

[illegible]

44

A mechanical, 'magical menagerie' is emerging out of the disused shipyard of Nantes in western France. For **Bob Sheil** the project was first embodied by the spectacle of a giant elephant being paraded through the streets of central London in 2006. He describes how the collective of designers at La Machine are creating creatures through carefully contrived production and performance routines.



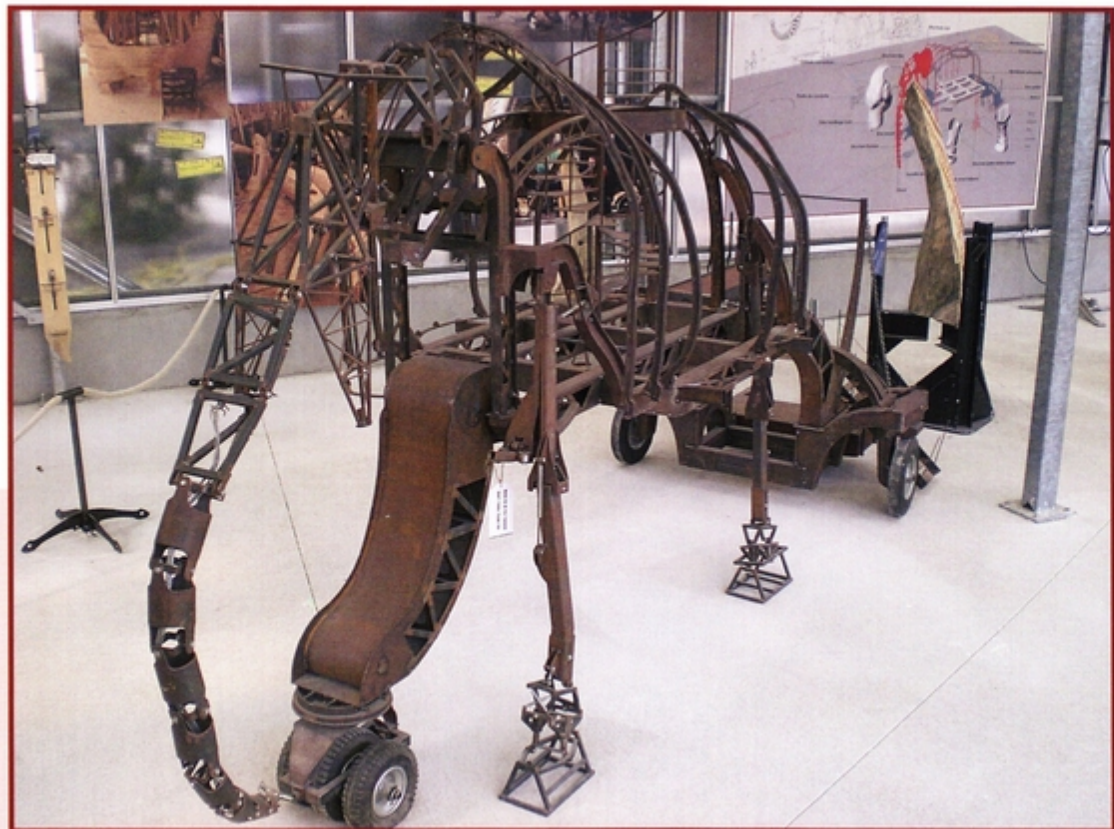
La Machine, The Sultan's Elephant, Regent Street, London, 2006
François Delarozière, co-director of La Machine, conducts the manipulators as they guide the Sultan's Elephant along Regent Street.

The French city of Nantes has long navigated the hazy line between the exotically imaginative and the fantastically real. The birthplace of sci-fi pioneer Jules G Verne, it also has an important place in France's history as a primary port and a centre for innovative shipbuilding and submarine construction. At the city's centre is the Île de Nantes, a tapering landform that divides the Loire for 5 kilometres (3.1 miles). The island's decline in the late 20th century, and subsequent passage through competing visions for commercial regeneration, maps the city's quest to rekindle its imaginative tradition. This spirit is most evident in the ribs of the former Dubigeon shipyards, an assemblage of post-industrial wreckage reskinned in the summer of 2007 to shelter the extraordinary goings on of La Machine, a collective of designers, makers, engineers, choreographers and theatrical performers led jointly by Pierre Oréface and François Delarozière.

