



JO COUCKE

PANAMARENKO



FUNDAMENTALS

PANAMARENKO FOUNDATION

MER. BOOKS

EVELINE HOORENS

LETTER TO PANAMARENKO

Pana'tje,

I was completely stunned when I walked into S.M.A.K. in Ghent in 2001 and saw the *Scotch Gambit* (1966–99) standing there. One of my teachers at the academy had told me: “Evelientje, you *have* to know that artist, that work is really something for you.” And indeed, I had never seen anything like it. I was walking on air cushions. It wasn't just that enormous, poetic construction that deeply impressed me, but also the meticulous planning visible in it: how you had calculated, day by day, how you would make the work. I couldn't believe my eyes; I felt as if I were floating outside myself.

Back then, I could not possibly imagine that your favourite book, *Panamarenko: For Clever Scholars, Astronomers and Doctors*, with *Scotch Gambit* on the cover, would one day appear in my mailbox as the beginning of a great adventure.

Pana'tje (only I was allowed to call you that), I am speaking to you now from “Outer Space”, from that universe you longed so deeply to understand. “Many people think they know a lot”, you said, “they have been searching for so long to figure out how the universe works, yet we still know so little”. You were a mathematical genius, but you didn't make idle calculations. You wanted to investigate whether all the existing formulas actually held up. You didn't want to accept them as dogmas. And you wanted to break free from gravity, no gravitating but escaping to other galaxies with your theory *Toymodel of Space*.

Above all, you were a playful spirit. Your imagination knew no bounds. You took me along in your flying saucer *Bing II*, on adventures to other dimensions.

Pana'tje, you loved nature so much; you looked at it with the wonder of a child. You wouldn't hurt a fly. But you could stare at that fly for hours, trying to understand how its wings worked. You could spend an entire day pondering how a spider climbs a mountain. And when I came home from work in the evenings, you could tell me all about it so delightfully. You



Edition *Scotch Gambit*@Rijnkaai, Antwerp

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were a master storyteller, and you pulled me completely into your thought process.

I only discovered that last part once a deep affection had gradually grown between us. Because when I first approached you at the airport in Barcelona, where we were waiting for our connecting flight, the conversation didn't flow right away. Now and then there was an awkward silence. In truth, you were a shy person who preferred to be left in peace. You told me you had come from Madrid, where they wanted to organise an exhibition of your work in the Palacio de Cristal. "Unfortunately", you said laconically, "the doors were too narrow for the submarine. Either they break out the doors, or it won't get in".

How you managed to create those enormous works in your house on the Biekorfstraat in Antwerp was a complete mystery to me. At first, you wouldn't let me in. When we met up, you would quickly close the front door behind you. Only after many stories did it become clear to me how you lived there with your parrots and your pitbull Bobby. You told me about the time of the *Prova Car* (1967) and how you lived there with your hundred-kilo Saint Bernard, who could barely squeeze between the wall and the Prova, leaving dents in it from time to time. But you didn't mind; you thought it gave the work more character. And you know what? Your house eventually even became a protected monument.

Pana, you were so handy, a true brico-blitz. As long as you could tinker and cobble things together – you *saw* instantly how things could fit and which components you would need. When you moved in with me in Michelbeke, I would go looking for aluminium rims, windshield-wiper motors, ice-cream scoops and so much more from the hardware store, DIY shop or model-building store. Making toys together – our greatest joy.

When I cleaned out the shed in Michelbeke in 2020, I found among the tools – the motors, solar panels, screws and bolts – a metal panel the size of a large towel, with rotor blades. A kind of prototype for a flying carpet, one by one-and-a-half metres, which I remembered you weren't satisfied with. You had taken it from the Biekorfstraat and tossed it here in the Flemish Ardennes to prevent it from being considered an artwork in Antwerp when, for you, it wasn't one. I honoured

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your way of thinking and dumped it into the waste container. How wondrous, then, was Philippe Van Cauteren's phone call shortly afterwards, inviting me to come and look at a crate in S.M.A.K., one that no one seemed to know the origin of or how long it had been there. Could it perhaps be something by Panamarenko? I went there, and together we opened the crate. We carefully lifted a long balsa-wood object with propellers from the polystyrene I knelt beside the crate and nearly fainted. That little card and that signature – I recognised them instantly. There was no doubt. It was a real Panamarenko.

