

**MASSIN IN CONTINUO: A DICTIONARY****Curated by Laetitia Wolff****At the San Francisco Center for the Book, July 11-September 26, 2003****Massin in Continuo: A Dictionary**

Massin is unclassifiable. Over the past fifty years, he has created unprecedented bonds between writing and design, between Letter and Image. Certainly, it is the work of a designer and art director that we are looking at today. But what makes Massin so unique is his ability to endlessly reflect on the very nature of French culture: the culture of the written word. Massin likes to recall that at age 4 and before he could recite the alphabet, his father, a stone engraver, taught him how to write his name in a soft stone.

Massin, the unclassifiable free thinker. Not a mere dabbler, rather a passionate amateur who has excelled in graphic design, art direction, book design, typographical experiments, fiction and memoirs writing, photography and musicology, as well as enlightening professional treatises on design. Clearly, a relentless enthusiasm has nourished the projects of this Renaissance man.

One touchstone ties all these endeavors together: the book, ultimate symbol of knowledge. The book: an object, a universe, which Massin has at length redefined by means of the letterform. He wrote about literature before even considering design. He edited and laid out a book club's newsletter and then designed thousands of its covers. He invented the term *art director* in book publishing before the position existed in France (Gallimard). He edited book series and redesigned major book publisher's logos (NRF, Laffont). He shattered the linear nature of the book by experimenting with *typographic interpretation* (*La Cantatrice Chauve*), breaking the basic conventions of book layout.

Massin, the erudite designer, has crossed many boundaries, both of disciplines, of specialization—which he despised—and, again, boundaries of the letterform itself. Although not a type designer, Massin has interpreted typography and has even collected vernacular, hand-drawn alphabets. Not an illustrator, he has hired hundreds. Not a teacher nor a theorist, his encyclopedic knowledge and restless curiosity have often embarrassed scholars. Not a specialist, he has been the harbinger of a culture made accessible to all.

Although he never had followers, never taught (because he never received his Baccalauréat), never ran a large studio, never created nor participated in any movements, this free-spirited and compulsive creator is the unsung hero of an immense graphic heritage. Make way for Massin.

## **MASSIN: A CHRONOLOGY**

1925 Robert Massin born in La Bourdinière, near Chartres, France to Henri Massin, a stone carver, and Palmyre Foiret, a school teacher.

1935-1943 As a child Massin created many hand-made books filled with his own drawings and writings. He played the violin and, as a teenager, joined a jazz ensemble called Le Hot Club de L'Île de France (in imitation of the famous Quintette de Hot Club du France of Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelli).

1944 Graduated with his Baccalauréat (French High School Diploma) and with no technical training, Massin is a self taught designer/writer. He moves to Paris with the idea of becoming a writer.

1946 Amateur poet. Editor of Proximités, poetry review featuring poets such as Maurice Fombeure and Michel Crozier.

1946–1947 Traveled in England, Scandinavia and Germany. Massin worked a variety of odd jobs during his travels, including freelance journalism. Interviewed Louis-Ferdinand Céline, author of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, in exile in Copenhagen, Denmark.

1948 Joined Club Français du Livre as editor of Liens, the monthly newsletter.

1949 Executed first book design for Oeuvres de Rimbaud for Club Français du Livre

1951 Designed first book cover for La Bombe H for Editions Corrêa

1952 Joined Club du Meilleur Livre, as “artistic advisor”. His first layout for the CML is *L'expédition du Kon Tiki*.

1956 Bought Rolleiflex 2.8. Beginning of photographic activities.

1957 Designed Soleil collection. (designed for Gallimard as a freelance)

1958 Designed hardbound record cases for Club des disquaires de France

1958–1979 Joined Editions Gallimard. Began as graphic designer.

1960 Became art director. In following twelve years developed department from staff of one to a dozen.

1961 Designed *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes* by Raymond Queneau.

1964 Designed edition of *La Cantatrice Chauve* by Eugène Ionesco. Winner of the Leipzig International Book Prize. Massin also designed two English language editions (*The Bald Primadonna* for Studio Vista, London 1966 and *The Bald Soprano* for Grove Press, NYC, 1965).