In their own words, La Machine is an urban project whose aim for Nantes is to conceive of a different city: a city of movement, and a city of the imagination. How this will be manifest will be appreciated by those who have witnessed any of La Machine's extraordinary city spectacles, such as the Sultan's Elephant tour of central London in May 2006, a collaborative event with theatre group Royale de Luxe. The Sultan's Elephant, a 15-metre (49.2-foot) high, 43-ton wheezing mechanical mammal, was coaxed along by 18 costume-clad performers and a hoard of spellbound followers over the course of its two-day 'surprise' visit. The event was only made known to the public by the unexplained appearance of a wooden rocket half buried in a crater of asphalt, clay and steam early in the morning on the first day of the event at Waterloo Place.

London's renowned ambivalence to the unexpected and spectacular was tested as a vast crowd converged in search of the improbable. For François Delarozière, public and civic engagement is critical to understanding La Machine's work as architecture: 'One speaks of architecture in this sense as a living body, in other words a system, not just an object. The elephant is a machine that reveals its skeleton as a steel frame, its muscles as pistons, its veins as hydraulics and its heart as a motor, but, more importantly, it is constructed and assembled as a deliberate evocation of something other than the image of the object, something that is brought to life by action and reaction. An architecture of movement.'

Despite the exquisite fluency and detail of his hand drawings, which he refers to as 'instructions to make', and his academic background in anatomy, Delarozière is not particularly interested in the elephant looking like an elephant, nor his other creations, such as the ray fish or shrimp, closely resembling nature. The purpose of the works, he says, is their transgression of the real and the imaginary. They are made to partially resemble creatures which, through their illusiveness in the real world and proliferation in the narrative world, have entered into myth. It is the capacity of La Machine's creations to project acts of human curiosity, intention, emotion and invention that defines them and gives them their sense of delight. The effort



La Machine, The Grand Elephant, Nantes, France, 2007

Carcass study of the Grand Elephant on display at the La Machine workshops in The Île de Nantes, France.

