

# Magnificent man's flying machines

**VISUAL ART:**  
Panamarenko's  
surreal and  
melancholy  
machines delight  
Richard Cork

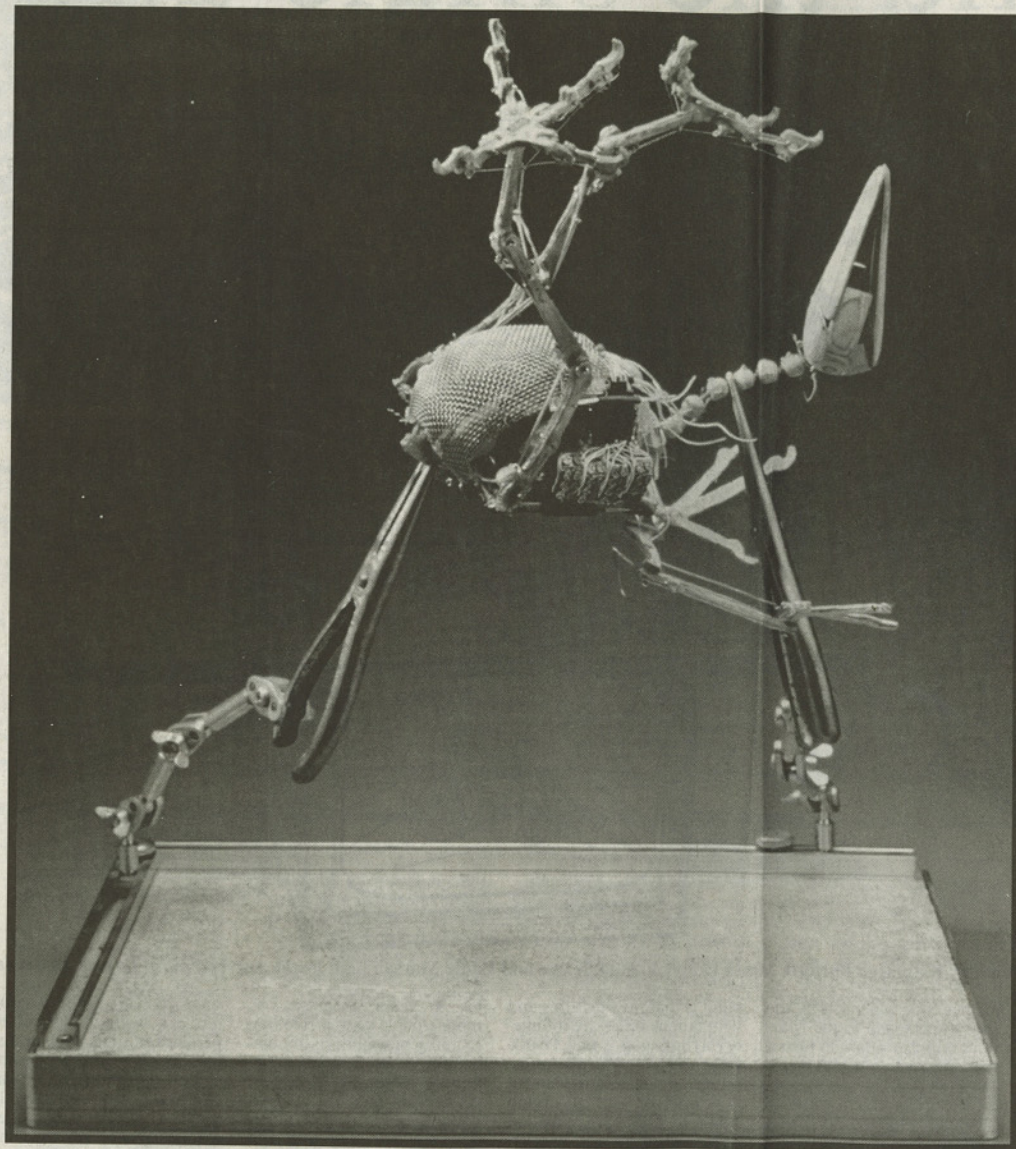
Tilting forward as he grips the handles, a sombre, life-sized man with long, straggling hair dreams of taking off. The large propeller attached to his backpack power system might soon start spinning, and an enormous parachute curves high above him. Flight seems imminent, yet nothing stirs. The whole gigantic contraption seems held in a state of suspense, longing for aerobatic freedom while remaining motionless and earthbound.

