GRANTA

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Hilary Mantel, Rick Moody, Annie Proulx, Tim Lott, Douglas Coupland, Joshua Ferris, Xan Rice
plus dispatches from Paris, Beijing, Angola and the Arctic

PHOTO ESSAY

THE ARCTIC

Photographs by Gautier Deblonde

Words by Lavinia Greenlaw

There is a place in Lapland called Arctic Circle. You can step across a painted line and receive a certificate, although the actual circle, around 66 degrees latitude north, is unfixed. It wavers over the north like a lasso and slips according to the tilt of the earth on its axis.

Midwinter

The feeling of slippage is immediate. The nights are at least twenty hours long and the world is snow. While my mind gives up trying to keep time, my body clings to any familiar sign of it. The sky pales for three or four hours, although a constant black haze remains over the pole. A small sun inches into view and rolls along the horizon, and the sky takes on a faint wash of yellow and blue. I feel as if I've caught a glimpse of an actual day happening somewhere else. As the sun tips away again, I can't keep my eyes open.

The Arctic Highway runs north from Rovaniemi along a river, only now there is no river, just fields of snow. There is no road either,

and the few cars that come this way follow its compacted grey trace past signs that cannot be read because they, too, have been wiped out. This is fairy-tale snow, hanging in glittering swags from trees which double over under its weight. It emphasizes telegraph wires and heaps up cosily against windows. Snow scatters light and flattens perspective. It is absence and substance at the same time, a perfect form of equilibrium. There is nothing to read in it, just a fundamental continuity that makes every place familiar. I am near the edge of the compass. From the pole, whichever way you head is south.

What does minus fifty mean? That the ink in a pen freezes, that water thrown from a cup turns to ice before it hits the ground, that your lungs might bleed. Even now when buildings are heated and sealed and streets can be as brightly lit as a film set there is an inheritance of cold and darkness.

In a hospital in Lapland I meet a Finnish psychiatrist who is an expert in Arctic Personality Disorder. He says that darkness is less of a problem than the cold; it makes the body hoard blood around the heart, depriving the brain. He explains that the Arctic personality is characterized by *sisu* – adaptability and perseverance. Such people have a tendency to be greedy, stingy and ruthless. They hoard information, are suspicious of strangers and are 'sexually specialized'. His other interest is suicide, and he remarks that women have started to kill themselves in the same way as men. They used to take an overdose or drown themselves, 'so as not to leave a mess', but now they are as likely to use a gun.

This darkness doesn't trouble me. I came to the Arctic having lost my imagination and soon feel restored, not because there is nothing to see but because this is such a fundamental way of seeing. Even when it is cloudy, you can catch sight in the sky of wild streaks, sheets and pillars of gaseous colour. The aurora borealis or Northern Lights are a form of elemental disturbance (electron showers stirring up hydrogen and nitrogen) and the rawness of their colours, like the rawness of that small sunset, suggests a time when light was first

occurring. The Finns call the Northern Lights *revontulet* or foxfire, after a mythical fox who swept snow into the air with its tail, igniting it. If you talk to the Northern Lights, they will come down and grab you. If you don't wear a hat, they will clutch at your hair.

Not being able to see did not trouble me as I am so short-sighted. My understanding of light begins with fractured auras and haloes, leaky shifting colours and granulated shapes which might or might not become clear. There is a moment, though, when this world becomes very clear indeed, a winter twilight called, in Finnish, *sininen hetki* or the 'blue moment'. It is as if blue light rises out of the snow and, because everything is covered in snow, everything turns blue, so the world is full of its own space and silence and not empty at all.

Midsummer

A night in the port of Bodø in northern Norway, where every building, from the fishery to the church, is compact, functional and low. The town looks as if it has been constructed from a kit and could be packed up and driven off in a single day.

Even softened by cloud, the light is insidious. I am waiting for something to happen, for the sky to break, but nothing will happen and all night people circle the harbour square or ride back and forth in cars and on motorbikes, just passing the time. I lie down for three hours and, once or twice, dip into sleep.

The next day the ferry sails for five hours towards a dark line that breaks down into islands. Their cliffs are so sheer that they veer away from themselves and each island sits in black shadow, giving the impression that it is hovering on the sea. Everything is unanchored. There are too many islands, too much water and too much light.

Vaerøy is one of the Lofoten Islands. Here, the sun does not rise for a month in winter; nor does it set for two months in midsummer. The beach is little more than a ledge of blanched sand; the sea is so thickened by cold and light that it might be glass. For now it is calm, but whatever washes up has been pounded and scoured: heaps of

stones worn into huge, beautiful eggs shot through with quartz, a sheep's vertebrae, eye socket and jaw as smooth as paper, translucent shells of crabs, sea urchins and limpets, fraying husks of seaweed.

