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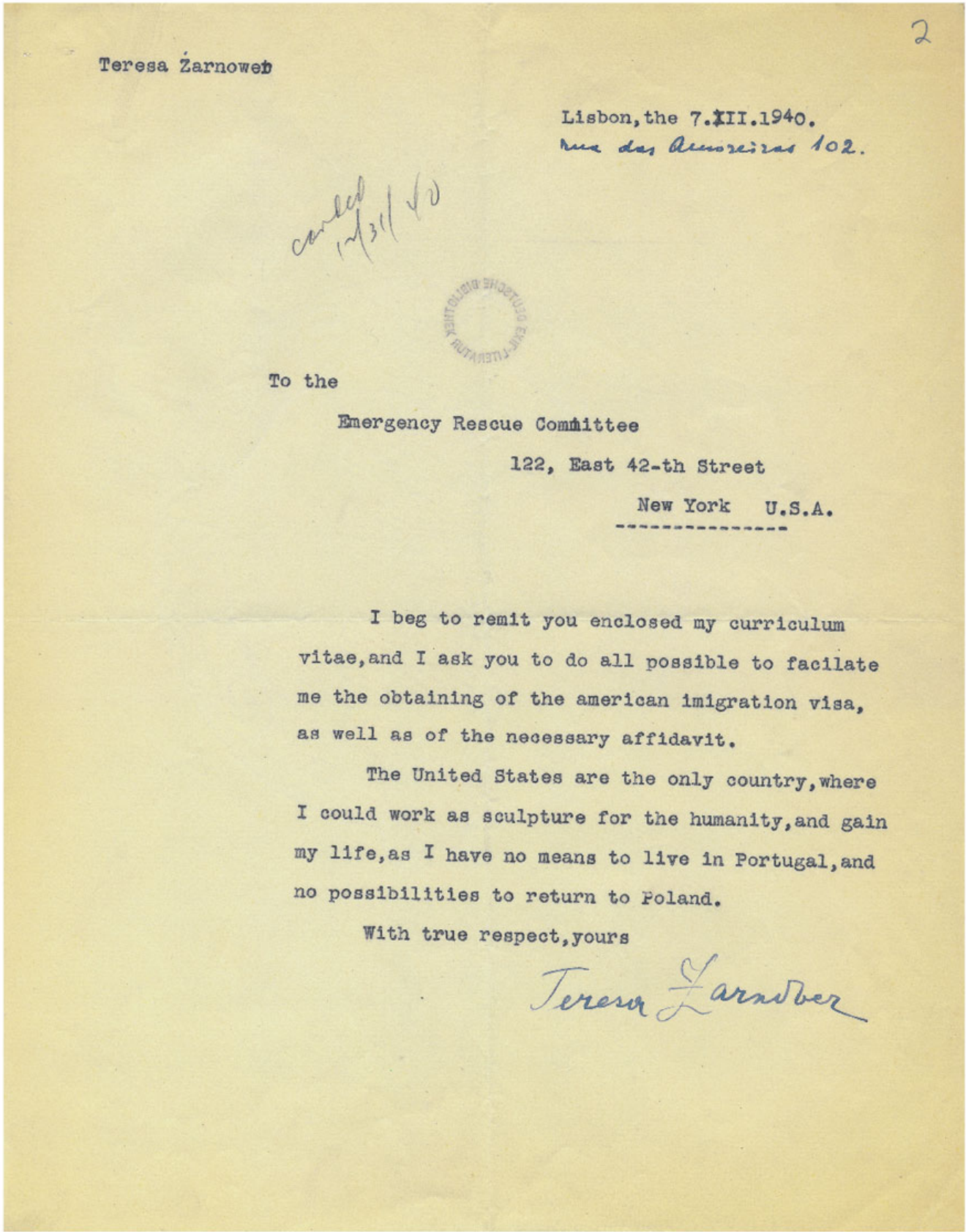
It is difficult to write about the work of Teresa Żarnower in isolation from her life, and her life was full of unexpressed thoughts and fragmentary utterances, feelings concealed and works that refuse to coalesce into any clear form. It is an untold story that has to be pieced together from lost fragments in memoirs about others, extrapolated from banal letters to friends or inferred from press reports about art exhibitions. She comes into focus through a signature on a painting or under a political petition. At times she flickers into life in the handwritten CVs she wrote as part of her émigré existence, in applications to organizations and departments in the pursuit of the means of subsistence, in the routine and indispensable administrative documents by which everyday life is governed. At the same time, hers was not a life lived at a far remove from public events, on the sidelines of tumultuous happenings, in the seclusion of the artist's studio or in the serenity of a passive submission to the outside world. Żarnower's life was played out within the wider history of the 20th century and was inescapably entwined with it. Historical events divided her life into stages and defined its boundaries, threw up questions, magnified emotions and dictated her decisions. Hers was a life carried along by history's unfolding sweep. Central to her biography were the triumph of her Jewish family's intellectual aspirations and their cultural assimilation, the utopianism of the artistic avant-garde, the uncompromising principles of abstract art, her links with a communist milieu of proletarian activists, social engagement wedded to a belief in the power of the photomontage poster, a youthful and passionate love affair cut short by the tragic death of her partner, the experience of economic crisis and a sense of doom during the Stalin purges, the threat of fascism, the rise of anti-Semitism, the right-wing nationalist dictatorship at the helm of the Polish state, strikes and unemployment, the shadow of the Bereza Kartuska detention camp and finally emigration to France. A moment of calm, and then war and exile again, a sense of loss and grief at the Holocaust, and finally distant New York and her first individual exhibition, and the vesting of her last hope in the "apolitical" metaphysics of modernism expressed in a series of post-war gouaches, troublingly different from what had come before. Such was the particular lot of Teresa Żarnower, interwoven as it was with wider events. It was a story of growing strength of expression and of ineluctable failure, culminating in the artist's tragic death in 1949.

