

Tania Mouraud in dialogue with Elodie Stroecken
March 2016

Elodie Stroecken: You are exhibiting at Eastwards Prospectus gallery your “Balafres” photo series, that you started in 2014 and where we can find your most recent images. The photos were made in the Cologne coalfield, Germany, in three lignite extraction open-pit mines. This mineral – an energetically mediocre-quality fossil fuel, for which Germany is the world's biggest producer – is today the most polluting energy source¹. In spite of that, it is heavily produced by a method that seems insatiable and that destroys thousands of hectares: the mines “move” about the territory, eating away the soil on one hand, while digging up huge pits on the other hand, thus drawing out new landscape. The title of the photo series is a reference to the profound wounds caused to the Earth by humans, the authors of a total destruction of history and of the cultures in that area.

What made you visit those places?

Tania Mouraud: As it often happens, the project was born out of reading the press. I stumble upon an image that troubles me and it becomes the starting point for a new creation. This also goes both for some of my photos and for some videos. For instance, *Once Upon a Time* originated in a company magazine: I saw in there an image of a gigantic machine that enveloped the tree trunk, then cutting it into logs. I felt like my own body was being squeezed. I need to have an intimate and emotional rapport with a subject in order to approach it.



Elodie Stroecken: So, also a visual rapport?

Tania Mouraud: Yes, but sometimes an auditory one as well. In the case of “Balafres”, I stumbled upon an article in *Le Journal du Dimanche*. I clipped it. I immediately said to myself I needed to go and see that place. The image was very poor and, still, it started everything. I began doing some more research in the Internet, I saw other photos and I realized the extent of the disaster. What struck me was the fact that it was about the “biggest machines in the world.” I was keen on seeing this wasteland with my own eyes. Once I got there, my “horror behind the beauty” esthetics took over...

¹ Source: “Mines et énergie en Allemagne : enjeux environnementaux et paysages”, Michel Deshaies. http://archives-fig-st-die.cndp.fr/actes/actes_2003/deshaies/article.htm

Elodie Stroecken: You chose to approach this subject in an extremely direct, yet undoubtedly subtle manner.

Tania Mouraud: I can say that I react to whatever I find onsite. In 2014, I set out with the intention to shoot films, but, when I saw these landscapes, I decided to take photos. I only made a video the next year. When I work, I often have History in mind, as well as many cinema or television scenes, and paintings I saw in museums when I was a child. I think that this approach is the one that generates the effect you are talking about. I do address the subject directly, but it filters from the very beginning through my attitude towards the flow of images of the society we live in.

Elodie Stroecken: Since you allow yourself to be guided by instinct and emotion, can you tell me how you felt when you arrived onsite?

Tania Mouraud: I felt what Cézanne called "a slight sensation." It matches the moment when I become certain that it is exactly what I wanted.

Elodie Stroecken: How did you proceed to approaching this subject and this situation presenting before your eyes? Were you, for instance, tempted to play with its meaningless scale?

Tania Mouraud: One of the photos unveils this game, but it's not the best in the series. In the countries I know, such as India, there are people everywhere. Instead, these places are so deserted that even the machines seem small, but they are the only ones that allow you to grasp the space. A space that could very well be on another planet... My goal was not to report on the machines, but to approach an activity whose meaning we do not know. The first time I ever arrived at such a mine, I found myself somewhere high above, because these mines are incredibly deep... and I had never seen stretches of land in such different colors. They each correspond to geological layers brought to light by the excavations. This range of shades is to be found in my first photos. I was also fascinated by the coexistence with other sources of energy, such as windmills. They are strangely present in the same visual field, unveiling the schizophrenia of the contemporary world, which oscillates between extreme destruction of nature and focusing on renewable energy out of a feeling of guilt. But above all, I must say that discovering these landscapes awoke memories from my youth, from the time when I was watching western films. Ever since I was 17, when I saw Antonioni's *Red Desert*, I have always been fascinated by factories, by furnaces. I have always had a place where I could go to "contemplate my factory".

