

# ALLES WIRD GUT, 47° 9' / 8° 32' 69 VIDEO STILLS ON CANVAS

DOROTHEA RUST

TRANSLATION BY STACY WIRTH

Eds.' Note: The enigmatic title of this contribution will be translated and explained in the pages to come. Important to mention here is that this essay is Dorothea Rust's response to Stacy Wirth's questions about a performance that led to her exhibition of sixty-nine video stills on canvas.<sup>1</sup>

Dorothea Rust, M.A.S., is a dancer, artist, and licensed practitioner of the Alexander Technique. Born in 1955 in Zug, a small canton occupying a plateau in central Switzerland, she grew up in intimate contact with the region's rural landscape. Remaining as much of an influence as her years of dance training in New York is the extensive time she spent growing up with her farmer relatives—especially the summers with them, tending cattle on their high alp. She now holds a degree in the visual arts and a Master of Advanced Studies in Culture and Gender Studies, both from the *Zürcher Hochschule der Künste* (ZHdK). As a freelance teacher, she works in cooperation with artists from other fields as well as with lay people, and has been artist-in-residence in a number of universities. Her body of work includes dance and performance art, installations, pictures, and video. Here she reflects more than twenty years of engagement, with an expressed debt to the Judson Church group of the 1960's, and as well, to collaborations with a number of contemporary New York artists such as the choreographer Deborah Gladstein and the musician Malcolm Goldstein. She has presented in solo and jointly with other artists throughout Switzerland, in North and South America, and in India. Her work has been awarded by the Cantons of Zug, Zürich, and most recently Basel.

This work was originally commissioned for and exhibited by the Cantonal Hospital of Zug.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR

My performances and artistic interventions are part of an ongoing process: I am continuously drawn in by the immediate, physical presence of bodies, objects, ideas, spaces, terms, names—and this, in many different situations—whether they arise in the outdoors, in abandoned buildings, galleries, museums, theaters, or other public places.

Physicality is, so to speak, the lowest common denominator that we humans share with other living beings, living things, and inanimate objects. Every single body and every object has its own weight. Each particular shape and each particular uprightness or bearing expresses a particular way of handling the force of gravity. Each way of handling gravity in turn contains its own inventiveness and play—and also its own hazards. A sense of vulnerability and the risk of injuring or losing the body resonate somewhere within us, always.

Among the elements included in my performances, there is always this physicality. And there is always my interaction with the specific place, such as a city bridge or a riverbank. Within such places, my spontaneous bodily movement congeals into patterns, in which I perceive tasks that demand my fulfillment and eventually my understanding. My carrying out of tasks always involves everyday movement, dancerly gestures, and my use of natural materials (such as branches and stones) and found objects (such as buckets, chairs, table legs). Sometimes I use voice. I may bring language into play, for instance using terms and names that I find in newspapers and on the internet. Because I always engage with the elements of chance and improvisation, the outcomes remain open-ended—or, as Jungians might say, I am open to the influence of synchronicity. This could mean, for instance, that I respond to people who happen to pass through my space at any given time.

Finally, with this admixture of elements, my performances often evoke a sense of archaic, symbolic ritual that reaches beyond ordinary perceptions of time, space, and meaning.<sup>3</sup>

#### A PARTICULAR POINT OF DEPARTURE

“*Alles wird gut*” translates in English to, “everything’s gonna be alright.” This re-assuring idea belongs not only to the title of the essay you are now reading. It is as well the message I received in nearly thirty languages—from German to Serbo-Croatish to Urdu—when a certain hospital staff agreed to formulate for me their strongest common wish, and to express this wish in their native languages. This particular staff is employed in a hospital in the green industrial outskirts of the city of Zug, and this particular hospital is new.<sup>4</sup> The glass and steel structure arises from the earth as a glistening symbol of high-tech medicine, on first glance seeming to starkly oppose the encircling sky, fields, and meadows. Yet like a great mirror, the building reflects and thus incorporates surrounding nature into its own façade. And its enormous windows, viewed from inside, are like wide gateways to the outdoors. As I wandered the sun-drenched corridors a particular set of windows led my gaze and imagination to a grassy green hill arising at the compass point, 47° 9' / 8° 32'.

