

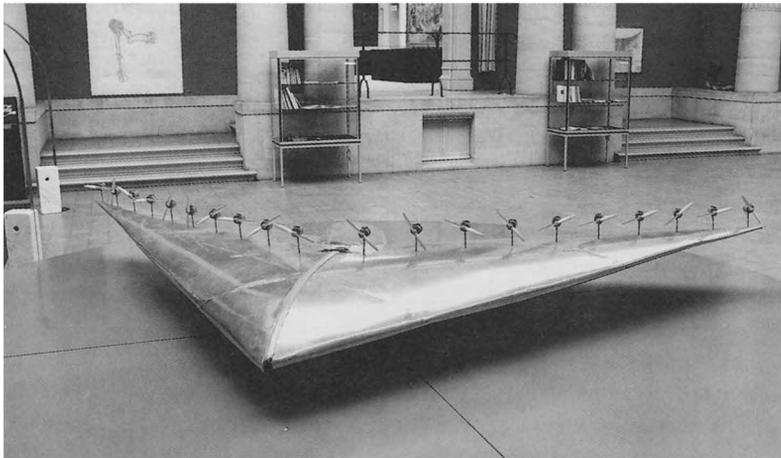
A

Naïve Engineer

Panamarenko's Art

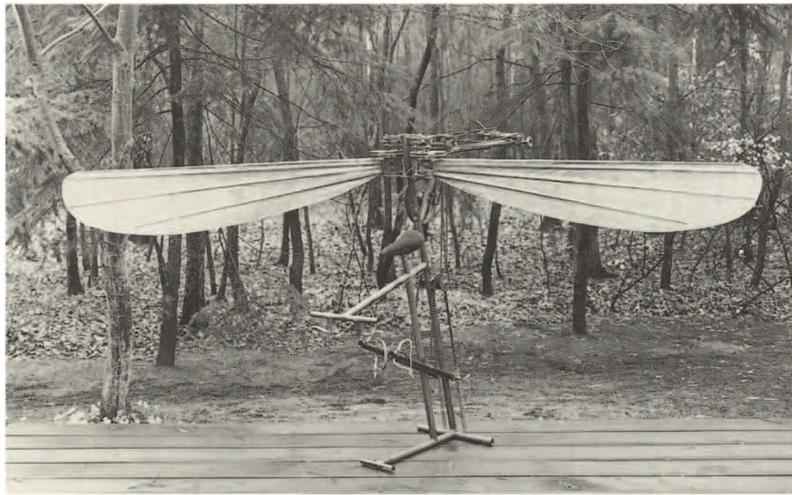
Panamarenko is the Belgian who makes aeroplanes. Or are they works of art as well? If you ask him this question, he will give various answers or, more probably, no answer at all. He would like to be regarded as a 'savant'. Being an artist means nothing to him. Quite the contrary, in fact.

A perusal of his output – he has been working for about thirty years now – reveals fully-fledged machines, prototypes, test models and hordes of drawings. His creations cannot be categorised. With his own hands he pieced together an *Aeroplane (Six-Rotor Helicopter)* driven by means of bicycle pedals worked by the pilot himself. Then came the *Portable Air Transport* project: a portable, one-man flying system with internal combustion engine and propellers; various models were tested with limited results. He began a series of investigations into a closed system for accelerating matter, based on the movement of an electron around the atomic nucleus. Some sixteen scale models – the *Accelerators* – serve to illustrate the principle. Then there was the *Piewan*: a small, one-man, boomerang-shaped aeroplane, built entirely of aluminium and studded with propellers arranged in a swallow formation from its nose to the tips of its wings.



Panamarenko, *Piewan*.
1975. Museum van
Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent
(Photo Heirman Graphics).

Panamarenko,
Meganeudon III. 1973.
Private Collection
(Photo Heirman Graphics).



Or perhaps you would prefer a giant dragonfly? The tail of the *Meganeudon II* can be folded up like a harmonica and the machine runs on large bicycle wheels. The wings, made of Japanese silk and balsa wood, are feathery and strong; they vibrate at very high speed because of a spring mechanism copied from the flight of the actual insect. Again it is propelled by means of pedals. A more recent series is based on the theme of a ‘Journey to the Stars’: a *Flying Carpet* – which floats above the surface on the Earth’s magnetic field –, the *Flying Cigar Called Flying Tiger I*, and an *Adamski Saucer* for your interstellar travels.

