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Panamarenko: A Plea to Broaden Art

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four thousand men!  
 masterly plan of attack!  
 the surprise attack!  
 like a thunderclap,  
 That is nothing new;

AT LAST it has stopped.  
 raining the infantry could  
 press forward. Now  
 unknown to the enemy  
 wheeled invention under  
 the sign of the Lion do  
 their part. powerful



**CLASSICS**

THE astrologers have  
 declared that the  
**MITTELPUNKT**



PANAMARENKO  
 Panamarenko  
 Panamarenko

impressive material.  
 propelled monsters flapping  
 wings, instruments of  
 murder to mow down the  
 soldiery, blowing up the  
 heads and arms radiating  
 unquenchable energy,  
 in every disguise,  
 All this galloping evil  
 artillery: calculated death  
 and destruction

The enemy will soon surren-  
 der. Now the days of the  
 kingdom draw to a  
 close, the soldiers  
 prepared the successful  
 invasion with diabolical  
 delight and admiration.  
 Not one stone will be left  
 upon another, and its  
 population utterly obliterated  
 from the face of the  
 earth. they polish their  
 weapons, slaughter may be  
 just now, at the very begin-  
 ning, wonderful inventions.

We won the battle. We  
 knew it in advance, and  
 also that it must involve  
 considerable losses. The  
 casualties on both sides  
 were heavy, but presumably  
 the enemy came off worse.  
 In future it will be very  
 difficult for them to put  
 up any effective resistance,  
 but for us also it was  
 a serious bloodletting.

The second day in  
 particular was gory in  
 the extreme.

But what are soldiers  
 for if not to be used?

It was not nearly so  
 bad as some maintain.

Enemy country is enemy  
 country and must be  
 treated as such.

from  
 war and cruelty  
 Panamarenko  
 JACKPOT



AT PRESENT I am in  
 action.

Mars is now in juxta-  
 position to the sun

I observed that the  
 ghastliest glowing star  
 a quasar, CTA-102, one of  
 the new mysterious objects,  
 had regular light variations  
 One scarcely believe

it the particular object

into a

homemade



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 1 family  
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 that  
 demands  
 Quality  
**LOWER  
 THE COST  
 OF FUN**



Panamarenko

Panamarenko,  
*Lower the Cost of Fun*,  
1965, collage.  
Photograph:  
Francis Jacoby  
and Hans Theys.  
Courtesy the artist

## Panamarenko: A Plea to Broaden Art

– Hans Theys

Previous spread:  
Panamarenko,  
*Umbilly*, 1976,  
steel, wire, nylon,  
glass fibre and epoxy,  
43 × 268 × 82cm.  
Photograph:  
Francis Jacoby  
and Hans Theys.  
Courtesy the artist  
and Panamarenko  
Collectief

Montagne de Miel, Belgium, Friday, 21 March 2014. I am working on my second big book about the work of Belgian artist Panamarenko. My desk, the windowsill, the leather armchair and the wooden floor are scattered with hundreds of photographs: pictures of cluttered interiors, mechanical parts, animals, strange objects, museum exhibitions. A detail of the steel torsion spring of *Umbilly I* (1976), giraffes in Botswana, a rubber car named *Polistes* (1975), Hedy Lamarr, a dried piranha from Brazil, a man posing on top of the Swiss

of a moment; but most importantly, they all question processes that are typically simply accepted as a matter of course.

As you entered Panamarenko's house when he was still using it as his home and studio,<sup>1</sup> you first encountered the workshop where he conducted dangerous experiments with engines and propellers and constructed his larger artworks. The place was stuffed with electric gear, welding equipment, propellers, all kinds of saws and drills and various models and unfinished objects. Further on, you entered a kind of small botanical garden, with an iron staircase. The higher you went, the more birds you met. They lived freely in the house, slowly covering all the objects in the house with their excrement. On the first floor you found a kind of showroom, where Panamarenko received visitors and continually worked on smaller projects, such as the *Archaeopteryx* (1990–2005), for which he devised robotic dancing birds powered by solar cells. Perhaps most striking to the visitor's eye was the collection of things piling up in the living room: scientific magazines and books, hundreds of videotapes, parts of unfinished machines, a reel of Kevlar, black and white swallows' nests from Borneo, dried insects, fossils, corals, a diving helmet, a stuffed hoatzin, batteries, a marine aquarium and some caged birds – several parrots and a prize-winning nightingale from Hong Kong.

