



Massin in Continuo: A Dictionary **Interview with Robert Massin**

Laetitia Wolff

The consultancy of Laetitia Wolf, futureflair, and the Cultural Services of the French Embassy will coordinate the tour of the exhibition throughout the United States during 2002–2003.

Massin: A Dictionary in Continuo: Traveling Exhibition Itinerary (Curated by Laetitia Wolff). The exhibit was originally produced at the Cooper Union School of Art, Herb Lubalin Study Center, New York, December 17, 2001–March 2, 2002.

Conversation between Massin and Milton Glaser moderated by curator Laetitia Wolff
 Spring 2002
 Los Angeles, UCLA Media Arts Department
 April 12–May 3, 2002
 Exhibit tour organized Friday, April 12, in presence of the curator.

Fall 2002
 MassArt, Boston
 October 2–November 1, 2002
 Conference with Massin:
 Wednesday, October 2, 2002
 Conversation between Massin and
 Laetitia Wolff

UQAM, Montreal, Design Center
 November 6–December 15, 2002
 Lecture with Massin: November 7, 2002

Winter 2003
 Maryland University, Baltimore
 Albin O. Kuhn Library Gallery at UMBC
 January 28–March 2, 2003
 Conference TBA.

Spring 2003
 Minneapolis College of Art & Design

An Introduction: *Massin in Continuo: A Dictionary*

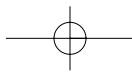
Massin is unclassifiable. Over the past fifty years, he has created unprecedented bonds between writing and design, between letter and image. Certainly, it is the work of a designer and art director that we are looking at today. But what makes Massin so unique is his ability to endlessly reflect on the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

Massin, the unclassifiable free thinker. Not a mere dabbler, but rather a passionate amateur who has excelled in graphic design, art direction, book design, typographical experiments, fiction and memoir 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 of these endeavors together: the book, which is the 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 baccalaureate), never ran a large studio, and 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.

Originally written for *Massin in Continuo* exhibition:

J'aimais les peintures idiotes, dessus de portes, décors, toiles de saltimbanques, enseignes, enluminures populaires ; la littérature démodée, latin d'église, livres érotiques sans orthographe, romans de nos aïeules, contes de fées, petits livres de l'enfance, opéras vieux, refrains niais, rythmes naïfs.

Arthur Rimbaud

Through a series of pleasant circumstances, I met Massin about two and a half years ago via e-mail! At that point, I did not know that I had read one of his novels (*Les Compagnons de la Marjolaine*) and that I had studied literature reading pocket books he had designed for Gallimard Editions (Folio, Poésies, TEL). Nor did I know that I would discover an immense and inspiring talent behind this fragile, yet incredibly energetic man who can't stop designing at the young age of 76—including his now famous graphic interpretation of Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*.

To tell the story truthfully, I must confess that it all started because of Mirko Ilić, the New York-based designer/illustrator who had been in touch with Massin in 2000 during the preparation of his book, *Genius Moves* (co-edited with Steven Heller). Mirko suggested that I contact Massin and curate an exhibit of his work, which was only known in America to a happy few specialists. Mirko's "punishment" for having me get involved in this colossal adventure was to design the exhibition announcement poster.

Two years later—after many trips to Paris, where Massin lives, and Chartres, where his archives are stored at the City Public Library; several visits near Etampes, where his second residence is located, and a daily correspondence with one of the most enlightened creative minds I have encountered, the exhibition *Massin in Continuo: A Dictionary* opened at Cooper Union's Herb Lubalin Study Center for Typography and Graphic Design, in December 2001.

The title for the exhibit (*Massin In Continuo: A Dictionary*) emerged as I was going through fifty years of his work, spanning graphic design, art direction, typographical experiments, fiction and memoirs writing, photography, and musicology, etc. I thought that the rather stiff but rational order of the alphabet, with which Massin had played and which he studied, could help me organize the enormous amount of information I had come across. A theme central to his career corresponds to each letter of the alphabet, which was then illustrated in the exhibition with material and interpretative texts.