Pana'tje, these turned out to be the authentic panels of your *Magic Carpet* (1979), a major work that had sunk into the depot for years and had been exhibited only once, in Sydney, for the 1979 Biennial there. After that, it returned to Ghent via Germany. Synchrodestiny? Twenty years later, once again, I was completely stunned in the same museum, S.M.A.K.

Pana'tje, creating every work – the path toward it – was just as important to you as the result, if not more. Once a work was finished, it had to go; you wanted an empty mind so you could begin something new. Like a zen master *avant la lettre* who does not cling to material things but lets the poetry around them flow freely. You believed things needed to happen during life. "What good is it", you said, "if your work is only worth something when you're dead, like Van Gogh. In eight hundred years they don't need to give me the Nobel Prize anymore".

We don't have the Nobel Prize for you. But we do have a foundation: the Panamarenko Foundation. One of its objectives, written into the statutes, is to create new joy. To keep discovering through play, to encourage creativity. To pass on the message: follow your imagination and dream. With the discovery of the *Magic Carpet*, you gave us a sign: keep the magic travelling! Our dream is a "Magic Journey". One day, the *Magic Carpet* will fly back to Sydney again.

Eveline'tje

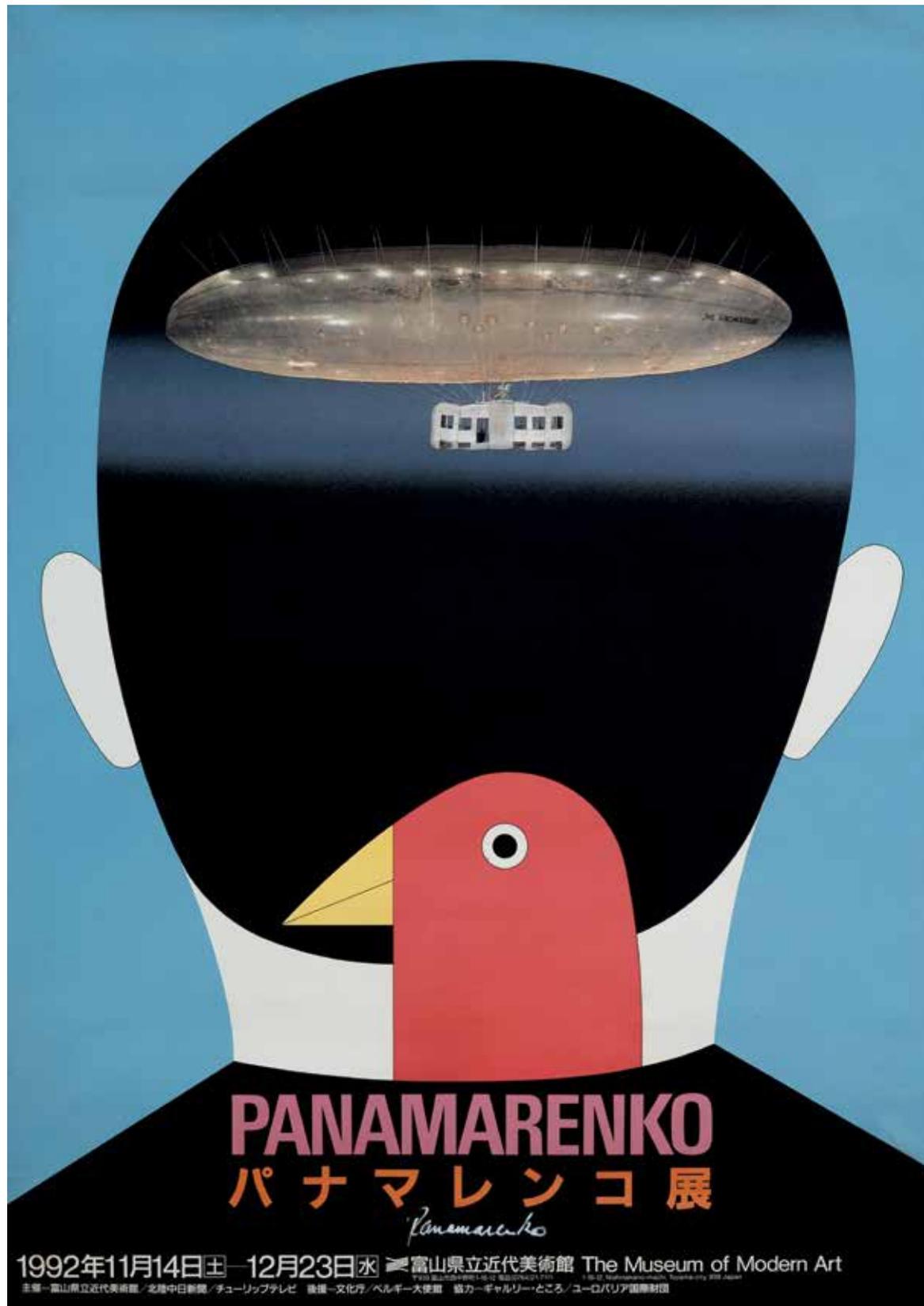
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To those close to him, the Belgian artist Panamarenko (1940–2019) was always an immensely charming personality. To many art lovers, however, he was at times a rather difficult character. He held an original and authentic view of art and artistic practice, one that certainly earned him sincere appreciation, yet did not always function in the same way for others. Panamarenko was indeed an artist, but he “didn’t want anything to do with art. So I occupied myself with science. I specialised in magnetic force fields, because that is the driving force behind space travel. Now and then, there was a detail in that study that struck me. I might even say: that there was a spark of true poetry attached to it. Then I would make something of it. Something that wasn’t art, yet which was afterwards labelled as art by others.”

