

Cosmic Speculation about the Sexes – a Work by Vaslav Nijinsky

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The Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky (1889–1950) achieved world fame with his virtuoso dancing and his choreography for Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, including "L'après-midi d'un Faune" (1912), "Jeux" (1913), and "Le Sacre du Printemps" (1913). It is less well-known that he also created a large number of independent pencil and ink drawings.¹ Most of them were made in the months before March 1919, when he was committed to the Bellevue Sanatorium in Kreuzlingen at Lake Constance for treatment. Today, this oeuvre is spread across a number of public and private collections.

The almost entirely untitled works consist of primarily gestural circular 'sweeps', built up with lines and areas coloured blue, black, and red. Patterns, predominantly mandorla forms, develop from overlapping lines. Eyeballs appear often, sometimes so that faces emerge with uncannily blank expressions. Although it is possible to make references to other contemporary works,² these images are unique in their radical simplification of shape and their aesthetic force.

This has confused interpreters ever since the first drawings were exhibited in 1932. Many said the works were merely existential reflexes of the artist's insanity.³ Others preferred to reduce them to illustrative intentions, responses to the World War („bloodstained shrouds", „faces of soldiers") or to biography („spiders with Diaghilev's face")⁴. A connection with the original choreographic notation developed by Nijinsky between 1916 and 1918 seems more likely.⁵ In this notation, dancers' movements are indicated by coordinates on vertical and horizontal circles.⁶ Nijinsky did not just introduce this geometric form as a new visualization of movement. Evidence for this is that in spring 1918 he worked on a ballet about "his own life, expressed as a choreographed poem", which was to be based completely on circular shapes. Moreover at this time he explained that "The circle is the complete, the perfect motion. Everything rests on it – life, art, especially our art. It is the consummate line."⁷ Nijinsky was therefore particularly interested in the "experimental, as well as philosophical dimensions" of circles, which might explain why, in his later notes, he hardly ever gives examples of practical applications for his new choreographic systems.⁸ It seems plausible to understand Nijinsky's more open-ended works as an extension of his speculations about the circle. The abstract compositions could represent the harmonious constellation of various movements or dimensions of movement – an abstract concept which would apply not only to staged dance. Their significance goes further.

According to the journal Nijinsky kept before his breakdown, images had a straightforwardly existential significance for him. They were an integral part of his life project. As with writing⁹ and all his other artistic endeavors, he considered drawing and painting to be inner work: "I want to be God, and that is why I work on myself. I want to dance. I want to paint. I want to play the piano. I want to write poetry. I want to create ballets."¹⁰ In creative activities especially, he saw himself as well on the way: "I have drawn a lot, and made much progress."¹¹ In the process, he made an effort to follow his instincts – through which he was convinced that God expressed himself – in all the arts.¹²

One entry in his journal associates the dancer's idea of being a medium of God as being the central motive for his pictures: "I know what the eye is. The eye is the theatre. The brain is the audience. I am the eye in the brain. (...) I often draw a single eye. (...) I am the divine (...) eye."¹³ Nijinsky saw himself confronting humanity with his life, as well as his divinely-inspired vitality, imparting it with significant insights. But it was drawing that made his spirituality, the divine in him, visible.

Thus it is understandable that the eyeballs in Nijinsky's pictures always appear in mandorlas – why his pictures 'see' with their mandorlas. A mandorla is formed when two circles intersect. This is how Christ and Maria are depicted in Christian iconography, as the intersection of the earthly and heavenly worlds – in which both take part. In Nijinsky's works, circles meet. With pen in hand, transcribing divine impulses, the artist makes a supernatural, ideal

¹ Cf. Thomas Röske, Im Schnittfeld der Kreise – Vaslav Nijinsky zeichnet, in: *Tanz der Farben*. Nijinskys Auge und die Abstraktion, exh. cat. Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg 2009, p. 69-85.

² Cf. *Tanz der Farben*, *ibid.* There are also analogies to the "Formenzeichnen" developed by Rudolf Steiner.