■ The Polish avant-garde of the 20th century came into being along with Polish independence after the First World War. Its members were the generation of artists in their twenties who were completing their artistic education at around the end of the second decade of the cen-

ture. It was a period that threw up a plethora of events giving rise to a sense of hope and permanently changing the face of the century. Standing at center stage of the Constructivist movement, the builders of that world, of which Teresa Żarnower was one, were Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro, Mieczysław Szczuka, Henryk Stażewski, Henryk Berlewi and Szymon Syrkus. They organized joint exhibitions, events, groups and associations. They established journals and proclaimed iconoclastic programs. They broke with the past and imbued the future with new content. They formulated a new set of values and created unfamiliar forms. They were the generation of the left-wing intelligentsia of the time, who, whether of Polish or Jewish ethnic backgrounds, were linked by a joint sense of engagement in the face of threatened statehood, uncertain democracy and widespread poverty. A fundamental role was played by various versions of the "socialist ethos", in which the concepts of freedom and justice were interconnected within the framework of a single artistic and universal culture. Of no small importance was the role played here by revolutionary ideology, which arrived in Poland in all its variants. "We were socially and politically cynical," wrote Aleksander Wat, looking back at those times. He said that socialism was viewed as the fundamental ideal, but that the collectivism associated with it – the rule of social regimentation – was an alien concept. "What we wanted was an absence of rules." The Russian Revolution was seen as a force of nature that destroyed all that had come before and created an opportunity to "re-make everything from the beginning". It had, of course, been an object of fascination in the imaginations of members of the intelligentsia, the poet went on, noting that he and members of his circle had formed certain contacts and did not operate in a vacuum. "I remember giving a few lectures to workers. I had been drawn into it by a group of members of the former PPS-Lewica [Polish Socialist Party-Left]. What communism was going to become was still an unknown quantity. In the meantime, it appeared to us like a great nihilism, a great steamrolling of the masses." In our youthful naivety, Wat concluded, we imagined that we were important players, and that is how we ended up in Hempel's **Nowa Kultura** [New Culture] in 1923.¹

■ The need for self-definition both politically and artistically played a particularly important role in this milieu in the period 1921–1923. Student engagement was gradually subsiding. The Polish-Bolshevik war, the military threat to Warsaw, victory and peace, economic crisis and poverty all helped to bring things to a head. Political models and choices became polarized. Szczuka and Żarnower found themselves in a milieu directly influenced by communist activists and distanced themselves from their student friendships. "He was suffocated by the atmosphere

¹ A. Wat, *Mój wiek. Pamiętnik mówiony* [My Century. An Oral Memoir]. Conversations conducted by Cz. Miłosz, vol. 1, Warsaw 1990, pp. 28–29.



