



PANAMARENKO

Article for The Independent

**Hayward Gallery, South Bank. London.
February to April 2000**

One of Panamarenko's sculptures is called *V1 Barada Jet*. It looks like a V1 flying bomb: the Germans sent them raining down on Antwerp. Panamarenko, born there in 1940 and living there still, remembers from his own childhood seeing a V1, hearing the engine cut out and seeing it begin to drop. Then the engine re-started and the V1 moved on.

The word "Barada" comes from the sci-fi classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still*; an alien has been shot at by a human but he chivalrously calls off his robot, which is ready to destroy the world, by ordering him back into the spacecraft with a few words of 'alien speak' including the word "Barada". This piece, then, is about a brush with death. Unlike a V1 bomb, it's a tiny wooden plane that includes a cockpit. It's designed to be launched, as were the V1's, by being sent hurtling along rails atop a small trolley: the engine is modelled on the very earliest jet engines designed by Frank Whittle using, apparently, little more than a stovepipe.

Panamarenko adopted his name at the start of his career. He says it was to give himself more self-assurance - and even now, he's painfully shy. He wanted, it seems, to mark a break with his family and his previous life. He doesn't elaborate. He likens the adoption of that name to a placebo: it works, though only for a time. He enjoys paradoxes, and perhaps his name is one as well: it

both draws attention and yet conceals. This is his first major show in Britain - and it fills the whole of the Hayward Gallery in London. Reading the publicity material, I wondered at first whether the reference in it to a "playground of the imagination" might be construed as an unconsciously encoded putdown: machines equal childhood, equal fun (i.e., not Serious Art). Indeed, the show is aimed at "anyone who has dreamt of flying". As a child, I was obsessed by the image (from a children's comic perhaps) of a man building a full-size plane in his very small back garden. I only ever built model planes but in my imagination I flew away. That's what children do. You make the engine noise, you are the plane, and you're in it too. You dream. If we think - not too seriously - about this work in terms of erotic symbolism, we could say it's about not having sex. Not yet. It's about endless revisions, endless preparations. You never make it to the ball.

Panamarenko stands between art and science, a subversive in both directions. He refuses to be awed by science: he insists on "breaking through" the apparently impermeable wall that deters most of us, and he can't comprehend people who seem proud of their lack of interest. On the other hand, he insists on bringing into art things that many people in that world feel don't belong there. Subversives throw the normal into relief: Panamarenko's work makes one realise art can be about exclusion. When we look at Panamarenko's

work, there's that nagging worry that it isn't right; we feel we might need to exclude it...

Panamarenko agrees. It's fair to say that he in turn is contemptuous of much art that is produced. "I see it as the repetitive supplying of little more than trinkets," he says, and adds, with loud laughter, "but then I am easily bored." He sees those who develop many of the technologies that surround us as guilty of a particular strategy - they complicate things in order to hold on to power. "The explanations of science," he says, "are written in invisible ink." He cites the example of the first jet engine: it's a simple technology. The internal combustion engine is likewise a simple technology - but cars go on becoming more and more complicated. Perhaps art adopts a similar strategy: it's all about contexts, all about reactions from previous developments in art practice. If you missed the soup, you can't enjoy the main course.

Freedom, for Panamarenko, means certain refusals. Jon Thompson's excellent essay in the exhibition's catalogue makes the point that for the radically minded, coming of age in the mid-1960s, the crucial rejection was of the "straights". Then, it was a political notion rather than, as it now tends to mean, a matter of defining sexual orientation. It referred to those who are malleable, who do as they're told, who aspire to simple notions of success.

So Panamarenko is doing many things in his work. Firstly, he is putting into effect his cherished belief that making art is about discovery. If many of his machines don't finally quite do what they seem intended to do, it's not because he's a "crackpot" who flies in the face of technological logic. His conviction is that an artist must always be working from the starting point of what obsesses him or her, of what the artist loves. He's on a quest to

make something where every component has its own rightness - an aesthetic value which has to be revealed. It's the 'beautiful little things' he finds out along the way that matter - these finally dominate. His work is about process, and that's the way the work has value for him. The process isn't dogmatically revealed in his art.

The second thing he's doing is to engage with the big wide world. He starts with things which already exist - planes or submarines, for example. He wants to make a submarine which is better than these already around - funnier, more personal. There are no mysteries in his work, in the sense that you have to know certain things or have read certain books, before you can make full sense of it. But his sculptures are not "just" machines. They are pieces of art, things which have been lovingly made, struggled with, in which countless choices and decisions have been made along the way.

"Every year, I say to myself that this year, just for the hell of it, I'm going to fly like crazy with one of these things I've made just to show that I don't make them especially bad so that they don't function, that I'm not so stupid that I don't know how to make things so they really fly. My work is somewhere between the dream of what's possible, and what's not possible." And then Panamarenko adds: "But if I fly, I have to fly in a very beautiful way."