Elodie Stroecken: In your exhibition you present a video installation entitled *Pandemonium*. It was made in Germany and describes in the background the constant smoke column rising from the furnaces resembling to those of nuclear plants.



Tania Mouraud: They are actually thermal power plants fueled by the lignite mined located a few kilometers away. Because the reason for being of these mines and of all their consequences, is the production of electricity via these plants! I made *Pandemonium* after my third trip to Germany, in 2015. There are three mines in the North Rhine-Westphalia land that I visited: Inden, Garzweiler and Hambach. At the end of the last trip, I wanted to return to Garzweiler to make sure I had taken all the images I wanted. But access was restricted by the Police because of the presence of environmental protesters. I regretfully went to another mine. I had no other photos to take. Looking around, I saw the furnaces and filmed them from afar, mechanically, as I often do when I have a camera with me and want to record situations or scenes for some subsequent development. I looked over the recording later that evening and I liked it a lot. So I went back the next morning for a longer film, right before returning to France. I like a lot the fact that the blue sky can every now and then be spotted behind the huge amounts of CO₂ that fill up the background. I deliberately focused the image on the formation of the smoke columns in order to rule out any anecdotal element and to allow the viewer to oscillate between the remains of History and the present of that invisible death.

Elodie Stroecken: Due to this framing, the viewer sometimes loses the notion of scale. The smoke merges with the sky, which becomes abstract, the same as in another video of yours, *Niagara*, that you made from behind the water curtain of the namesake waterfall and that introduces the viewers to the liquid and abstract essence of matter. Immersed into the image, they no longer know whether it is smoke, water or ink, and thus confront the unleashing of nature.

We have talked a lot about the picturesque nature of your photos and videos, particularly when nature becomes the subject of your works. You have a keen sense of detail, which allows you to create series of images that we could describe as pure abstractions.

Tania Mouraud: I think that the reason for that is my fascination for painting. My bank of fixed frames is the Museum. It is probably why, in the nature-related series, this idea of working on the edge of the photo prevails, either through the choice of subject, or through certain features of the photo camera, as it happens, for instance, in the "Made in Palace" series. I thus try to convey a sense of foreign element, a sense of solitude.



The appearance of details is mainly the result of the chosen equipment, but also of the fact that they are snapshots. I am very keen on this photography method. The paper used in printing is also crucial. I don't want to employ glossy paper as in documentary photography. I choose a more silky paper, which allows me to obtain what we in the 80's called Fresson studio's "carbon print".

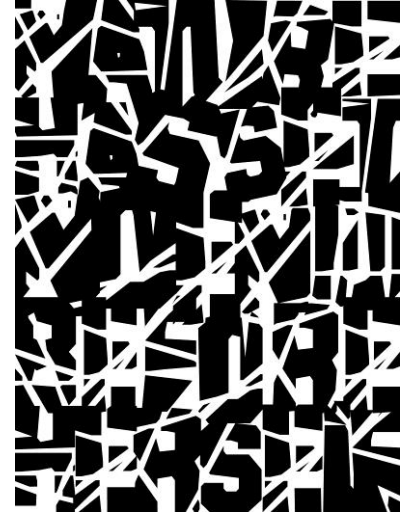
Elodie Stroecken: The "Balafres" photo series was born at the same time as *AD NAUSEAM*. We can find in there your attraction to machinery, some sort of fascination-repulsion that we had already identified in *Once Upon a Time, Face to Face*, as well as that violence against nature.



Tania Mouraud: The origin of that is a fascination towards what the machine says about "civilization". Today, we are all keen on asserting the true environmentalist concerns in our society. Spinoza's quote that is part of the exhibition – "*Nature has set no end before herself and All final causes are nothing but human fictions*" – has emerged in my work 15 years ago.