With that, we – those who love and collect his work – must make do.

The same poetic experience that Panamarenko himself felt is reserved entirely for the reader of the texts presented here, which discuss the works the Panamarenko Foundation considers his “Fundamentals”. The texts describe the works, the reasons the artist had for making them, and their history. But their poetic qualities are not described here, nor pre-chewed. This is an invitation addressed to the reader and viewer to go and seek out the artworks in person, wherever they may be, to open oneself to them, to sense their poetry and to enjoy it. To paraphrase the words of Peter Struycken: Panamarenko considers physical facts entirely as a private domain, making them so subordinate to his own experience, thinking, and feeling that he believes he need not wonder about anything on the basis of any criteria other than his own. Panamarenko stands for a resolute autonomy. It is up to the viewer of Panamarenko’s work to surrender to this attitude.

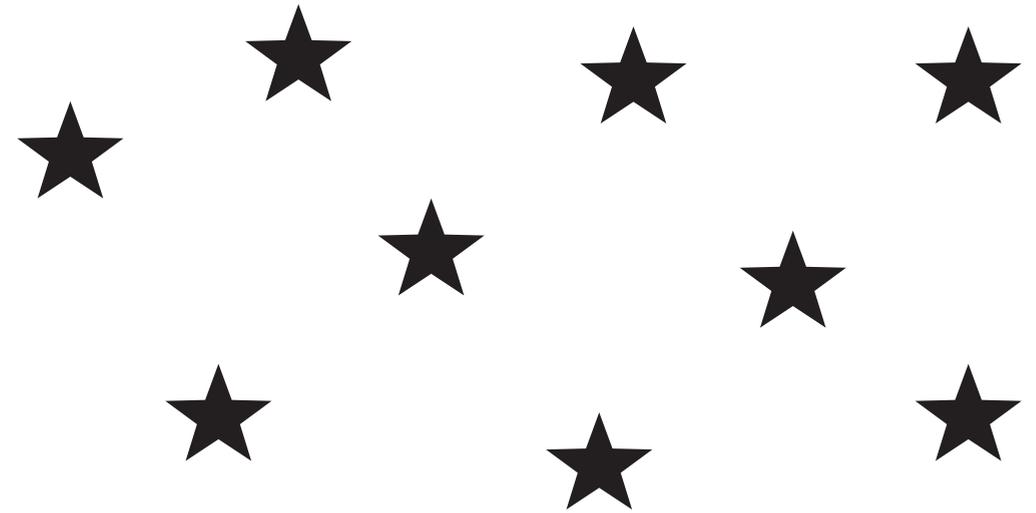


Poster *Panamarenko*, Museum of Modern Art, Toyama, Japan, 1992 9

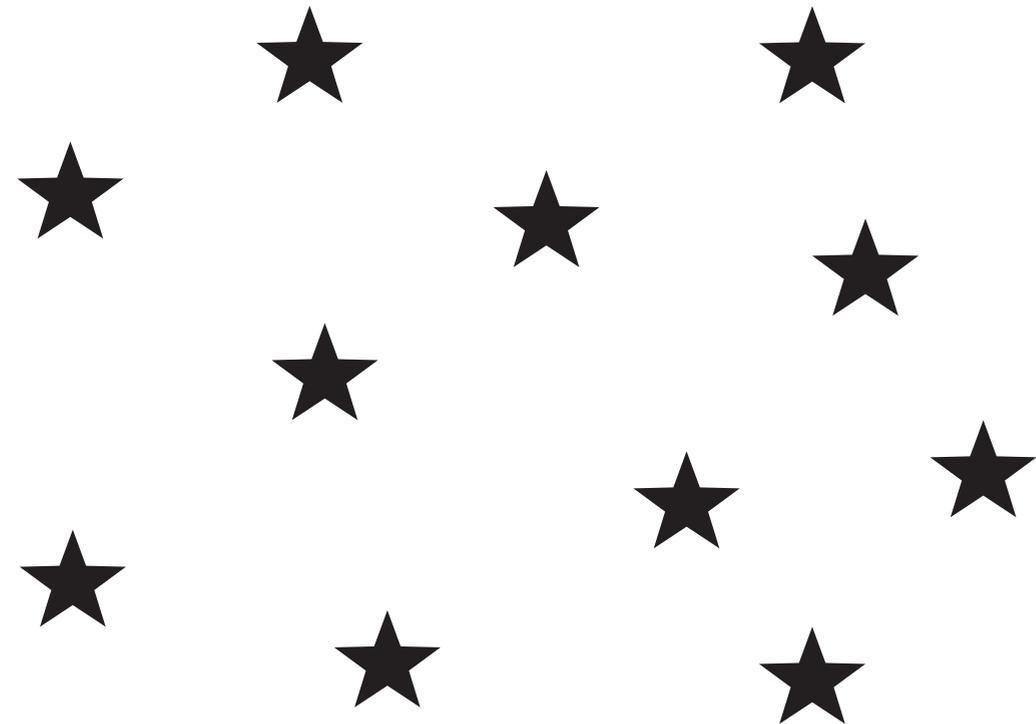
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Films, expeditions, the natural sciences, *das Militär*, the history of science and technology, the history and exploits of aviation and space travel, fauna and flora, science fiction – these were all sources of inspiration and challenges for Panamarenko. Each of them led to highly original, exceptional artworks that have made a significant contribution to the fundamental renewal, broadening, and deepening of the concept of art in their time. The dictionary defines as “fundamental” those things that touch upon the foundation.