1965 Executed typographic interpretation of *La Foule* sung by Edith Piaf for Evergreen Review.

1965 First trip to New York City and the United States.

1966 Designed *Délire à deux* by Eugène Ionesco.

1966 Designed *Conversation-sinfonietta* by Jean Tardieu.

1966 Began work on *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* by Jean Cocteau. Not completed until 1994.

1966 Created look for *Poésies* Gallimard series.

1972 Designed Folio collection of pocket books by contemporary authors.

1976 Tel collection of books on philosophy and social science.

1977 *L'Imaginaire* collection of literature.

1970 Author of *La Lettre et L'Image* (Editions Gallimard). Translated into English (as *Letter and Image*), German and Italian editions as well as a pirated Serbo-Croatian edition. Winner of Prix des Graphistes from Compagnons de Lure, France.

1984 Started career as freelance book and cover designer for various publishers (Fixot, Hoëbeke, Albin Michel, Robert Laffont)

1980–1982 Publisher in conjunction with Hachette under name *Atelier Hachette / Massin*. Published eight titles on topics such as shoes, beds and glasses (all inspired by the new history of the Annales school).

1986 Organized *Alphabets* exhibition at the Musée-Galerie de la Seita, Paris held in conjunction with *Abécédaires* exhibition at Centre Georges Pompidou. Editor and designer of accompanying joint catalogue *Alphabets / Abécédaires*.

1988 Author of *L'ABC du Métier* (Imprimerie Nationale), an autobiography of his career as a designer.

1989 First retrospective exhibition at Musée-Galerie de la Seita, Paris.

1991 Author of *La Cour des Miracles*. Winner of the Bourse Goncourt for historical literature.

1991 Author of *La Mise en Pages* (Hoëbeke).

1995 Triple retrospective exhibition in Strasbourg at La Laiterie, at the Ecole des Arts Décoratifs and at the bookstore chain FNAC.

1997 Awarded International Book Award for his “activities on behalf of book design and culture”. by Unesco

1998–present Massin Archive donated to the City of Chartres. The material will form the core of the Massin Mediathèque scheduled for opening in the near future.

2001 Massin inducted as member of Alliance Graphique Internationale (AGI).

2001 Work exhibited as part of Typojanchi: Typography Biennale exhibition in Seoul, South Korea.

### **The art of kinetic layout**

*The illustrated book is a film, the text is the dialogue or voice over—Massin.*

At the beginning of his career, Massin had access to very few models of creative, dynamic layout from which to derive inspiration. The double-spread title page had been anticipated by W.A. Dwiggins and Merle Armitage in the late '20s and early '30s. But the idea of *déroulement* (transl. unfolding) can actually be traced back to Stéphane Mallarmé's legendary poem *Un Coup de Dés* (transl. *A Throw of the Dice*, 1895). And Matisse's *Jazz* (1947) was certainly considered a successful wedding of image and word. However, when Massin started to work in the late '40s, the cultural references were essentially bookish. He learned how to be a book layout artist from looking at the work of Pierre Faucheux, the Club Français du Livre's art director, from whom he picked up the concept of and interest in the textual function of letterforms.

Along the way, the influence of film and film titles became perceptible in his double-page spreads. The space of the page became the screen.

Massin has often spoken about the cinematic quality of book design, revealing its narrative structure while constantly changing scale and rhythm, alternating focal planes and perspective.

Before Massin started to use computer thumbnails to visualize the composition of his pages onscreen, he spread his layouts on the floor of his 400 square-foot atelier in the country, a refurbished barn in Pierrefitte/Etampes, 40 Km south of Paris. Documents juxtaposed on the floor helped him to visualize the narrative unfolding of the page layouts (a practice very similar to Alexey Brodovitch's, art director at *Harper's Bazaar* from 1934 to 1959). Massin usually built his layouts around vertical and horizontal axes, which he often interrupts in order to highlight contrasting structural movements and unexpected breaks in the pacing.

A lover of Bach and baroque music in general, Massin has often stressed the use of counterpoint as a key aspect of layout—counterpoint as a means to alter scale and style of both type and illustration. Massin's most notable use of counterpoint was in the design of *Conversation-Sinfonietta* (1966) by Jean Tardieu in which the voices of the various speakers, each inhabiting a different stratum on the page-score, form a fugue.

