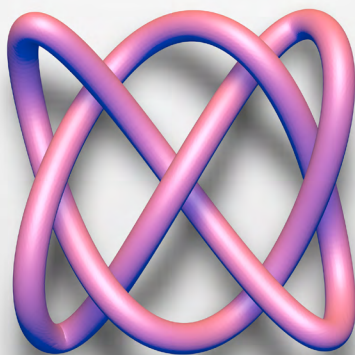


MERCURY RETROGRADE

EMILY SEGAL



A NOVEL

Mercury Retrograde
By Emily Segal



*It is also possible to put Mercury into modern terms.
He is the Modulator. Modulation is the principle of
impressing information onto what would otherwise
be random, meaningless action. – Robert Hand*

Experience is a hoax. – Alice Notley

DELUGE BOOKS

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BRANDING 101

As I had alluded in my eXe interview, the trajectory that led me to this mystical sphere began a few months after graduation. It was 2010 and I was a recent Comp Lit grad beginning to suffer the contradictions of working and “making work” in the big city. Though I loathed my new job, that beginner publicity gig, one great thing about having my own money and being out of school was buying proper hardcover books, with no syllabi or canons to distract me. I bought stacks of full-price hardcovers at all the bookstores I used to avoid for fear of going broke: dour French social realism, autofiction by women, a great pulp novel about a trend forecaster with 9/11 trauma, and many more.

Surrounded by these purchases, I sat in the same pizza place on 9th Ave. nearly every day during my lunch hour, reading, hating myself for a period I already saw as a failure. Time was expanding and unwinding like an infinite A.P. Chemistry class, my workday spooling out and out, the accordion cranking itself. Then, one day, I decided to stop doing my work. Possibly it was like that Marxist action, slowing work down to a trickle instead of going on strike.

Yet I did not have that frame for it – what I was doing was more reckless. I miss this part of myself.

My job did not seem to be worth doing, pasting thousands of screenshots into a Word document – the endless scroll, machines freezing from software being used against its purposes, my sense that I was becoming a talking paperclip. Though I continued to attend the events in the evening, where it was impossible to avoid participation due to the watchful eyes of Z-List celebrities and PR higher-ups, by spring I decided to take back my daytime hours. Like Bartleby before me, I cheerfully arrived at the PR firm every morning, took a seat at my desk at the top of the stairs, and did no work whatsoever. It took three weeks for me to get fired.

It was during this period, on one of my after work book buying missions, that I located one particularly good K-HOLE case study in a coffee table book on experimental sex toys, while browsing the Sex & Relationships aisle of the Barnes and Noble on 18th Street. The Cone was a pink rubber vibrator with a circular base, the size of a pomelo in diameter. It came with no clear instructions from the look of it, and had no physical features that one could easily insert. The consumer had to be responsible for its meaning and its use. It was a product that suggested an unknown behavior, an as-yet-unarticulated audience, a piece of a puzzle, and it could function as a node in a circuit we were wiring, made of products and suggestions and neologisms and imaginary consumer segments. “MAKE IT WORK FOR YOU.”

Then someone unsavory tried to cruise me in the Sex & Relationships aisle and I ran, book ditched on the floor, pages splayed open on the carpet – you always had to protect your body in the city, stalk around all hunched and masc at night, let your face lapse into something slack if someone was looking too long, know how to ignore people and bolt. I was 22 and had never been raped or pregnant, some kind of American miracle. Thinking about this now, from whatever ghost-vantage I write, I must have looked so young; the pillowiness that shamed me then, my half-purple

half-black dye job, black cigarette pants, combat boots, sweaters from the thrift store, patent leather doctors bag, bitten nails, punk eyeliner, a baby.