Teresa Żarnower An Artist of the End of Utopia

Letter from Teresa Żarnower to
Emergency Rescue Committee,
7 December 1940

Teresa Żarnower
Lisbon, the 7.XII.1940.
rua das Amoreiras 102.
To the
Emergency Rescue Committee
122 East 42-th Street
New York U.S.A.
I beg to remit you enclosed my
curriculum vitae, and I ask you to do
all possible to facilitate me to obtaining
of the american immigration visa, as
well as of the necessary affidavit.
The United States are the only country,
where I could work as sculpture for
humanity, and gain my life, I have no
means to live in Portugal, and no
possibilities to return to Poland.
With true respect, yours
Teresa Żarnower

Emergency Rescue Committee
Archives, Deutsche Exilarchiv
1933-1945, Deutsche
Nationalbibliothek,
Frankfurt am Main



Photograph of the house
in which Teresa Żarnower
lived in Lisbon:
rua das Amoreiras 102
Lisbon Municipal Archive
unknown photographer
PT/AMLSB/FAN/002303

"Dear Franka [...] I found your comment that I shouldn't expect an American visa (via London) quite depressing. I find myself vegetating and constantly waiting ...". She also asks to be sent an "English-Polish teach-yourself book or dictionary".⁶

■ At the beginning of 1941, the Żłotowskis and the Korsaks leave Lisbon for the U.S. With the help of the Emergency Rescue Committee, Józef Wittlin with his wife and daughter quickly receive an emergency visa.⁷ For Żarnower, however, a long period of passive existence begins. She has no idea that she will have to stay in Portugal for over a year, 14 months to be exact. She continues to write CVs and send them to Wittlin, to New York, asking for help in obtaining a U.S. visa: "I ask

that you forgive me for so boldly imposing on You in a personal matter and I fervently plead for Your assistance, if at all possible—I heard so many good things about You from Halszka Korsak that I'm writing with full confidence".⁸ In March, Żarnower receives a letter from the Polish Mission in Lisbon, signed by Minister Dubicz, confirming her artistic activities and "recommending her to the kind attention of the Consul of the United States".⁹

■ In order to apply for a U.S. visa, Żarnower has to present an **affidavit** of support, which would serve as a guarantee and confirmation issued by a U.S. citizen with steady employment and income and, most desirably, with savings in the bank. Such a citizen should also be able to confirm that the person coming to America was morally impeccable¹⁰ and that the new arrival would pose no burden to the country and would not take advantage of its welfare system. Lotta Loeb, responsible for Żarnower's case on the Emergency Rescue Committee's side, writes to Wittlin that "it is absolutely es-

sential that we have letters from well-known people interested in art, who will testify that she is a well-known artist".¹¹ Loeb contacts MoMA founding director Alfred Barr, Jr., in New York City with a question about Żarnower. She also approaches Barr's wife, as well as three art dealers: Klaus Perls of the Perls Gallery, Kurt Valentino of the Bucholz Gallery and Karl Nierendorf of the Nierendorf Gallery. Unfortunately,

A History Found

⁶ Letters from Teresa Żarnower to Franciszka and Stefan Themerson, 28 and 31 December 1940, Themerson Archive, London. Documents previously unpublished. Translation: Krystyna Mazur.

⁷ Perhaps due to the suggestion that he was a Polish candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

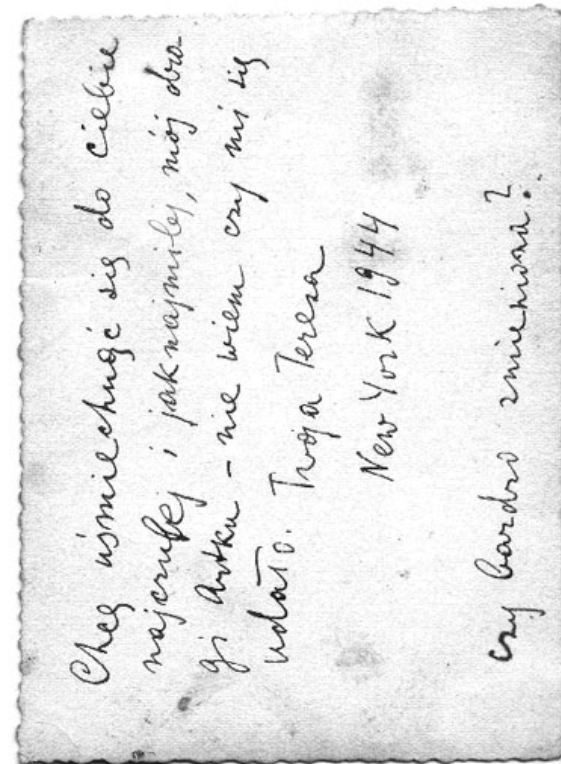
⁸ Letter from Teresa Żarnower to Józef Wittlin, 16 January 1941, op. cit.

