notes

1. Several accounts have been offered of the artist's decision, at the beginning of his career, to adopt this pseudonym. It may reference a little-known Russian general who momentarily gained notoriety in the West for quelling riots in Eastern Germany during the Cold War before being sent to Siberia, where he carried out his professional duties for the remainder of his career. Another links it to the airline Pan American, noting the addition of the Russian sounding suffix *enko*. See Jon Thompson, "Panamarenko: Artist and Technologist," in *Panamarenko* (London: Hayward Gallery, 2000), p. 16.
2. The most substantial account remains that of Lucius Grisebach, in *Panamarenko* (Berlin: Nationalgalerie, 1978), pp. 131–147. Since its debut at Documenta 5 in Kassel in 1972, *The Aeromodeller* has always been inflated with air, a much heavier substance, which necessitates that, if it is to be elevated, the balloon be suspended by cables from the roof of the gallery.
3. The Brussels International Exposition of 1957 made an enormous impact on the young Panamarenko, who visited it several times and still vividly recalls his first encounter with, among other items, color television, miniature transistors, computers, and plastic extrusion machines.
4. Precedents in the work of Vladimir Tatlin have often been proposed, but Tatlin is less concerned with the role of the individual creator than with the potential of technological development per se. More relevant is the influential trajectory unleashed by Duchamp, who declared as his primary impetus "to invent instead of merely [express] myself" and who, in 1935, chose for the debut of his Rotor Reliefs not an art gallery but the annual Paris salon of inventors. (Duchamp, quoted in Katharine Kuh, "Marcel Duchamp," in *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* [New York: Harper and Row, 1962], p. 83.) Closer affinities may be found in the art and aesthetic of Canadian Murray Favro, also born in 1940, who lives and works in London, Ontario: neither artist was aware of the other until the mid-seventies. I'm grateful to Ben Portis for bringing Favro's work to my mind.
5. This title is derived from a nonverbal—as distinct from a knowledge-based—intelligence test developed by an American psychologist, which was used to examine recruits in the Belgian and other armies, and which, as a novice conscript, Panamarenko deciphered with exceptionally impressive results.
6. It is not an insignificant detail that *The Aeromodeller's* gondola contains just two asbestos suits.

selected bibliography

Panamarenko. London: Hayward Gallery, in association with Museum Jean Tinguely, Basel, 2000. With a text by Jon Thompson.

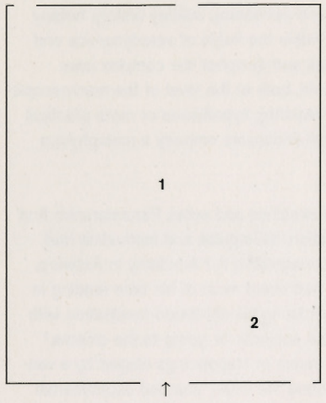
Panamarenko: La Grande exposition des soucoupes volantes. Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, in association with éditions Actes Sud, Arles, 1998. With texts by Véronique Baton, Hervé Chandès, Michel Onfray, and an interview with Nicolas Bourriaud.

Panamarenko: A Book by Hans Theys. Brussels: éditions Franck Van Haecke et Isy Brachot, 1992. With a text by Hans Theys.

Panamarenko. Hannover: Kunstverein Hannover, 1991. With texts by Maria Otto and Eckhard Schneider.

Panamarenko. Paris: Galerie Isy Brachot, 1989. With a text by Wim Van Mulders.

site map and checklist



1. ***The Aeromodeller***, 1969–1971
   mixed media
   gondola: 90½ x 130 x 224¼ inches
   balloon: 92 feet long x 17 feet diameter,
   holds 1000 cubic meters of air
   Collection Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent

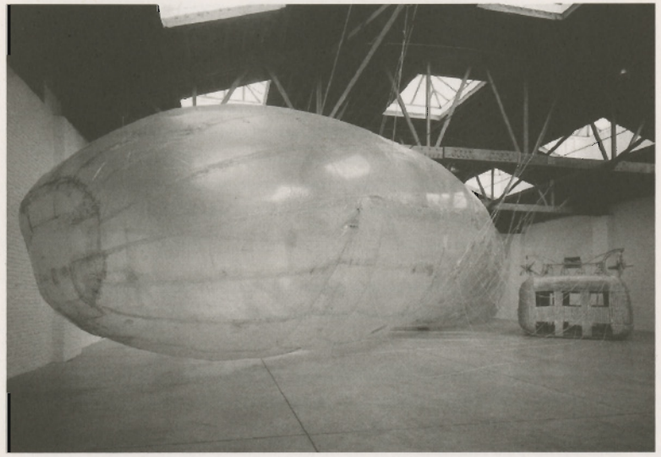
2. ***Raven's Variable Matrix***, 2000
   mixed media
   65 x 143 x 200½ inches
   Courtesy Ronny Van de Velde, Antwerp