Panamarenko, who identifies himself as the would-be pilot, has spent his entire career in just such a state of yearning. It runs like an unsentimental sigh throughout his retrospective at the Hayward

‘He seems caught halfway between surging exhilaration and an awareness of futility’

Gallery, and gives everything he makes a peculiar poignancy. Now 60, he is still based in his home city of Antwerp and shares a house with a dog, two fish and 20 birds. He dislikes travel, contenting himself with fantasies of epic voyaging in his own inventions. They are, for him, an alternative reality, like the strange pseudonym he adopted while at art school in the 1960s. He now claims that Panamarenko was a Soviet general. But the apparent reference to Pan Am, the former US airline, cannot be ignored. Maybe the name was intended as a demonstration of the artist's global outlook. East meets West, and his willingness sometimes to use the abbreviated name "Panama" confirms that he likes the idea of making links between different parts of the world.

He is certainly in love with the romance of flight. Downstairs at the Hayward, one long gallery is almost filled with the colossal, swollen form of *The Aeromodeller*. Even though it is only half inflated, this great zeppelin-like balloon bulges and presses awkwardly against the ceiling. Its skin of transparent PVC film is splattered with patches, suggesting that it has been peppered by



Clockwise from above left: *Archaeopterix III* (1990), *V1 Barada Jet* (1991), *K3 Jungle Flyer* (1992-93); the impotence of Panamarenko's painstaking contraptions overrides any functional prowess they may have

shot during aerial combat. As inert as corpses, they accentuate the sense of sadness. For *The Aeromodeller* has never been capable of taking to the sky. Panamarenko tried once, inflating it with hydrogen before the local police forbade it to fly. They even threatened him with jail.

He persists, nevertheless, in planning grandiose journeys through the cosmos as well as the sky. *Bing of the Ferro Lusto* is the typically quirky title given to a prototype for a spaceship. To my eyes, it has the period charm of an old-fashioned flying saucer, something from, say, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.

Everything he produces is shot through with ambiguity. On one level, Panamarenko seems to be an intoxicated inventor who sets no limits on his soaring ambitions. Liberation through flight is a con-

stant source of stimulus: he told me in all seriousness at the Hayward of his resolve to improve an elaborate contraption called *Bernoulli* and make it airborne. On another level, though, the work he produces with such unabated zest is also touched by a strain of melancholy. He is caught halfway between surging exhilaration and a perpetual awareness of futility. That is why his finest art is so haunting, and bears directly on our own aspirations. For human beings have always known that they will never be able to fly like birds. But we have constantly dreamt of doing so, and refuse to let the doomed example of Icarus discourage us.

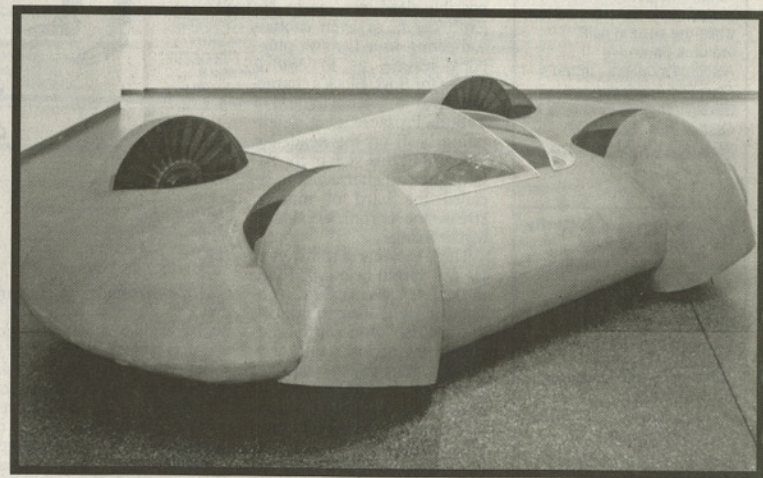
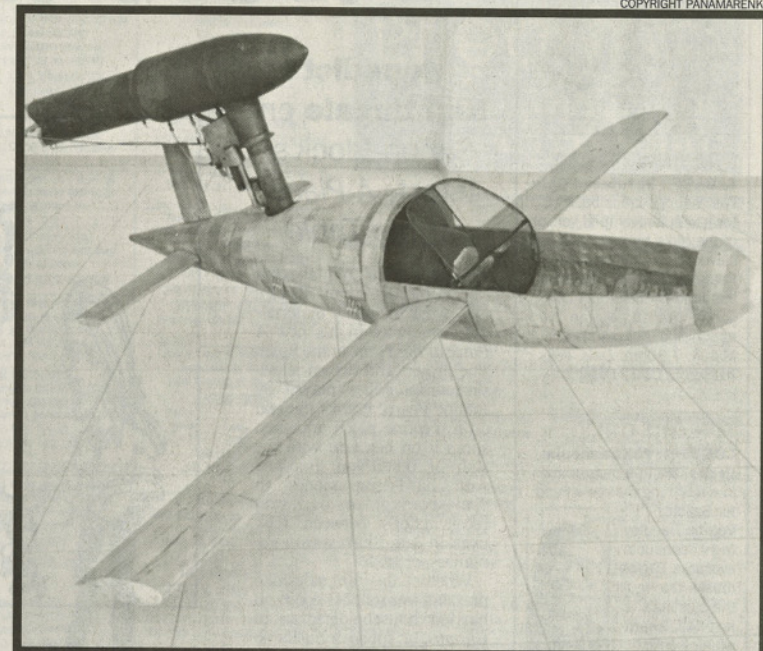
So he can arouse pathos with three small robotic birds (*Archaeopteryx*). Made of balsa wood, glue, string, electronic chips and servometers, they are supposed to be functional.