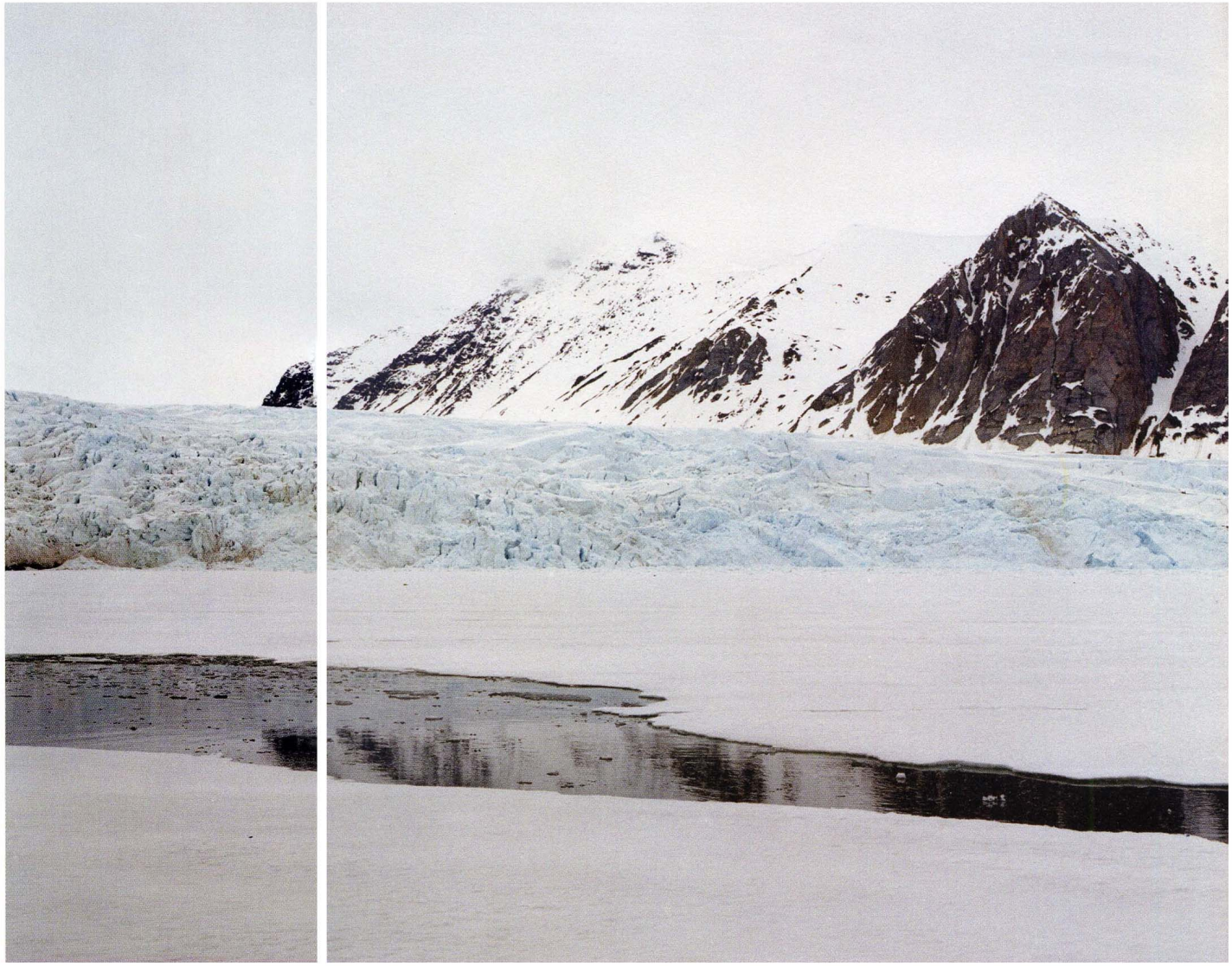
This is bird land. Their eggs are hidden beneath my feet among the egg-shaped stones. There are no trees so they make do with ground cover: rock, gorse and grass. Oystercatchers run past screaming, warning or distracting. Redshanks blurt from fence posts, their nests scattered among whatever grass they can find. Masses of gulls and terns explode out of the cliffs. Crows mob the oystercatchers, after their fledglings. Cormorants wheel and dive. Auks come into land to breed. They nest on high ledges and lay eggs which have evolved into a tear shape so that they won't roll.