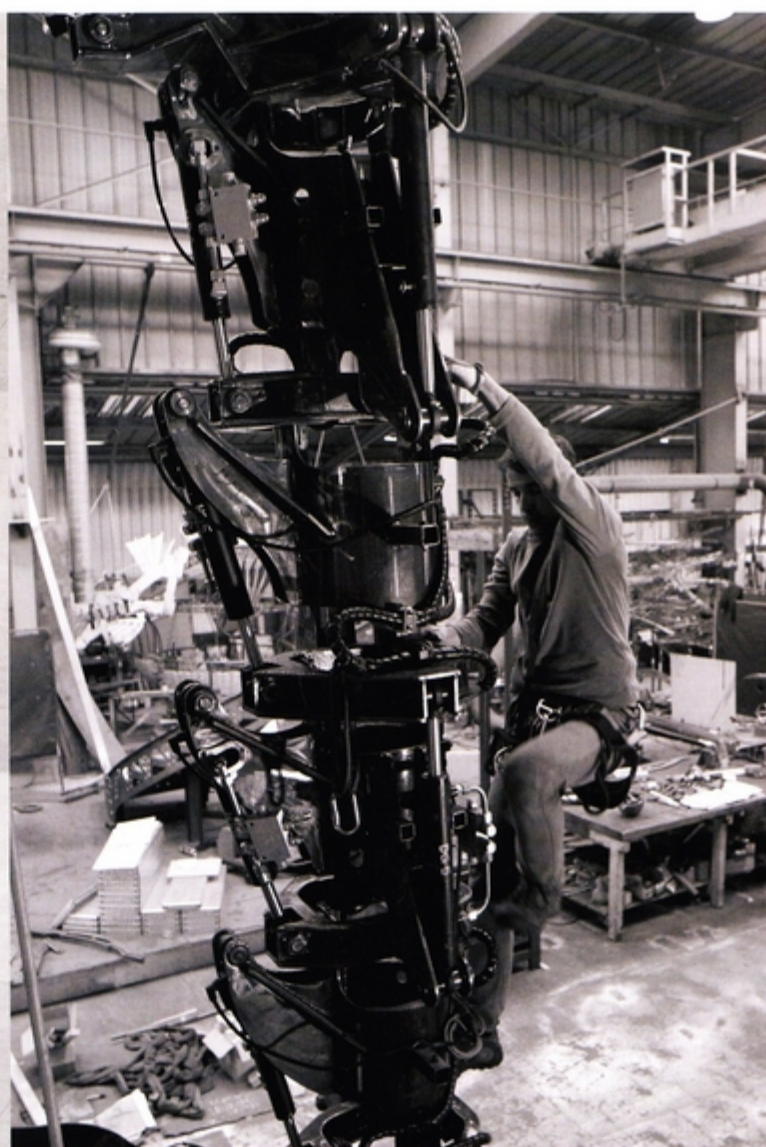
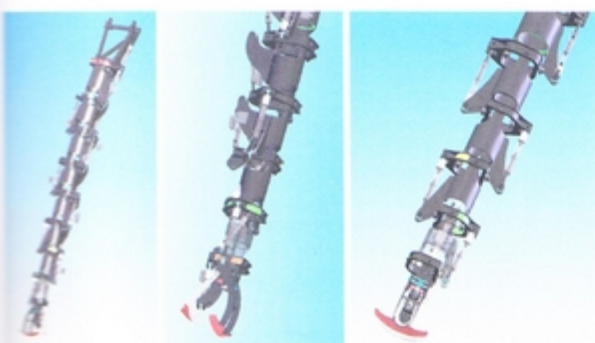
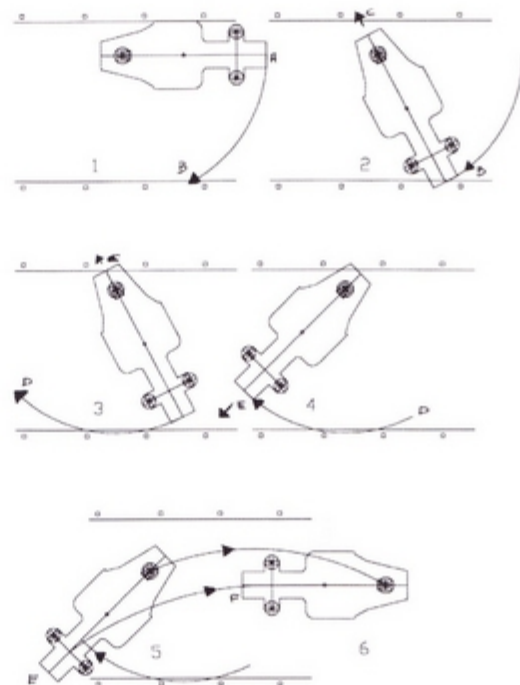
required in translating the machines' behaviour is thus regarded as the primary performance; although assembled to the scale of medium-size buildings, these machines are merely props upon which to project imaginary journeys as they undertake voyages through seemingly familiar places.