*La Mise en Page* (Höebeke, 1991) is a theoretical treatise written and designed by Massin. It focuses on interior spread layouts and explores the relationship between text and image. The book is illustrated by Massin's own work and is accompanied by comments, comparative analysis, and technical advice.

## BOOK CLUBS

*A time of innovation for book designers*

After WWII, book clubs were instrumental in spreading literature classics into French middle-class households. While publishers were ready to produce new books, there was no longer an established network of bookstores. The breach was filled by the new concept of the book club, with a four-book-per-year subscription, modeled along the lines of the American Book of the Month Club and the Swiss cooperative society La Guilde du Livre (both founded in 1936). The first club was the Club Français du Livre (CFL) founded in 1946, establishing the formula for those that followed as it published a mix of classics, foreign works and out-of-print texts. Due to the innovative designs of its layout artist (*maquettiste*) Pierre Faucheux, the CFL quickly gained a reputation for exciting editions. After a short period at the Club Français du Livre as the editor, Massin's first job was as graphic designer, and then art director of the Club du Meilleur Livre (CML).

The book clubs' era was the heyday of book design, when books were conceived as art objects in limited editions of 4,000-5,000. Subscribers held their breath waiting for each successive title to arrive. The production was highly sophisticated with novelty and technical tricks, and out-of-the-ordinary printing techniques (die-cut pages for instance) creating a book club phenomenon. "Book designers given total freedom in the genre were true graphic acrobats," recalls Massin. Fascinated by the new dimension brought to the surface of covers with inserted objects, Massin and his colleagues used surprising materials, such as silk, velvet, burlap, mylar, acetate, wood, foil, cellophane, and butcher paper, in order to create innovative surfaces and packaging treatments. The binding, endpapers, and cinematic unfolding of the pages were some of the many innovations they brought to book design.

With Jacques Darche at the Club des Editeurs and Pierre Faucheux at the Club des Libraires, there was a sense of rivalry among the various club designers. Massin confessed: "For my first covers, I was asking myself, 'What would Pierre Faucheux think?'" Faucheux—his father figure and shadow influence—had been one of the first designers/typographers to emphasize the importance of dynamic typography and documentary iconography on covers, at a time when illustration had not yet been replaced by photography.

Massin's work for the CML established his reputation as a designer, going even further than the Faucheux formula, incorporating influences from the work of Dutch type designers like Dick Elffers, or even from American film titles. At their height in the early '50s, the Clubs reached an audience of about 700,000 members, but the book clubs' success was short-lived. As soon as the distribution of the Club's books reached bookstores, there was little reason for them to exist: graphic virtuosity was no longer the Clubs' exclusive signature. Massin also believes that the excesses of the clubs' *livre-objets* (book-objects) had begun to wear thin on the members.

## PASTICHES

*Finding inspiration in vernacular culture.*

Massin's extraordinary scholarship and intellectual curiosity has been an inexhaustible source of inspiration, both for himself and his admirers. While an innovator in typography, he has shown respect for classic, romantic, and popular art, integrating graphic elements of other epochs to match the content and context of a book he is designing.

Explicit attention was devoted to decorative patterns of the seventeenth century to ornate his limited, leather-bound editions of Molière's *Oeuvres*. For *L'Or*, by Blaise Cendrars, Massin cut typefaces from an old American poster dated 1848 that he had found at an antique shop in Paris, thus matching the graphic style of the Gold Rush era.

In using pastiches, Massin never copies but always extracts the essential character of a period, thus acknowledging the course of graphic history.

## JOURNALISM

*On writing*

Expectedly, Massin's graphic career started with writing; he was a journalist from 1945-1948. Post- WWII, paper was rare and expensive. Massin's articles were published in limited edition popular papers, such as *Le Populaire*, *Gavroche* and *Combat*.