³ See: Pascal Sauvayre/Barbara Forbes, In the Dialectics of Imagination: Nijinsky's Sublime Defeat, in: *Imagination and its Pathologies*, ed. by James Phillips & James Morley, Cambridge/Mass. and London 2003, p. 233-252.

⁴ Romola Nijinsky, Nijinsky. *Der Gott des Tanzes* (Engl. 1934), Frankfurt am Main 1981, p. 382.

⁵ E.g. Françoise Reiss, Nijinsky. *A Biography* (Fr. 1947), New York, Toronto and London 1960, p. 182.

⁶ Claudia Jeschke, *Tanzschriften – Ihre Geschichte und Methoden*. Die illustrierte Darstellung eines Phänomens von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart, Bad Reichenhall 1983, p. 321-333.

⁷ Romola Nijinsky 1981, see note 4, p. 372.

⁸ Claudia Jeschke, *Russische Bildwelten in Bewegung, Bewegungstexte*, in: exh. cat. *Schwäne und Feuervögel – Die Ballets Russes 1909-1929*. Russische Bildwelten in Bewegung, München 2009, p. 59-89, see p. 76.

⁹ Waslav Nijinsky, *Ich bin ein Philosoph der fühlt*. Die Tagebuchaufzeichnungen in der Originalfassung, Berlin 1995, p. 233.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 181.

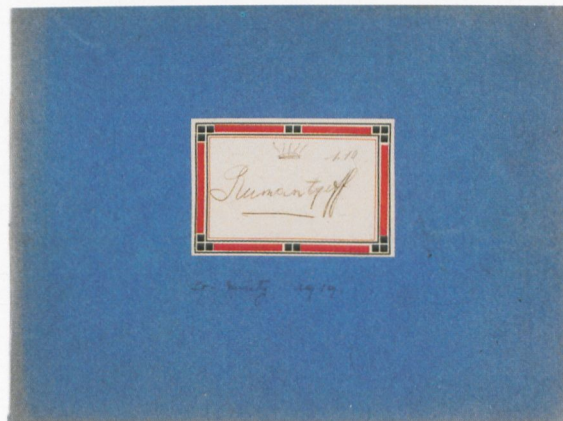
¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 67-68.

geometry visible in sections, specifically those that include his own position. This is how he describes the central idea in his journal: that he is "God in man"¹⁴, the alternative Christ.¹⁵ The uncanny quality of the eyes and faces in Nijinsky's images results neither from insanity nor the trauma of war, but from the fact that God is looking at us.

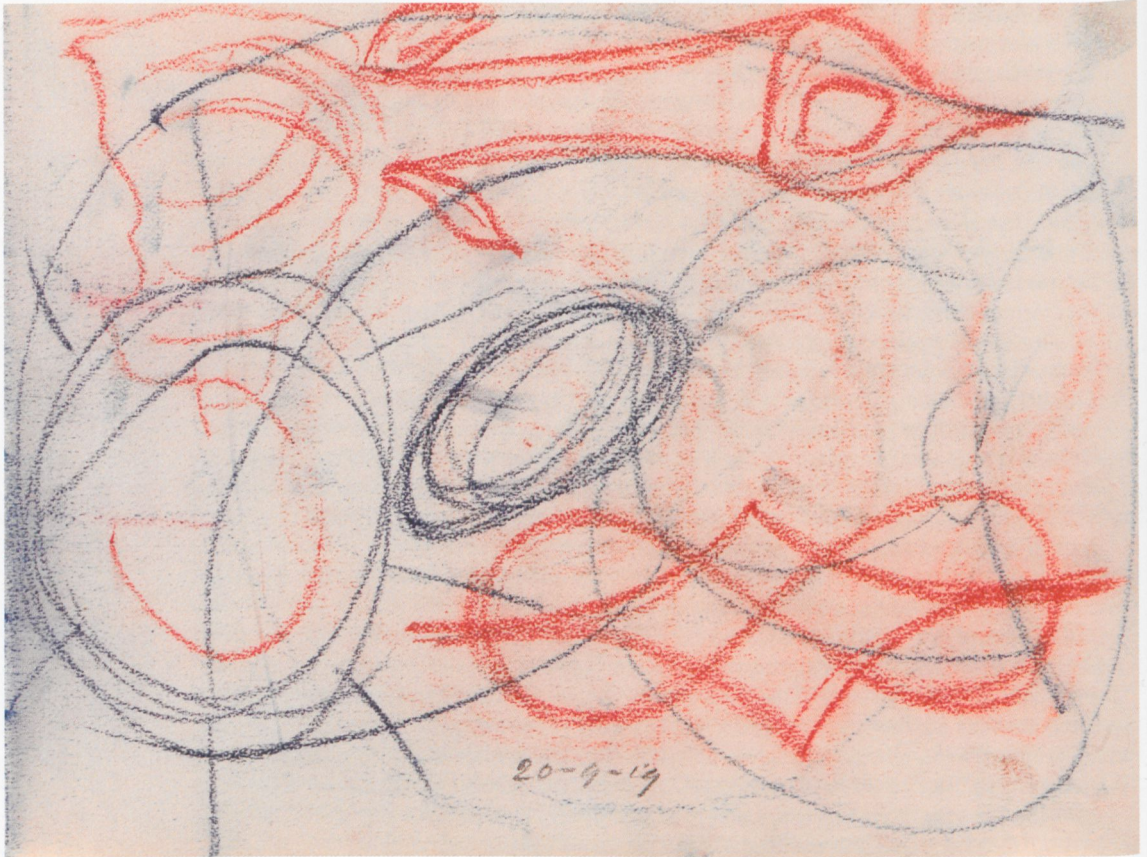
¹⁴ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁵ He sees himself as the "beardless Christ", whom he also wants to have drawn – Ibid., p. 33, s.a. p. 35, 42, 44, 68, 96.