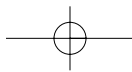




Figure 1 (above)
 Massin exhibit poster by Mirko Ilić.
 © Copyright 2002 Mirko Ilić.

Figures 2 and 3 (below)
 Front and back views of the exhibit poster
 when folded down to make a flip book.



This interview is based on several conversations with Massin over the past two years, during my trips to France and while going through the work we selected for the exhibition, as well as during the installation of the show in New York. Massin has an amazing memory and is fond of anecdotes. I tried to remember all of them and give a lively portrait of a lively graphic designer whose influence has been underplayed all these years.

LW: A recent exhibition of your photographs was held at the Chartres City Hall (November 2001, entitled, with a pun in reference to the Beauce region, “Qu’il est beau, ce”). The curators showed pictures of your childhood environment. Can you describe them?

Massin: This was the first time those photos were ever exhibited. I took most of them in the ‘50s, around the region I grew up in, a rural flat land where my family lived. They show my cousins at the farm, agricultural rituals, and the endless horizon which to this day still fascinates me. I was born [1925] in a little village called La Bourdinière on the Nationale #10 Paris-Bordeaux, the Paris-Bordeaux main road axis, 15 kilometers away from Marcel Proust’s house in Illiers-Combray (my favorite writer). As we speak, I am reading *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* for the fifth time.

**LW: So your parents were both from the region?**

Massin: My mother, Palmyre (born Foiret), was from the Beauce region [one of the richest agricultural areas of France], but my father, Henri, moved from the north after WWI. He had been wounded in 1916 and temporarily became a gym school professor—that's how he met my mother. Both of my parents had been married before they met, which was quite an exception at the time. I grew up the first son with three older stepsisters who spent most of their childhood in boarding schools.

LW: What were your parents' occupations?

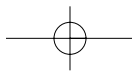
Massin: My mother was a school teacher. I actually attended her classes. We used to live above the schoolhouse at La Bourdinière. Four or five years ago, I went back there because the house was for sale. What an emotion to see inscribed on the front wall near the gate "14 Juin 1940." This was written in memory of the bombing which happened that day. I remember it so vividly. We were getting out of school when the Germans bombed the area. There were six casualties; my father and aunt were wounded. I remember, we went to hide behind some trees in the field nearby. This was a very traumatic experience for a fourteen-year-old!

LW: What about your father?

Massin: My father became a stone engraver—an art he had inherited from his father whom he had stopped seeing, having cut all relations with his family. He would carve memorial monuments to the dead (quite a prosperous business in small towns after WWI and after WWII, believe me). I remember he used five or six different typefaces, he always paid attention to variation. He was my first inspiration. I often tell this anecdote, that when I was four, he gave me a chisel and a hammer (which I still own) and asked me to engrave my name, age, and address in a soft stone when I did not even know how to write. This remains in my imagination [as] a founding moment of my interest in letters and all graphic things.

LW: What else influenced your visual sense as a child?

Massin: My grandmother had a grocery shop in La Frileuse, including a fabric counter. I would spend hours in her shop looking at logos, lettering, packaging, liquor stickers, poster advertisements and enamel plaques (Bouillon Kub, Bibendum of Michelin, the red cherry of Bitter, the stork of La Potasse d'Alsace, the moon face of Crème Eclipse, to name a few). Since then, I found some of these popular images at flea markets and antique shops, and have bought some for myself and even published them in *L'ABC du Métier*. My culture was mainly popular, vernacular as they say. I remember especially this Calendar of La Poste hanging in the kitchen, 1927. We would look at the same image for an entire year.



**LW: Can you date your first true interest in graphic design?**

Massin: Actually, I started pretty early. At seven, I knew what I wanted to be: an author. My father kept some of the booklets I made between age seven and twelve. I would write the story, do the layout, either mimicking newspaper tabloids, advertising layouts, or fiction books and sign them all “Robert Massin, Author, Editor, Publisher, Typographer, and Photographer.”

LW: What kind of schooling did you receive?

