

# Gin Tonic, Not Icing

Year: 1997  
Level: First Years, Spring Semester 2  
Unit: 33063 Foundation Studies 2  
Duration: 5 days  
Dates: July 28, August 4, 11, 18\*, 25\* \*assessments

## Origin

This project was the first of three 'research topics' offered in the second semester. I prepared a detailed briefing lecture, delivered on the first day. The project itself focussed on acts of 'noticing', and in using the conceit of an anagram upon the word set the challenge of finding ways to metaphorically reference three further things: 'Gin', 'Tonic' and 'Icing'.

## Premise

I began with the assertion that 'noticing' was crucial to human survival. Each of us possessing sophisticated sensory apparatus to detect and confirm things in our immediate environment, developing a 'memory index' that categorises experience and against which, as a database any new experience could be 'mapped' to 'match' and confirm its status. The system is hyper-sensitive to anything that does not meet expectations, anything unexpected and evasive of 'matching' – registers as potentially dangerous in being unknown, triggering the 'alertness' which we associate with noticing or taking note of something.

I contended that Art as an activity positions itself within this field of alertness and makes great play with the realm of deceit and illusion as a means of exercising our 'noticing' capabilities, (reassuringly within a non-threatening environment). Participants willingly allow a 'suspension of disbelief' (switch off their incredulity or play with the switch) in order to make-believe experience as artifice.

I used the analogy of 'passing through customs' as a crucial threshold. The 'customs officer' becomes the sensory field intent on detecting deceit, the 'customer' passing through is the 'foreigner' who may be benign or may be dangerous. It is in the interest of malicious intent that it remains undetected: notions of 'camouflage' and 'disguise' here play an important part (I made reference to a key text on animal camouflage: "The Art of Disguise" by Paul Zborowski, projecting many images of creatures, chameleon-like that could barely be seen.) I used the analogy of a light switch, a 'noticing' trigger (a warning light switched on) as something of a 'lie detector'.

I gave a brief history of gin and tonic, and made the point that in absence of an identifying label one cannot visibly distinguish between gin, tonic or water, when displayed in identical bottles. Sight alone is inadequate to differentiate in this instance: taste and smell become crucial to confirm the difference. Similarly the white powder of icing sugar is visually indistinguishable from salt or plaster or talcum powder etc. With any given experience there is a reliance on all senses to concur in their expectations (for any possible threat to be averted).

The challenge of this project was to create a work that could be 'overlooked' or 'passed by', something that cunningly 'blended in' with its surroundings; something that did not overtly draw attention to itself such that only the most discerning and observant would 'notice' it.

There was much amusement around the prospect of nothing apparently being presented for assessment, as the cleverness of each disguise would increase the chances of avoiding detection. The opportunity to locate these deceptions anywhere within the building drew attention to unusual settings, not normally considered to situate a work in.

Debra Porch arranged for a screening of Woody Allen's film "Zelig" as part of this project. The chameleon-like character of Zelig having relevance to deception and detection.

## Gin Tonic, Not Icing

Methods of reducing shadow:

- A. A rounded object casts a large lateral shadow.
- B. An object of the same mass but sitting squat to the ground casts a much smaller shadow.
- C. An object with a flange becomes continuous with its surroundings thereby eliminating all form revealing lateral shadow.

### **Crypsis or the Art of Disguise**

A project dealing with **artifice** rather than art, with the subtleties of contrivance and cunning (O.E. *cunnan*: to know). A project about concealment and **artfulness**. Art has a colourful history of deceit, tricks of illusion proliferate in the conjured imaging of images (the magic of imaginings). A pre-requisite condition of entry into any pictorial world is a surrendering or suspension of our disbelief to it, in order to make-believe the illusion as reality and so “get the picture”. Art very often relies upon its audiences knowing gullibility (credulous of the fraud) and willingness to be tricked and deceived.

*“An object is only visible by nature of being different to its surroundings. An interplay between the elements of colour, tone, light and shadow produce effects ranging from stark contrast to **virtual invisibility**. A great number of animal species have adaptation to help them blend in with their own environment by resembling some aspect of their background. Animals concealed within their own camouflage are cryptic (Gk. *Kruptos* – to conceal) creatures –*  
Paul Zborowski.

### **Being wary of Colourless Liquids**

Appearances can be deceptive. A colourless glass of water and a colourless glass of gin are visibly indistinguishable. In the absence of identifying labels we rely upon the nose and the tongue to verify the liquid. Senses are by their very nature discriminatory and their effective deployment in countering deception (misinterpretation) ensures our daily survival.

### **Setting up a distillery, setting a trap**

As well as being the name given to a distilled spirit, flavoured with juniper berries, from which its name derives, “Gin” can also be a snare or trap. To distil a liquid is to purify through evaporation and condensation, to concentrate and **capture** the essence of something. Essences are ingeniously and artfully arrived at and their tracks are often hidden (the secrets of recipe).

### **The tensions of tautness**

A tonic can be a medicine that tones up the system, something that can have an invigorating effect on mind or body (or gin). It also has sound connotations (sound in mind or body?) that derive from the tensions of its tautness. A *sound* argument is a plausible argument (applauding the plausible).

### **Skating on thin ice**

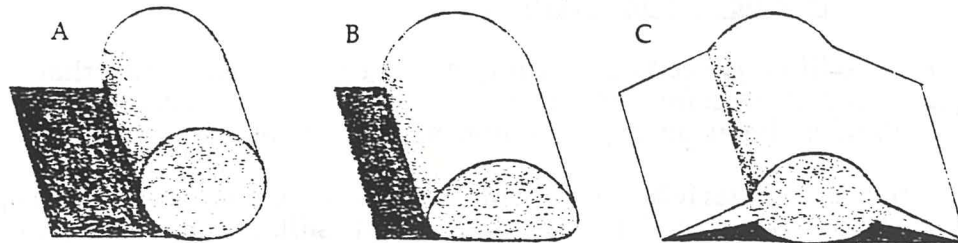
As well as referring to the solidification of water and the freezing of liquids, “icing” also refers to “concreted” sugar, that superfine powder that **simulates** in its hardened white opacity the skating rink of the wedding cake. The thickness of a sheet of ice (its cover) is critical to the support of the skater on the look out for cracks (the wisdom of the crack).

### **The Vanishing Trick (recipe for invisibility)**

- 1. To cook up a work of artifice conceived and manufactured in such a way that although accessibly situated it remains sufficiently blended into its surroundings as to not draw attention to itself as being in any way unusual or out of the ordinary.**
- 2. To sieve and stir what is counterfeit, what replicates, what simulates, what copies, what mimics, what acts as a decoy, what substitutes, what imitates, what remains transparent, what appears to dis-appear.**
- 3. That the outcome is the consequence of 30 hours of preparation and that each stage in the process be carefully documented (preserving the recipe). Each hour should be accounted for.**
- 4. That the proof of the pudding is in the eating (in the pudding’s dis-appearance) and the tasting is in the testing.**

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