Thus, these people, this place, and the wishes they hold formed a particular point of departure for my work. They have lived on in the title of my resulting picture exhibition, and now, too, in the title of this essay. The idea for my exhibition began to emerge when I was invited by the curator Susann Wintsch to participate in a project that, over three years’ time, would make of the new hospital the site of a series of artistic events. Her goal was to “... positively and poetically influence everyday life in the hospital.”<sup>5</sup> From the outset she was especially attracted by the extensive and large windows, which are,

... a central element of the hospital’s architecture. In opening the view to the outdoors they form a bridge that spans one reality to another. For, those who gaze out the windows allow their thoughts to wander—they stream out to the fields, over the hilltops, enter new spaces and times.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, Susann Wintsch invited me along with several other artists to “physically enter and explore the landscapes” framed by these windows, and to “leave [our] footprints” in this turf.<sup>7</sup> We were encouraged to photograph, film, and so forth, with the only requirement being to bring our results back to the hospital’s interior. Our results would in turn “... create other ‘windows’ that afford a poetic gaze, both to the inside and the outside.”<sup>8</sup>



## A GOING OUT . . .

So it is that on a beautiful day in April, I went to my chosen grassy knoll at compass point  $47^{\circ} 9' / 8^{\circ} 32'$ , to perform and film seven tasks that had congealed out of my foregoing explorations in that landscape. As it emerged, my tasks here dealt very specifically with our precarious relationship to gravity, an elemental force that besets all living things everyday, and that we realize in the motions of our bodies and relationship to material objects. What were those tasks, inspired by this landscape and some found objects I'd brought along with me? Retold now as if relaying a dream:

Using an old wooden ladder I climb up a cherry tree in full blossom on the hilltop. From the crown of the tree I toss into the sky slips of white paper bearing the message in thirty languages, "everything's gonna be alright."

An old steel-wheeled side-table rolls over the hills, hobbles through fields and meadows—transporting stones, and apples with it, too.

The messages fluttering down from the sky to the earth—are they to dig up—or to bury? Will everything be alright? Who knows? Who decides?



I whirl a heavy stone tethered to end of a rope, and dance wild circles in a meadow with a garland of apples around my neck and shoulders.

Lying on a wooden dolly, I take off, navigating a hilly country road toward the village of Allenwinden—a strenuous going-forward as my only propulsion is the force of my own paddling against the unyielding ground.

With the help of a pitchfork I levy myself up to cross the road.

My precisely juxtaposed movement fragments are about this basic force—gravity—which both obstructs and gives cause for joy in our every (self-)uplifting, our every going forward, our every shifting, every transporting. My movement is about the outbreak of spring as expressed in the rupture of each blossom from the tree. It is about nature, and things of nature that cling to our bodies. It is about the felt paradox of our largeness and smallness—the paradox of our strength, levity, and confidence, lived with the on-going background resonance of struggle and a portion of helplessness.





### ... AND A COMING IN

Playing further with the foregoing ideas, I withdrew to my studio to distill three hours of filmed performance footage into video stills. I then had the video stills printed as a series of sixty-nine pictures on canvas. My somewhat unconventional printing of video stills on canvas (rather than on photo paper) was to reiterate the motif of the high-tech juxtaposed with the elemental, with canvas as such lending the images a painterly look and sensuous tactile quality. The canvasses form several sub-series, with the sets of pictures ranging in size from the quite large to the rather miniature—that is, from about 100 x 55 inches to 5 x 3 inches.<sup>9</sup> These sets I hung throughout the hospital on five floors, on walls adjacent to the monumental glass windows. Thus nature, re-envisioned to include images of the human dilemma, is brought within the hospital's interior. And the windows come to play as an interface that invites nature and re-envisioned nature to gaze upon one another.