But, as regards environmentalism, I do not have the same concerns as the younger generations. Having read René Dumont in the 70's, I understood what was at stake. Among

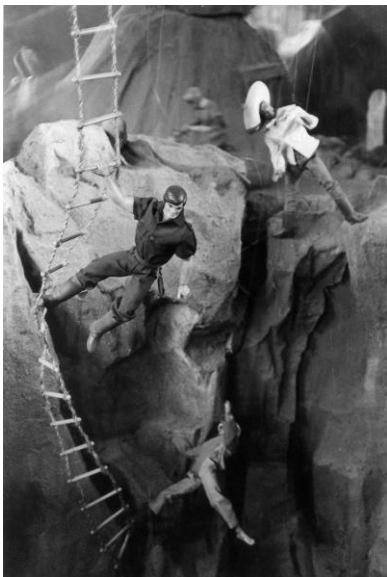
others, he anticipated a return to vegetarianism in order to be able to feed the entire population on Earth.



Elodie Stroecken: Some sort of humane environmentalism? Reflections guided exclusively by the people's living standards?

Tania Mouraud: Yes. The rich countries destroy the environment to get fatter, it all comes down to a class conflict in the end.

Elodie Stroecken: In the exhibition, you are presenting your "Désastres" photo series that you created right before "Balafres", in the woods near Saint-Etienne (France). You are portraying hectares of destroyed forests. Once again, you maintain your distance. For that matter, in all your photography cycles, your point of observation is extreme: you are either very close to, or very far from, the photographed subject. In "Vitrines", "Rétrovisées", "Borderland" or "Rubato", you are very close to the subject, while in "Backstage", "Balafres", "Désastres", you are much farther or you need to be farther. Therefore, you need to use much more powerful objectives.

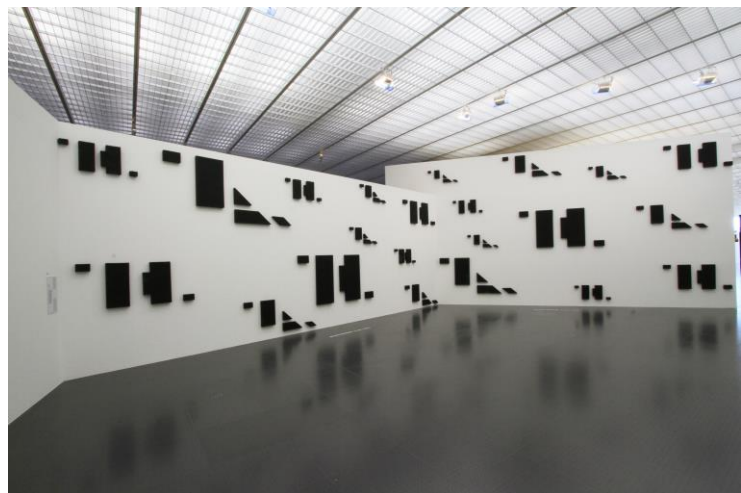




Tania Mouraud: One advantage of the objective, from a plastic perspective, is that it flattens image. Especially in the “Désastres” series, which almost present as Chinese prints.

Elodie Stroecken: You also subjected the photographs in this series to some processing in terms of colors - to be more precise, you suppress them and opt for black and white. Each time I look at the forests in the photographs, I feel like they are on fire and that they are nearing the state of ash.

Tania Mouraud: Indeed, the same as for videos, I feel quite at large when it comes to colors and I chose black and white because I think they are necessary to convey certain emotions. I dedicated six months to finding a key to this series. In the end, I switched the image to negative. Thanks to this unusual white, a connection emerges with the *Black Power* series of works.



Elodie Stroecken: *Face to Face* is an older video (2009), but it was already announcing your more recent photography series.

