and was going to stay there for one year, and therefore he will be unable to help me with the exhibition. On that same day my Chinese students organized a special meeting in a bar. The purpose of the meeting was to decide who was going to meet me in China. In the end they proposed my going to Jinan City instead of Chongqin where Uncle Qu would assist me in replacement of Comrade Shen. Uncle Qu was the uncle of one of my students whose graduation thesis I had supervised. As Uncle Qu was in charge of some art school he was nominated to meet us and assist with the exhibition.

I then discovered that one of my teachers, Georgij Pushchin, had worked some time ago in Jinan City and actually knew Uncle Qu. I bought a bottle of cognac and went to ask my teacher for some advice. Seeing that I was terribly stressed, he tried to soothe my nerves by saying: “No worries, Sergey, Uncle Qu is going to help you!”

Soon Liu Gang, his girlfriend and I were walking in Beijing. The city was trying to win our favor with its nice October sun, but I still couldn't stop worrying. I knew it would be extremely difficult to organize the exhibition I wanted within two months, without prior arrangements and without knowing anyone in the country other than my interpreter and his girlfriend.

A couple of days later we found ourselves standing at the train station in Jinan City. No one had arrived to pick us up. I had a huge suitcase with about 70 watercolour paintings languishing in its false bottom for days. With all our stuff the three of us couldn't even fit in the one car. We took two cabs and went in search of Uncle Qu.

Part 2

Naturally the first thing Uncle Qu did when he saw me was to offer me a pack of cigarettes. Within an hour the three of us were sitting in a pall of smoke in his tiny office filled with various junk, drinking green tea and chatting away. Back then I could only say “*ni hao*”² in Chinese, and Uncle Qu’s response was of course “*Vely gut!*”

My interpreter Liu Gang was doing an excellent job. He would translate a five-minute speech with just two or three words. So I actually never understood what was going on or what they wanted from me.

We then spent half the day looking for a suitable hotel. It turned out that foreigners were only allowed to stay in suites and that was out of my budget.

Liu Gang woke me up in the morning and announced that we were going to stay at my student Wen’s mother’s place. Student Wen was a nephew of Uncle Qu. To be frank, I didn’t really care any more, I just wanted to find some place to live. Two luxury black cars with state license plates and flashers came to pick us up at the hotel. We drove on a mountain road for ages. In two hours we finally entered a city and stopped in front of a five star hotel. I didn’t have to carry my huge suitcase anymore, it was directly taken to my room. Liu Gang told me that we could use some rest and that we would meet Wen’s parents later.

Wen’s mother came in the evening to see us. It was she who had sent her drivers to pick us up in Jinan City and it was she who had booked the rooms for us. She held an important post in the local administration and was a highly respected person. Very soon we were walking through the corridor with a floor covered with soft red carpet and pretty girls in silk dresses bowed to us as we passed by.

In one of the rooms some individuals with high positions were waiting for us at a groaning board of local delicacies. I recognized one of the individuals as our driver, but all the others seemed unfamiliar to me. It appeared that these people were businessmen and local officials.

² “Hallo”

Among them there was also a painter, who was addressed as Comrade Wu Yi. He headed the local painters association and was going to help with the exhibition.

The waitresses circled around us, arranging the fascinating array of gastronomical delights in a peculiar picture on the round revolving table. I was served first and as the guest of honor had to sample all the dishes first. Meanwhile everyone drank beer from small glasses and waitresses thoughtfully refilled them to the brim after each sip. During this dinner I learned two more words in Chinese “*ha*”³ and “*kampe*”⁴.

Finally I showed them my watercolours. Everyone stayed silent and a few lit up cigarettes. Then Comrade Wu Yi started explaining something for a while. Liu Gang translated that Jinan was a small town where people wouldn’t understand contemporary art. A painting on a canvas was in itself something contemporary to them and therefore no one would understand watercolours of that kind. He said that he needed oil landscapes: “*Vely Gut! Osen’ halaso! Ausumn gut! Vinta gut, tlee gut, mauntan gut, snou gut....*”

Part 3

I was about to get upset, but then reconsidered the situation. Going to Chongqin City, where people would probably appreciate my watercolours would be pointless as I knew no one there and couldn’t afford to stay at a hotel. Here, on the other hand, they promised to provide me with a studio and all the materials I needed. They wanted me to pay nothing, and the only thing I was supposed to do was to paint “*vely gut*” style pictures.