In October 1947, Massin met Louis-Ferdinand Céline in Copenhagen—it was the first time a French journalist had met with the famous author of *Le Voyage au bout de la nuit* since he had left France in 1944, disgraced for his antisemitism . Following a three-hour interview, Massin and Céline exchanged a polite correspondence. Massin's article was published in *La Rue*, a weekly that only printed 13 issues, and in which Sartre, Queneau, and Prévert had contributed.

Massin's first foot in the door of the publishing industry was as the editor of *Liens*, the monthly newsletter of the Club Français du Livre (February 1948). Some of his exciting assignments included interviews of Malcom Lowry and Blaise Cendrars. While the editor, "maquettiste" (trans. layout artist) was his official title. Massin was indeed in charge of the layout which had previously been redesigned by Pierre Faucheux. Massin played with *Liens'* layout and gave it the look of a newspaper.

Throughout his life, Massin kept the genuine curiosity of a journalist exploring thoroughly topics of his choice, preferably those untouched by scholars. He has always written fast and clearly, making him a fearsome and unique *popularizer* of

high culture. His passion for study, compiling anthologies, collecting iconographic references, and spending hours at the library fostered a correlation between written and visual culture.

### **The art of art direction**

#### *Massin in a publishing empire: between two covers*

In 1958, when Massin was hired away from the Club du Meilleur Livre and officially started at Gallimard, there was no graphics department, no art director, no paste-up or in-house layout artists. Everything at Gallimard was still being done at the printers. Massin stipulated creative control, proposing to Gaston Gallimard: “If you give me carte blanche, I’ll design the typographic charter for every single book collection published under your name.” Although astonished at the enormity of the request, the Gallimards decided to give Massin a try. The gamble paid off as Massin, over the next twenty years, successfully defined the look of the various series of books for Editions Gallimard, setting styles that other French publishers futilely sought to emulate.

When the book clubs were founded in the early ‘50s, it was a late start for the French publishing industry. Their European counterparts had already worked extensively on covers. Once the book clubs vanished in the late ‘50s with the distribution of highly designed books in bookstores, the book jacket replaced the decorative hardcover of the Club era, following a model explored earlier by Italian and American publishers of popular literature. Again, French publishers were stylishly late.

All along, Gallimard seems to have documented and anticipated the life of hard vs. soft covers, and given Massin the freedom to “maintain, restore, and renew” the list of over 10,000 titles in print at the time.

One of his first experimentations was the **Soleil** Collection. To thwart the eclectic look of the club books (which, oddly enough, were financed by Gallimard) Gallimard wanted Massin to work toward a simple, elegant, and homogeneous collection. Although Soleil borrowed its format, hardcover binding, and acetate jackets from the Clubs tradition, its original concept relied on its minimalist multicolor variance. Soleil was the expression of a renovated classicism, with its distinct tiny Didot typeface and interlettered titles. From 1957-77, 350 titles were printed in this series.

Until 1972, the NRF (La Nouvelle Revue Française, initial circle of Gallimard Editions) published literature masters such as André Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline who offered high caliber titles which were often reissued in a cheaper Hachette pocket book edition (Hachette Diffusion was the distribution arm of Gallimard). In 1972, their partnership dissolved with the abrupt divorce of Gallimard and Hachette. That same year, the **Folio** collection was launched as a response to the need for an independent, modern pocket book

collection. “Three hundreds layouts had to be designed in less than six months,” recalls Massin. Under his art direction, the collection quickly became a landmark of book design, with its white backgrounds, recognizable titles in Baskerville Old Face, and its ever-changing illustrations. The choice of a consistent bright white background was made possible only by advances in paper technology heralded through the introduction of Kromekote from Champion Papers. The Folio collection look was so successful that it not only influenced Pierre Faucheux’s design for the *Point/Seuil* collection that appeared in 1974 but it was blatantly copied in 1981 by Livre de Poche for its *Biblio* series. Massin chaperoned about 1,100 Folio covers, hired more than 250 illustrators—among them Folon, André François, Etienne Delessert, Ronald Searle and Roland Topor—until his departure from Gallimard in 1979.

**L’imaginaire** collection is one of his favorite and most experimental designs at Gallimard. Massin has used the metaphor of music variation more than once in his work. The visual rhythm is set as follows: while the white background (Massin’s idiosyncratic motif and a Gallimard signature) and the logo play as the continuous basses, the variation is in the color choice of the typefaces, which differ for each title. The differences between covers create the homogeneity of the collection.

