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TOMBSTONES AND TOYS

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Large financial transactions of the sort handled by the major investment banks—public offerings of stocks or bonds, corporate mergers and acquisitions, etc.—are customarily celebrated by the principals and their entourages at more-or-less lavish "closing dinners." Generally hosted by the agents who have brokered the deal (nearly always the investment bankers themselves), these gatherings are familiar and ritualized occasions in the upper echelons of global finance. It is effectively unknown that such a dinner should end without the distribution—sometimes solemn and speechified, at others bright with ribald bonhomie—of small gifts, generally in the form of what has come to be called a "deal toy."

The presentation of these sculptural objects, usually made of Lucite and seldom larger than a grapefruit, marks the symbolic close of the deal-making process as a shared episode in the social-professional lives of the lead parties—usually no more than a few dozen individuals (the bankers, CEOs, financial advisors, lawyers, and/or financiers). While the specific appearance of these commemorative articles varies widely and has changed through time, several general observations may be made. First, deal toys nearly always display the names of the relevant firms and the value of the transaction as a whole. Second, deal toys are very often customized to express aspects of the deal itself—an automotive company stock issue might be memorialized with little plastic cars; the Facebook IPO deal toy looks like a Facebook page; more elaborate works (a mini-foosball table, a plastic fish that sings the terms of a large cannery deal) epitomize the genre. Third, deal toys are almost uniquely commissioned and conceptualized by the banker-brokers in question, who tend to play a quite active role in their design.

Deal toys are, without question (and as the name implies), trinkets. They are gewgaws, knickknacks. They are, with few exceptions, made of plastic. They are relatively inexpensive, seldom costing more than $100 a piece to realize. They have no resale value whatsoever. Even the most stately of them (and plenty of them are not stately at all) might be described as silly, and the properly silly ones can range all the way over to sophomoric. And yet it is worth meditating on the following fact: in 2013, the total face value of the deal toys issued globally—which is to say, the value of the financial deals memorialized by these objects in that twelve-month period—was probably just shy of three trillion US dollars. This is a very large sum of money, larger than the GDP of all but the four most powerful economies in the world (the US, China, Japan, and Germany).

In this sense, deal toys are no ordinary trinkets. They are, it seems safe to say, the primary material-culture artifact of the most powerful industry on earth.

The purpose of the present essay is to recover the history of these small reifications of the financial imaginary, and to suggest the value of further work on what I believe should be understood as a significant, if idiosyncratic and largely overlooked, art form—what we might think of as a kind of "outsider" art (vernacular, marginal, obsessive) competitively collected by the ultimate insiders.

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Businessmen and bankers have given each other appreciative tchotchkes since the dawn of banking as such: silver plate among the financiers of

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Above: Deal toy commemorating the acquisition of digital security company Oberthur Technologies by the private equity firm Advent International in 2011.

the Hanseatic League, crystal bowls exchanged by London magnates, engraved clocks in the Gilded Age, etc. But the specific history of the Wall Street deal toy lies at the intersection of two otherwise apparently unrelated twentieth-century techno-legal developments: 1) the increasingly widespread commercial availability after World War II of the transparent thermoplastic PMMA, Poly(methyl methacrylate), originally developed for use in shatterproof cockpit windscreens, and marketed to consumers as acrylic glass, Plexiglas, Lucite, Crystalite, Perspex, etc.; and 2) the regulation of financial advertising in the US in the wake of the stock market crash of 1929 (specifically, the Securities Act of 1933).

A few words on each of these threads, en route to an account of the knot tied between them in the late 1960s, when the forerunners of modern deal toys began to emerge in lower Manhattan. While we tend to think of Lucite as a material of the 1970s or even 1980s (bright modernist furniture and minimalist sculpture), the chemistry of the various closely related plastics sometimes known as "organic glass" had hardly been worked out before artists, designers, and hobbyists began to tinker with the makerly possibilities of the new medium. Jewelry collectors will be aware, for instance, of the valuable "Jelly Belly" brooches made by Trifari in the late 1930s, in which cabochons of Lucite replaced rock-crystal in whimsical animal figurines. Rumors that the translucent stones in these pieces had been carved from army surplus aviation stock have never been adequately confirmed, but there can be no doubt that workers with privileged access to military material made several early experiments with "trench art" mobilizations of clear acrylic, including glass-like rings, and, it seems likely, keepsake embedments.