Another recent design, the *Rucksack Helicopter*, is now available in various models, each equipped with the specially-designed *Pastille Engine*. Here you put your arms through the armholes, slip the harness over your back and fasten the safety buckle. You are propelled into the air by means of blades and two mouth-like heads (made of transparent polyester). It is a perfect fit for the human body.

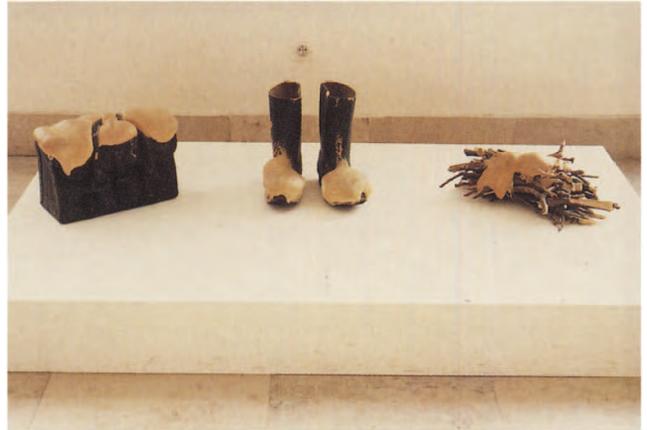
Work after work hovers between persuasiveness (because of the many details) and dream. Some are phantasmagorical structures, some absurd ideas, some are as light as a feather. But each of them leaves you with misgivings: could this machine lift a person into the air? – yes perhaps, but it would have to be someone very slight in build. And if this one can’t, could one of the others? The misgivings do not leave you, they creep up the wires and ropes, steal across bicycle pedals and saddles, over adhesive tape and ribbon and along endless hinges and joints. Until they become irrelevant.

They say that Panamarenko’s aeroplanes do not fly. But he couldn’t care less what others say. For him they fly. Project after project is committed to paper, is built and rebuilt in test models or prototypes that result in even more new designs. Drawing and calculating come easily to him. He even produced a book: *The Mechanism of Gravity, Closed Systems of Speed Alterations; Insect Flight, Seen from inside the Body of the Insect; The Helicopter as a Potential Winner; ‘U-Kontroll III’, An Improved Airplane driven by Human Power; ‘Polistes’, Rubber Car with Jet Propulsion; ‘Scotch-Gambit’, The Design of a Large Fast Flying Boat*. In it Panamarenko draws and comments on the development of all these various projects.

Panamarenko, *Rucksack Helicopter*. 1987. Museum van hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent.



Panamarenko, *Snow*. 1966. Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent.



It brought together years of activity and appeared simultaneously in English and German.

Born in Antwerp in 1940, Panamarenko was first heard of in the company of a handful of artist friends who were involved in street campaigns which they themselves described as *Happenings*. That was back in the sixties when ideas blew over from America to Amsterdam, and from there drifted down to Antwerp. They took the form, for example, of Jasper Grootveld, of anti-advertising campaigns on the streets and the 'Provos'. The artists tried to make their activities 'more artistic and also more poetic' by incorporating snippets of poetry by the expressionistic poet Paul Van Ostaijen, but to no avail. The end result of the many *Happenings* was 'disruptive' groups of Provos and continual police intervention.

According to Panamarenko, these were no more than a series of 'fringe events', to which he contributed episodes like driving round in a Cadillac in a thick cloud of smoke, a seat of piled-up blocks of ice on the Henri Conscienceplein in the city centre, gigantic spinning tops made of bamboo and transparent plastic and powered by a motor, etc. Just as important, and dating from the same period, is the description of his profession in his passport: balloonist (because multimillionaire was not accepted), and a plan to cover the whole Palace of Fine Arts in Brussels with artificial snow during its occupation.

Out of all this – and above all 'to get shot of those problems with the police' – came the foundation of the Wide White Space gallery in Antwerp in 1966. It was to draw the international elite of visual art to Antwerp in the years that followed. Panamarenko and Marcel Broodthaers (though from Brussels) spent a good deal of their time here. It was also here that Panamarenko and Joseph Beuys met.

An indoor space. For Panamarenko that meant a place where he could develop the ‘new materials’ that so attracted him, and above all exploit their ‘special potential’, in a series of objects which left little doubt as to their status as works of art. A tree covered in artificial snow was taken into the gallery: that did not work. Then add a pair of Wellington boots, a leather school bag, a small pile of papers and *Snow* was created. Panamarenko had long ago lost interest in making ‘sculptures’. He had discovered plastic, foam rubber, engines, processes, movements and forces and the relationships between forces and material.