### **Letter & Image**

*Massin, an erudite designer looking for the lost figurative quality in alphabets.*

Massin’s encyclopedic erudition comes from his extraordinary ability to visually collect. *Letter & Image* (Gallimard, 1970) is an in-depth study of the subjective life of letterforms over the centuries in Western cultures. It is one of the artist’s major contributions to the understanding of the graphic arts. It took Massin 15 years of work, and he had to compile the bibliography that had not previously existed. *Letter and Image* is a serious, though resolutely not pedantic survey of four approaches to the animation of letters: the letter in the environment, the letter as a symbol, figurative verse (calligrammes), and the letter in painting. The publication provided an alternative to the rationalist history of typography propagated by the Bauhaus-influenced modernists. An anthology of more than 1,000 pictorial symbols it includes everything from Apollinaire’s Calligrammes, Medieval manuscript illuminations, Times Square billboards and street graffiti to Romantic grotesque alphabets, advertisements, and popular signage.

Rather than seeing the letter as a shameful accessory to the image, only of use when the image fails to fully explain a concept, Massin celebrated the rhythmic and plastic attributes of the letter. *Letter and Image* is as much about literature as it is about art, focusing extensively on the contributions of literature—to the freeing of letterforms from linearity.

“Everything started with the image,” observes Massin, referring to the Caves of Lascaux; the alphabet is built upon this tradition of pictograms. Through a

process of stylization and schematization, the image has become symbol of what it referred to originally, as in hieroglyphs, always leaning toward more abstraction. In the romantic nineteenth century, Victor Hugo intuitively decided that all letters were signs, and all signs were former images ([A] was a roof).

Massin's reveals this phenomenon in *Letter & Image*, a publication that since then has become one of graphic designers' favorite reference books. His independent research at the Paris Bibliothèque Nationale, the New York Public Library and the Harvard University Library was often documented with his own photographs.

Roland Barthes in a rave review of *Letter & Image* published in the *Quinzaine Littéraire* (1970) speaks about the "spirit of the letters and their metaphorical power, always in relation with something else."

### **Art direction and design at Gallimard**

Gallimard Editions (Les Editions Gallimard) was created as an extension of a literary review, *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (NRF), founded in 1908 by André Gide. In 1911, the first books were published, with their famous white cover and the three initials, which grew to be so increasingly appealing throughout the twentieth century that they became the very symbol of literary consecration. The publisher has changed its corporate name several times: NRF Editions (Les Editions de la NRF) was the first one, Gallimard Bookstore (La Librairie Gallimard) in 1919, and then Gallimard Editions in 1961. The NRF logo has been kept on the book covers as a sign of this dual appellation. The review, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, still comes out as a quarterly and is available by subscription and in specialized bookstores.

It only took two decades to form an extraordinarily rich catalog, including works by André Gide, Paul Claudel, Saint-John Perse, Marcel Proust, Paul Morand, Louis Aragon, André Malraux, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Raymond Queneau, and Marguerite Yourcenar, to name a few. Such an outstanding catalog was made possible by Gallimard's demanding publishing policy. Attention was paid to new and singular voices, whether coming from abroad or from the greatest intellectual isolation. Time was respectfully granted to the development of each work. Gaston Gallimard managed his firm as a solid business, commercially balanced by surrounding himself with an alert team of editors. He also ensured the company's expansion by carefully controlling its retail distribution and by diversifying the catalog—including essays, the famous Pléiade collection of complete oeuvres, as well as children's books, popular editions, reviews and magazines.

After World War II, the company, which had been impeded by the German Occupation, found its leading position again—with literary prizes, new collections and acquisitions of smaller publishers. By then, the catalog included the

prestigious "Résistance writers", with Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Aragon and René Char. The "Nouveau Roman" with Nathalie Sarraute and Marguerite Duras and independent authors such as Jean Genet, Emile Cioran, Eugène Ionesco, Romain Gary, Jacques Prévert or Louis-Ferdinand Céline were added along the way. Other talents such as Patrick Modiano, Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, Michel Tournier and Milan Kundera were later discovered in the '70s, a period also marked by the development of social sciences with the writings of Michel Foucault and Georges Duby.