⁹ Document: Légation de Pologne à Lisbonne, from 18 March 1941 to Consul General des Etats-Unis, signed by Minister K. Dubicz-Penther, Emergency Rescue Committee Archives, the German Exile Archive 1933–1945, the German National Library, Frankfurt am Main. Translation: Krystyna Mazur. Document previously unpublished.

¹⁰ It pertained particularly to single women, whom the U.S. government tried to prevent from entering the country as officials were afraid that their purpose in coming was prostitution – information from Heidi Colsman Freyberg of The Barnett Newman Foundation, New York.

¹¹ Letter from Lotta Loeb to Józef Wittlin, 31 March 1941, Emergency Rescue Committee Archives. Document previously unpublished.

⁴⁴ Letter from Teresa Żarnower to Franciszka Themerson, 28 September 1944, op. cit.



Stefek's prayer is excellent. First of all, thank you for remembering and including me in the group of 'friends' (the 22nd in order). Both the film and the book I see as exceptional artistic sensations". She then continues: "By the way of artistic – the so-called artistic life is pulsating here, the so-called artists are working by the sweat of their brow for a piece of bread, or for fame, or 'posterity' (hmm), or fortune, or just to keep busy. I see myself among the first and the last ones. I keep myself busy with literally mad quantities of drawings (very remote from abstraction), and clay. I am just working on a large relief, so as to irritate the abstractionist [...] When she hears the question – what are you working on? [she answers:] On the table, i.e., I am drawing and sculpting, and apart from that I am running around, hustling and chasing commissions which I do obtusely and clumsily, enough. It's all mainly rubbish". Further on, she writes: "What people think and say about this country, I know, buffoonery and conceit. Because all Americans have bathrooms and refrigerators. Are you laughing? Because it's an important factor as they are polite and tactful, because they're young and unspoilt, because I feel well and free in the American environment, because I've begun liking America, and the color of the sky, because America evokes many new ideas ... There are many galleries and exhibitions".⁴⁴

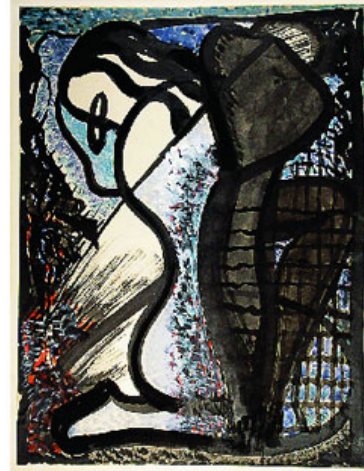
■ In 1946, an acquaintance of Żarnower, Peggy Guggenheim, offers to organize a solo exhibition for the artist at her gallery, Art of This Century, on West 57th Street in Manhattan. Guggenheim writes in her memoir that Żarnower used to be a constructivist sculptress then turned

Teresa Żarnower, 1944
Teresa Żarnower Archive
courtesy of Janet, Alex and
Anna Luisa Abramowicz

**Dedication to nephew, Artur
Abramowicz, written on the back
of a photographic portrait,**
Teresa Żarnower Archive
courtesy of Janet, Alex and
Anna Luisa Abramowicz