But they seem on the point of disintegration, especially the hapless creature whose spindly legs and claws already stick up in the air. The very opposite of airborne, this broken bird will never be able to fly.

Leonardo da Vinci was oneer to explore the possibility of man taking wing, and Panamarenko is often compared to him, especially as the two artists share a passion for inventing things. But the links between them can easily be exaggerated. The older Panamarenko has grown, the more his work is tinged with ironic detachment. Encountering each fresh contraption in this continually beguiling survey, we cannot help smiling at its humour.

*Das Flugzeug*, one of his most delicate and refined inventions, enlivens the larger

gallery upstairs with a linear tracery of slender aluminium tubes. Its six Styropor wings, each covered with white canvas, appear at first to float like fragments freed from a painted paper cut-out by Matisse. They induce a feeling of nostalgia for the early days of heroic wanting to see *Das Flugzeug* achieve lift-off. At the same time, though, we begin to notice how rickety the whole structure really is. Even when static, the fragile wings have to be supported by taut cords slung from the ceiling. But our concern for the machine's durability turns to disbelief when we notice, at its centre, a leather bicycle saddle, handlebars and pedals attached to a rubber driving belt. Silently waiting for the pilot to sit down and start manic exertions, they look absurdly inadequate. The impotence of the



contraption overrides any functional prowess it may have.

I would, for similar reasons, advise anyone to decline the opportunity to try out Panamarenko's *V1 Barada Jet*. Despite its open cockpit, Panamarenko promises that it offers "the fastest way to get to with disarming candour that "you would have to wear goggles, otherwise your eyes would be gouged out by the force of the speed". It is an unashamedly far-fetched object, powered by a real jet engine that looks more like a rusty stovepipe. And when I challenged Panamarenko about its speediness, he conceded in his best deadpan manner that the trip to New York would really take "around 12 hours".

One of the most deceptive exhibits is the *K3, Jungle Flyer*. It reminded me of the machines raced by drivers as

daredevil as Donald Campbell. But Panamarenko claims that it is ideal for flying below trees in the Amazon rainforest, or between Himalayan mountains. Steering is achieved by "body displacement", and he gives warning that "you could drop upside down in half a second. Panamarenko has also explored the sea, that other great unknown. *Ping*, a steel submarine made in 1996, is big enough to contain several people in appallingly cramped conditions. This boorish hulk squats now on one of the Hayward's outdoor sculpture courts. It was raining when I ventured out there, and water was dripping off the submarine's crudely soldered plates.

After a time, though, the submarine takes on a perverse fascination. Ludicrous fins jut out from the sides, and a risible propeller protrudes at the far

end. Odder still, the other end is covered by a circular sheet of glass.

Peering in, we find a claustrophobic green-painted chamber with a diminutive TV set resting on a seat. But the sinister appeal of the submarine is outweighed by its ridiculousness of obsolescence make it more weird than threatening. Stranded on a concrete slab far above the level of the Thames, it looks as beached as the glass-fibre *Whale* made by Panamarenko in 1967 and placed on a plinth made of Cellophane and tin.

At once visionary and matter-of-fact, high-flown and practical, self-indulgent and disciplined, the contradictory Panamarenko is out on his own in current art.

● Panamarenko is at the Hayward Gallery (0171-261 0127) until April 2

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