Tania Mouraud: The origin of the *Face to Face* video was a 15-line article in the free daily newspaper *Metro* on “Europe’s largest metal waste pit”, located near Duisburg and called Schrottninsel. I decided to go there and film. I went there alone, after I changed my whole equipment: one camera as small as the palm of my hand and all the other things stuffed in a small bag. This was the first time I used a monopod. On the first day, I rented a boat to

explore and see all the former, shut-down plants along the Ruhr valley. I passed right by this pit. On the same afternoon, I went to a decommissioned place to shoot it from afar. That was when the German train that we can see in the video passed by. The mount of metal waste immediately reminded me of the piles of human bodies in *Nuit et Brouillard*. The second morning I obtained the permission to film on the very location. The guard who let me in was not scared of an old lady who had no sophisticated equipment. So I carelessly filmed and, four or five hours later, he let me climb the tallest crane on-site.



Elodie Stroecken: Was “your slight sensation” affected by fear?

Tania Mouraud: No! When I film, I am in my element, nothing can happen to me, and my forces increase substantially. I am completely focused on what I do. In this world of men, I feel completely free and I live the life I want to live. I feel alive. I feel like myself. This video was presented, among others, at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver. I thought it was interesting and logical to present it in the “Border Zone” exhibition, which addressed the subject of cultural boundaries between peoples. This set-up became the symbol of the death of other cultures, and the machine – the symbol of destruction.

Elodie Stroecken: This video, which is the heart of the exhibition at Eastwards Prospectus, is in my opinion an extraordinary opportunity to understand that your work is never documentary, nor narrative, but it is open to multiple levels of reading, of historical, social, universal and autobiographical nature. Understanding that will enrich the images, whether they are photos or videos.

No Name also has a connection to Romania...

Tania Mouraud: It is a set-up that comprises two films, of which one was made in Iasi, with the permission of the chief rabbi of Bucharest. When I arrived in the local Jewish cemetery, I was stunned by the fact that half the tombs no longer had tombstones. They had been stolen for house building. This is something that also happens in other Eastern Europe countries.

I filmed the tombs for more than five hours... Then I systematically removed all the images that showed tombs with tombstones. For me, this absence of names means the eradication from memory of those who rest there. There could even be graves of some of my family members in that cemetery.

I switched all the images to a sepia shade with a hint of orange, which blurs perception and makes them unreal-like. Sight cannot stick to anything particular. I finally compressed the 5-hour film into a 11 minutes and 48 seconds long video. Many people have confessed to me that the image of the tombs makes them think of railway tracks.

The other part of the video set-up was made in Paris. An abstract form emerges little by little and we realize that it is a mouth, but we don't know exactly what it does. It represents the inexpressible. There are no words left for this barbarity of the humankind. That is why I named it *No Name*.



Elodie Stroecken: You extracted videograms from this video and used them to produce photographs.

Tania Mouraud: Yes, the "lasi" series. In this case too I resorted to slightly unusual processing: when you choose an HD videogram and run it through the image processing software, it aliases and then you must apply a filter to obtain one single image. Here, I willfully left it aliased. This is sheer fiction.

I do not claim to make reportage. I enact my personal fictions. The same goes for *Face to Face*. They are science-fiction images.



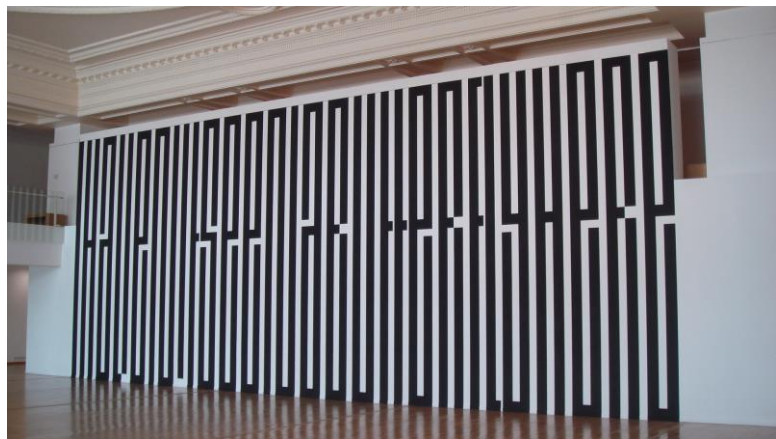
Elodie Stroecken: These tombs also reminded me a lot of the commemorative plaques that you filmed in your *Nein* video.