8 November 2024



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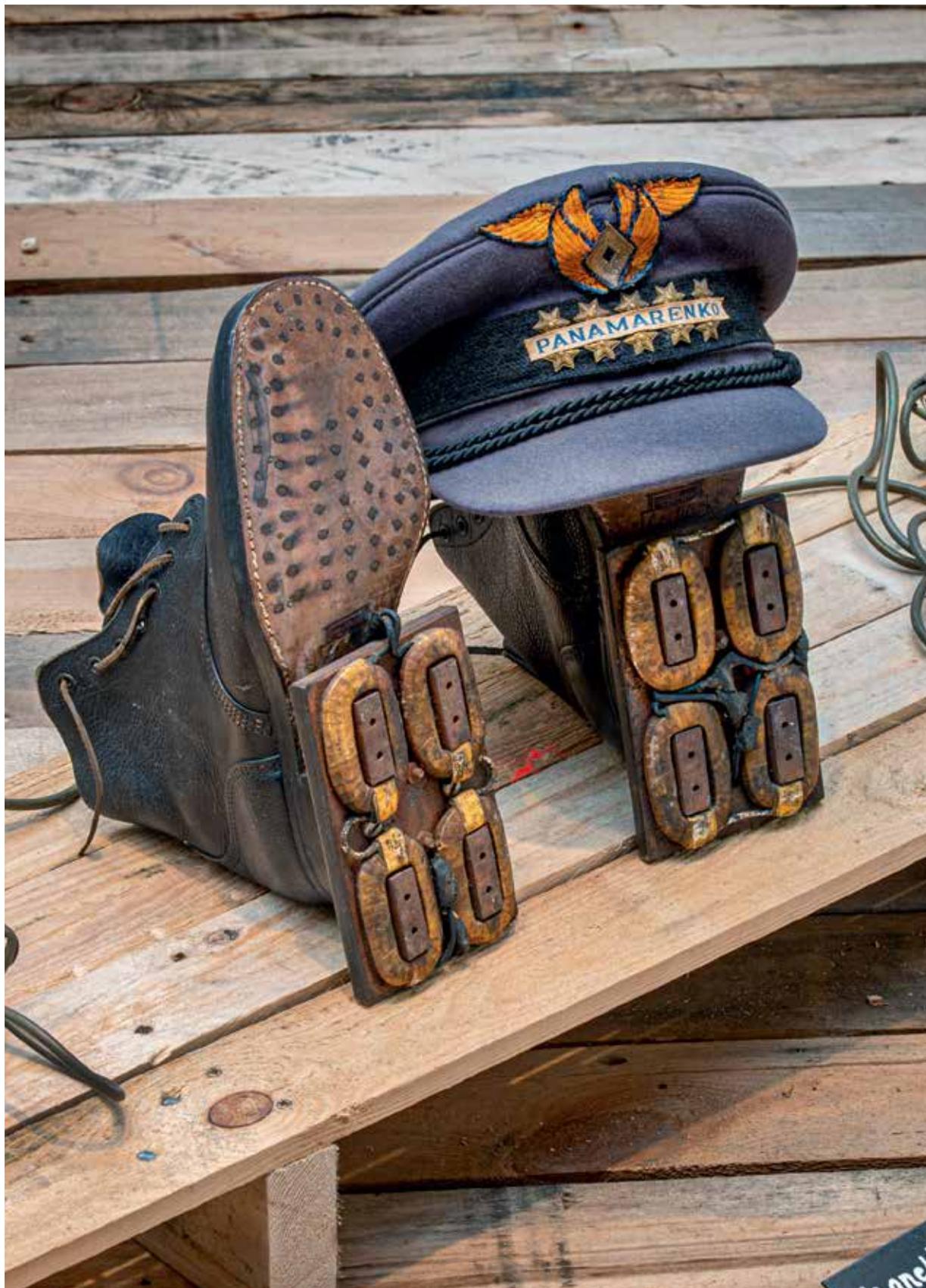


