Crooked Plane(s)
Friendship as Compositional Medium in the Labor e. V.'s
5-Tage-Rennen (1968)

by Elaine Fitz Gibbon

In October 1968 something was brewing in the center of Cologne. The Kölnischer Kunstverein was gearing up to host the second annual Kölner Kunstmarkt, but in the Kunsthalle's underground parking garage a different kind of event was in the works: a collection of Happenings by avant-garde artists from Cologne and its surroundings. This exhibition-installation was entitled *5-Tage-Rennen* – a duration that matched the five-day Kunstmarkt – and was organized by the Labor zur Erforschung akustischer und visueller Ereignisse, e. V. (Labor e. V.).[1]

The Labor was founded earlier that year on 11 January 1968 by a group of seven Cologne-based friends and partners (some of them seen in *Plate 1*): composer Mauricio Kagel; visual artist Ursula Burghardt, Kagel's wife; Fluxus artist Wolf Vostell; teacher and writer Mercedes Guardado Olivenza, Vostell's wife; actor and filmmaker Alfred Feussner; Friedrich Wolfram Heubach, editor of the avant-garde arts magazine *Interfunktionen*; and Caspar Wassermeyer, a lawyer who assisted with the group's registration and eventual dissolution.

In this article, I discuss this lesser-known moment in avant-garde (music) history and the role of friendship in the group's founding as an artistic medium, reading a selection of documents related to the collaborative project held in the Mauricio Kagel Collection. I focus on Burghardt's and Feussner's contributions to the *5-Tage-Rennen*, two co-founders whose membership has often been erased from the group's history, both by other co-founders and historians: with few exceptions, Kagel and Vostell, the most famous members of the Labor, are represented as its singular co-founders.

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1 The "Laboratory for research into acoustic and visual events" was a formally registered association to organize its own events, indicated by the "e. V." for "eingetragener Verein." A documentation of the *5-Tage-Rennen* with photographs and texts was published by Labor e. V. member Friedrich Wolfram Heubach, *Interfunktionen*, no. 2 (1969), pp. 1–57.

Plate 1: Labor members (from left to right) Gábor Altorjay, Peter Saage, Alfred Feussner, Mauricio Kagel, Ursula Burghardt, Mercedes Guardado Olivenza and Wolf Vostell in 1969 at the installation space Kombinat, with singing saws and Burghardt's sculpture, *Corpino + Bombacha*, in the background (photograph by Wilfried Bauer, Mauricio Kagel Collection, PSS).

The Labor e. V.: A Brief History

The Labor e. V.'s existence was brief: After its founding in 1968, by late 1969 the association had quietly faded from active participation in the Cologne arts scene and was officially dissolved in 1973.[2] But in October 1968 the seven co-founders of the Labor were energized not just by the heady excitement of having just founded their organization, but also by an underground sentiment of collaborative imagination of otherwise possibilities.[3] In keeping with the group's emphasis on "acoustic and visual events," each artistically active member of the group produced works that featured the intentional harnessing of sound: environments used speakers to amplify noises of actions and voices, be they gleeful shouts or the murmur of

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2 The official date of the Labor's dissolution is unknown but was likely 1973 (Mauricio Kagel Collection, PSS, personal documents).

3 The therm "otherwise possibilities" was coined by Ashon Crawley as a phrase which "announces the fact of infinite alternatives to what *is*." Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016), p. 2.
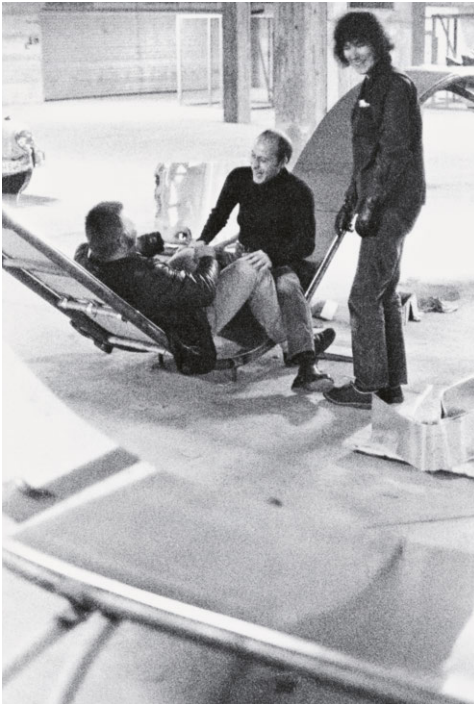
Plate 2: Labor e. V. members Vostell, Feussner and Burghardt (from left to right) take a break on Burghardt's *Krumme Ebene* (photograph by Wilfried Bauer, Mauricio Kagel Collection, PSS).

conversation, the underground garage providing natural amplification and echo effects.