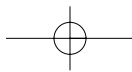
Massin: I was sent to the Bonneval boarding school when I was eleven. It was a nonreligious institution, very strict, applying the harsh educational theories of Alain Chartier, using corporal punishment to maintain order amongst the “dunces” of Paris. For six years, I was raised with older boys, 15 kilometers away from home, which seemed awfully far. Last November, my boarding school invited me as an alumnus to make a book presentation of my memoirs, *Le Pensionnaire*, which tells about my six years spent there. Then I went to college in Chartres. To be honest, I was not a very good student, but I loved to read. I certainly read a lot of books that I’d find at my mother’s school library. Preferably, I would pick the ones that were labeled “From the Académie Française.” Those two words made me dream.

LW: Well, as a solace you were recently inducted into the Académie Royale of Belgium?

Massin: Yes, and I am very proud of that. [laugh] It is a great honor. I decided I would add it onto my business card. A ceremony will be organized in Brussels this fall (2002).

LW: So, since the beginning, you seem to have had a combined interest in letters, i.e., reading, writing, and designing letters. What was on your mind when you graduated from college?

Massin: To be honest, I am not even sure I received my baccalauréat, which is the reason why I actually never taught in France. Talk about the French system! I am completely self-taught as a designer. However, I had this idea of becoming a writer, and to do so I needed to “go up” to Paris as we say in France. I moved there in October 1944 and, thanks to my friend Jacques Ricaille, I started to work as the personal secretary to Tristan Bernard. This was, I thought, an open door into the literary world of Paris. Basically, my job consisted of running to Fauchon at La Madeleine to buy cookies for tea time, during which the usual suspects such as Sacha Guitry, Léon Blum, and Michel Simon would show up. Until 1946, I lived as an amateur poet, freelance writer, and editor of *Proximity*, a poetry review featuring poets such as Maurice Fombeure and Michel Crozier.



LW: Did you feel you had realized your dream of becoming a writer?

Massin: First of all, at that point, I was more an editor than an author. I was in my early '20s and felt like going places, notably as a freelance reporter for various publications (*Le Populaire*, *Gavroche*, and *Combat*). From 1946–1947, I traveled through England, Scandinavia, and Germany working at a variety of odd jobs. I would be washing dishes in a restaurant for weeks, and then trade a shirt for a camera, a Kodak 35, which I used to film the ship *Exodus* arriving in Hamburg for *Combat*. At some point, I took a boat to Finland. I was the only foreign correspondent in Helsinki. This was right after the war. It was pretty barren and desolate(d). I got caught in a Russian camp. They thought I was a spy and put me in jail for two days. Back to Copenhagen, via Stockholm. I wanted to meet Louis-Ferdinand Céline, the author of the *Voyage au bout de la nuit* who was still in exile. He was disgraced in France for his notorious anti-semitism. Following a three-hour interview, I exchanged a polite correspondence with Céline. My article was published in *La Rue*, a weekly that only printed thirteen issues, and to which Jean-Paul Sartre, Raymond Queneau, and Jacques Prévert had contributed.

LW: How did you move from such a lively, intrepid reporter's life to your first "real" job as a graphic designer?

Massin: In fact, I was hired as editor of *Liens*, the monthly newsletter of the Club Français du Livre. I only started to design in 1949, and executed my first book design for *Oeuvres* by Rimbaud. It was thanks to Robert Carlier, a dear friend who died last February, and who was the literary director before moving on to the Club du Meilleur Livre, and then to Gallimard. He took me along with him each time in each of his new positions. They needed someone to handle both the content and the layout of the newsletter. I wanted to give it the look of a newspaper. Needless to say, I learned from scratch, not having received any training in design. Fortunately, I had met this Italian typographer, Rossi, who gave me an accelerated class in typeface fundamentals. It felt like being with my father again.

Figure 4

Le Club du Meilleur Livre présente ses réalisations, poster, 1954 (translation: the Club of the Best Book presents its production).

All images courtesy of Massin archives.



Figure 5

Wrapping paper (with various letters), Le Club du Meilleur Livre, 1956.
(Best Book presents its production.)

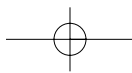


LW: How did you ensure the transition from writing to designing and, soon after, to art directing?