The heterogeneous collection of objects gathered together in Panamarenko's house might indeed be reminiscent of curiosity cabinets. However, as Thomas Kuhn so eloquently suggested, the essence of such cabinets lies in the fact that the proto-scientists who created them were seeking knowledge and understanding, to be sure, but didn't know how to acquire them. 'In the absence of a paradigm

### Hans Theys writes on the significance of experience in Panamarenko's work and his undeterred attempts to build impossible machines.

mountain Galenstock, two men in asbestos suits filling the zeppelin *The Aeromodeller* (1969–71) with hydrogen gas, a barricade made of blocks of ice in the centre of Antwerp, a man wearing an army uniform in front of a blackboard, a workbench with a voltmeter, a brass rocket, a mechanic trying out a human-powered aircraft, a diver on the bottom of the Indian Ocean, a parrot with an orange-peel beret and so on. Scattered about in a jumble, like an impudent, overgrown collage, these photographs remind you of the diligently compiled seventeenth-century curiosity cabinets that marked the first step towards modern empirical science. And yet, this represents more than a coincidental collection of curios, for all these things are part of the personal universe of Panamarenko. And Panamarenko is no collector; he *makes* things. All the depicted objects and actions are connected through the word *experience*: some are experiments, others conscious recordings

1 On 14 December 2006, Panamarenko gave this house to the Flemish government. It has subsequently been provided with a helicopter-landing platform by the architect Luc Delev (TOP Office) and conserved under the guidance of the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA) and Bart De Baere, the museum's director. It can now be visited as a museum. For more information on this, see Hans Willemsse (ed.), *Panamarenko: Workstation Biekorfstraat*, Antwerp: Linkeroever uitgevers, 2010, p.237.

or some candidate for paradigm,' Kuhn wrote, 'all of the facts that could possibly pertain to the development of a given science are likely to seem equally relevant. As a result, early fact-gathering is a far more nearly random activity than the one that subsequent scientific development makes familiar.'<sup>2</sup> Anyone who, looking back at such collections, focuses solely on that seemingly naïve lack of direction is forgetting that he or she is judging from within categories or paradigms that within a few years will themselves become obsolete. Anyone approaching Panamarenko's work in a similar manner may have the impression that he is seeking to reconcile disciplines such as science, technology, mechanics and art; yet the reality is that he does not actually perceive them as different fields. His activities are not random at all.<sup>3</sup>

Panamarenko constructed his first aeroplane, *Das Flugzeug (The Aeroplane)*, in 1967: a long bicycle with two sets of three propeller blades. But it was only when his friend Joseph Beuys invited him to exhibit it at the Düsseldorf Art Academy the next year that Panamarenko realised that his passion for technique and science might be an acceptable subject for art.<sup>4</sup> It was at this point that he decided to take literally Beuys's plea to broaden art.

In the work of Beuys, but also of Andy Warhol or Richard Hamilton, Panamarenko recognised that any topic could be suitable subject matter for art. No one reading Lawrence Alloway's description of the early days of British Pop will be able to miss the numerous similarities to the way Panamarenko spent the second half of the 1950s. 'We accepted the commercial culture as a fact', writes Alloway. 'We discussed it in detail, and consumed it enthusiastically [...]: technical and technological innovations, new

products, new materials, film, advertising, science fiction and pop music.'<sup>5</sup> Although Panamarenko is by no means an admirer of pop music, he has always been involved with film, science fiction, science and technology. 'When I was fourteen, in 1954,' he once told me, 'there was a pin-up in *Popular Mechanics* or *Electronics Illustrated* who was holding a matchbox, and underneath it said: "This contains more information than the whole *Encyclopaedia Britannica*." I am still looking for that little box. Underneath that, in the same magazine, which I still possess, was a picture of Boris Karloff and one of those robots with an antenna on its head.'<sup>6</sup>

In the late 1950s, when Panamarenko was informally studying electricity, mechanics, aerodynamics and the properties of matter at the library in Antwerp, he often spent afternoons at the cinema, viewing such classic films as Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949), with Hedy Lamarr, and Byron Haskin's *War of the Worlds* (1953), of which Panamarenko has recalled:

*It contained fine landscapes and tricks of exceptional beauty, with perfect little spaceships with uncommon shapes that had a certain magic, not like those insipid ships with twenty thousand pipes and eyes like you see in 2001: A Space Odyssey or in Star Wars, where spaceships always look like things that already exist.*<sup>7</sup>

Even though Alloway writes that the first phase of British Pop was closely linked to the theme of technology, he also concedes that scientific books were often not so much 'read' as 'looked at'.<sup>8</sup> One could argue that in taking every image seriously, artists such as Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi were trying to broaden art, but in the end their interest remained limited to iconography.

