



blown away

PHILIP SAMARTZIS' FIELD RECORDINGS OF ANTARCTIC WINDS CAPTURE THE ICONIC SOUNDS OF THE SOUTH POLE.

Writer *Max Olijnyk* Photographer *Philip Samartzis*

FIRST THERE'S A HOWLING, WILD WHISTLE UNDERCUT BY A BASSY MOAN – A WIND THAT IS ALL OVER THE PLACE, YET POWERFUL BEYOND UNDERSTANDING. There's also a softer tinkling sound, like a mixture of rain on a tin roof and change jingling in your pocket – maybe ice and snow smashing into a wall? Even played on a laptop, this mesmerising sound has the power to transport you to a place you've never been. It's a recording of a blizzard in Antarctica, and it was made by Philip Samartzis, an artist and academic of sound. It's just one of the field recordings he's collected from his travels, and part of a larger practice concerned with documenting unique environments.

Samartzis first travelled to Antarctica in 2009, and wrote the book *An Absent Presence* about the experience. However, the audio he recorded on the trip was disappointing. "I spent the entire time I was there mitigating wind: reducing it, removing it from my recordings," he says. "When I came back I discovered that one of the iconic elements of Antarctica was really lacking in my work."

With the help of a grant from the Australian Antarctic Division, Samartzis travelled to Casey Station last year, "armed with a whole range of new technology to capture the sound presence of katabatic wind". Katabatic winds are high-density, low-gravity winds that gain velocity as they travel down a slope. In Antarctica, these winds originate at the South Pole, and then zoom across the elevated

ice sheets before descending to sea level, often reaching hurricane speeds (and very frosty temperatures) by the time they collide with onshore breezes from the Southern Ocean. "Should you be out in the field and a katabatic hits, it could be a blizzard," Samartzis says. "The temperature drops, you lose orientation, you have white-outs – a whole range of things."

On this second trip, Samartzis encountered two blizzards. He documented both, and they sound terrifying. "For the first one, we were out in a Hägglunds [tracked vehicle] in an ice field and the wind started to pick up – there was no warning," he says. After finding a field hut to shelter in, Samartzis headed out to record the wind in the wild. "To hear a blizzard in a natural ice environment is a completely different experience and one that has rarely, if ever, been documented properly," he says. "The beautiful sound of granules of ice blowing across the field is something that's very hard to describe. I was out there for about four hours until my microphones and my field recorder froze."

He was safely ensconced at Casey Station for the second round, which was probably for the best, as it was the strongest summertime blizzard the station had ever recorded. "It was great, because I had 16 microphones set up around the station, and the station was just getting hammered for a 36-hour period." You can hear the outcome, along with some of Samartzis' other work, at bogongsound.com.au.

For now, Samartzis isn't planning any more trips to Antarctica. Instead, he's turning his attention to documenting other unique environments, starting with the Greenland ice shelf. "It's one of the fastest moving ice sheets on the planet, so the idea is to put a microphone as close to the base as possible," he says, describing a project in which scientists are drilling a 2.5 kilometre-deep hole through the ice. What will it sound like way down there, slipping through 80 thousand years of frozen time? "I'm not sure," he says. Someday soon, we'll all find out. •