In addition to the acoustically and visually oriented nature of these Happenings, two Labor members used another medium in their environments: friendship. Both Burghardt's and Feussner's installations asked attendees to engage with their works not as singular individuals, but with friends, creating sculptural spaces that invited or even fostered collaboration and moments of intimacy, thus enacting what Nicolas Bourriaud refers to as *l'art relationnel*.[4] This element of friendship was woven into the composition of the pieces themselves: photographs taken by the photographer Wilfried Bauer document moments of collective play and collaborative work, as can be observed in *Plate 2*. Here, Vostell, Feussner and Burghardt laugh together, resting and playing on the still-in-process sculptural installation piece that Burghardt created for the *5-Tage-Rennen*, entitled *Krumme Ebene (Crooked Plane)*. This photograph in fact portrays the Labor co-founders enacting one of Burghardt's instructions for how to interact with her work.

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4   Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Dijon: les presses du réel, 1998).

Plate 3: Burghardt (left) and Feussner working on their respective installations (photograph by Wilfried Bauer, Mauricio Kagel Collection, PSS).

"Meet with Friends on it": Bughardt's *Krumme Ebene*

As Burghardt describes in a local WDR television report on the *5-Tage-Rennen*, her interactive installation was "a sculpture that is meant to be climbed and slid on."[5] Indeed, *Krumme Ebene* was, for all intents and purposes, a slide, though a musical one: contact microphones were attached to the sculpture and speakers set up around the five aluminum "slide surfaces" and ladders that made up the work. The acoustically live surface of the slide produced a harmonic hum and, when slid upon, the microphones picked up the screeching friction of the interaction of clothing and skin with aluminum.

Burghardt composed a text score for the work, instructing ways to interact with it.[6] In addition to "sliding, caressing, hitting, climbing down" and "relaxing on" the aluminum-covered slides, Burghardt suggests that visitors could "meet with friends on it," thus emphasizing the functional, playground-quality of the environment. As sculptural sound installation,

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5   "Eine begehbare und berutschbare Plastik"; *Hierzulande – Heutzutage*, Almanach der Woche, "Vostell Labor," 15 October 1968 (WDR Video, ID 60-3654).

6   Reproduced in *Interfunktionen*, no. 2 (see note 1), p. 33.

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Plate 4: Kagel (left) and Feussner testing Feussner's "Doppelstuhl" (photograph by Wilfried Bauer, Mauricio Kagel Collection, PSS).
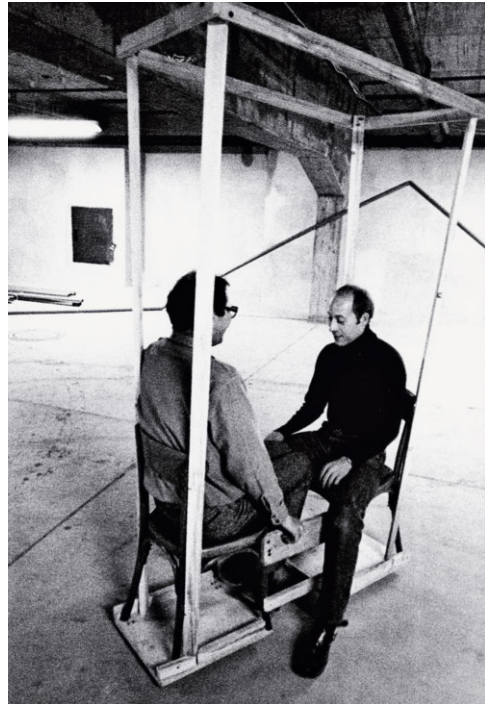
Plate 5: Kagel (left) and Feussner sitting in the "Doppelstuhl" (photograph by Wilfried Bauer, Mauricio Kagel Collection, PSS).

Krumme Ebene not only invited the audience to interact with it, play with it – play on it, even – but to treat it casually as furniture, providing a space to host conversations, communal play and relaxation, while projecting the acoustic products of these activities into the space.

By 1968, Burghardt was both academically and intimately acquainted with the question of what function a playground might have in a city and within society. While studying at the Technische Hochschule Köln, Burghardt participated in a 1959 exhibition on playgrounds.[7] In post-war West Germany attention to how and where children were playing was not an abstract concern, but was rooted in the visceral memories of adults, as an article in a local paper made explicit: "In 1945, our children played on mountains of rubble in the middle of flame-licked ruins."[8] Some of those children would bear the marks of such playgrounds for the rest of their

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7 "Kinder spielen: Spielgeräte im Freien" was exhibited from 28 October through 15 November 1959, in the exhibition spaces of the Kölner Werkschulen; *Kölner Werkschulheft*, no. 9 (1959).

8 "1945 spielten unsere Kinder auf Trümmerbergen inmitten brandgefleckter Hausruinen"; Ginzel Hermann, "Klar Schiff zum Spielen…!," *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 29 October 1959, p. 11.