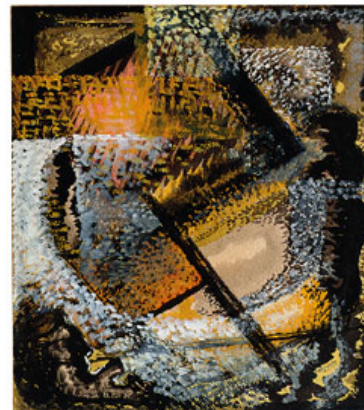
Untitled, 1944 — p. 410



Untitled, 1945 — p. 411



Untitled, 1944 — p. 400



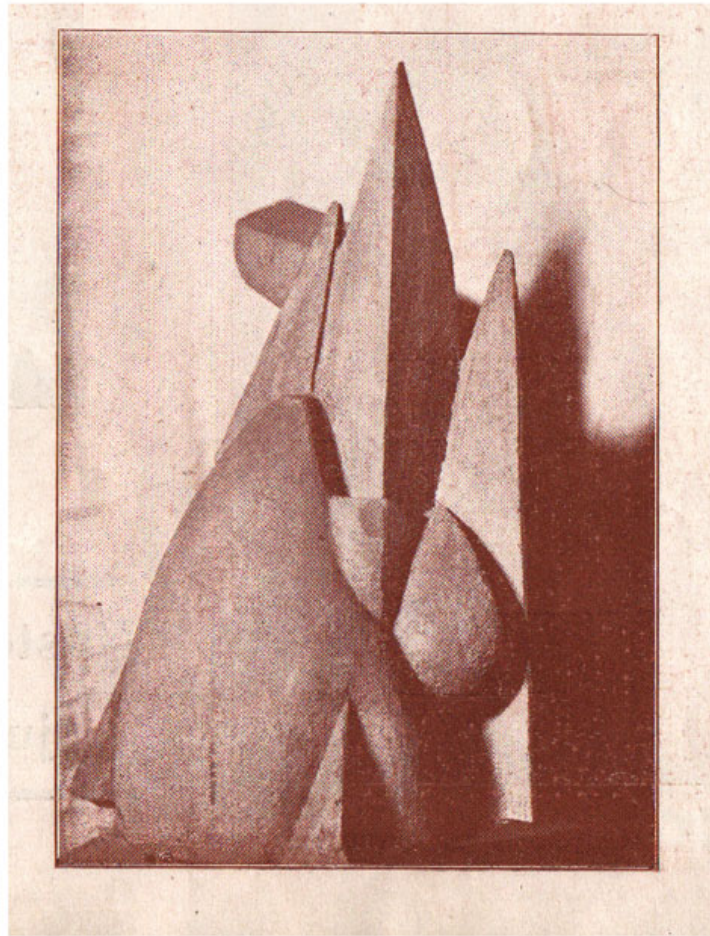
Untitled, 1945 (?) — p. 404



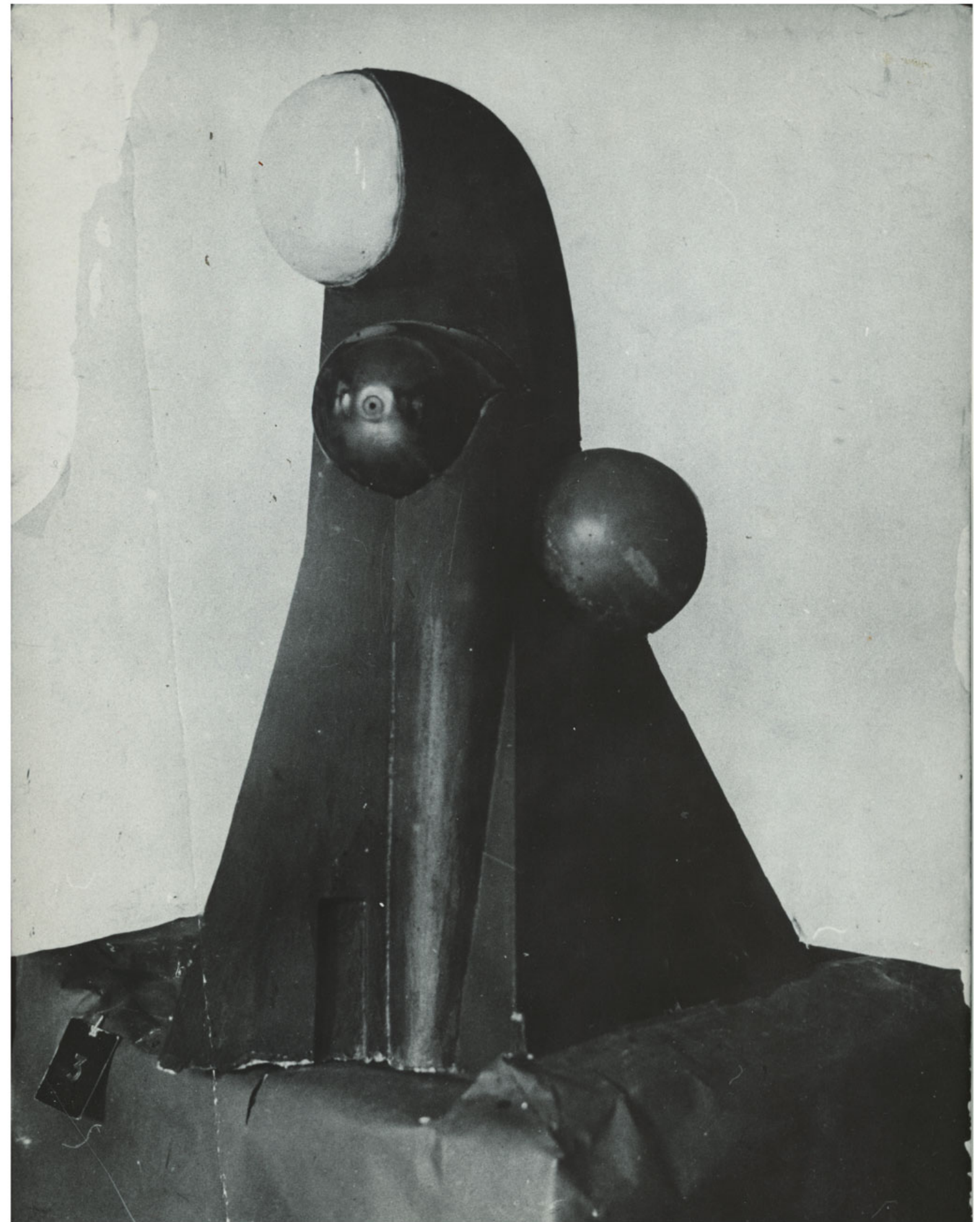
Photograph of Teresa Żarnower
with Peggy Guggenheim
at the exhibition **Teresa
Żarnower 16 Gouaches** at
the gallery Art of This Century
Teresa Żarnower Archive
courtesy of Janet, Alex and
Anna Luisa Abramowicz