Tania Mouraud: *Nein* is a fiction. The suffering of the human being reaches its apex there, because those people passed away as smoke, in anonymity, without even being buried. Their

My encounter with Fondane was a *major* one. When I was preparing my solo show at Centre Pompidou-Metz, I met a member of the Benjamin Fondane study society, who offered me a CD with texts by this author. That was how I found that sentence. The fact that Fondane is coming to Iasi, just like a part of my family...

Elodie Stroecken: For many reasons, you know Romania well. You have mentioned your family origins, as well as your trip to Iasi several years ago. You have also exhibited in Romania in the past.

Tania Mouraud: Yes, in 2009, at the National Museum of Contemporary Art, I exhibited a *wall painting*, IHAVENTSEENABUTTERFLYHERE, under the "Sublime objects" exhibition. There is a huge black hole in the Eastern Europe History: the extinction of one third of its population, who ended up in gas chambers or mass executions. We cannot pretend that nothing has happened. My origins are French and Romanian and, of course, these issues particularly concern me.



So I chose this sentence by Pavel Friedman, a 20-year old man who was imprisoned in the Theresienstadt concentration camp and who described what he saw. I discovered it in Prague, in a bookstore in the Jewish quarter, where I came across a catalogue with this title on the cover. I thus became aware of a collection of six thousand drawings made by Jewish children during their detention at Treblinka. Many teachers were arrested together with their classes of students and continued teaching in the camps. The book contained a part of the drawings that were preserved intact. That sentence allowed me to describe Ceausescu's palace where the "Sublime objects" exhibition was held, but it was also a reference to environmentalism and a cryptic reference to the greatest crime in the history of the 20th century.

Fondane's sentence as reiterated on billboards, in the same manner, partially reflects my story: my origins are French and Romanian. I am returning to Romania to present an exhibition, and Fondane, who left Romania the same as my father, is coming back here in the French language. For me, it is as if I cried out in my place of origin. It is more powerful here than anywhere else.

Elodie Stroecken: CRIERTOUJOURSJUSQUALAFINDUMONDE seems to represent a remarkable echo to the work requested by Frac Lorraine at the Metz, entitled *HOWCANYOUSLEEP?* and exhibited there permanently. It would be extraordinary that this sentence by Benjamin Fondane should become, the same as at the Metz, a permanent set-up.

While your public “writings” are today read from the perspective of street art, I find it significant for us to remember that you started this type of works in the 70's. In 1977, you went to the street for the first time...

Tania Mouraud: It all started with *City Performance n°1*. At that time, the newspapers wrote: “Tania Mouraud's cry in the city”. It was actually a stance. At that time, it was mostly about escaping the museum/gallery system, according to a rhizomatic development.



Elodie Stroecken: So you decided to work on billboards.

Tania Mouraud: I found it important to work on the spots that contained commercial messages. To use one single word that said: “I am not interested in what you are submitting”.

Elodie Stroecken: So it was a novel gesture!

Tania Mouraud: The novelty for the artistic practice was to use the redundancy from advertising. Others had already worked on billboards, but without this strategy of message reiteration and dissemination. The important thing in the city is to extend the possible reading targets. It is an individual and anonymous stance, at least onsite, because the message is then absorbed by the press, and the name of the artist becomes known.

Within this exhibition, I wanted to intervene on billboards at Roman and Iasi, two cities with special significance in the history of my family. I am very happy I have had the opportunity to exhibit in Romania. In a way, my return here is a journey back to my roots through art.