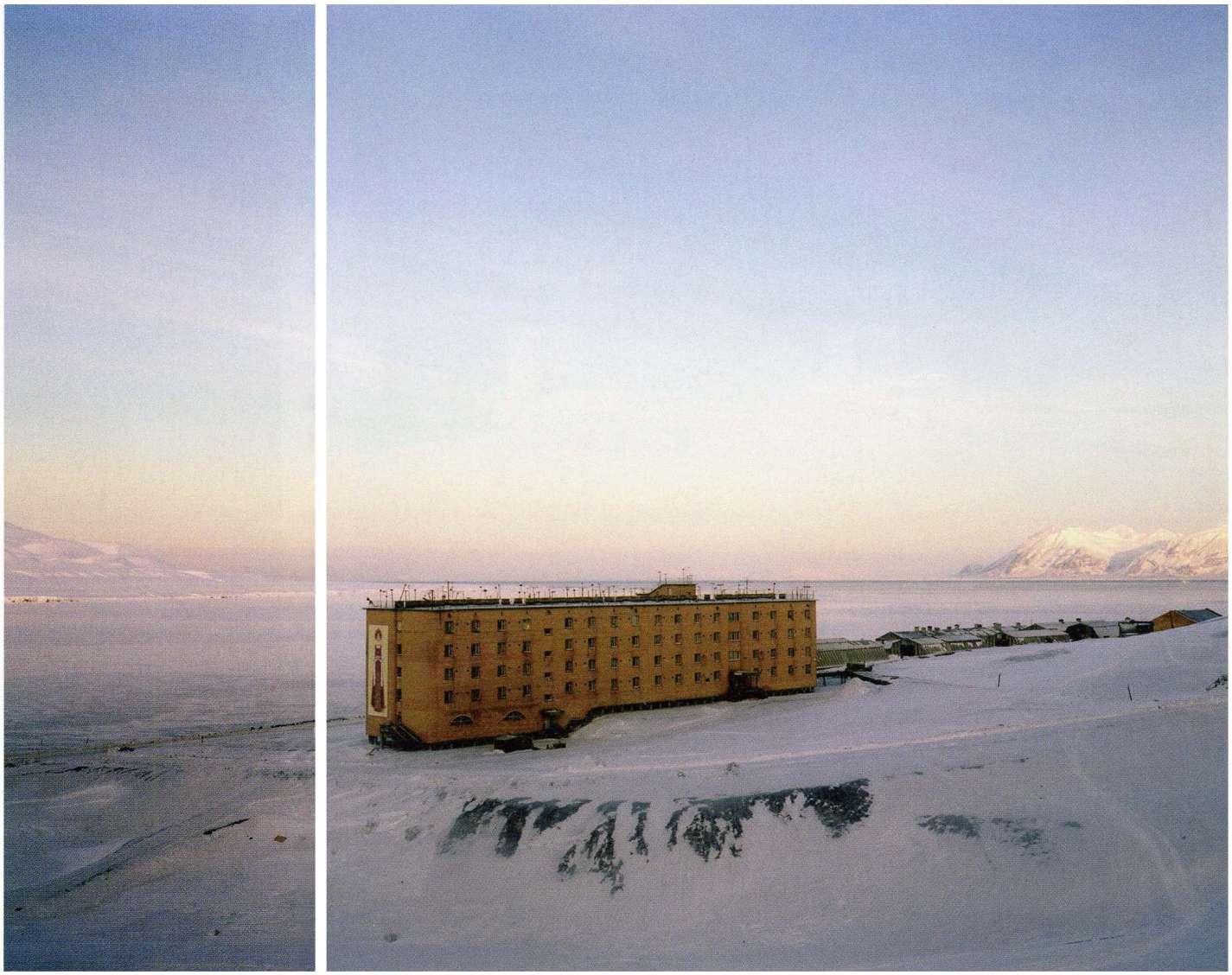
Midsummer is the feast of John the Baptist. Tonight the trolls come out to make mischief and the witches go to meet the devil on the mountain top. By late afternoon, the sun begins to make its way from stage left. People appear along the coast building fires. They share the traditional midsummer feast of dark beer, salami and semolina, but this is no raucous affair. The light is so bright that the flames are invisible. There are no leaping shadows. People gather round long enough to make sure that their unwanted furniture and tyres have properly caught light, and then they go home, long before midnight.