Massin: I owe it to Pierre Faucheux, the artistic advisor of the Club du Meilleur Livre at the time, who taught me everything, before he moved on to the Club des Libraires. You see, after the war, book clubs were instrumental in spreading literary classics into French middle-class households because there were no bookstores left. The club produced four books a year for subscribers. These were pretty much limited editions. Faucheux had been one of the first designer/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. For my first covers, I was asking myself, “What would Pierre Faucheux think?”

LW: What was a typical assignment at the clubs like?

Massin: There were about five clubs each with different names. We had so much freedom. We were true graphic acrobats, it was mad. The production was highly sophisticated with novelty and technical tricks, and out-of-the-ordinary printing techniques (die-cut pages for instance). We had a few weeks to design a book. Most were literature classics, so we sort of knew the story. My colleagues and I were fascinated by the new dimension brought to the surface of covers with inserted objects. We 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 we brought to book design. You have to imagine what most of the books were like at the time. There was no concept of book design *per se*. It was all done at the printer.



LW: What was your main influence as a self-taught book designer?

Massin: When I started to work in the late '40s-early '50s, the cultural references were essentially bookish. Matisse's *Jazz*, (1947) was quite revolutionary. But along the way, the influence of film and film titles became perceptible in my double-page spreads. I was fascinated by Saul Bass's movie titles for Hitchcock, which reached France a decade later. I remember also vividly discovering Tex Avery's cartoons one rainy weekend in London with my wife. I have spoken often about the cinematic quality of book design, revealing its narrative structure while constantly changing scale and rhythm, and alternating focal planes and perspective. Between the endpapers and the first signature, it was like creating a little flip-book within the book. It was quite common to have these elaborate introductory pages in the Clubs's books.

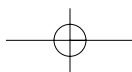
LW: What was the publishing industry like when you started in the late '50s?

Massin: In 1958, when I was hired away from the Club du Meilleur Livre and officially started at Gallimard, there was no graphics department, no art director, and no paste-up or in-house layout artist. Everything was still being done at the printer's. 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. I told Gaston Gallimard: "If you give me carte blanche, I'll design the typographic charter (corporate identity program guidelines) for every single book collection published under your name."

I stayed at Gallimard more than twenty years. The profession of art director did not really exist until I arrived. It had been initiated by André Malraux in the '30s to some extent. But it is really with the post-war development of the popular book industry, in which Gallimard played a major role once they split from Hachette Diffusion, that we developed collections that were truly art directed, with a specific look, colors, logos, etc.

LW: What was your first true art direction project?

Massin: I had been mostly a designer at the clubs but, with the *Soleil* collection, I worked toward a simple, elegant, and homogeneous collection that bore its own identity. 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, three-hundred and fifty titles were printed in this series.



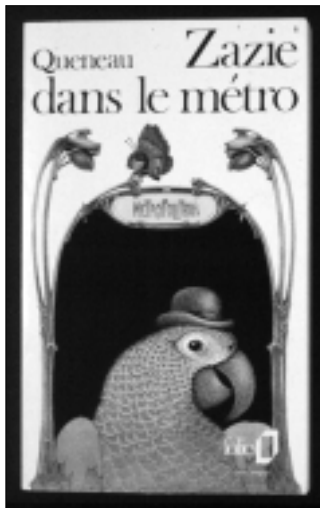


Figure 6 (a and b)
Folio Gallimard Collection 1972–1979.
Le procès, Kafka, 1972. *Zazie dans le métro*,
Queneau, 1972.

LW: How was the transition between the book clubs and your years at Gallimard?

Massin: The transition was smooth in a way, since Gallimard secretly owned the Club du Meilleur Livre, but the book clubs' success was short-lived. At their height in the early '50s, the clubs reached an audience of about 700,000 members. As soon as the distribution of the clubs's books reached bookstores, there was little reason for them to exist: graphic virtuosity was no longer the clubs' exclusive signature. Once the art direction department was set up at Gallimard, my mission was to "maintain, restore, and renew" the list of more than 10,000 titles in print at the time. The work at Gallimard, although very creative, was done within boundaries of consistency and rigor. I always tried to reinvent my position and give myself special projects that had, in a way, a similar freedom to the book club years.