Between the trajectories of these two gazes emerges yet another interactive and indeed poetic performance that takes place in the day-to-day human

realm. Now the players are the visitors, patients, and staff, who discover and re-discover the canvasses as they go about their hospital routines: ascending the stairs, descending the stairs, turning to look out, turning to look in, stepping back, drawing near, leaning, sinking, arising, puzzling, imagining, whispering, chortling. They are as if one body, filling the hospital corridors with contrapuntal rhythms, rivulets, and streams of motion—synchronous with nature out there and with the flow of the images lining the interior walls. And as if all together humming, “*Alles wird gut*—everything’s gonna be alright.”

On reflection it seems rather self-evident that, in its evocation of elemental nature and human vulnerability, my performance outdoors ritually embodied a counterpart to the high-tech, glistening glass hospital. Less expected and perhaps more compelling is something I haven’t yet mentioned. That is, the sense of archaic ritual *healing*, which developed first during my outdoor performance—and that arises now in the on-going “performance” within the corridors of this architectonic icon of advanced medicine. And this points to the idea that modern medicine may still be bound to religion and connected with our belief in the meaning and healing power of images.

### NOTES

1. The images in this article, selected from the complete series entitled, *Alles wird gut 47° 9' / 8° 32': 69 Videostills auf Leinwand*, are reproduced by permission of the artist © Dorothea Rust, 2010.

2. *Alles wird gut 47° 9' / 8° 32': 69 Videostills auf Leinwand* was originally curated by Susann Wintsch and exhibited in the framework of her concept that made the Cantonal Hospital of Zug (*Kantonsspital Zug*) the site of a series of events contributed by a number of artists over the duration of three years. The series was commissioned by the Department of Education and Culture of Canton Zug, the Division of Culture. Rust’s sixty-nine images were displayed in the Cantonal Hospital of Zug from 20 August, 2009 to 10 January, 2010 and thereafter in the corridors of the Cantonal School of Menzingen, Zug (*Kantonsschule Menzingen, Zug*).

3. Eds.’ note: In a review of her recent site-specific performance amidst antique stone ruins in the Swiss village of Baden, Dorothea Rust is said to be, “a wildcat slinking down from a high mountain, a lizard

slithering with caution over a wall, a snake encircling a bench with calculation—or perhaps something entirely other.” (Daniela Poschmann, “Dorothea Rest legte einen Flüsterbogen über der Ruine Steine,” *Aargauer Zeitung*, June 24, 2011 at <http://www.aargauerzeitung.ch/aargau/baden/dorothea-rust-legte-einen-fluesterbogen-ueber-der-ruine-stein-110289656> [accessed Oct. 18, 2011], trans. Stacy Wirth).

4. The Cantonal Hospital of Zug is located in the village of Baar, near the canton’s capital city of Zug. The building was designed by *Zürcher Architekturbüro Burckhardt + Partner* and completed in 2008. For glimpses of the architecture see, [www.burckhardtpartner.ch/de/projekte/projektliste/Kantonsspital\\_und\\_Pflegezentrum\\_Zug\\_Wettbewerb\\_1.\\_Rang\\_ancProject\\_photos](http://www.burckhardtpartner.ch/de/projekte/projektliste/Kantonsspital_und_Pflegezentrum_Zug_Wettbewerb_1._Rang_ancProject_photos); and [http://www.gurimur.ch/gurimur/ref\\_spitaeler\\_de\\_fr\\_en\\_it.htm](http://www.gurimur.ch/gurimur/ref_spitaeler_de_fr_en_it.htm) (both accessed Oct. 22, 2011).

5. *Vom Fuss der Mauern in den Horizont (From the Foot of the Wall to the Horizon)*. Contact Person, Prisca Passigati, unpublished internal memo on Susann Wintsch’s curatorial concept for the Cantonal Hospital of Zug (Zug, Direktion für Bildung und Kultur, Amt für Kultur, Kanton Zug; undated), no page numbers, trans. Stacy Wirth.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. The actual image sizes: 98.4 x 55.1 in; 66.9 x 37.4 in; 37.4 x 20.9 in; 98. x 5.9 in; 5.5 x 3.1 in (250 x 140 cm; 170 x 95 cm; 95 x 53 cm; 25 x 15 cm; 14 x 8 cm).