After I got fired, I wasn't completely screwed: I had already applied for a 3-month paid internship in the strategy department at a branding agency downtown (no health insurance) and it came through. Unlike the PR firm, the branding agency was in an actual office building on Varick Street, above a magazine kiosk and a McDonald's, near the crush of cars going into the Holland Tunnel. The agency shared a floor with the New York City Board of Elections. There were four elevators that slowly climbed the twelve stories, stopping on every floor, crammed with midlevel marketing managers and poplin seeping through with subway sweat. I was always paranoid people could hear through my headphones, even though what I was listening to wasn't necessarily embarrassing.

I found it extremely luxe that there was a stack of large-format Moleskines you could take at your whim from the cabinet behind the receptionist. She was a girl who'd gone to the same school as my supervisor the same year but couldn't quite scrape her way up into the bigger jobs. It was hard for me to parse all the differences among such girls. My supervisor and I were somewhat dissimilar since we were four years apart – she had graduated before the financial crisis and I had graduated after, which meant that she had always expected that as a good student from an Ivy League school she would go on to get a good job in New York, whereas I found that notion strange and dangerous. I had been watching my supposedly brilliant classmates saunter up to Brooklyn with *veni vidi vici* grins on their faces and eat shit.

The first days of my internship were slow, and I spent time between tasks reading the books that had been placed on my desk as an intro: *On Brand*, *No Logo*, *Lovemarks*, *Pattern Recognition* and a few others. As far as corporate identity went, the viewpoints of these books were a mix of pro and con, fiction and non-fiction – an early sign that branding mixed all these registers. I ordered an academic

book (*Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy*) to add to the pile, grasping for a filter that felt real. I found it strange that people kept referring to “brand” without an article, as in, “the thing about brand...” but I did manage to learn a few things about brand, myself.

The academic source, a sober grey-blue tome with pinched serifs, provided a credible though somewhat opaque intellectual definition of how it all worked.

“This book suggests that the brand is an alternative or supplement to the rational order of reason, or 'logos' of the economy established by price, and is thus an example of an object of the economy that is already a matter of value. In particular, [the brand] is an example of an object that opens up how it is that the economy is organised, and does so in ways which introduce qualitative intensivity into the extensive but limited rationality of a conventional market economy of price. The brand organises the activities of the market as if it were an interface. It is a privileged medium of translation, both a mediation of things and a thingification of media...”¹

The idea that we were somehow outside “the rational order of reason” both struck me as exciting and resonated with the experiences I'd had so far. An empty sense of branded lunacy came through even more clearly in another of the books, which was much more commercial – square-shaped with a black and red glossy cover, full-bleed graphics, and eighteen-point font.

“To inspire our people and partners, we hired a very big and very smart hotel in Toronto. Everyone came: the trade, all our bottlers, the media. My keynote speech was all about competition. How Pepsi had just beaten Coke, and how, in the same way, Canada could be competitive with America. About halfway through my presentation a huge red-and-white Coca-Cola vending machine rolled onto the stage. I ignored it. As I ended my speech I reached down behind the podium, picked up a machine gun and started blasting the Coke dispenser. We had people

diving under tables and heading for the doors. It was incredible. It was the power of humor and brand at work in very different times. And it truly galvanized our sales force.”²

Yet it was the most prosaic book of the bunch – a spiral-bound collection of case studies, compiled by other strategists, with a plastic cover – that really seemed to get to the heart of the matter.

“Whenever we’re stuck, we always go back to the basics. Brand is determined by the customers, not us. We really cannot determine anything. That is the essence. Always, always, we have to come back to the market, back to the customer, back to the sum total of what they think: it is simply the Toyota way.”³

Over and over in different meetings, I began to hear the mythology of the Agency and how it came to be. In 1960s London, they had invented the idea of branding as a discipline separate from advertising, a semi-spiritual concept through which the corporate personality was designed, animated, defined, put forth – a unique kind of power and these were their stewards. *“All organizations have an identity whether they control it or not. A corporate identity programme harnesses and manages this identity in the corporate interest...”*

They began to teach me the tools of our trade – the Venn Diagram and Square – and led me to develop my own, specious one, the Macrotrend Web. The Venn Diagram articulated the essential “brand idea” of a company by cross-referencing “what was special about it” and “what the world needed” and generating a sticky, evocative phrase in the overlapping space. The Square took that brand idea and mapped its expression through four quadrants – Products & Services, Environments, Culture, and Communications. The Macrotrend Web was a newer format, which tracked currents in culture and suggested how they might inform the overall receptive atmosphere for a brand. They wanted me to work on building that season’s version, since the department found out I “did trends”.