The work in the Dammann Collection comes (Fig. p. 120/121) from a book that was first created in Bellevue, later than most of Nijinsky's other existing works. Both sides are dated 20.9.1919. The representations seem sketch-like in comparison to earlier works. However, they build on their vocabulary. On the reverse side, four superimposed gestural line 'sweeps' can be seen. Where they intersect, they form – almost on the upward diagonal of the page – a narrow mandorla, which the artist emphasized with a reddish-brown colour. A reclining female figure with opened thighs might have been intended in an abstraction reminiscent of Constantin Brancusi. This motif is unusual for the dancer. However, the more complex front section of the page is also of a sexual nature. Here, a red-lined phallus reaches up to the right. The exposed glans, with large, eye-like opening, ends at a point, like an onion. At the base of the shaft, in place of the testes, there are two small extensions reminiscent of leaves, while the more loosely drawn base is shaped like a small round hill, as if Nijinsky wanted to emphasize primordial (male) sexuality. At the lower right hand side of the page, a rhombus with concave, curved contours – also in red – is drawn over a figure of eight. The rhombus and the eight might symbolize the unity of opposites; perhaps this message is meant to be intensified by combining these contrasting forms. In the middle of the work, an oval, repeatedly reinforced in blue pencil, lies between the two red elements, possibly suggesting a vaginal opening corresponding to the phallus. Using the same pencil, Nijinsky drew a larger blue form (which contains a smaller red circular form) emanating rays, while a waning crescent is drawn on the right – more male and female symbols. Of the remaining lines, the two on the left leading upwards emphasize the energy direction of the phallus. Other lines sketch a characteristic superimposition of two circular forms and an emerging mandorla. In this way, Nijinsky incorporates the cosmically complementary elements of male and female into his speculations about the encounter of different spheres.



Vaslav Nijinsky (1889–1950)
Zeichenheft/drawing-book, 1919
Courtesy Nijinsky Estate, Curatorial Assistance, Pasadena



Vaslav Nijinsky (1889–1950)

Ohne Titel/*untitled* (recto), 1919

Wachskreide auf Papier, aus einem Zeichenheft/*wax crayon on paper from a drawing-book*

20,9 x 28 cm



Vaslav Nijinsky (1889–1950)

Ohne Titel/*untitled* (verso), 1919

Wachskreide auf Papier, aus einem Zeichenheft/*wax crayon on paper from a drawing-book*

20,9 x 28 cm