Next day we bought everything I needed for work and they brought us to some secured territory with plenty of villas in the mountains, which appeared to be a fashionable place often visited by local

³ “Drink!”

⁴ “Cheers!”

officials. I had one month's time to draw 60 oil paintings for the new exhibition and it was a *vely lot!*

Every day I woke up at dawn, went out on the terrace with a cup of coffee and started working. At first I painted everything I saw, the beauty of nature that surrounded me – *the mauntans, the tlees, the osen'...*

In a couple of days the driver picked us up again and took us to Comrade Wu Yi who wanted to see what I had done. I couldn't tell from his reaction if he liked my paintings or not. I felt like a student during an exam. Finally Liu Gang explained to me that according to Wu Yi the paintings should have been more realistic and it would have been better to have foreign landscapes like Russian or European instead of Chinese ones.

I must admit that it was quite interesting to paint those practically kitsch old fashioned paintings. I worked in an out-of-date, almost 'salon'-like manner. I forgot about all my ambitions, principles and prejudices. I devoted these works to the Chinese people who treated me so well in their country. I decided to take into consideration all their comments, even the most absurd ones, such as being asked to fill in a loving couple or make a Russian house out of a Chinese one. I was working at a Chinese pace: slogging away at the "machine" twelve to fourteen hours a day. I tried to manufacture the required amount of specified product units within a stated time.

It was like a game, painting every picture was like playing a part in a theatre production. I tried to play Korovin, Levitan, Monet, other Russian and European artist whose works I appreciated. It was not a discovery of a new form of self-expression, it was just like playing a piece of music composed by someone else a long time ago. But I did enjoy it. I immersed myself in memories of France, Italy, travelling through Russia and my favorite, Crimea.

Everything looked too rosy. Every day I met other important officials and honorary citizens. I was treated like a prince. Scrumptious dinners at the restaurants, personal driver coming at a moment's notice. I started to question the reality of it all. Sometimes I felt like I went mad. There was a moment when I stopped trusting people, I thought they

were all lying to me and exploiting me. Frankly speaking, it was highly possible after what happened with Comrade Shen.

I called my teacher Pushchin to share my worries. I was nervous and Pushchin tried to calm me down again: “Don’t worry, Sergey, it’s the Chinese hospitality!”

China was like another galaxy to me, with its own laws of physics. I decided that I wouldn’t try to find any explanations to all these miracles and just worked, the way many Chinese people obviously do. Finally in one and a half months I finished about a hundred canvases. I was to give some of these as presents to people who had helped me, and the others were to be exhibited.

Part 4

Finally the time was ripe: my visa was soon to expire. I had to open the exhibition as soon as possible, so we went back to Jinan where the exhibition was going to take place. It turned out that Uncle Qu hadn’t made any arrangements for an exhibition hall. On top of that, we had to frame the paintings as well. For the record, framing that amount of paintings normally takes around two weeks and the exhibition space must be booked in about half a year beforehand. However in China all these paintings were framed within three days. The gallery was found almost immediately. It was a huge hall and was not easy to fill, even with as many paintings as I had drawn. So I decided to exhibit my watercolours which I had brought from Russia as well. Later I found out that the rent of the hall cost an enormous sum of money. I guess if I rented it for 2 weeks, which is a minimum term for an exhibition, I would have become a bankrupt. Naturally, I worried a lot. Liu Gang calmed me down: “We don’t need two weeks, three days – *vely gut!*”

In the end we had the hall rent for three days paid with just one painting.

The day before I visited an opening of another exhibition at the same gallery, just so I could understand how to organize the exhibition better. A prominent Chinese traditional style artist was being exhibited with more than a hundred large size paintings. I discovered that the ex-

hibition lasted only one day, so I tried not to be surprised when I heard that the opening was scheduled for eight o'clock in the morning.

There was a crowd in front of the exhibition hall. A giant arch-shaped balloon and an unthinkable amount of wreaths, the same we use in Russia to send one to glory, decorated the entrance.

- My God, the painter died? – the words escaped my lips.
- No, it is the custom. - explained Liu Gang.