MACROTREND 1.

Traditional Money > Alternative Currencies

As consumers reassess value after the recession, and new technologies create new forms of exchange, money is being radically redefined, and not only at the margins of society. Colloquial terms like “social currency” are becoming literal, as social media influence can be exchanged for goods and services. If consumers have many more currencies to choose from, brand will come in as a key way to negotiate the options.

I shared my desk with an account manager who appeared to shave his arms (and, possibly, his chest). He had printed out a square of paper and taped it to the surface behind his monitor with fluorescent tape. In caps it read, “CHOOSE TWO,” above a triangle with the following phrases at each corner: “MAKE MONEY, MAKE BEAUTY, MAKE SENSE.” He’d crossed out “MAKE SENSE” and put an exclamation mark next to it. All around us the wrists of graphic designers moved against their Wacom tablets, styluses jumping from pixel to pixel like salamanders.

I didn’t know if I would have a job when the three months were up. The thought of being broke filled me with self-loathing in advance. Pewter dread. Pre-emptive self-rebuke. There was still part of me that thought you made money in proportion to how hard you worked, a notion that would be disabused in time.

I didn’t want to get sent back to a place like my first job, or worse. And I liked the challenge, being in a place with verbally perfect people like my supervisor, doing expensive corporate work that felt less humiliating than what I might be doing at a PR firm, like standing in front of Indochine with an iPad, or taking screenshots till my eyes bled. So I dug in my heels and overdelivered. Soon I was cracked out on a new observation: in brand strategy presentations it was totally acceptable to generalize, globalize, lob assumptions as truth, casually plagiarize, misconstrue sociological data, and worse, as long as it was persuasive and narratively coherent. As a methodology went, this was the opposite of everything I’d

learned in school. It gave me the exhilarated sensation of falling through space. It was the feeling I'd always yearned for when I'd tried to write fiction.

In college I'd seen the real literary kids, the more serious writers-to-be, as practically homeschooled – if all they studied was writing, how would they ever have something to write about? It seemed like a logical fallacy. Still, I had dillytanked around in that department, and taken some of those classes. Though compelling, they were also filled with weird Robert Coover stories, my classmates swooning over a single rape scene written through several different dimensions. Was I supposed to like that, too? I was one of them, yet also not one of them, I couldn't tell – I tortured myself over it.

Yes, as my own Fiction professor had bellowed at me in front of the entire class: "you're too judgmental of yourself, too judgmental of your writing, and too judgmental of your boyfriend!" which I was, perhaps because I shouldn't have had a boyfriend in the first place – not that I ever would've believed it at the time. And it's true, that feeling, writing those stories in the early morning computer lab in the Brutalist science building, came with the same brown-out, white-hot feeling of my teenage skirmishes with queer sex, and similar resignation after – *so hot but so painful, there must be an easier way*. The intolerableness of high stakes rejection, the desire to life-hack every scenario: these can't be overestimated in my young consciousness. I thought having an unpublished novel in the drawer to be the ultimate unbearable failure. I had been trained to avoid humiliation at all costs.

JOINERDOM

me: *did u get hit with a police clu*

me: *b*

Hannah: *naw*

Hannah: *i am nonviolent*

Hannah: *maybe i will tomorrow*

me: *GETTIN CLUBBED IN DA CLUB*

Hannah: *"tha whole world is watching!"*

Hannah: *i did talk to one of the privately contracted security guards for a while*

Hannah: *he told me i should paddle down the bronx river*

Hannah: *and that cbgb's was a shithole*

Hannah: *"but a fuckin' fun shithole*

Hannah: *"*