Photograph of Teresa Żarnower
with Peggy Guggenheim
at the exhibition **Teresa
Żarnower 16 Gouaches** at the
gallery Art of This Century,
with a dedication to Annelee
and Barnett Newman

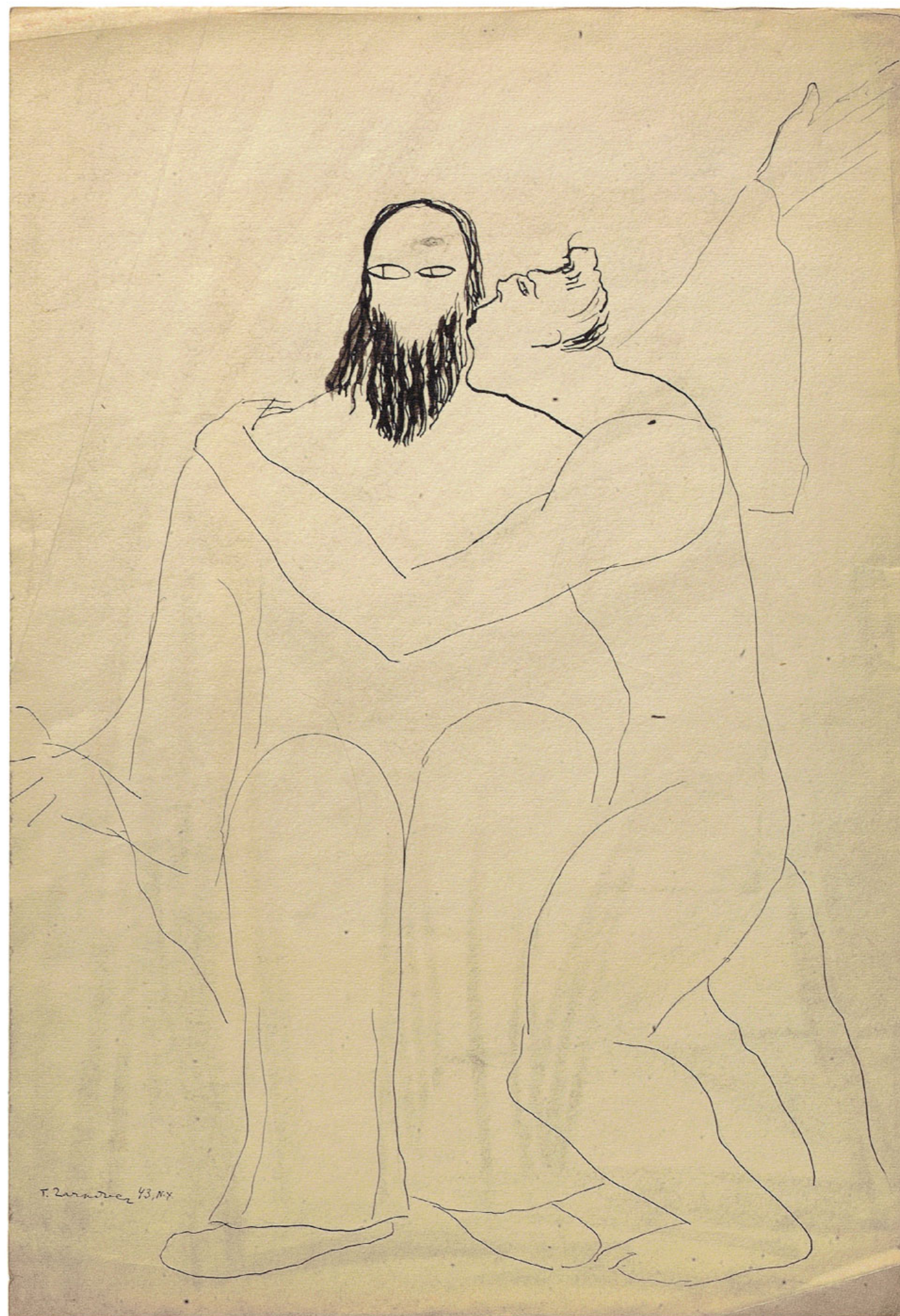


Bez tytułu (Projekt pomnika?), 1921