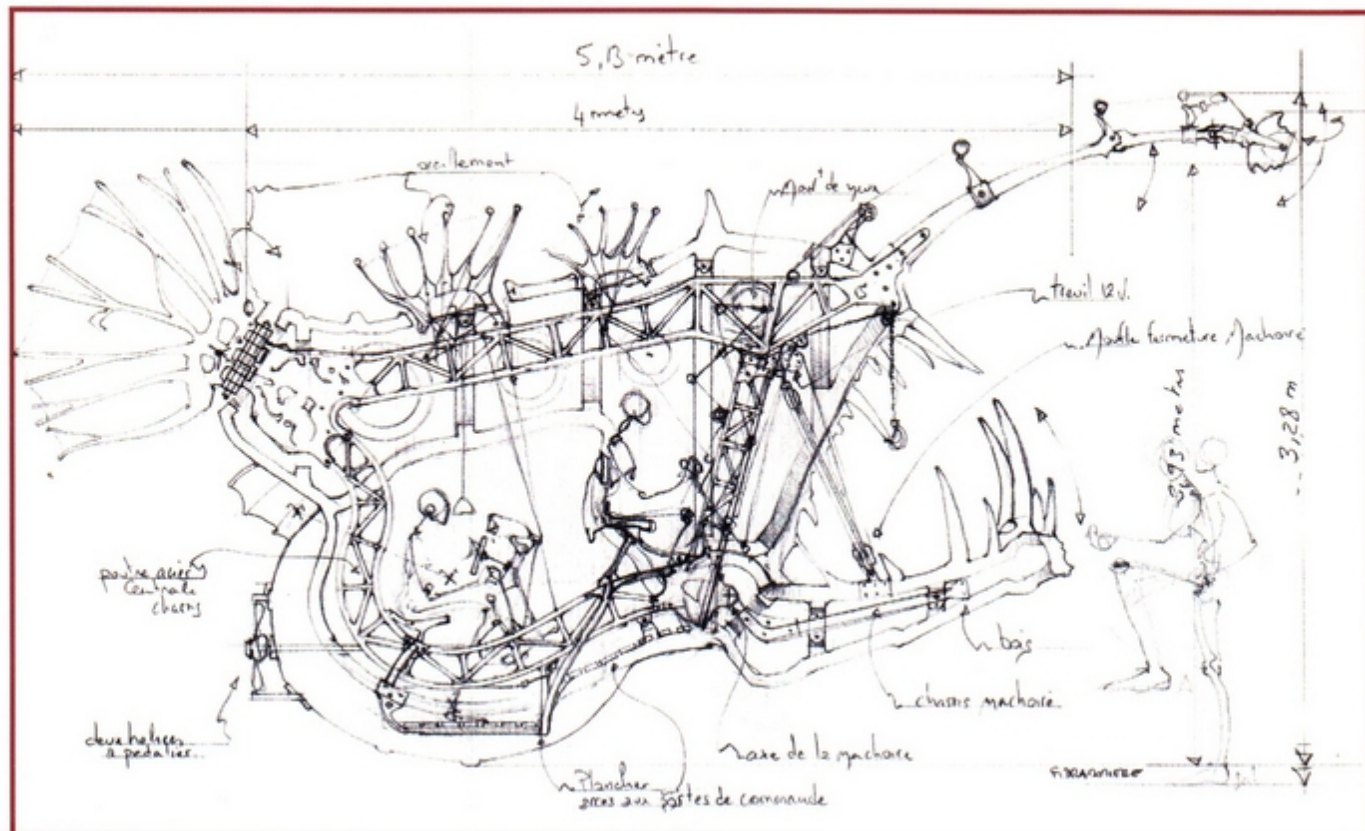
La Machine's den at the Dubigeon shipyards does not adhere to the traditional secrecy of theatrical superstition. Where once vast submarines slid into the grey-blue of the salty Loire, drawings, models, tools, materials, prototypes and completed machines are all exposed in seamless acts of creation and performance. At first glance, gallery ushers, dressed in gauntlets, spats and boiler suits, appear a dramatic step too far; later, though, the same individuals can be seen in action within a welding booth, by the chop saw, all from the public viewing gallery designed by Patrick Bouchain. Stacks of raw material, rolls of shop drawings, arrays of jigs, and disparate fabricating processes are clearly visible as inseparable acts of the ongoing spectacle. Delarozière compares this transparency to the strings that connect the marionette with its manipulator. It is the evidence rather than the erasure of human involvement that prompts imagination. What might be thought of as 'human error' is a deliberate attempt to convey the translation of

ideas from image to artefact as a physiological human endeavour. For him the key component is that the audience reads human intention, and the effort required to translate it, as the primary performance.

This is all quite apparent in the carefully choreographed script that stretches from sketch to promenade. The fine line between hands-on and computational methodology, however, lies not far beneath the spectacle of La Machine's production and performance routines. Exquisite as they are, Delarozière's drawings do not encapsulate all the information required to fabricate, test, assemble or engineer these works, nor do they rely on the embellishment of workshop conversation for completion. They certainly inspire confidence, a not unimportant role for a design whose primary purpose is to result in the manufacture of a complex artefact. They certainly allude to the artefact's quality, scale, position of structure, scope of articulation and so on. They certainly occupy a dominant place in the initiation, portrayal and placement of imagination as

From analogue to digital, from static to dynamic, and from live to recorded performance. The design, fabrication, assembly and performance study of the elephant's trunk is previewed through digital simulation, tested in fabrication, and both physically and digitally manipulated in performance.