I wait on the beach as the sun makes its way to the centre of the view. At midnight exactly it starts to sink down on to the sea, so smoothly that it looks like a ball about to bounce. And then it does bounce, off the horizon. It is immediately rising again. I feel thrown into reverse. For all my years in the city, in London, my nights manipulated by tungsten, neon and sodium, halogen and sixty-watt bulbs, traffic lights, street lights and security lights, my body insists that this is wrong.

It is wrong to be able to see so far and so clearly that the earth curves, wrong to have a fifty-foot shadow, wrong to be sleepless and wrong to be so happy. Light meets every thought and glance. I have no imagination here. ■

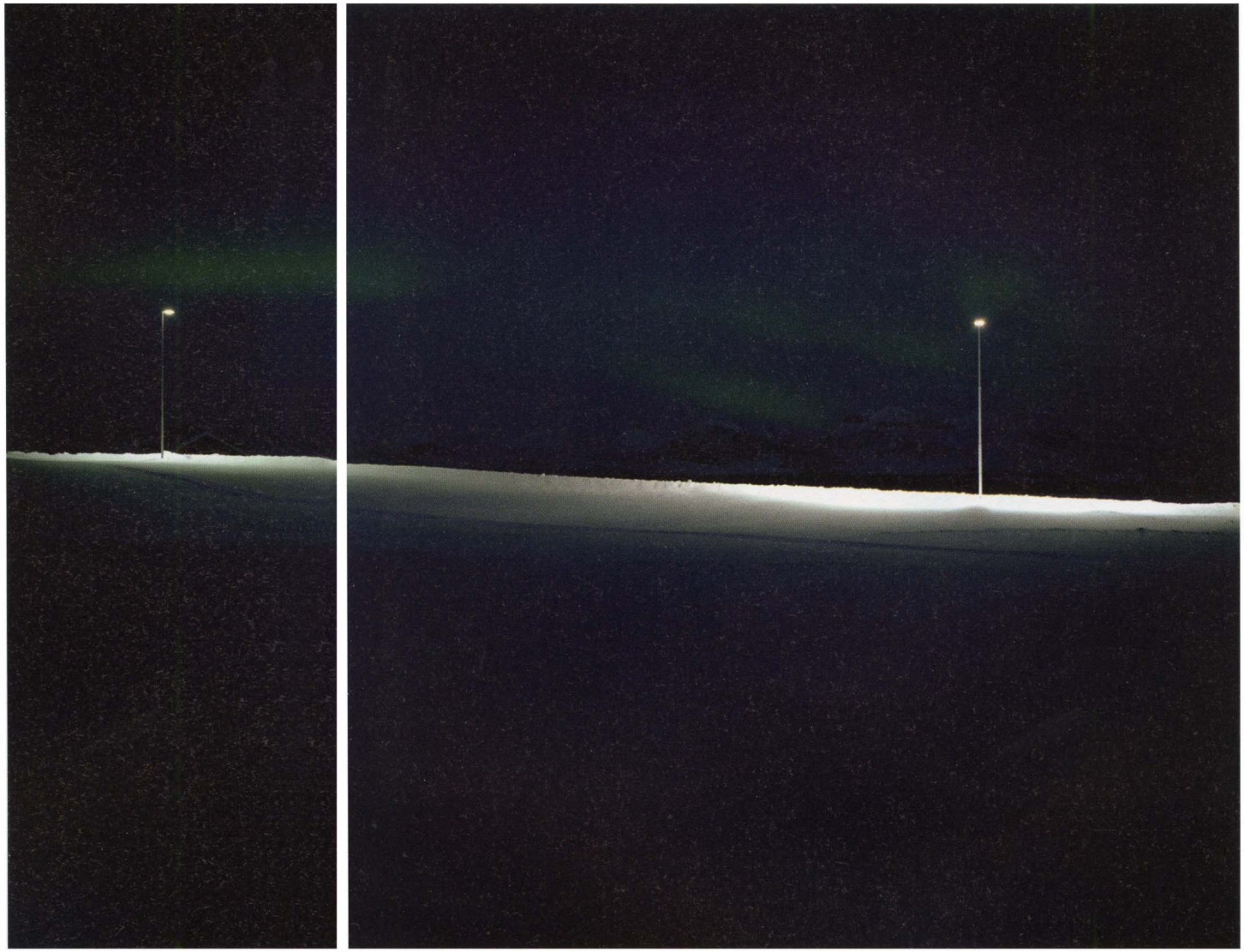
Gautier Deblonde has made five trips to the Norwegian archipelago of Svarlbard in the High Arctic since 2003. Spitsbergen, the main island in the group, lies between latitude 76.5° and 80° north. For 115 days each year, the sun does not rise above the horizon.