2 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, p.15.

3 Panamarenko has frequently amazed me with assertions I was only able to verify years later. He once told me that he had seen bluebottles buzzing around a Dutch meadow with tiny stumps of wings, barely larger than the heads of matches. Years later, I read how US researchers were steadily reducing the wing size of a particular type of swamp fly without preventing the creatures from flying. In 1995, he told me that his favourite nightingale, Koko, once sang so loud that blood dripped from its eyes. Last year, I read in a history of ornithology that two competing male nightingales are capable of singing until one of them dies. See Tim R. Birkhead, *The Wisdom of Birds: An Illustrated History of Ornithology*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2008.

4 'Panamarenko', curated by Joseph Beuys, Staatliche Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf, 16 May—30 June 1968.

5 Lawrence Alloway, 'The Development of British Pop', in Lucy R. Lippard (ed.), *Pop Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1966, p.32.

6 'Knockando! Panamarenko interviewed by Hans Theys', *Nous Magazine*, 28 November 1988, p.6. According to Alloway, the picture of Robbie the Robot was one of the most striking images of the iconic exhibition 'This is Tomorrow' (Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1956).

7 Hans Theys, 'Ping le sous-marin. Entretiens avec Panamarenko', in *Panamarenko: La Grande exposition des soucoupes volantes* (exh. cat.), Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, 1998, p.59.

8 L. Alloway, 'The Development of British Pop', *op. cit.*, p.32.



Panamarenko's living room. Photograph: Francis Jacoby and Hans Theys

Overleaf: Panamarenko testing the rucksack plane *Hareback* (1992–98) in 1992. Photograph: Hans Theys. Both images courtesy the artist

The greatest difference between the work of Panamarenko and that of artists associated with London's Independent Group is that Panamarenko's does not involve science, industry, science fiction and film as potential suppliers of new images, but as disciplines that might lead to new forms of beauty. Since his participation in Beuys's exhibition in 1968, Panamarenko has considered art as being open to what is new, unexpected and unknown, as something that overcomes fear in its search for magic, wonder and poetry. All too often the opposite occurs: art functions instead as a calming ritual, so that fear is not overcome, but suppressed, disguised and reinforced. As a result, art repeats itself and rarely really surprises us with a new form of poetry.

Panamarenko's works can be seen as the leftovers of his attempt to experience something new for himself. 'As for my teacher of natural sciences,' the Italian writer Primo Levi once said, 'chemistry was a textbook, and that's it. It was pages in a book. She had never in her life touched a crystal or a solution. It was knowledge transmitted from teacher to teacher

without ever a practical test.'<sup>9</sup> At first, it might be difficult to understand why Panamarenko has spent the larger part of his working life constructing aeroplanes that cannot fly. But building a plane that flies is not interesting. What has fascinated Panamarenko is trying to find out why something doesn't function if you try to make it work in an alternative, illogical

***Panamarenko's work does not involve science, industry, science fiction and film as potential suppliers of new images, but as disciplines that might lead to new forms of beauty.***

way. The knowledge you gather in such a way is never second-hand, but based on true experience. 'As a rule,' the Belgian philosopher Leopold Flam wrote, 'we experience what is generally valid, and apply it in various circumstances. What is extraordinary and new usually goes unnoticed, though it is precisely here that experience lies.'<sup>10</sup>