In 1958 Massin joined a renowned publishing house. Directly collaborating with Gaston and Claude Gallimard, the graphic designer worked on the renewal of the firm's image. He designed pocket book series (Folio), while personally achieving one of his most outstanding successes (*La Cantatrice Chauve*, 1964). Since 1988, Antoine Gallimard, the founder's grandson, has been heading Gallimard Editions. He has managed to keep that very spirit, by preserving its autonomy and expanding around prestigious trademarks as well as publishing and trade businesses, keeping always a priority in mind: a demand for quality.

### **Massin Editor**

Massin has played a variety of roles in the publishing industry. By 1979, having left Gallimard Editions, he was offered the role of collection editor at Hachette, and his first titles were published in 1980 under the imprint *L'Atelier Hachette/Massin*. Massin orchestrated the project entirely: he conceived, edited, designed, photo researched, and selected the iconography for the eight titles printed. The perfect example of an image-based, socio-cultural study, *The Shoe* was a manifesto of popular culture, in the same vein as *Les Cris de la Ville*, published a couple of years earlier at Gallimard.

Massin also had a brief association with Balland Editions; *Le Monde à l'Envers*, in English, *The World Upside Down* explores a recurring theme in the European imagination.

Also of interest, about ten years ago Massin started a hobby designing hand-made, limited editions (seven–forty copies) of small-format books (4" x 6" ) featuring short stories he had written, children's tales, unusual letters, and

unpublished classic texts. These little hand-sewn books are often given to friends as Christmas cards.

### **On Exercices de Style By Raymond Queneau 1903-1976**

Raymond Queneau is one of those rare birds who have created a singular voice in postwar French literature while having been part of the development of prewar intellectual groups.

Having flirted with Breton's Surrealism, Queneau split his time between his day job at Gallimard—like Massin—as a manuscript reader and as the editor of the *Pléiades* series, and his personal writing. Queneau is a versatile personality, excelling equally in poetry, essay, fiction, journalism, and cinema. His *Zazie dans le Metro* was adapted for the cinema by Louis Malle in 1960. He belonged to the curious *Collège of Pataphysique* and was one of the founders of OULIPO (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle).

Queneau's concern for language, and his fascination for colloquial speech and phonetic spelling, has fostered the bridge between Surrealist irrationality and absurd existentialism.

*Exercices de Style* (first edition of text alone: 1947; Massin's collaboration: 1964) belongs to the Dada tradition of mixing type and messages. It is a collection of ninety-nine short pieces, which recount, in different styles, the same banal incident. On the bus, the narrator bumps into a man with a long neck and later sees him in a train station in the company of a friend who fixes a button on his coat—the inspiration for Massin's limited, hardbound editions. The artist Carelman had suggested to add a series of visual *Exercices de style* either drawn, painted or sculpted, presented in parallel to the text, meaning more than a literal translation.

In the spirit of the exquisite corpses, *Cent Milliards de Poèmes* (1961) imagines the computer era in its interactive form wherein ten short poems made of fourteen verses each were cut into interchangeable strips by Massin.

### ***La Cantatrice Chauve***

*When the eye listens.*

*La Cantatrice Chauve* (1964) remains to this day the ultimate masterpiece of Massin's career. It was translated and adapted in American English as *The Bald Soprano* (Grove Press, 1965) and British English as *The Bald Prima Donna* (1966). Published by Gallimard Editions, it is a typographic and photographic interpretation of Eugène Ionesco's classic Absurdist anti-play, one of the landmarks of modern theater. Massin's version, created with the blessings of

Ionesco, sought to capture the dynamism of the theatre within the static confines of the book.

The piece was inspired by Nicolas Bataille's direction of the play, as performed at the Huchette theater in Paris' Quartier Latin, where it has been performed continuously since its creation in 1950.

Massin, who attended the play twenty times, wanted to reproduce for the reader the experience of being in the theater. He recorded the play so that he could better reproduce not only the words but the inflections, intonations, and pauses of the actors.