This latter technique—in which a locket, love note, photograph, or other memento was embedded in a polished block of Lucite (which can be poured and molded before it sets)—rapidly became a very popular hobby project, particularly in the 1950s, when the raw materials from which clear PMMA was made came to be sold in craft kits.[1] Before this, readers of *Popular Science* were directed to buy the necessary liquid monomer and powdered polymer at a "dental-supply house," since PMMA was used in casting dentures.[2] As early as the late 1930s, scientists had experimented with the use of cast clear acrylic as a material for the preservation of specimens in medicine and biology, and anatomical displays embedded in faintly yellowed Lucite blocks from the 1940s and 1950s can still be found among the wares of dealers in medical antiques.

The mainstreaming of domestic tabletop sculptural embedments, however, came in the early 1960s, and seems to have had much to do with the popularization of coin collecting in these years: proof sets of coins in Lucite bricks were already a commonplace by 1962, when the first international coin collectors' convention gathered some forty thousand souls in Detroit, Michigan. Real numismatists might lament the sterility of a practice that sequestered the coins from the expert hand and myopic loupe, but hobbyist collectors bought many of the paperweight-like cubes, which showed off mint coinage to fine effect. It is notable that the functional inaccessibility of the money under these display conditions both expressed and instantiated the numismatic obsession with "uncirculated" currencies: money reserved from the dirty business of being money is, in those circles, valued at a (perhaps paradoxical) premium. Paper money and stamps were similarly embedded in these years, as were, as we will see in a moment, certain other forms of financial documentation of great significance to any history of deal toys.

To understand those other forms of money documentation, we must return and pick up our second thread in the twisting lineage of the deal toy: financial advertising. A direct quote from the head of a New York advertising agency in 1922 will set the terms of the problem: "Today Banking and Advertising form a strong union—a natural union," explained a bullish William T. Mullally in a special supplement on "Publicity" in *The Bankers Magazine*. "They coordinate as naturally as the right hand with the left."[3] This energetic promoter of the pitchman's trade went on to report that this winsome spirit of shared mission had only recently, if rapidly, replaced a sorry estrangement, occasioned by the longstanding reservations of those in the banking industry who had too long harbored an unwarranted prejudice against the forthright promotion of their wares. Fearing to appear hucksterish, the industry had dawdled on the sidelines of the modern age, preferring the stolid façade of circumspection to ad copy shill. "Hence," Mullally pointed out with deprecatory condescension, "the so-called *tombstone ad*—Sphinx Co., Bankers—nothing more to be said!"[4]

"Tombstone ad" was a printer's term from the late nineteenth century, referring to column-width newspaper ads run without any illustration or typographical ornamentation. Dominated by white space, with minimal textual information laid out in a simple, centered format (company name, address, line of work), the tombstone ad looked like a tombstone. As a forward-looking ad executive, Mullally didn't like them. They were old hat in the go-go days of the twenties, when a new cooperation between banking and advertising helpfully facilitated the boosterish promotion of countless exciting new financial possibilities and institutions. The crash of 1929 followed close on the heels of these heady developments.

