



# Luc Mattenberger

The Machiavellian end that justifies the means might be a way to describe the art of Luc Mattenberger. But although we can understand the means, the end seems to elude us.

The “machines” created by this Swiss artist seem to oscillate in a limbo in which their intended use has not yet been fully defined. They could be disturbing instruments of attack, or just bizarre toys. It is the eye of the beholder which defines their identity and decides whether to baptise each work by placing it on a battlefield or a playground.

The only certainty is the aesthetic value of Luc’s creative work, as he produces mechanisms, gears and alien compositions of materials. Although part of the valuable legacy of his fellow countryman Tinguely, they embrace a historic and cultural panorama that is entirely contemporary - the kind of contemporary that over the past twenty years has seen the beginning of international conflicts, ruthless ethnic battles, the rise of terrorism in its most insidious form, kamikaze, and an increase in all forms of religious, economic, political and social intolerance.

Those who are creating change are those who try to fight the systems that make the wrong decisions on their behalf.

Our thoughts and actions should be guided by free will and conscience, knowledge should be the picklock with which to sweep away prejudice and aberration, in order to recover the concept of civility and respect for diversity.

**WE ARE ALL POTENTIAL CANDIDATES FOR KAMIKAZE,  
WE COULD ALL JUMP INTO THE SADDLE  
AND HEAD TOWARDS THAT STEEL BELLY, CLOSING OUR EYES  
FOR ONE FINAL PRAYER OR LAST ADIEU.  
IT IS NOT THE MEANS WHICH ARE DECISIVE, BUT THE END.**

Mattenberger’s works are question marks, and observers are given great freedom to fear them or love them.

As if they were characters in search of an author, in the vein of Pirandello,

**his machines can become part of our  
worst nightmares or find shelter in our  
most reassuring fantasies.**

There is no doubt that Luc has always been fascinated by machines, whose power is so seductive that their dark side is cast into oblivion.

How can we fail to stand open-mouthed and gaze skywards as we watch the acrobatics of the Red Arrows flashing across the skies? At times like those, nobody connects the wonder of those aircraft, piloted so skilfully, with their true function as military planes - built for defence of course, but also for attack.

**All** of Luc’s works run along this same vein: good and evil. All of them can function in space, if only someone dares to drive or touch them.

**EXCAVATRICE** could be held and taken for a walk, were it not for the toothed wheel that can tear open the pavement, crush the floor and carve out new trajectories.

If we wanted to be provocative, we might think it was the artist’s anarchic response to having his works placed in museums that are usually unsuited (because of their age) to the strength and steely solitude of his creations.

The exhaust pipe has the features of a megaphone, to amplify the deep throb of the engine, silenced in the halls of the museum.

It refers to the exhausts of the bikes of the *Hells Angels*, the most famous bikers in America, veterans of World War II who became notorious for committing crimes, abusing alcohol and living nomadic, dissolute lives after finding it impossible to rejoin mainstream society.

The motorbike, whose clever engineering and speed excites us, can become an instrument for violent, senseless acts.

## Once again, it is the individual who makes the difference in how the machine is used.

**CANDIDATE** is also part of this passion for motorcycles. The motorbike, commonly associated with an idea of freedom, the carefree venturing into unknown territory, surpassing the unexpected and encountering adventures, is for Luc a true travelling companion. He has used it to cross deserts, discover other cultures and marvel at fiery sunsets.

With *Candidate*, Luc really has darted across the waters of a lake, but still dreams of conquering the horizon of the sea.

The work embodies all the hopes and values of the motorbike enthusiast, yet arouses a subtle yet forceful sensation of unease, insecurity and panic in the onlooker. This is no coincidence: the idea for this work dates back to October 2000 when two kamikaze terrorists affiliated to Al-Qaeda blew out the American ship USS Cole at the port of Aden in Yemen.

An *objet d'art* that seems to be the result of an amusing, industrious mechanical collage could become an instrument of death, if ridden by a potential suicide victim. Could the title of the work be a self-declaration?

We are all potential candidates for kamikaze, we could all jump into the saddle and head towards that steel belly, closing our eyes for one final prayer or last *adieu*.

It is not the means which are decisive, but the end.

*Candidate* is placed on a rotating platform whose revolutions remind us of the cyclical ambiguity of things which can be good or evil, attractive or threatening, depending on how they are perceived and interpreted.

The last work on display at Steellife is a guard rail, mounted on wheels as if it were a trolley. It can defend but also obstruct, it can be relegated to a corner or placed centre stage: once again, the public decides.

The artist investigates the concept of safety which is partly represented by the idea of a guard rail: as we see it curving along the side of the road, it triggers the idea of protection in our minds.

We feel so protected that we accelerate, transforming the object of our security into an excuse to push beyond the limit. Why is the guard rail on wheels?

Because what represents security for one might be limitation for others: the wheels can be used to pull the work closer or push it away.

Luc observes places and buildings as though they were cars with gears. He looks for the ignition, the heart of the engine, the battery and the exhaust pipe. He has an engineer's way of thinking, which developed as a child and has been nurtured by an unflagging passion.

He sees the car as the ultimate expression of human intelligence. Perhaps this is why his works are characterised by a robotic vitality: they emit noise, smells, they move.

He is smiling though as he tells me that we are still a long way from the day when machines will master the human race, although with a leap of science-fiction it is not hard to imagine his creations as characters on the futuristic set of *Blade Runner*, seeing things that “*we humans cannot imagine, attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion, C-beams glitter in the dark close to the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time like tears in the rain. It is time to die*”.

Fortunately, for the works of Luc Mattenberger the finale has yet to be written.