Massin collaborated with photographer Henry Cohen who shot the actors in their original costumes at Gallimard's headquarters. Headshots of each character replace the standard repetition of names as the dialogue unfolds. Massin's use of high contrast black and white— necessitated by a limited budget—“emphasizes the abstraction of the two-dimensional space, while paradoxically giving each character a new iconic and physical dimension,” said François Caradec in *Caractère*, 1964.

*La Cantatrice Chauve* was his first experimentation in expressive or “spectacular” typography to introduce the notion of stage time and space onto the printed page, in book length. On each spread Massin ordered a variety of characters (i.e. typefaces) which indicate varying intonations, volumes, strengths, and speaking traits, each corresponding to a different character (i.e. person).

Massin's *typo-graphics* begin with a different typeface for each character: Mr. Smith by Plantin, Mrs. Smith by Plantin Italic, Mr. Martin by Monotype Grotesque 215, Mrs. Martin by Gill Sans Italic (because there is no italic for Monotype Grotesque 215), the maid by Cheltenham and the fire chief by Monotype Clarendon. The maid Mary is depicted with a Roman, unlike the other women, because Massin viewed her as masculine.

Today such effects are taken for granted in our digital world, but not only did Massin achieve his expressive effects without the aid of a computer, he did so without the flexibility of phototype—which was not fully in use in the early '60s. Instead, limited to metal type (both Monotype and foundry), *La Cantatrice Chauve* was printed offset, forcing Massin to produce each page as hand-made, cut-and-paste mechanicals. On individual sheets of tracing paper, elements of type, illustrations and photographs were glued as artwork to be photographed by the printer in order to make the negatives for offset plates.

Massin combined the pictorial directness of comic books and photo-novels (including speech balloons) along with the expressive letterforms of Futurist poetry to create a design masterpiece of “visualized literature.”

The extraordinary layout manages to convey not only the sense of the lines, but also notions of time and rhythm. Massin graphically translates the conversational void, the explosion and obsessive repetition of words, the actors' unexpected

movements on stage, and the daunting presence of silence—all aspects of 1960's Absurdist literature.

### **Eugène Ionesco 1912-1994**

*Massin. A great artist. Not a painter, not a musician, nor a poet, but an artist in typography.*—Ionesco.

Eugène Ionesco, the father of the Theater of the Absurd—although he preferred the label “derision”—was born in Romania. He settled permanently in Paris in 1938, where he was granted a government fellowship to study French poetry. It was by chance, and quite late in his career, that Ionesco wrote *La Cantatrice Chauve* (*The Bald Soprano*), following his experience of the formulaic stiffness of an English phrase book. *The Bald Soprano* (1950) breaks down clichés and truisms into wild, absurd caricature reducing language to disjointed words. Ionesco rejected logical plot and character development, creating instead a farce to convey the meaningless existence of modern men in a society ruled by chance and conventions. A militant anti-Communist, he had long campaigned against Ceausescu's authoritarian regime, which had banned his plays.

*The Bald Soprano's* revolutionary format received a cold reception in Paris during its first years of performance at La Huchette. It was only after the Theater of the Absurd gained support from other literary radicals, such as Samuel Beckett, Jean Tardieu, and Alfred Jarry that it became a classic.

Ionesco, Tardieu, and Queneau are playwrights who essentially explore language's limits, playing on words and miscommunication. Massin shared with these authors a common territory between language and image, written and spoken words.

### **Expressive typography**

The clothing of words

The term expressive typography, was first used by Ed Gottschall in a 1961 illustrated lecture to the Type Directors Club of New York. It was then popularized by Herb Lubalin in 1979 to describe “the use of typography, or letterforms, not just as a mechanical means for setting words on a page, but rather as another creative way of expressing an idea [in order to] enhance the impact and memorability of a graphic statement.”

One can certainly trace a tradition of expressive typography in literature and art, with Mallarmé, and then Futurists and Dadaists alike interested in breaking “rules”. Some of the techniques prescribed included a non-grid orientation (type placed on a diagonal, curved or simply freely placed), altered leading and letter-spacing, mixing of typefaces, distortion of letterforms, and type treated as an

image (and vice versa)—all of which Massin has extensively used. And although he has never designed typefaces *per se*, Massin has made innovative use of type while taking into consideration the cultural background of fonts and their relevance to the subject treated.