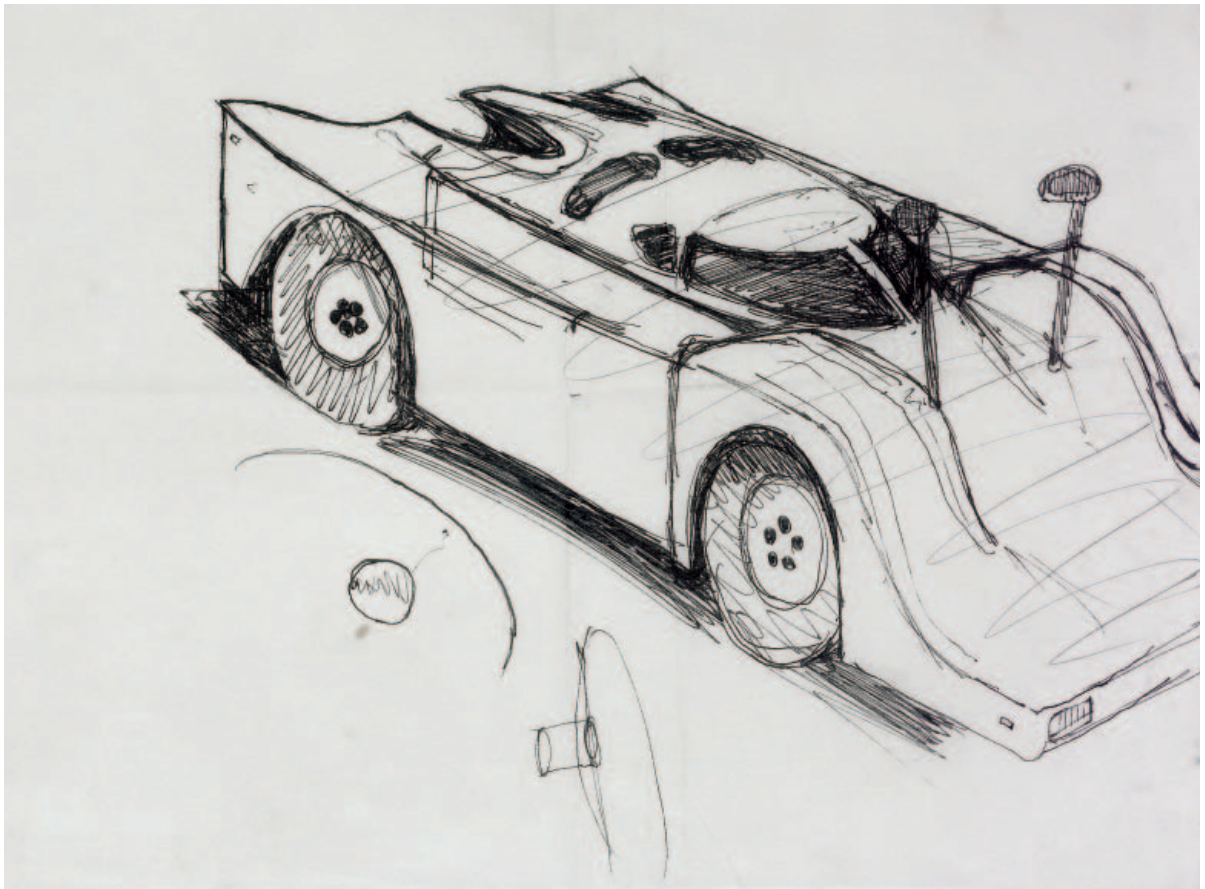
9 Primo Levi and Tullio Regge, *Conversations* (1984, trans. Raymond Rosenthal), London: I.B. Tauris, 1989, p.16.

10 Leopold Flam, *Liber Amicorum*, Brussels: VUB Press, p.347. Translation the author's.









A good example of Panamarenko's curiosity for how things could work otherwise is his engine-driven rucksack plane *Hareback* (1992–98). (A rucksack plane is designed to be carried on one's back; it thrusts air to the ground to propel the wearer for enough seconds to jump over a brook.) The starting point for this work was an engine cut out of a Suzuki motorbike – a regular, functioning motor. Panamarenko, however, decided to turn it upside down for aesthetic reasons, with the result that the spark drowned. From there he tried to understand why it would be impossible to prevent the spark from drowning, inventing new systems of ignition and applying all kinds of counter-intuitive techniques. Finally, after months of attempts, he succeeded in getting the engine going for a few seconds at the Free University of Brussels, where he sometimes used the aerodynamics laboratory.