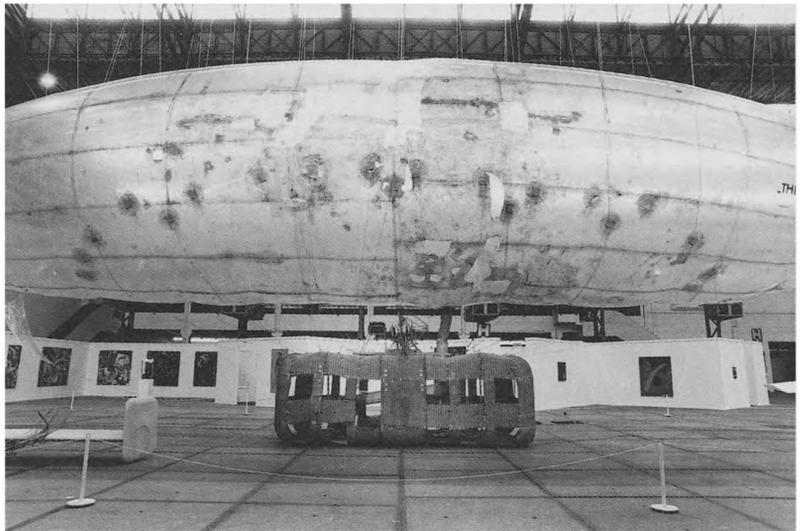
At that time he made mainly wasters or replicas. He reconstructed *Crocodiles* – with a tank like the one in Antwerp Zoo – made of plastic stitched together, filled with sand and covered with net. The tank was made of tiles and cardboard. *Ducks* was made out of wax and linen. Battery-operated fluffs of cotton wool – *Moths in Cane* – hurtle around inside a little upright stack of straw. *Bags* are no more than cotton bags with seaweed soaked in polyester. The sprinkling system used at the royal greenhouses in Laken had served as the model for the wooden platform and rubber hosepipes above the bags.

Panamarenko’s experiments with materials continue. He is still busy with their ‘special properties’, with what they can do. By combining those materials and those forms and principles to produce something like, let’s say, an aeroplane, he succeeds in distancing himself from everything that one might expect from art and from other areas of social activity. In exactly the same way as exponents of pop art were fascinated by what was new, Panamarenko adopted a new graphic vocabulary from the world of advertising. And by borrowing from it, it proved possible to avoid what one might expect of a painting (paint, touch, emotion, etc.).

It was because of his ‘derivations’ from subjects and concepts from



Panamarenko, *Crocodiles*.
1967. Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent.



Panamarenko, *Aeromodeller*.
1969-1971. Museum van
Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent.

science and technology that the German artist Joseph Beuys came to describe him as a 'naïve engineer'. It is an expression which serves as the perfect alibi for Panamarenko. He need answer no further questions.

Panamarenko showed his first aeroplane to friends (not to the public) on Monday 21 July 1969 at 5.30 in the morning during a champagne breakfast organised by the group to mark the televised moon landing of Apollo 11. The venue was a rented house in the Beeldhouwersstraat in Antwerp which they used for activities which could not take place in the gallery 'simply because they were not commercial'.

The same house in the Beeldhouwersstraat, which closed its doors to the group a few months later, served as the first construction site for what was till then Panamarenko's most ambitious project: the airship *Aeromodeller*. Its construction was completed in 1971, in style: as a contribution to the open-air statuary exhibition *Sonsbeek-buiten-de-perken* in Arnhem in the Netherlands, Panamarenko undertook to fly the more than 11 meter-long zeppelin to the exhibition park. The attempt was abandoned because the airship proved impossible to steer. Then there was the competition organised by the Englishman Henry Kremer. To qualify, candidates had to cover a distance of 800 m. at a height of 3 m. with a flying machine driven by human power, describing a figure of eight in the air between two points. In 1972 Panamarenko tried his luck with the *U-Kontrol III*: grass-green, pedal-driven, bicycle chain, featherweight and made of balsa wood, metal and plastic. Problems of humidity prevented the machine from leaving the ground.

ILSE KUIJKEN

Translated by Alison Mouthaan-Gwillim.

FURTHER READING

THEYS, HANS, *Panamarenko*. Tervuren, 1992.