And for this reason—suspicious of the complicity of boisterous advertising and irrational stock speculation—the US Congress implemented, in the Securities Act of 1933, strict requirements concerning the timing and character of advertisements by banks. The detailed history of these regulations (and their revisions in the postwar period) remains to be written, but the net effect was the enshrining of the *de minimis* conventions of the traditional tombstone ad as the primary instrument for public notification of large-scale financial transactions in the United States.[5] Indeed, readers old enough to recall the stock tables of the *Wall Street Journal*'s old "C" section (the printing of which only ceased in 2007), will remember pages of tombstone ads such as would have made William T. Mullally slap his progressive forehead in disgust: in every respect, the typography and conventions remained those of the nineteenth century. Even today, though the tradition is much attenuated, such listings are still seen in the financial press, announcing IPOs and bond issues. Like an armored chiton clinging to a seaside rock, these primitive advertisements represent a kind of living fossil from the media Paleozoic.

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Only now are we in a position to make sense of the origin of what comes to be called a "deal toy" in American finance: since well before anyone used that expression, the small table sculptures exchanged at closing dinners were known as "Lucite tombstones." However redolent this name might be of the cut-and-thrust dynamics of the warrior agon known as banking (and/or the Marxist critique of cadaverous capital), the moniker is easily and unallegorically explained: the earliest deal toys were, in fact, *Lucite embedments of the tombstone announcement of the deal in question*.[6]

Preserved in a polished block of acrylic glass, these terse financial disclosures instantly became trophy-paperweights, suitable for desk display—where they served as an aspic archive of all the money a given banker had pushed around. This documentary function of the deal toy has never been superseded, even as the sober tombstone-style Lucite deal commemorative gradually gave way to the sculptural exuberance of the deal *toy* proper: e.g., the little hyperrealistic acrylic ice bucket full of cold longnecks (marking the 2012 acquisition, for $1.2 billion, of the Dominican Cervecería Nacional by a Brazilian unit of Anheuser-Busch), or the drop of genuine petroleum crude together with a jewel-like gold oil derrick, both encased in a fist-sized Lucite barrel (celebrating Energen Resources' purchase of the privately held First Permian for $190 million in 2002).

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Exactly when did the Lucite-encased tombstone emerge as a feature of investment banking? At what point did these encapsulated texts give way to expressive sculptures? And finally, above all, *why* did this striking transition occur? Perfectly satisfactory answers to each of these inquiries continue to elude this researcher, but I can relate the present status of the investigation, with an eye toward the further work that is necessary.

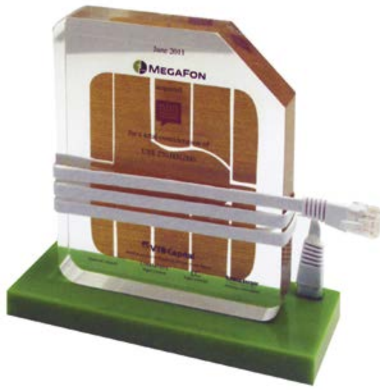
The canonical origin story for the Lucite tombstone has become a commonplace in the small literature currently available on the history of the deal toy.[7] Briefly, credit for the innovation is universally awarded to one Don McDonald, who is said to have done the first Lucite embedment of a tombstone advertisement (reprinted on heavier paper) for an old school-friend-turned-investment-banker. Gifted at a closing dinner in early 1973, the object was a hit, and shortly thereafter McDonald quit his job at an advertising agency to found Don McDonald & Associates (later Don McDonald & Sons), the


One Source
REGIONS


$486 Million
dunkin' brands
Initial Public Offering
NASDAQ
DNKN
DUNKIN' DONUTS


ebay
ebay
$1.5 Billion Senior Secured Notes
$400 Million of 0.875% Notes due 2013
$600 Million of 1.625% Notes due 2015
$500 Million of 3.250% Notes due 2020
citi


Sale of
SPECIFAR
to
Watson Pharmaceuticals
for €400m


MEGAFON


IRON MOUNTAIN
IRON MOUNTAIN
Autonomy
J.P.Morgan


SUNBEAM
MANASSEN FOODS
A$530 million
CHAMP

first firm dedicated to the making of Lucite deal commemoratives.