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lives: Alfred Feussner lost the majority of his right hand when he picked up a grenade while playing amidst Cologne's rubble.[9]

Krumme Ebene invited a return to the play that children engage in on playgrounds – play that is enacted not singularly, but collectively, with friends. In the intervening years between the 1959 exhibition and *5-Tage-Rennen*, Burghardt gave birth to two daughters, with whom she had the opportunity to test Cologne's playgrounds. *Krumme Ebene* can thus be seen as a product of Burghardt's reflections on the implications of public spaces for a society facing the consequences of children who developed during the Nazi regime and who played in its rubble in the years following the war.

Double Chair: Navigating Friendship in Motion

The site-specific nature of the *5-Tage-Rennen* further fostered the collaborative spirit of the Labor's work. In *Plate 3*, Burghardt and Feussner are captured working on their respective installations: the labor of constructing the exhibition was done in close quarters, with the friends sharing worktables and tools. In the process, Labor members consulted on each other's pieces, experimenting with them as the works came into being.

Kagel and Feussner are pictured together in *Plate 4*, entering Feussner's "Doppelstuhl" (Double Chair), one of three mobile chairs that Feussner created for *Vorspann (Opening Credits)*, the installation that he contributed to the *5-Tage-Rennen*. The filmic language of *Vorspann*'s title is indicative of the environment's usage of film and projected images as its main medium. However, in *Vorspann* Feussner disrupts the viewer's passive role in traditional filmic experiences. He built three immersive viewing chairs covered by swaths of a translucent plastic material that acted as projection surfaces for the three slide projectors and seven 16 mm film projectors that he arranged in a 18 m by 6 m space in the garage. Feussner attached wheels to the chairs so that attendees could move themselves throughout the projection space, thus changing the images projected upon the flexible screens within which the participants – whom Feussner refers to as "actors" in plans for the work – were ensconced. *Vorspann* thus placed attendees in an active position, allowing them to shape their experience within the acoustic and visual field of the installation, an instantiation of the experimental impulse of the Labor e. V.'s name.

Vorspann enacted the collaborative nature of the Labor, for such experimentation was not relegated to the singular individual, as can be observed in *Plate 5*. Here, we observe Kagel and Feussner sitting together in the "Doppelstuhl" prior to its completion. Kagel's legs are pulled in tightly, his hand gripping the wooden board that connects the two chairs, while Feussner's

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9   Deborah Kagel recounts this in her autobiography. Deborah Kagel, *Mit Kind und Kagel: Der Fadenschein muss gewahrt bleiben* (Santa Barbara: Lots of Dots Publications, 2021), p. 28.

feet are planted on the floor, straddling the chair-vehicle, allowing him to steer its movement. While Kagel famously towered over others (he was over six feet tall), it is clear from the photograph that the "Doppelstuhl's" dimensions were not luxurious, the small space requiring that the two individuals, regardless of their height, carefully position their knees and feet. Such physical immediacy also affected the position of the sitters' heads: in *Plate 5*, Kagel looks straight ahead, while Feussner glances downward towards his right hand, the friends engaging in conversation, but avoiding the immediacy of each other's gaze.

Vorspann thus encouraged a playfully experimental disposition on the part of the attendees, and like Burghardt's *Krumme Ebene*, invited them to "meet with friends [within] it." But while Burghardt's acoustic slide was open to multiple forms of friendshipped interactions, Feussner's *Vorspann* instantiated a different kind of friend-based activity. The participants, now "actors," were fitted into the intimate proximity of the "Doppelstuhl" and asked to collaborate in the physical negotiation of the environment and to navigate (literally) their distinct aesthetic preferences, enacting the push and pull of individual desire and the frustrations – or joyful satisfaction – of finding common ground.

Unequal Planes: Some Conclusions on Friendship and Collaboration

Burghardt's *Krumme Ebene* and Feussner's *Vorspann* stand out in their engagements with friendship as an artistic medium. As the Labor's most socially vulnerable members – Burghardt, a German-born Jewish woman and mother who, by accident of marriage had returned to her country of birth; and Feussner, a physically disabled, gay man whose livelihood was precarious – it is perhaps unsurprising that these artists would take up friendship actively in their work.[10] But as *Vorspann* articulates and musicologist Ryan Dohoney has argued, the capacities of friendship are multivalent and not to be viewed through rose-colored glasses.[11] As is apparent in the Mauricio Kagel Collection, these were relationships that involved strife, imbalance and mourning, as well as fantasy, support and more equal forms of collaboration.[12] In attending to the entwinements of friendship we gain a richer understanding of this historical moment and more nuanced models for articulating (im)balances of power in the creative act, particularly in the analysis of collaborative creative labor and the fruits it bears.

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10 See art historian Jennifer Rath's monograph on Burghardt for discussion of the artist's biography and work throughout the 1960s. Jennifer Rath, *Ursula Burghardt: Transgression des Alltäglichen* (Freiburg: Edition Metzel, 2022).
11 Ryan Dohoney, *Morton Feldman: Friendship and Mourning in the New York Avant-Garde* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2022), pp. 4–5.
12 Tragically, Feussner took his own life less than a year after the *5-Tage-Rennen*, on 22 August 1969.