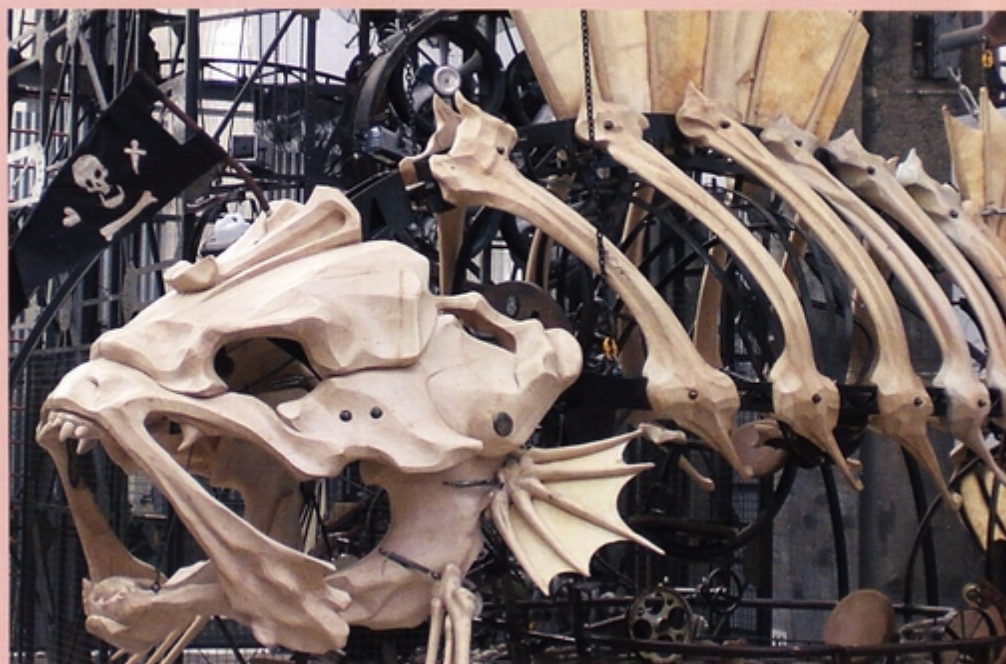


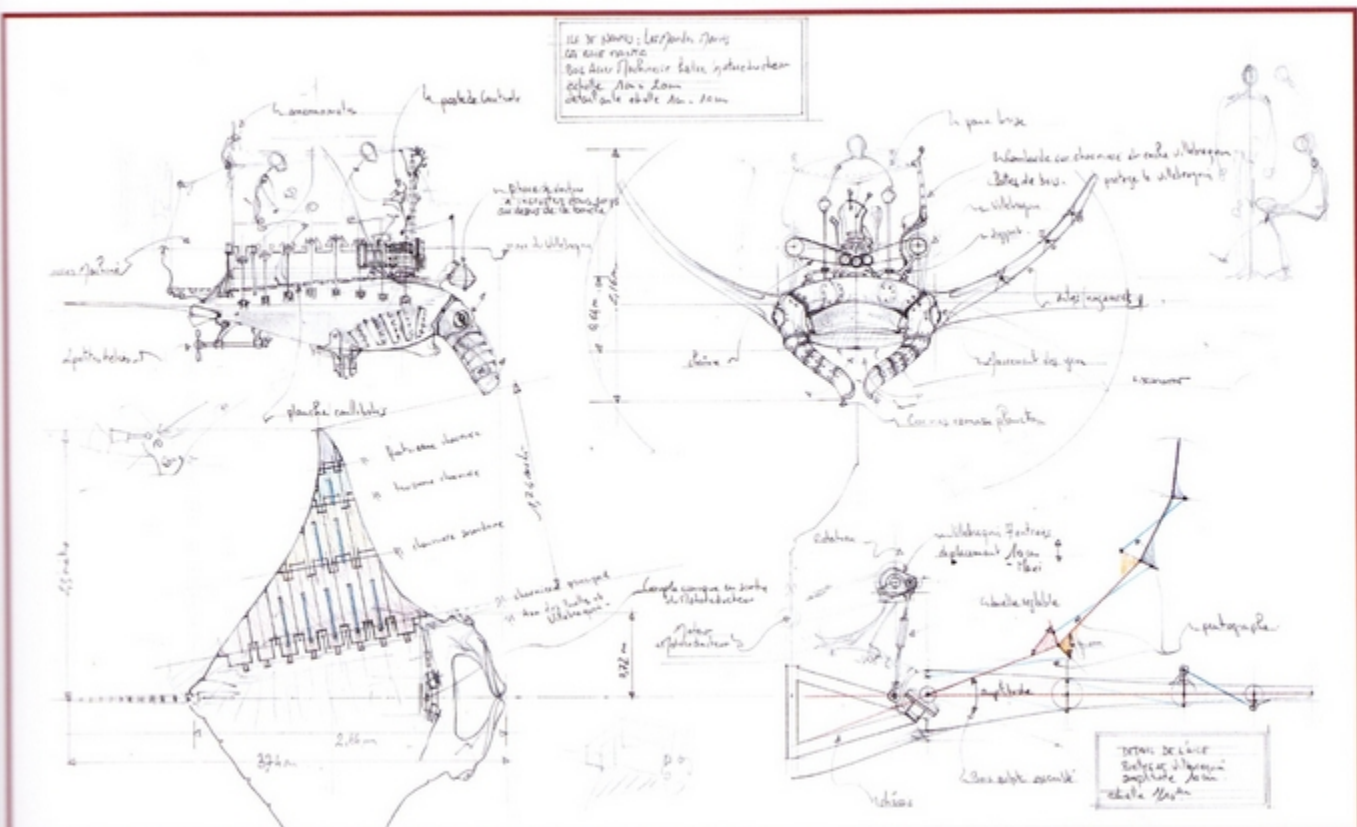
La Machine, La Luminaire des Grands Fonds (The Deep-Sea Angler Fish), Île de Nantes, France, 2007