That McDonald's business was the first major player in the industry (his company would eventually create its own production factory, open multiple offices abroad, and peak in the mid-1990s, making as many as five thousand deal toys a year) is beyond question. And it is also quite possible that McDonald (who passed away in 2009) hit upon the idea of Lucite encasement of tombstones in the absence of any personal experience of precedents. Nevertheless, it must be noted that Lucite-embedded tombstone ads from the late 1960s survive, antedating his ostensible innovation. This competing *terminus post quem* does not, however, definitively rule out his claim, since I am only aware of pre-1973 tombstone embedments that commemorate the announcement of elections to partnership in a Wall Street firm (such elections also traditionally being memorialized in tombstone advertisements). It therefore remains possible that the first use of the technique with specifically *financial deal* tombstones—and thus the first use of the resulting object as a closing dinner gift—was indeed McDonald's. More work is needed.

Similarly, an unambiguous chronology for the important transition to sculpturally expressive commemoratives remains beyond reach. Don McDonald's son, Michael, who entered the business in the early 1980s, remembers the commemorative for a municipal bond issued by the city of Philadelphia in 1981 for which McDonald & Associates cut a (by then already traditional) Lucite tombstone into a flat silhouette of the Liberty Bell, etching the crack over the embedded financial announcement with a stencil and sandblaster. This must be understood as a suggestive transitional form—still essentially a Lucite tombstone, but one that gestured in the direction of a playfully expressive materiality and design. A further step down the "toy" road was taken in 1983, with a Lucite commemorative that marked the completion of financing on Donald Trump's Atlantic City casino Harrah's at Trump Plaza. Here, the tombstone information was embedded in a Plexi disk tinted and etched to look like a giant poker chip. By 1985, one of the fateful mergers of the Gordon Gekko boom years—the marriage of R. J. Reynolds Tobacco and Nabisco—was solemnified in a good-sized Lucite Oreo. The tombstone data was still included (silk-screened on the *cream*, so you had to *break the cookie open* to get at it), but we are firmly, by this point, in the realm of the deal toy proper.

Satisfying as this lineage would seem to be, it is necessary to consider that there are several early (ca. late 1970s) documented instances of Lucite deal commemoratives in which the embedment is not merely a financial tombstone advertisement, but rather a *miniaturized three-dimensional paper copy of the full financial prospectus itself*—in other words, the "prospectus book" for the deal was photographically reshot, printed out as a doll-house simulacrum, and embedded (fanned open for maximum readerly effect) in a block of clear acrylic. This technique, with its virtuosic miniaturization and proffered pleasures of mimetic tractability, strongly suggests an alternate stemma for the toy-like qualities of later deal commemoratives—and for the sculptural ambitions of their makers.

Be that as it may, the transit to the deal toy proper must be plotted, I think, along an axis of textual dematerialization: the rise of the toy form meant a corresponding reduction in salience or centrality of the archival/declaratory "content" of the traditional Lucite tombstone. Significant, in this transition, was the emergence of a craft technique whereby the tombstone ad would be reprinted (for Lucite embedment) not on paper, but on a sheet of clear acetate. This etherealization of the text-substrate represented an important shift in that it accorded to the Lucite object itself a new autonomy: no longer merely a preserving *envelope* for the paper trophy within, the Lucite matrix (within which floated a few ghostly names and numbers) could now dominate the visual and haptic experience of the recipient. This sublation of textuality is perhaps the most satisfying way to understand the birth of the deal toy as such: no longer newspaper clippings trapped in acrylic amber, these protean tokens rapidly became something like infinitely variable chess pieces continuously added to the expanding board of an Olympian glass bead game called global finance.[8]

History is hard. The world gets in the way of stories about itself. In the course of the research on

Opposite: Transactional tchotchkes. A selection of contemporary deal toys.

this essay, I came upon a Lucite cube awarded at the closing dinner of one of the most important deals in the emergence of modern corporate finance: the acquisition of Drexel Firestone Inc. by the Burnham Company, giving rise to an entity known as Drexel Burnham (which would later more or less create, destroy, and be destroyed by the world of junk bonds—becoming along the way a central player in the notorious abuses of 1980s finance). Not only does the cube not encapsulate a tombstone ad, it displays no textual information whatsoever. Within its clear void hang two golden balls. Nothing else. They are actually brass, of course: this insider artifact plasticated a virile inside joke about the prowess of the men who made this new kind of deal. The year? Surprisingly, 1973—making trouble for each of the chronologies I have carefully outlined above.