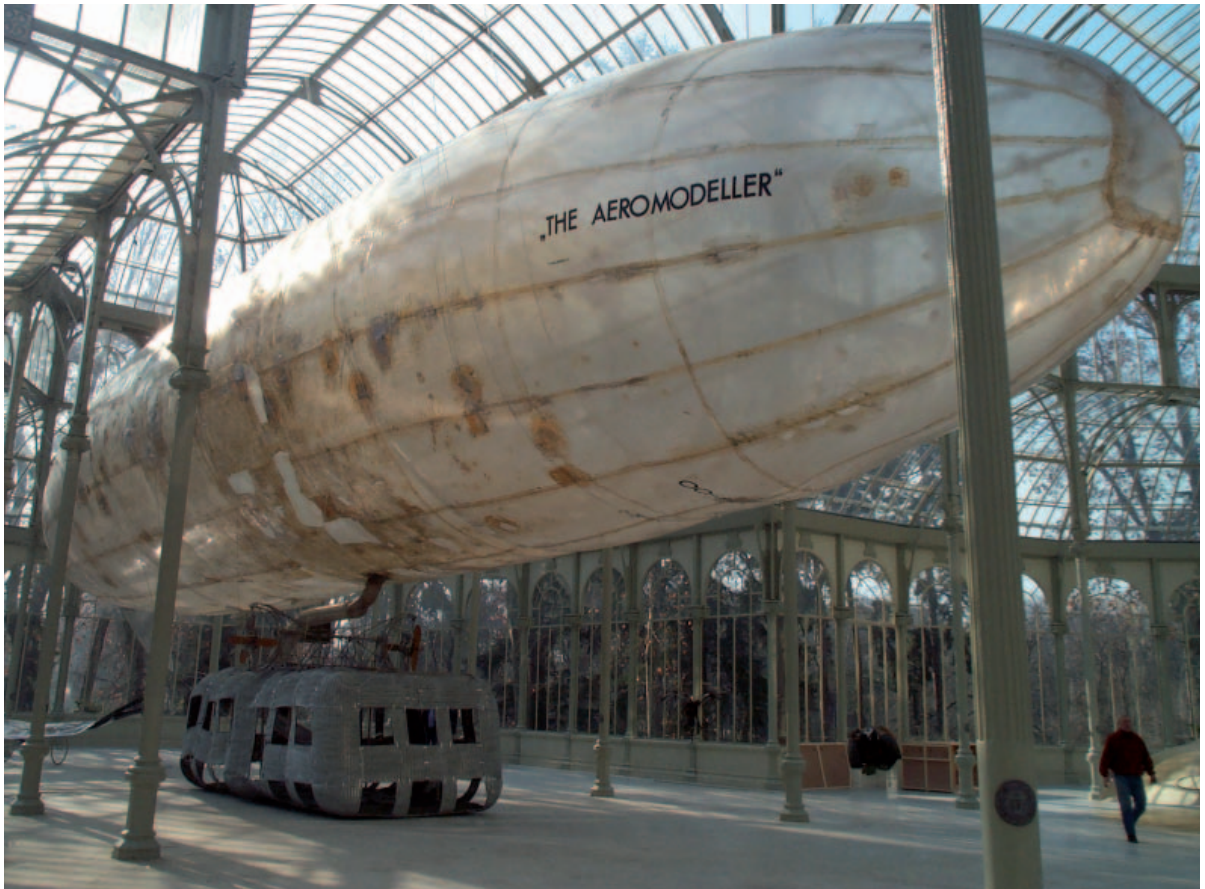
The first time I interviewed Panamarenko, in 1988, he told me that it was easy to invent a perpetual-motion

machine, but almost impossible to prove it wrong. Nevertheless, a large part of his oeuvre consists of variations on a principle of perpetual motion that he calls 'The Closed System Theory', a theory that first appeared in his work in 1968 and has since taken various shapes and forms. Panamarenko started from the principle that it had to be possible to successively build machines that, with an equal supply of energy, could generate increasing power through acceleration. Panamarenko assumed that the impulse that sets a body in motion gets separated into two reactionary forces. Whilst one of these forces would ensure forward motion, the other would maintain rotation.<sup>11</sup> In 1993, with *Toy Model of Space*, this theory was applied to the movement of celestial bodies, as Panamarenko explained, for instance, in a short video for his exhibition at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York that summer. Later, in 2001, he published the theory in the book *For Clever Scholars, Astronomers and Doctors*.<sup>12</sup>

Panamarenko,  
*Polistes*, 1973,  
black ballpoint on  
paper, 21.6 × 27.5cm.  
Courtesy the artist  
and Panamarenko  
Collectief

11 More details about this theory can be found in a beautiful book designed by the artist himself: Panamarenko, *The Mechanisms of Gravity, Closed Systems*, Bielefeld: Marzona, 1975.