LW: What would be a significant example of book design/art direction "within boundaries of consistency and rigor"?

Massin: Well, *Folio* Gallimard still is considered today one of the most famous pocket book collections, and you can still find them on the shelves of the FNACs (the French equivalent of Barnes & Noble), although today the covers are based less on original, commissioned illustrations than on stock photos. Until 1972, the NRF (La Nouvelle Revue Française, initial circle of Gallimard Editions) published literary masters such as André Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Those titles were often reissued in cheaper Hachette pocket book editions (Hachette Diffusion was the distribution arm of Gallimard). In 1972, Gallimard and Hachette abruptly divorced. That same year, the *Folio* collection was launched as a response to the need for an independent, modern pocket book collection. I remember we had to design three-hundred layouts in less than six months. We decided on a white background, recognizable titles in Baskerville Old Face, and unique illustrations. The choice of a consistent, bright-white background was made possible only by advances in paper technology heralded by the introduction of Kromekote from Champion Papers. One of the major achievements we managed to impose on the sales force at Gallimard was the concept of a pocket book that could be kept, whereas most of them generally were lent, read, and disposed of—remember, the GIs during WWII were breaking the books into pieces. All in all, I art directed about 1,100 *Folio* covers, and hired more than two-hundred and fifty illustrators—among them Folon, André François, Etienne Delessert, Ronald Searle, and Roland Topor... I still have a few original drawings at home framed: *Rhinocéros* by Etienne Delessert, and *Crime and Punishment* by Tibor Csernus.

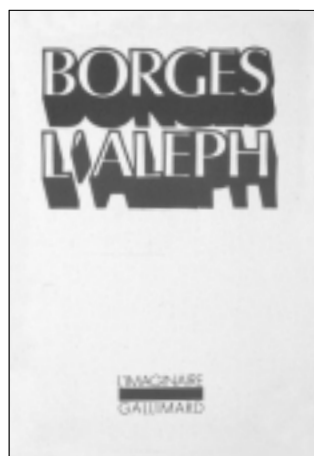


Figure 7 a and b (above)
Collection *L'Imaginaire*, Gallimard, first issued in 1977. (*Vice consul* by Marguerite Duras, and *L'aleph* by Luis Borges).



Figure 8
Cover design, for *Les Ténébres* by Oleg Volkov, Editions J.C. Latès, 1987 (On the use of typography on covers).

LW: Were your design solutions mostly based in typography rather than in the use of illustration?

Massin: It really depends. I always say that I am not an illustrator. I am not a type designer either, and I do not know how to draw for that matter. It did not prevent me from inventing type usage, or mixing images and type, or simply knowing how to use type. For instance, the *L'Imaginaire* collection is one of my favorite and most experimental designs at Gallimard. I used the metaphor of music variation more than once to describe it. The visual rhythm is set as follows: while the white background (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 created the homogeneity of the collection. Along with *Folio*, this one also belongs among the classics of popular publishing.

LW: But if *L'Imaginaire's* solution is purely typographic, most of your work deals with that very relationship between image and letter, and not only as a designer but also as an author, correct?

Massin: Yes, to piggyback on the title of my own research, *Letter & Image* (Editions Gallimard, 1970). In this in-depth study of the subjective life of letterforms in Western cultures, my premise is that everything started with the image, in reference to the Grottos of Lascaux. Our alphabet is built upon this tradition of pictograms. Through a process of stylization and schematization, the image has become a symbol of what it referred to originally (as in hieroglyphs), always leaning toward more abstraction. What I am fascinated by is this relevance of the lost pictorial quality of the letter. I always try to keep this in mind when I design covers that include type. Look at my cover for *Mémoires de Chirico*, for instance, the perspective of the letters is a visual pun to the work of this surrealist artist.

LW: How did you proceed in collecting for this encyclopedic publication that, since its first publication in 1970, has become one of graphic designers' favorite reference books?