Panamarenko was born in 1940 in Antwerp, where he still lives and works. He attended the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in the same city from 1955–1960. Since his first solo show at the Wide White Space Gallery in Antwerp in 1966, Panamarenko has exhibited widely in Europe and Japan. Among numerous group shows, he was included in Documenta V (1972), VI (1977), and IX (1992), the Third Biennial of Sydney (1979), the São Paolo Biennial (1983), and in the Venice biennials in 1976 and 1990. In recent years, retrospective exhibitions of Panamarenko's work have been presented at the National Museum of Osaka (1992), the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris (1998), and at the Hayward Gallery, London (2000).

Funding for this exhibition has been provided by the members of the Dia Art Council.

Cover Photo: Cathy Carver

Panamarenko
Orbit
November 29, 2000–June 17, 2001



Dia center for the arts
545 west 22nd street new york

Panamarenko Orbit

> My projects are not exactly ideas, nor dreams. It isn't a question of making a plane but of exactly producing something that is an ideal. It's enjoyable, even if I never actually fly it. For me, its success lies in the realization of the dream, and it's strangely tied to failure. If one is more scientific, more rational, one loses the ideal nature of the form, and the object becomes simply a demonstration, a functioning proof. I could say: "You are all mad for thinking that my objects cannot function because they are made by a naïf." That isn't the problem: it's a miracle if the object works, but it would be even more perfect if it didn't. The objective is then completed within the strict confines of the dream.
>
> –Panamarenko

> Things are even less beautiful than the dreams we have of them but *more particular* than the abstract notions we have of them.
>
> –Marcel Proust

On June 26, 1971, after long months of preparation, Panamarenko[1] inflated *The Aeromodeller* (1969–1971) with hydrogen. Until the arrival of urgent telegrams from the Dutch authorities, worried at the prospect of such a craft landing in the vicinity of local residents, his plan had been to fly the airship from the fields outside Antwerp, where it had been provisionally stationed for several months during its final production and testing, to the Sculpture Park in Arnheim, where "Sonsbeek Beyond Borders," a large international exhibition of contemporary art, was about to open. Violent winds abruptly broke the long spell of calm weather, battering the artist and his associates as they struggled with the huge sac, trying to stabilize it over the cabin in preparation for liftoff. The danger of an explosion from the highly inflammatory gas was aggravated by the blustering wind and by the balloon's constant flipping broadside into the gale due to certain navigational limitations of the design. Soon the wickerwork gondola showed signs of fracturing under the stress. Then, suddenly, rips appeared in the PVC casing. Seizing the nearest available tool to hand, a pair of scissors, the artist began frantically stabbing the plastic skin, inflicting long, gaping wounds in order to allow the hydrogen to escape as quickly as possible.[2]

Far from being deflated by the failure of the test flight, the young Belgian sculptor was emboldened to design vehicles for travel on land and sea, as well as air. Over the past three decades, Panamarenko's oeuvre has encompassed fabricating and launching a racing car and a submarine, in addition to diverse aircraft—from a miniature spaceship to a flying carpet, to a motorized parachute, to a rucksacklike device, fitted with shoulder straps, elevating and propelling its wearer without need for additional ornithoptic hardware. Assembled manually by this self-styled artist-technologist, these modelcraft have been accompanied by numerous other more modest or partial mechanisms devised to test and communicate the principles of operations in visual form: air compressors, turbines, magnetic force fields, and much more. In related lectures and publications, Panamarenko has revealed the extraordinary breadth and depth of his study of many different sciences, ranging across astrophysics and astronomy, military history, botany and zoology, alongside narrower specializations within the fields of aerodynamics and engineering. His highly individual theories unmask and decipher the complex laws linking space, time, and motion in the natural world, both at the level of the macroscopic and the microscopic. Whether galvanized by far-reaching hypotheses or more practical research experimentation, even his most technical endeavors embody a metaphysics as personal as it is conjectural.

