



Gautier Deblonde

Today three of us went to Pyramiden, a Russian mining town closed since 1998. You don't really notice it at first but there is no activity. Its buildings still stand, deserted, it feels like a film set. You come across the swimming pool, the sports club, the cinemas, and everything has been left behind. In the library all the books are on the shelves. In the indoor basketball court the balls have been left on the floor. We go to the cinema, to the projection room, and all the films are still stacked there. It feels as if you can hear the people who lived there – just like when you're in a room where a party has just finished, and there's a lingering sense of the voices and the music. There is something magical about this place. Everything seems as if it is waiting to be used. It's all on the verge of happening, you would just have to put the heater on and life would start again.

I'm going to Barentsburg tomorrow, established in 1932; it's the last Russian settlement in the Arctic. I've always wanted to stay there so I've booked a room in the only hotel for a week. It proves to be a small town, a few streets and a mine, which is grim, run down and melancholic. The snow is covered with coal dust and you hardly see anyone outside. Six hundred people from Russia and the Ukraine work there on two-year contracts: 400 men and 200 women all come for the money. Many families are divided; they leave their children with relatives in Russia while they work at Barentsburg. There is nowhere else to go while their contract lasts; they are trapped in this town surrounded by hard, fragile icy mountains.

The work and the quality of life has been the same for years, they live under almost impossible circumstances but they are, as a community, incredibly generous with their time and spirit.

When I talk to them about global warming, they say that it does get warmer sometimes, that it rained last summer for the first time, the glacier has shrunk, but they have to work, life goes on.

12 / 03 / 2005

Images: Gautier Deblonde