12 See Panamarenko, *For Clever Scholars, Astronomers and Doctors*, Ghent: Ludion, 2001.



Panamarenko, *The Aeromodeller*, 1969–71, transparent PVC, axis, wood, metal, aluminium, nylon, 4 Flymo-engines, propellers, petrol tank, servomotor and balloon. Installation view, 'Panamarenko', Palacio de Cristal, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2002. Courtesy the artist and Panamarenko Collectief

His most important aeroplane, *Umbilly I* (1976–77), is also based on the same principle – namely, that a human-powered flying wheel could set off a pair of wings which, when bounced back by a spring, would gain an equal supply of energy, thus doubling the energy produced by the pilot. This spring is, in fact, the most important part of the sculpture. The aeroplane itself is made of balsa wood and cellophane and painted in kitchen green; it somewhat resembles a cockpit but is in fact designed to carry the propelling system. Attached to the slim body of the aeroplane are two sets of wings: flapping wings made of strong materials such as fibreglass, epoxy and nylon, which are supposed to propel it; and static wings made of balsa wood and Japanese paper. The aeroplane also contains a tiny blue seat like the one Panamarenko's father installed on a tandem bicycle when the artist was a small boy, with which they travelled from Antwerp to France.

Usually inventors dare people to prove them wrong. In Panamarenko's case, however, he has time and again tried to prove himself wrong. The resulting vast store of knowledge based on experience explains why numerous of his drawings are

so detailed. His machines are dysfunctional, but only for aesthetic reasons or because he wants to find a new way to make something work. Indeed, the fact that they don't take flight, for example, doesn't mean that the enormous amount of study and real attempts to make things work didn't work. The human-powered planes, the *Pastille* engines (1987–2005), the rucksack planes (1984–1998) and the flying car *K2* (1992) have all been built to function, but they always contain jokes or impossible elements that make the adventure a pipe dream from the beginning. The rubber car *Polistes*, for instance, has no brakes, the flying car *K2* has no steering mechanism (you steer it by leaning over with your body) and the rucksack planes are steered by holding your hands in the 700C hot-air stream.

Drawings take an important place in Panamarenko's output. In *Zonder titel (Moe Houts vliegende auto — Studie voor K2 Flying Jungle and Mountain Machine)* (*Untitled (Moe Hout's Flying Car — Study for K2 Flying Jungle and Mountain Machine)*, 1991), a preparatory drawing for the flying car *K2*, we can see how the artist is still seeking to define the final shape of the vehicle while testing technical



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Panamarenko,  
*Arlikoop*, 2004.  
Photograph:  
Panamarenko.  
Courtesy the artist

solutions and titles (subsequently erased), as well as elucidating the device's working mechanisms for the viewer (vertical lines represent the air stream, for example). This amalgamation of investigation and didacticism is characteristic of most of Panamarenko's drawings, as if he was trying to explain to himself how things work. Occasionally, Panamarenko has produced less functional drawings after the work's completion, but rarely. As in architectural practice, in Panamarenko's sketches drawing and thinking become inseparable.

One might argue that a similar distinction can be traced in his sculptural work. Some toys have been worked at for years (such as *Hareback*), while others are mainly formal experiments (as with most of the other rucksacks he has produced). Amongst these purely aesthetic creations, *Arlikoop* (2004) stands out: a robot that brings to mind Panamarenko's earlier dancing chickens, the *Archaeopteryx*, with the difference that this contraption has a swaggering strut, a little like the swerving movements of ice skaters. (Panamarenko has always complained about the robots' stiffness and has dreamed of making an elegantly moving one.) Interestingly, he made *Arlikoop* in order to place it at the exact location of the North Pole, which he did on 9 July 2004. The importance of this gesture has less to do with the sculpture itself than with the place: the artist has often pretended to have written his letters at the extremities of continents or at places remarkable to him, including Peenemünde, where the German army developed the V-1 and V-2 missiles.

One year after his North Pole expedition, as he was being filmed by a television crew during the opening of his retrospective at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels, Panamarenko proclaimed his retirement.<sup>13</sup> Since that moment, many have wondered whether he has held to this. Few can grasp the possibility that an artist might stop creating. But apart from two small walking chickens, the model of a winged monument and a funny two-seated floating device with pedals, Panamarenko has in fact stopped making artworks. 'You're trying to get me at work again,' he wrote to me in 2012,

'but it won't work. Together with the Big Lebowski I'm trying to win the world contest of laziness.' And thus, having moved to the countryside and surrounded himself with animals, he is going for his greatest achievement yet: to stop working completely, quite simply, to live.

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13 'Panamarenko: The Retrospective!', Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Brussels, 30 September 2005—29 January 2006.