



Will Menter, *Branch Lines* (2012)

### ***Always Sound***

Will Menter

ReR Megacorp Pbk 200pp + 3xCD

For a self-published book documenting an artist's work, this is an ambitious and luxurious production, and pretty much an artwork in its own right. The trio of CDs included here go much further than simply recording the sounds of Will Menter's sculptures. On a track called "Wood On Snow" he's hurling tiles of pine wood ('tavallons' in France) into deep snow. This explosive, crunching soundworld is invaded by the hooves and snorts of passing horses, come to investigate. A distant woodpecker drums furiously while Menter skedaddles his tiles across a frozen pond. Not a simple field recording, this filmic sound collage is assembled by Menter in his studio. Photos in the book show a huge French building covered in tavallons, and a snowy forest floor dotted with those chucked pine tiles.

Menter emerged alongside the likes

of Max Eastley and David Toop from the musicians' collectives of the 1970s. (Menter's specific milieu, the Bristol Musicians' Coop, has just relaunched this year as an Improv session at the Bristol Fringe Bar.) His work is anti-generic, often austere and down to earth, a prolonged sonic exploration of the nature of his favourite materials: wood, slate, metal and ceramics. Originally a saxophonist, he retains an interest in collaborative performances: photos in the book show clay-smearing dancers roaming the sound sculptures as a performance environment, while Menter plays a self-built 'Ersatzinette' (sax mouthpiece on angled drainpipe).

In the mid-90s Menter relocated to Burgundy in deep rural France. His work in instrument building and sculpture has expanded from modest slate marimbas to the large-scale, almost architectural installations illustrated here. A spidery aerial runway supports pipes full of water,

dripping onto ringing slates below. Hundreds of shells and pink ceramic twists dangle from branches like sounding blossoms. Heavy stone slabs are laid on oak beams across fields, creating a meandering runway that visitors can then activate into sound, using wood hanging from small fishing rods. Menter's work is a perfect example of musical practice embedded in context, as demanded in Jon Rose's recent essay *The Music Of Place* (reviewed in *Wire* 354).

As this bilingual book's title indicates, there's always something worth listening to here (the idea is clearer in the French title, *Le Son Est Toujours Présent*: 'sound is always present'). Menter breaks up his photo sequence with concise essays and poems, in which he goes beyond recounting a work's genesis, to self-interrogate as to how and why he's doing all this. The book is pitched to reach out to the non-specialist reader: instead of the jargon of art crit, or straightforward documentation, Menter tries

to strike a personal, introspective note. Up to a point this works, but some of the writing has the incense-laden whiff of a positive thinking workshop, which can erect a barrier between the reader and these earthy, highly physical artworks. I'd prefer more memoir and less yoga mat.

In spite of these minor reservations, the book is fascinating and its three CDs among Menter's best releases yet. *Land Sea Air*, the first, is a captivating sequence of music made from slate, ice and wind flutes, alternated with recordings of sea and bird song. Elsewhere we hear Menter's signature sound of bass slate marimbas, beautiful mbira playing and an exuberant chunk of faux-electronica produced by snorting terra cotta trumpets in a bowl of liquid clay. Menter steps out of austere, documentary mode to play subtly bizarre games with layered recordings, and this kicks his work into a whole other experimental arena.

**Clive Bell**