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i

MAGNETISCHE SCHOENEN

(MAGNETIC SHOES)

1966–67

leather shoes, electromagnets, wires and switches

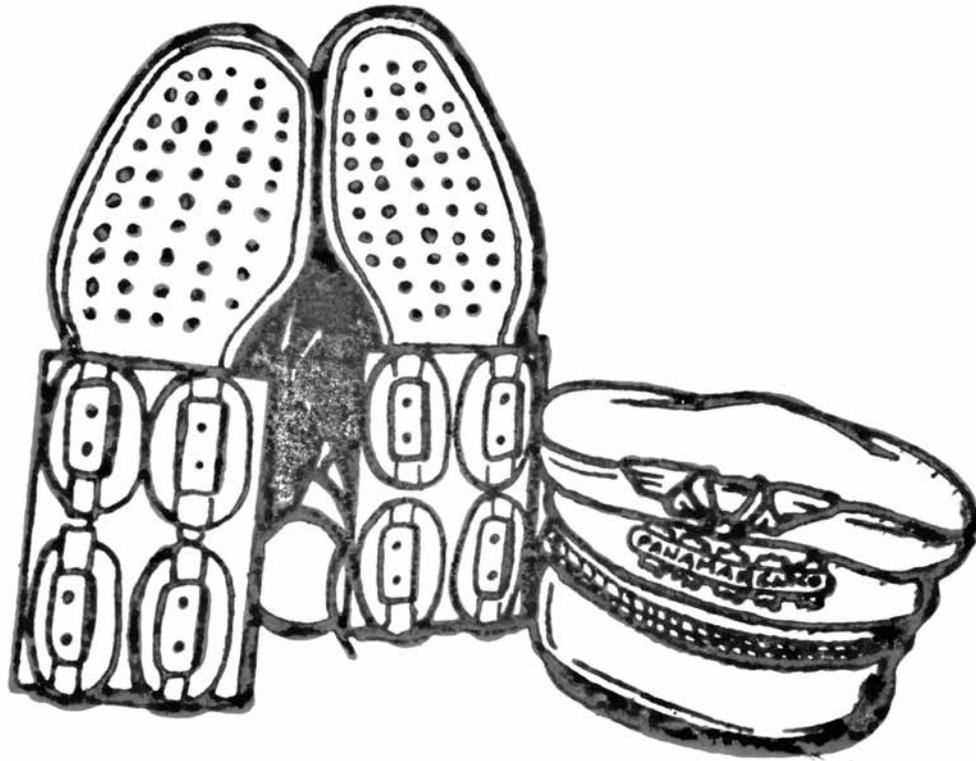
approx. 34 h × 28.5 × 23 cm

Collection Family Deweer, Otegem

This pair of ankle boots is the perfect symbol for the free, unbound human being and artist that Panamarenko was – someone who explored the wondrous world of nature step by step.



With these homemade magnetic shoes, Panamarenko demonstrates that it is possible to walk upside down, hanging from a steel ceiling. The electromagnets embedded in the soles can be magnetised strongly enough to make his weight “stick” to the steel. By alternately switching off the electrical current in the magnet of one shoe and turning on the current in the other, he can move his feet step by step across a steel plate. Dressed in a military uniform, Panamarenko performs this imaginative stunt twice in 1967: first at the KVS (Royal Flemish Theatre) in Brussels and later in the studios of the public television broadcasting network BRT, for the popular television programme *Echo*. During the latter performance, the artist makes a mistake and falls headfirst onto a mattress that had prudently been placed beneath the steel ceiling.



Magnetic Shoes and Cap, stamp impression, undated



In his book on Panamarenko, Michel Baudson rightly points out that this artwork – strictly speaking the residue of a performance – is a visionary key work: on the one hand, this pair of props still stems from the time and spirit of the happenings, to which Panamarenko contributed significantly in the 1960s (see, among others, the statement *RESERVAAT*, p. 25); while on the other hand, they form a beautiful symbol

of Panamarenko's many later attempts to move around on land, at sea, and in the air in his own unique, alternative way. He even wanted to travel to the stars using the existing interplanetary and interstellar magnetic fields. *Magnetische schoenen* is often shown in exhibitions and illustrations together with the kepi that Panamarenko wore as part of his military outfit.