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That brassy/classy-lowbrow/high-net-worth cube foreshadowed what was to come—and not merely in the history of deal toys. It can in fact be understood to epitomize the very socio-cultural transformations just then beginning to alter the complexion and character of Wall Street: to wit, the shift from the clubbishness of postwar American banking (lots of old-school debt underwriting by Ivy League gentlemen from social register families) to the brave new world of private equity and hostile takeovers, the greed-is-good, para-criminal creed of go-getter financiers—the so-called "barbarians at the gate." The cool, clear sobriety of a tombstone was a deal toy only a grown-up WASP could love, whereas a rising cohort of hungry, risk-tolerant outsiders, impatient with the complacency and inherited privilege of their bosses, would conjure creative new gaud with which to celebrate their ascendancy. This new banking was more like playing high-stakes Monopoly than keeping a library of ledger books, and so that new generation of bankers, rather than doing Cold War decoupage on their scrapbook clippings, covered their credenzas with a menagerie of colorful little Monopoly pieces—hotels and casinos, tankers and trucks.

He who had the most toys would … win.

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Late capitalism has birthed several alchemies (or are they one?) whereby—as in Pop Art and national electoral politics—frank kitsch, rightly handled, may be transmuted into pure status. It is a puzzling phenomenon, entangled somehow, one suspects, with the paradoxes of commodity fetishism under the infantilizing condition of increasingly pure consumerism. The rise of the deal toy would seem to participate in these dynamics, and emerge out of them, but a full treatment of the problem outstrips the scale of the present analysis. What can be said, in closing, and with some certainty, is that a sensitive survey of Lucite deal commemoratives between 1970 and 2010 would, without doubt, meaningfully recapitulate essential features of the history of global finance in the last half-century, and likely shed new light on the material culture of our progressively dematerialized economies. It is to be hoped that someone will undertake this worthy project.

1 A critically engaged history of Lucite embedment would be very welcome.

2 See Evelyn Hayden Humphrey, "Molding Plastic Jewelry at Home," *Popular Science*, vol. 145, no. 4 (October 1944), pp. 160–161.

3 "The Banker and the Advertiser," *The Bankers Magazine*, vol. 105 (July–December 1922), p. 132.

4 "Shows Forward Step in Bank Publicity," *The Fourth Estate*, no. 1460 (18 February 1922), p. 17.

5 For a period discussion of the issues, see Nathan D. Lobell, "Revision of the Securities Act," *Columbia Law Review*, vol. 48, no. 3 (April 1948), pp. 313–340.

6 The earliest unambiguous print usage of the term "deal toy" (to my knowledge) appears in 1991, in an essay in *Harvard Magazine*. The phrase "a row of Lucite-encased tombstones" appears in a profile of Robert Baker (CFO of Chrysler Financial Corp.) published in 1978 in *The Institutional Investor*.

7 The financial press returns to the story of deal toys with a repetitious sense of surprise every few years—rediscovering at each occasion the deal toy industry as a twee index for the state of the global financial markets (e.g., Thor Valdamis, "Lucite monuments pop up to mark increase in mergers, acquisitions," *USA Today*, 16 December 2004).

8 Note that deal toys are made and awarded before the deals in question have met the approval of federal regulators. Which is to say, the toys mark the moment when the deal yields its fees to the broker-bankers, though the deal in question could conceivably never happen. The rise of the deal toy may thus be seen to index the progressive cleavage between economic creation proper and a financial services para-economy parasitic thereupon.