

The high altitude field recordings of Philip Samartzis document the stress and strain of a world in environmental peril

By Richard Thomas

Philip Samartzis
Atmospheres & Disturbances
Room40 CD+Pbk/DL

Philip Samartzis's *Atmospheres & Disturbances* is an electro-acoustic composition based on field recordings made at the High Altitude Research Station in Jungfrauoch, Switzerland. Perched 3500 meters above sea level in the Alps, the research station performs an important service for all living species on this planet in that its principal area of research is climate change analysis.

These recordings exude an extremely cold, formidable quality. One of the many interesting aspects is that Samartzis also documents the impact of weather systems upon the structures of the research centre. Sometimes this sounds belligerent, sometimes benign. We hear the strangely comforting yet threatening howls and shrieks of gale force wind and other malevolent elements battering the metal clad infrastructure juxtaposed with the sweet, tinkling hard bop complexity of trickling water. Or the enjoyably musical jangle of metal cylinders in a gale – an Alpine gamelan of steel and ice.

These moments are occasionally disturbed by people and machines external to the research station. A helicopter, mysterious electronic buzzes, the hoot of a train whistle, a human chanting something or other in the landscape, service announcements at the local railway station. In spite of this, throughout these recordings we have no real sense of the research centre as a social space. We do not hear anything of the feelings and opinions of the people who work there. We have no sense of their professional lives or their inner lives. They are phantoms.

What must it be like to live and work in an environment so inhospitable that it may as well be the surface of the Moon, Mars or Antarctica? One might be drawn to ask questions, such as: do these singular people dream and have nightmares about? Do they get bored, frightened, depressed, worried? What do they do for fun? What are their names? Where are they from? How did they get there? What do they actually do and why? What are the socio-economic conditions of their working lives really like? What do their voices sound like?

We also hear nothing of the acoustic ambience of the actual place in which these people live and work. Yes, we hear the gargantuan drama of weather systems knocking seven shades of shit out of the exterior hull of their workplace, but we do not hear the sound of their offices and labs, their living quarters, or the equipment they use for research. Perhaps it is because such environments are seemingly undramatic and deemed boring to listen to, and that this sequence of recordings is concerned with the overtly dramatic – a work of oppositions and conflict. The title of the project makes that clear. It could be said then that this is a theatrical work.

How does Samartzis fit in to all this as an actor, as a human with agency? We don't hear him. We only hear what he decides to listen to and record. He is a ghost haunting a research station high in the Alps, or a medium absorbing and transmitting the cosmic petrochemical impact of spectral corporations that slowly but surely shove the planet into the ebb of a tide of death. But as much as Samartzis's intention is to examine the direct physical impact of climate change and the transformation of the landscape, he is also transforming that auditory landscape and musicalising it.

So any sense of what that environment is really like is obscured by compositional gestures. This, by extension, creates a distance between the listener and the core conceptual



The iceman cometh: Philip Samartzis

components of the project: location and climate change. Those living in an urban environment can only really get close to space and nature when they are mediated; we can only listen to a blizzard when it has been fixed and contained within a sound recording. Once this force of nature is sanitised, we can hear it as if it were music. This is also expedient – if it gets too fierce, too hostile, too much of a challenge, we can always press pause or stop and listen to something else.

So, what is happening here is anthropomorphic. We impose the conditions of music upon nature. Something that is anything but music yet which is nonetheless audible. Nature from places that we perceive to be mysterious, exotic, remote, extreme. Places that we will never visit, but we know that humans have visited and, in some circumstances, places we know humans and other animals and microbacterial organisms actually dwell. Places that are imaginable to us but unknowable all the same.

Those humans that visit these places and report back, sound recordists in this case, become proxies for us. Their ears become our ears. Perhaps that is it. We want to listen to someone else listening so we don't have to. But be wary – get ready for ruin, get ready to flee when your house is on fire, under six feet of water, or frozen solid. ○