Massin: Well, it took me fifteen years of work, and I had to compile a bibliography that previously had not existed. It is an anthology of more than 1,000 pictorial symbols that includes everything from Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, to medieval manuscript illuminations, Times Square billboards, and street graffiti to romantic grotesque alphabets. I always had a bias for popular culture lettering. As I mentioned earlier, I started to pick things up at antique shops and flea markets. This is actually how I came across, completely by chance, my own alphabet primer one day, at an antique dealer located near my country residence. Also, my wife was a compulsive flea market picker, obsessed with the year 1925 (my birth date!). Plus I always photograph signs, advertisements, and popular street



Figure 9
Alphabets, poster for an exhibition, 1986.
Organized Alphabets exhibition at the Musée-Galerie de la Seita, Paris held in conjunction with the Abécédaires exhibition at Centre Georges Pompidou. Massin: Editor and designer of accompanying joint catalogue *Alphabets/Abécédaires*.

signage, so I have been updating the editions of *Letter & Image* (now in its fourth edition, and there is even one edition in Serbo-Croatian and one in Korean which I discovered last year while I was in Seoul for *TypoJanchi*). [laugh]

LW: How does this relate to the freer work you did in the '60s using expressive typography?

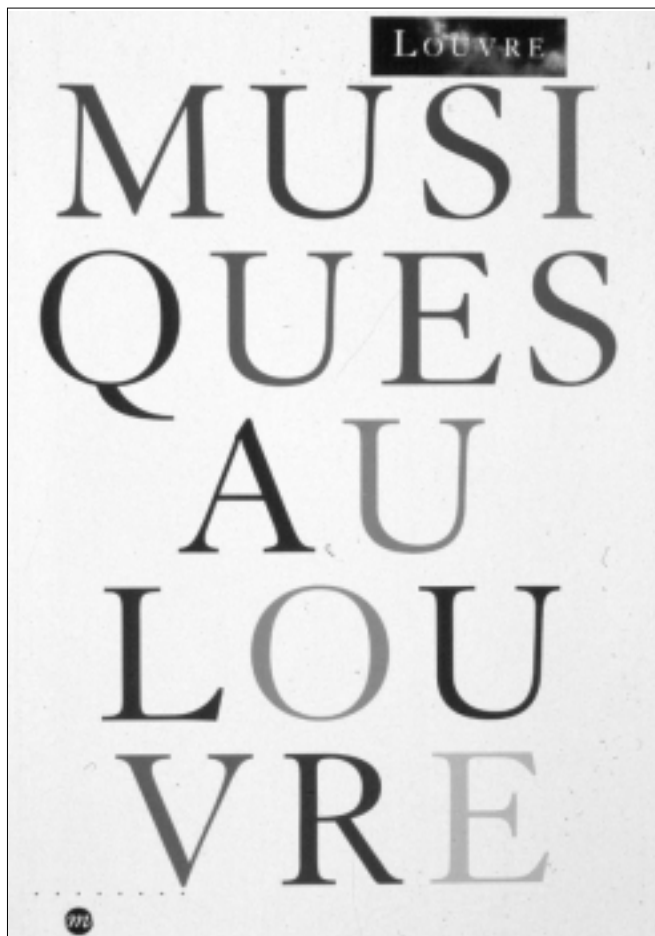
Massin: Precisely because I do not know how to draw, I had to use fonts as they came and distort them; it is my way of drawing. It is all about "looking sideways," i.e., searching playfulness within the stiff system of the alphabet. I certainly did not invent expressive typography, but I brought it to a new level, in book length, almost making a new medium out of it. In contrast with my full-time job at Gallimard, which implied a certain restriction, my experimental type work was a recess, a release, by breaking graphic and book rules. The interesting thing is that I was, however, able to do it at Gallimard (although no one really believed in my graphic interpretation of Ionesco's *Cantatrice Chauve* when it came out in 1964).

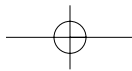


Figure 10 (above)
Mémoires de Chirico, La Table Ronde, 1965.
(on the use of typography on covers.)

Figure 11 (right)
Musiques au Louvre, Musées Nationaux, 1994
(book design + cover).