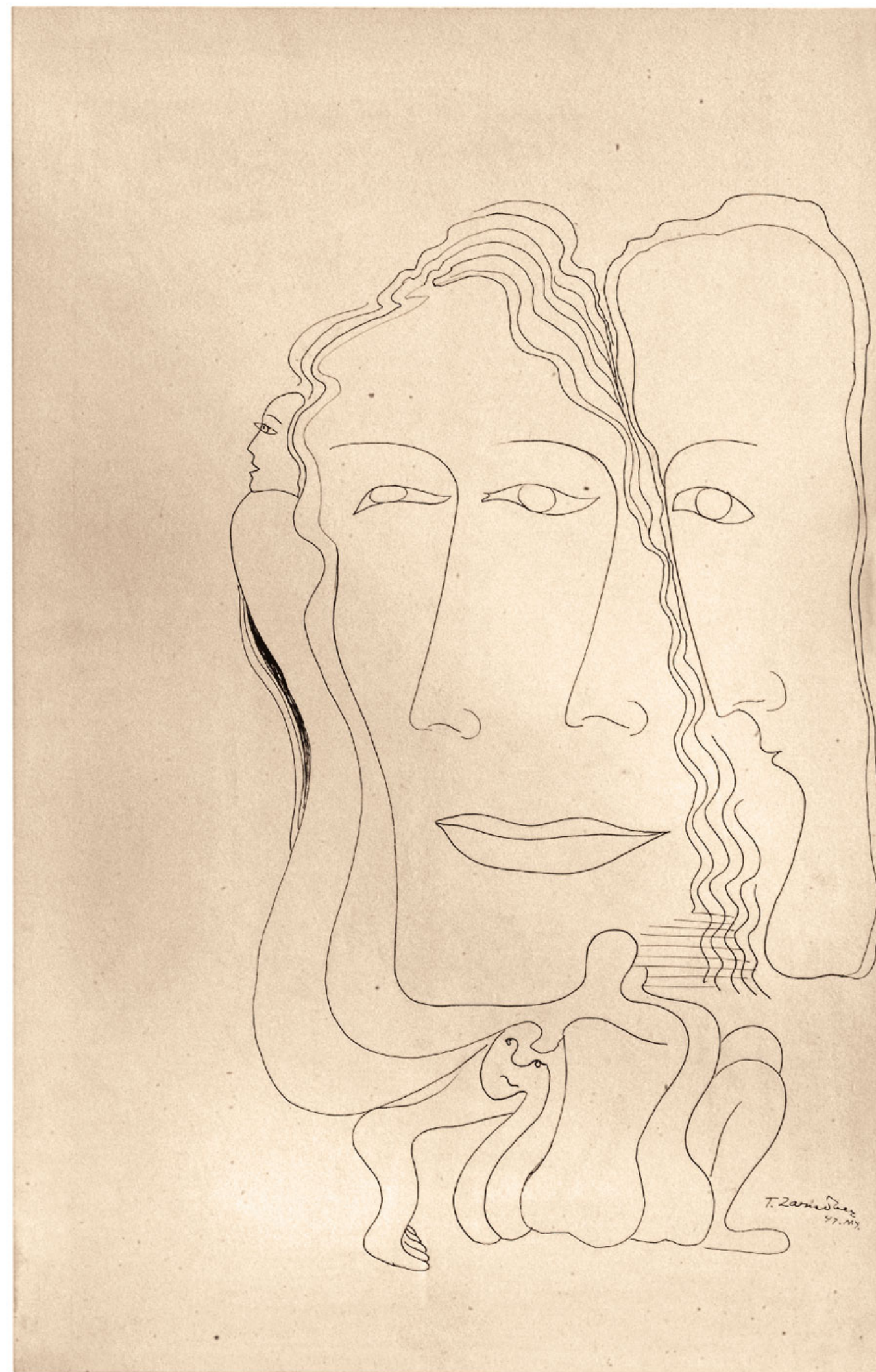
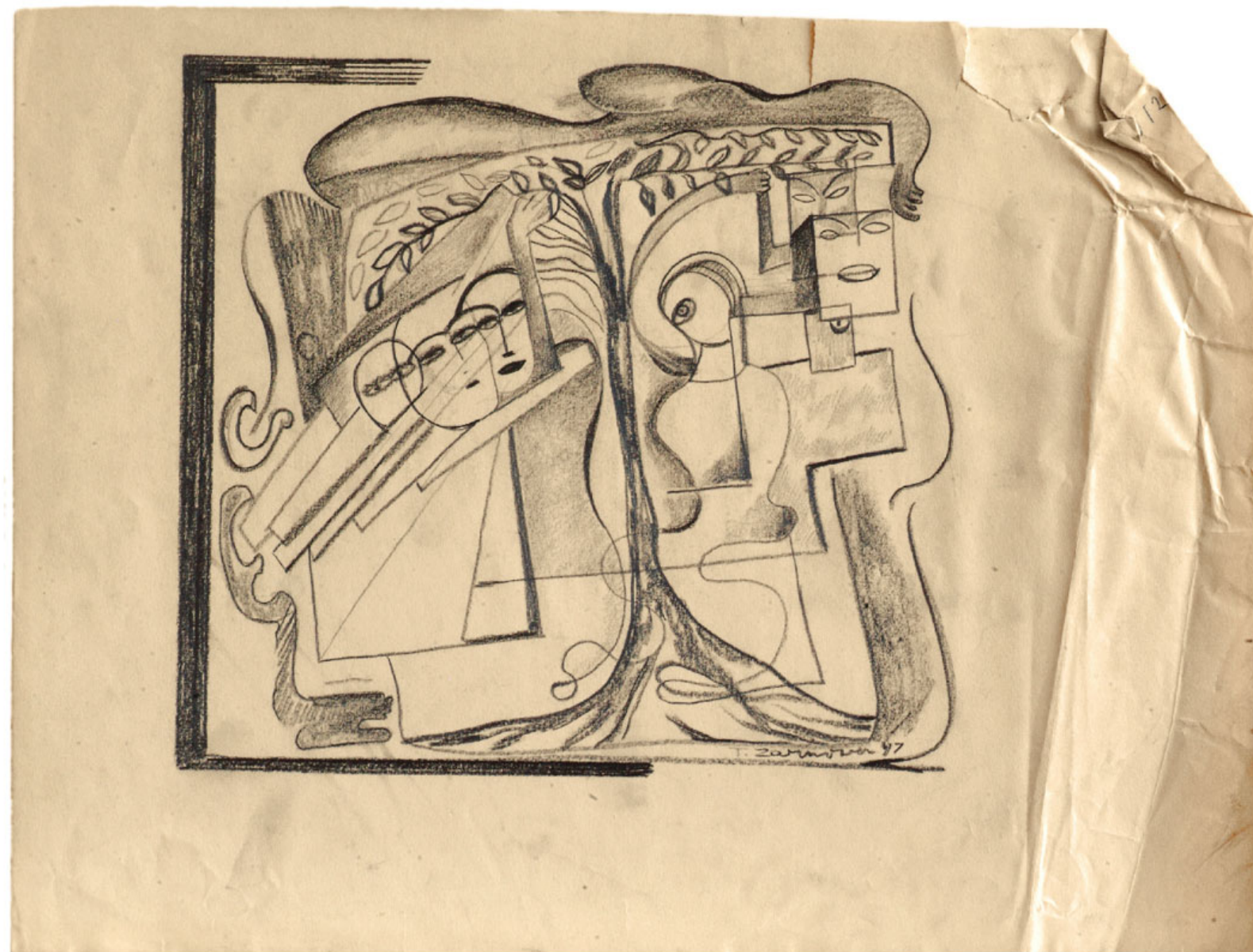




Bez tytułu, 1943 (?)



T. Znamierowski 43, N.Y.





Bez tytułu, 1948 (?)