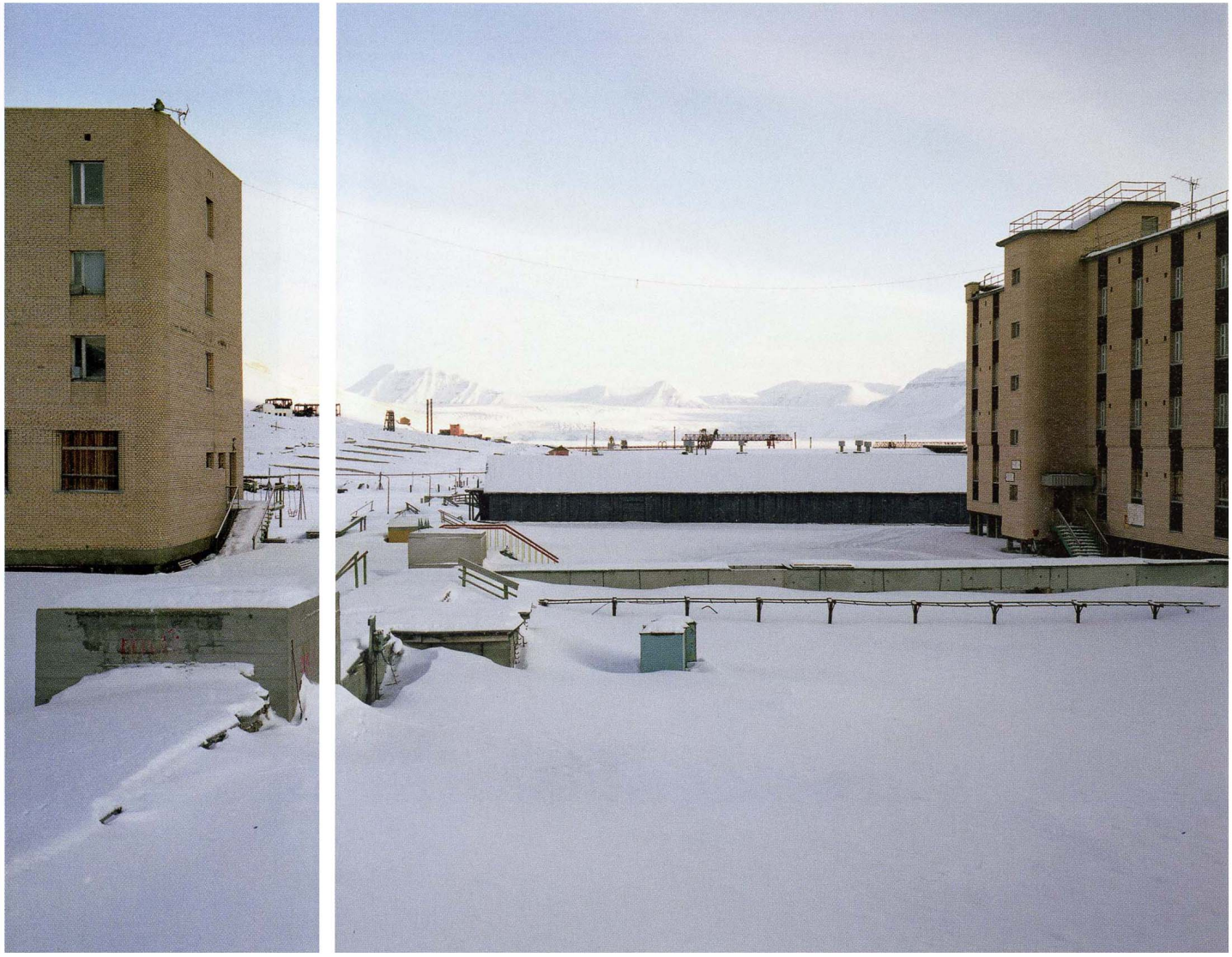


Barentsburg is a Russian mining town. It was established by the Norwegians in 1912 and bought by the Soviet Union in 1932. Now it is in decline, with a workforce of around 600 men and women from Russia and Ukraine.


УЗБЕК СУКИ



Ny Alesund, originally a mining town, is the world's most northerly community, where around 150 scientists work on the Natural Environment Research Council's international research station.



Pyramiden, founded as a mining settlement by Sweden in 1910, was sold to the USSR in 1927. It was abandoned in 1998 and is now a ghost town, though there are plans to redevelop it for tourists.