On the use of typography on covers: Massin likes to remind us of the difficulty he encountered in submitting this all type cover to the people at the Louvre, they were puzzled one could break the words into parts, have a cover with no image, the approval process was long and tedious.





LW: What was your intent with the Cantatrice Chauve?

Massin: Using expressive typography was a means to offset my lack of drawing skills, and a way to combine my interest in performance art. This spectacular typography introduced the notion of stage time and space to the printed page. On each spread, I 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).

I attended the play twenty times. I wanted to reproduce for the reader the experience of being in the theater. I recorded the play so that I could better reproduce not only the words, but the inflections, intonations, and pauses of the actors. The piece was inspired by Nicolas Bataille's direction of the play, as performed at the Huchette Theater in Paris's Quartier Latin, where it has been performed continuously since its creation in 1950.

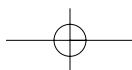
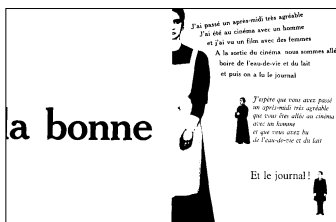
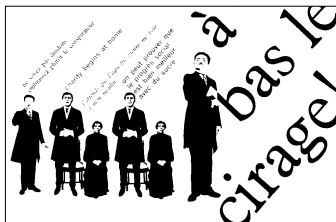
Figure 12
Front cover, spine and back cover of *La Cantatrice Chauve*, by Eugene Ionesco, Editions Gallimard, 1964 for the French version. Henry Cohen, photographer.

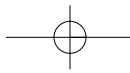


LW: In what sense is it a photographic interpretation, and not only typographic?

Massin: Headshots of each character replace the standard repetition of names as the dialogue unfolds. I collaborated with photographer Henry Cohen, who shot the actors in their original costumes at Gallimard's headquarters and we used his photos transposed into high contrast black-and-white without halftones. This was necessitated by a limited budget and an aesthetic choice. For this exhibition, I dug out the old record featuring the actors at the Huchette Theater, those who were actually photographed for my book. At the Huchette, where Ionesco's play still is performed every night, the children and grand children of the original cast carry on today.

Figure 13–17
Various inside spreads of *La Cantatrice Chauve*, by Eugene Ionesco, Editions Gallimard, 1964.





LW: What was the reaction of Eugène Ionesco?

Massin: In fact, *The Bald Soprano's* revolutionary dramatic 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 *The Bald Soprano* became a classic absurdist anti-play. My version was created with the blessings of Ionesco. Although I removed all punctuation with his permission, he only asked me to respect rhythm. One of his favorite moments was my forty-eight pages (out of the total of 192), which corresponded to two minutes of stage performance, and that were designed to evoke the daunting presence of silence. A perfect example of a Bergsonian distortion of time.

LW: How did this piece relate to the cultural and design context of the time?

Massin: It did not. My type experimentation was clearly a reaction to the overwhelming German-Swiss school, with predominant personalities such as Hollenstein, a Swiss professor of design based in Paris and Frutiger who were very influential in Paris in the '60s, in the art and schooling system, and in the press (e.g., *Graphis*). By imposing a binary, systemic practice (pre-computer era), I think they too often misinterpreted the true Bauhaus message. My work is set against a one-way graphic design vocabulary—some pages in the *The Bald Soprano* actually make fun of the narrow, stiff typefaces. (See the page when a character has a cold.)

LW: Would this experiment have been possible without the complicity of the literary masters?

Massin: It is true that the writers whose texts I worked with—i.e. Eugène Ionesco, Jean Tardieu, and Raymond Queneau to name a few—are playwrights who essentially explore language's limits, playing on words and miscommunication. I shared with these authors a common territory between language and image, written and spoken words. What was particularly interesting in my collaboration with Queneau though was that he is the one who asked for my help for *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes* (1961). It was a very different angle than my approaching Ionesco for *The Bald Soprano*. Set in the spirit of the exquisite corpses, *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes* is an interactive piece that predates the computer era in its form. Ten short poems made of fourteen verses each are cut into interchangeable strips. The design gave the text an entirely new meaning. It was also quite interesting to see the actual interactive adaptation of the *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes*, designed for the exhibit *Massin in Continuo* by Manny Tan. The digital version emphasized the notion of hypertext and the innovation of the Queneau piece at that time.