Sectional study for La Luminaire des Grands Fonds, one of many extraordinary machines under construction for Le Mondes sous Marin (The World below Water), prototypes for an ongoing proposal for a vast carousel in Nantes of imaginary deep-sea creatures. François Delarozière describes his drawings as his language, his way of telling stories: 'It is the starting point of either the studies or the construction. Most of the time the object diverts from the drawing, but I do not modify the sketch which exists independently. They have their own life as drawings.'

La Machine, Le Poisson Pirate (The Pirate Fish), Île de Nantes, France, 2007

Le Poisson Pirate located in La Machine's exhibition space while it awaits the future construction of Le Mondes sous Marin.





La Machine, La Raie Manta (The Manta Ray), Île de Nantes, France, 2007

Preliminary fabrication studies for La Raie Manta. Delarozière's drawings seem to capture all that is necessary to evoke the idea and the information on how to make it. Although followed by extensive embellishment in digital and analogue media, it is remarkable how often the final outcome resembles the detail of early studies.

the central role of La Machine's activities. But for conversion to the real thing they pass through a number of digital formats and processes, including 3-D scanning, modelling, animation and fabrication. Occupying a clear place in the gallery, the display of how digital technologies are deployed in the fabrication process is not concealed. However, the presentation conveys them as merely practical and efficient tools rather than a means to challenge or evolve design. The sketch remains the blueprint.

Far more curious is the deployment of processing technologies in the performance of the machines. On big occasions their performance is always live. Transmission of human intention and interaction from conductor to marionette, from mechanical nervous system to articulated limbs, from induced movement to the illusion of behaviour, and finally to the mind of the audience, is magical. What is less apparent is that

while this is going on, the performance is recorded as a digital script. Past performances can therefore be recalled at any time later, to review the most or least successful movements or responses. While, again, digital technologies are deployed for purposes of practicality and efficiency, their presence provokes a fascinating line of questioning on what might be possible if they were accepted as a system integral to the performance. Could the machines learn to 'read the city as they march through it? Could they teach us a thing or two about the way that we use it? Could they generate indigenous offspring? La Machine's projects are not architecture in the conventional sense, but they present an extraordinary mirror to it. Thus they should not be dismissed as mere street theatre, albeit on a spectacular scale. Within the mechanical menagerie is a deep well of magical inspiration. **D**