The idea of building a zeppelin can be traced to sketches and notes Panamarenko first made in the mid-sixties; by the time of its realization, its impulse and motivation had become multidetermined. While enrolled in the conservative Art Academy in Antwerp, his birthplace, this notoriously maverick student had spent most of his time reading in the nearby science library, developing and consolidating his childhood fascination with natural history, mechanics, technology, and related subjects, or going to the cinema.[3] Soon after graduating, he became involved in a series of Happenings staged by a vanguard coterie of fellow artists who gravitated around the newly founded experimental gallery Wide White Space. Panamarenko became at the same time closely engaged with Joseph Beuys and Marcel Broodthaers, both of whom were still at a somewhat formative, open-ended, and exploratory, stage in their work and consequently had yet to establish international reputations. Though widely different in spirit and practice, together they offered compelling models for self-inquiry through a visual language generated by subjective interests and passions. Greatly encouraging must have been the debunking and disarming humor underpinning Broodthaers' exigent investigations into issues concerning representation, the identity of the artwork, or the character and role of the institution, striking a chord with his younger Belgian compatriot, whose seemingly innate proclivity to adopt failure as a guiding strategy manifested itself in a perversely imaginative, often comedic exploration of the most drily scientific or stringently technical problems. Reinforcement came, too, from the efflorescence of Pop Art, which Panamarenko, like many of his European colleagues, interpreted as a liberating precedent, a license to explore any passion or obsession free from restriction. Thus he quickly forsook his brief flirtation with the female figure and still life, subjects that he had refracted through a Pop-inspired filter, for the matrix that, henceforth, would provide not only the thematics, vocabulary, means, and materials for his future endeavors but an encompassing and ever-deepening metaphysic, the source of a singularly personal vision.

Manifestly indifferent, as were many of his contemporaries, not only to the conventional categories of art but to any rigid separation or distinction between art making and those scientific and technological disciplines that involved invention and experimentation, his productions neither necessarily nor automatically identify themselves as works of art per se; Panamarenko nonetheless embodies in his practice a central quality of art itself—directed imaginative play. A process of investigative learning, rather than the acquisition of verifiable knowledge in and for itself, fuels his quest. Poetically grounded cognition is directed toward experiences garnered through observation and perceptibility to the senses, and analysis and logistics are as often in thrall to fancifulness and speculation as the converse. At once declarative and enigmatic, his works seem to belong more properly to the realm of pataphysics—that is, pace Alfred Jarry's ludic exemplar, the science of imaginary solutions—than they do to that of "hard science," as it is commonly known.

For Panamarenko, aeronautics rather than, for example, physics or cinema offered the paradigmatic embodiment of space/time, itself a governing thematic of the twentieth century. At its dawn, the flying machine, long the product of human fantasy, became a reality through the ingenuity of such iconic pioneers as the Wright Brothers. Dominated by the space race, the second half of the century saw the Russians send the first astronaut into orbit in 1951 and culminated in the moon walk in 1969.[4] As optimism and idealism gradually gave way to more critical assessments of technology—its functions, costs, and global depredations—Panamarenko's stance did not essentially deviate, for its founding premises are neither decisively pro or con since his goals are more visionary than utilitarian, oriented more to meditation on the subject of flight as a metaphor for understanding human endeavor and enterprise. His commitment to the activity of artist-technologist as the source of individual inquiry thus remains paramount and unqualified.

With its corpus sheathed in a transparent skin ending in synthetic rubber fingerfeathers, *Raven's Variable Matrix* (2000) exemplifies one of the two principal types of man-powered planes in Panamarenko's vocabulary: those driven by the beat of insect wings and those harnessed to more conventional propellers.[5] Constructed over a period of several months from commonplace, readily available materials, ranging from bungee cords to a chain-saw motor to bicycle wheels, the design synthesizes mechanical components with features emulating structures in the natural world. Fabricated with his hallmark matter-of-factness, and on a scale calibrated to the strength, weight, and capacities of the body of its lone pilot, this poignantly revisionist craft harkens beyond such heroic embryonic ventures into solo aviation as those of Charles Lindberg and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry to such legendary dreamers as Daedalus and Icarus. For these renowned avatars, as for Panamarenko too, flights of the imagination prove inspiring prerequisites to those grounded in historical actuality. If he more fully encapsulates the vision and practice of an earlier era, he does so without polemics. Risking nostalgia for a time in which a more transparent relationship bound technical form to function, when the solitary even idiosyncratic inventor could contribute significantly to and assume responsibility within a specialist's field of discourse, Panamarenko's work proposes a substantive role and place for the single individual committed to directed imaginative play.[6]

L.C.