Figure 18

Dé lire à deux by Eugène Ionesco, Gallimard, 1966.

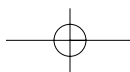
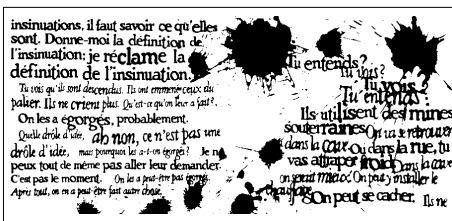


Figure 19

Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel by Jean Cocteau, Hoëbeke, 1994—typographic interpretation.

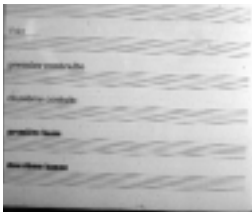


Figure 20

Conversation—sinfonietta by Jean Tardieu, (2 copies), Gallimard, 1966.



Figure 21

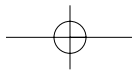
TNS, Théâtre National de Strasbourg, 1994 poster and logo design, inspired by Cassandre's 1927 Bifur typeface.

LW: How different is your graphic experiment with musical scores, such as Edith Piaf's song "La Foule" (1966), or most recently Schoenberg's "Pierrot Lunaire" (2001)?

Massin: The intent is not so different. It is always about transcribing visually the intonations of the voice. The main difference between those two pieces, thirty-five years apart, is the techniques I used to convey the expressivity of sound into animated type. For *La Foule*, I had to look for a printing technique that would allow me to stretch and distort the letters. I tried first with rubber undersheets but they were too thick to hold and would tear. It worked with condoms (I had to go several times to the pharmacy to buy some—imagine the face of the pharmacist!), which were flexible enough to be pinned on a flat surface distorted, and then photographed. Again this was done before the computer era whereas the *Pierrot* was completely developed using Photoshop/Illustrator.

LW: Over the years, how have you combined your various activities, for instance your role as an editor/writer?

Massin: Well, as I said earlier, I always had an interest in writing and a natural aptitude for it, which increased with my frequenting Gallimard writers. I suppose my designing books also emphasized my interpreting other people's writing, although I must say it is quite rare that I actually read the book whose cover I design. I have tried to continue working on a few personal projects involving the writing/editing on authors I admire. For instance I made this unique cork-bound book of Marcel Proust's correspondence. It presents a selection of my favorite passages from the *Recherche du Temps Perdu* with annotations, footnotes, iconography and excerpts from his correspondence in sidebars. I've been reading Proust for the fifth time now, so this book was my personal homage to him. Recently some scholars from the Sorbonne asked me to lend them the piece for a colloquium. I was flattered but the book was still on



display at Cooper Union. In a way, it is very similar to what I did at Hachette in 1980–82, when I founded the collection entitled *Massin/Atelier Hachette*. For each, I orchestrated the project entirely: conceived, edited, designed, photo researched, and selected the iconography for the eight titles printed. *The Shoe, The Glasses*, etc., were perfect examples of image-based manifesto of popular culture, socio-cultural studies borne out of the annales of the new history.

LW: Are you currently writing a book that would add to the existing list of your memoirs, fiction novels, essays, etc.?

Massin: I have always tried to alternate personal memoirs with essays. The last one was *Style et écriture* in 2001, Variations, on the interactions of the arts in general—a topic which is dear to my heart.

LW: Is there something you have not done or designed that you would like to do/design?

Massin: I had dreamt of going to the desert and I did, two years ago and this January, I spent two weeks in the Sahara. It was mind-blowing. I took lots of photos. I am still working on the Pierrot Lunaire project, finalizing the typeface, which remains a problem for which I have not found the solution.

Otherwise, I am also working on a new children's tale. It might be translated in English...I am preparing as well a big book about the notion of curiosity, based on my own collection, probably not a publishable project! [Laughter]