A bunch of old ladies in national dresses carrying an enormous drum each was standing in front of the huge balloon playing some parts from time to time. Then a firework burst out and the opening ribbon was cut and the happy crowd rushed into the gallery to enjoy the art. I turned to Liu Gang:

- Look, buddy, do I also have to arrange my exhibition the same way, with all these wreaths, balloons and grannies with drums?
- It is the custom.
- And if I don't?
- People will think it's a very poor exhibition.

I took my chances and decided to make an opening without all that glamour tinsel.

For about three hours I arranged the exposition. In one hour all the works were hung up by a group of dashing Chinese students, thoughtfully brought in by Uncle Qu. Two further hours was spent making photos with them in front of all my pictures in gratitude for their help.

I decided to make my opening a little later, at least at nine in the morning. Perhaps that is the reason why I did not have so many visitors. The official part went fine and calmly. The only journalist present interviewed some old man for a while and then asked me a couple of questions. In one hour there was no one in the gallery any more. A man in sportswear came in the afternoon, he made 3 rounds in the hall and asked us to wrap him up 52 paintings. Liu Gang helped him to load his car with the paintings and came back with a backpack full of cash. A few more people visited the exhibition the same way and by the end of the second day the gallery walls were almost empty. The third day was un-

necessary, only a few outcaste watercolours were lonely hanging on the walls. A local artist asked me to exchange them for his paintings later.

Almost everything was sold out, but I continuously received new orders. The last canvases I painted directly in my hotel room, that is until I got poisoned with paints! The owner of the framing shop asked me to sell him even incomplete paintings. He persistently handed me a batch of money without even seeing the pictures.

Once back in Russia I thought, but *vely gut!!* I offered my resignation to the university and applied for a new Chinese visa.

Part 5

I prepared myself well ahead for the next trip to China. I took some canvases I painted in France and a great deal of preliminary material like sketches, drafts, photos. The quality of the “product” was improved so I asked twice or three times more money for my paintings. This time Wen represented me.

It was certainly a commercial project and I perfectly understood that it could unfavorably influence my reputation in the West, but I was caught in the game. This time I wasn't surprised that one pompous businessman proposed buying all hundred and twelve paintings even before the official opening of my exhibition. I turned him down because the price didn't sound high enough for me. My assistants probably thought I was too greedy, but that time I felt myself more an experienced businessman, than a painter. It took me some time to understand how deeply mistaken I was. I was quickly brought back down to earth.

Nevertheless my second exhibition was as successful as the first one. I decided to settle down in China and started to look for a suitable apartment in my beloved Shanghai.

I rented a big loft with a thrilling view in one of Shanghai's skyscrapers. This time I decided to take my time. I wasn't in need of extra earnings, I had lots of free time and somehow found myself living a glamour life with endless parties, restaurants, concerts, etc.

In half a year my wallet became empty and I thought I could make a third exhibition in Jinan. I had enough paintings by that time and invested all the money I had in it. However, it was on this occasion that I understood that I did not have a calling for business. I didn't want Uncle Qu to help me any more and did everything together with Wen. However, Wen found a full time job by that time and was unable to devote as much attention to me. As a result everything went wrong: the gallery was far from downtown, we couldn't get the right people for the opening, so we sold almost nothing.

I came back to Shanghai empty-handed. I survived thanks to my "barter exchange" project. I published an ad in the internet, where I proposed painting people's portraits and swapping them for food and other essentials. People brought me everything, from fruits and coffee to furniture and household appliances, but I still had rent to pay. At this time, I was very lucky to meet the leaders of the Russian community in China, who told me that Russian Shanghai felt a lack of cultural life and proposed organizing Russian club meetings at my place, so I could charge them for entrance to pay off the rent.

That is how my home studio transformed into one of the Russian cultural centers in China. Lots of musicians, film directors and artists stayed at my place. I started organizing different concerts, parties and movie watching evenings. Many people came just to share a cup of coffee and chat with another interesting guest of mine.

The crises in my life showed me that life itself and its reality are far more important than fictional worlds. My world is populated by real people; their paths crossed with mine. The man, who fate brings into my life, features in my story. Each individual becomes an active accomplice in the creative process, which I do not consider separate from life.

The story you have just read is a part of an unfinished book, a book without a cover, without any illustrations. If there is more content one day, what kind of content it's going to be, depends on you – the Reader.

*Sergey Balovin,
Shanghai 2011*