Expressive typography is perhaps the most precious contribution Massin has brought to graphic design, but Massin brings the pure typographic exercise to a new level, that is an idiosyncratic typographic interpretation. Based on the premise that it is a visual interpretation of a dramatic piece of literature or music—generally performed—Massin’s expressive typography brings space, time, sound, and rhythm together onto the white page.

The non-conformity of Ionesco’s plays found its partner in crime in Massin’s graphic interpretation. The experimental character of Ionesco’s work is pushed to its extreme in *Délire à Deux*, which visually translates with ink-blots an explosion of words, expressing the difficulty of communication between human beings. Massin has become the film director of the moving page.

### ***Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* by Jean Cocteau**

*The greatest masterpiece of literature is nothing less than an alphabet in disorder—Cocteau*

This book is a document of the evolution of book making in the twentieth century—from cut-and-paste to electronic desktop publishing. *Les Mariés*, the labor of thirty years of love, is another attempt at expressive typography. It was published in 1994, quite late in Massin’s career, at a point when the *Cantatrice* had already become a reference work of graphic design.

The first thirty pages of the book were entirely laid out by hand, each letter having been cut-and-pasted, picked individually from old advertisements, flea market ephemera, and vernacular prints. Back to the job in the early ‘70s Massin used letter-transfer, photo-title in the ‘80s, and finally, in the ‘90s the last 160 pages of the 192-page book were designed on a Mac—and one can tell.

Massin’s *Les Mariés* is a complex typographic homage: to Dada, to popular multi-color street fair announcements so admired by Guillaume Apollinaire, as well as a reference to silent film title inserts.

### **Jean Cocteau**

**Author of *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel***

Cocteau is a French artist and writer, a “Renaissance dandy” par excellence. He made his name widely known in poetry, fiction, film, ballet, painting, and opera.

Cocteau's works reflect the complex influences of surrealism, psychoanalysis, cubism, Catholic religion, and the use of opium. In his time Cocteau was a promoter of avant-garde styles and fashions, and his friends included such prominent figures as Pablo Picasso, the composer Erik Satie, and the Russian director Serge Diaghilev with whom he created the famous *Parade*, the first surrealist ballet (1917). His aesthetics is often based on the rejection of formality, mixing banal and vulgar to spiritual imagery, a sort of anti-Wagnerism, some critics have said. One of the most striking and disconcerting examples of this aesthetics is the ballet of "Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel. Jean Cocteau liked to joke "I have the same age as the Tour Eiffel" (b. 1889).

On October 11, 1963, Cocteau was informed of the death of his best friend, singer Edith Piaf. He then said: "This is my last day on earth," and died that same day.

## **MASSIN PHOTOGRAPHER**

### **Photography**

The graphic eye of a serious amateur

Massin acquired his first 6 x 6 Rollei 2,8 in 1956, and began photographing Paris and the Beauce region "à la Cartier Bresson." In 1965, for his first trip to America, he bought himself a Nikon and brought back close to 1,500 shots, which he printed in his photo lab at his country house.

While also working in color, Massin used photography as a medium for recording the street's graphic culture, which would become the core material for his publication *Letter & Image*. New York graffiti, neon signs in Hong Kong, posters, signage and logos around the world. Not surprisingly, almost all his photos have a strong graphic sense of composition. Today his photo archives consist of several thousands slides. His most recent book is a photo documentation of outsider artist Picassiette's tiled house in Chartres. One of his favorite conceptual assignments was photographing Manhattan from the roof terrace of the Empire State Building.

Massin has worked closely with Emile Zola's family to bring Zola's photography to the general public. He has also published coffee table books on the work of Robert Doisneau, *La Vie d'un Photographe* being one example, which have become some of Hoëbeke Editions' best sellers.

#### **Credits:**

Texts by Laetitia Wolff

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**NOTE:** the dates mentioned correspond to the book design of Massin and not to the date the text was originally published.

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