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PROVA-CAR

1967

tinned and polished sheet metal and cellophane

95 h × 200 × 290 cm

Collection Flemish Community / M HKA -

Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, Antwerp

Although *Prova-Car* is not a technically sophisticated contraption, it is – together with *Das Flugzeug* (The Airplane, 1967, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg) – one of the first works that refers to the world of technology and mobility. With this early object, Panamarenko creates an artwork that, as a symbol of movement, displacement, and speed, announces his overarching theme of “mobility” in general, and all his later flying, sailing, and driving vehicles in particular.



Panamarenko first presents the sculpture at Anny De Decker’s gallery, in the exhibition *Panamarenko, Opgepast! Bochten! Blijf op het voetpad!* (Panamarenko, Watch out! Curves! Stay on the Sidewalk!) in November 1967 at her Wide White Space Gallery in Antwerp. The title of the exhibition and of *Prova-Car* is borrowed from Italian motorsport. “Prova” in Italian means “test” or “trial”. The legendary racing driver Tazio Nuvolari (1882–1953) carried out his test runs in a car bearing the inscription “PROVA.” During the Mille Miglia (Thousand Miles) race, which was run on public roads, spectators were urged – especially near dangerous bends – via signs to stay on the sidewalks.

PROVA-CAR

A few years after *Prova-Car*, he builds the rubber car *Polistes* (1974, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven). In 1992, he presents his *K2 - 7000-Metre-High Flying Jungle and Mountain Machine* (Collection Family Deweer, Otegem; see p.79) at documenta 9, a flying machine with the appearance of a car. This is followed in 2001 by the *Thermo Photo Voltaic Energy Converter* (Art Collection Alychlo / Marc Coucke), a solar-powered car. It is on the preparatory drawings for *Prova-Car* that Panamarenko first uses his red Panamarenko / Nailati Efil logo: a stylised image of the blooming peyote cactus, a source of mescaline. Reversed, the logo reads "Italian life".

Panamarenko would remain fascinated by cars throughout his life. During the 1960s, the era of happenings, he toured around in a white Cadillac, then the prototype of the luxurious, powerful, and imposing automobile; and in the collages he made for the magazine *Happening News* (1965), he included several images of racing cars. Even in his private life – inasmuch as it can be separated from that of the artist – Panamarenko made no secret of his love for fast, powerfully motorised, and eye-catching vehicles. In the 1980s, he drove around in a gold-coloured VW Beetle convertible.





Prova-Car, 1967



In the catalogue for Panamarenko's travelling exhibition of 1978 (Berlin, Otterlo, Brussels), Lucius Grisebach rightly points out that Panamarenko is reconstructing a racing car. The artist believed that the reality of an object is more convincing than any painting. "The new poetic reality enters into dialogue with the existing reality of a real car." This statement should be understood in light of Panamarenko's aversion to painting in general and to figurative painting in particular. To imitate – or attempt to imitate – the depiction of an object from reality with paint struck him as extremely dull and pointless, because in copying, the painter learns nothing

about the thing being copied: "Someone paints, for example, a locomotive, but doesn't care how it works." For Panamarenko, *imitatio*, or imitation, is subordinate to *inventio*, or "invention".

Having previously belonged – since 1972 (*terminus ante quem*) – to the private collection of Panamarenko's friend Isi Fiszman, Prova-Car was then acquired by the Flemish Community in 2005 and was officially protected in February 2024 through its inclusion on the list of movable cultural heritage, the so-called Masterpieces List of the Flemish Community – a fundamental recognition of the groundbreaking character of Panamarenko's art.

