It Was Not a Dud!

A response to EPIC FAIL by Jeanne Randolph
It Was Not a Dud!

It was a dud. But at first its prospects had seemed extraordinary. Everyone in Toronto had been besotted with anticipation. Communally we had inflamed the wonder of it.

It had ignited the public imagination for months before it had actually happened; we dreamed it was on track toward visibility, dreamed its destiny as it sped close to Mars to sizzle and then to wax excited. It would emit a million miles of vapour and discharge numberless volumes of scintillating dust. A gigantic head would form, and a fiery tail.

As is traditional with comets — and this was Kohutek, “The Comet of the Century” — this comet had engendered catastrophes all throughout the year:

Nineteen nuclear bombs tested,  
The Helgafell volcano eruption (for the first time in seven thousand years),  
The Oaxaca Earthquake,  
The Veracruz earthquake,  
The Salta Argentina earthquake,  
The Hawaii earthquake,  
The Point Mugu California earthquake  
The Harbour Breton landslide,  
One thousand U.S.A. tornadoes,  
Fourteen Aeroflot plane crashes,  
The Yom Kippur War,  
The fall of Nixon,  
The fall of the American dollar by ten percent.

The catastrophes didn't seem to matter to the many pedestrians, shopkeepers, buskers and hawkers up and down Yonge Street in Toronto. Anticipation and the prolonged summer weather kept us on the streets into October. Astrophysics doctoral candidates seemed to be everywhere. They all looked ready to dance a jig. They donated information to anyone who would listen; everyone listened eagerly, sitting on curbs, jauntily strolling, drinking in bistros, relaxing on restaurant patios, maybe even in church. Astronomy facts flowed as copiously as beer. The vision of a boulder of ice six miles in diameter and spiked with methane inspired many versions of the “Comet Kohutek Cocktail.” As I had moseyed up Yonge Street on one of those summer days I had grabbed a tattered page from an Ann Arbor student newspaper just before it flitted into the street. Comet Kohutek, the editorial exuberantly predicted, would bring down capitalism. *The Toronto Star* had lightheartedly mocked a Duluth “STOP THE COMET CITIZENS’ ACTION GROUP.” The group was claiming the comet’s tail would zoom disastrously close to the earth unless the US government blasted it to pieces with a Saturn 5 rocket.

The mood along Yonge Street however had been festive, as if a mass pajama party had been promised for the night the glorious comet would become visible. There were trinkets and t-shirts galore. Many decals, stickers and fridge magnets depicted previous classic comets labeled Kohutek (which itself had not yet been photographed). Several store windows displayed schoolchildren’s drawings of comets: some of their trinkets and t-shirts galore. Many decals, stickers and fridge magnets depicted previous classic comets labeled *Kohutek*
Kohutek displayed schoolchildren’s drawings of comets: some of their comet scenes included dinosaurs or flaming skyscrapers, and one depicted deep mole burrows with a single sentry mole’s snoot poking above the ground. Of course there were sales promotions on banners, such as Eaton’s College Street store window’s “Cozy Knits in Out of the World Colours!” And there were conversational quips such as “Buy Buy Buy We’re all gonna die!” and “Lucy in the Sky with Kohutek.” The Bradford Exchange had minted a silver medallion with a diagram of Kohutek’s trajectory on one side and an embossed streaking smudge au verso.

Late autumn winds finally brushed most pedestrians inside, but expectations of the December 28th perihelion outshone much of the Christmas frenzy. Of course the similarity of Kohutek – or rather the vision of Kohutek we desired – tinted the Jesus-baby story with refreshed colour.

By December 30th at 4 p.m. 2.5 cm of snow had accumulated, yet a dejected Kohutec fanatic stood on a windy corner of Yonge and Bloor gripping a huge poster. The poster was protected in a bag of clear plastic. It wriggled and flopped like a feral cat. The image on the poster was a copy of a modest drawing by an astronaut on NASA Skylab 4; the previous night, December 29th, crewmember Dr. Edward Gibson, had made a sketch of Kohutek in outer space the very night we earthlings should have been able to behold it with our naked eyes --- if the sky that night hadn’t been completely and impossibly overcast. With binoculars a person might have been able to hallucinate the celestial wisp, but otherwise to see Kohutek in detail someone would need a telescope the size of a streetcar. By New Year’s Eve day reporters for newspapers, radio and television, as well as ordinary citizens in conversation, concurred one hundred per cent that Comet Kohutek had been “A Spectacular Dud.”

Comet Kohutek was in no way an awe-inspiring, radiantly ruby red explosively brilliant cosmic monster. As a popular spectacle Kohutek was an epic fail. It was remarkable how quickly Kohutek faded into the dullness of that murky winter sky. It was astounding how fast everyone completely forgot that Kohutek had ever existed.

In forty-four years I have not forgotten those Kohutek days and nights. I remember the cheer on strangers’ faces, how they were light on their feet. Imagining the sight of a rare mysterious comet had been so effortless. Envisioning the Comet of the Century seemed to have bestowed a universal respite from pragmatism and alienation. Naively I had totally over-emphasized this social effect of the comet’s arrival. It hadn’t occurred to me that Kohutek was supposed to be more spectacular than Disney’s Sleeping Beauty on Ice at the CNE. I had been thinking, “The comet is all about us! How we can, whoever we are, marvel at something that is not manufactured – savour something unmanageable (noting that “man” is integral to manufactured and unmanageable).” Surely I had been participating in the public construction of a three-dimensional matrix, a matrix of time, curiosity and conviviality.

What a silly goose I was: I have to concede that without a massive spectacle the summer of 1973 was dimmed and disintegrated into a December haze of disappointment. The earthquakes, plane crashes and tornadoes suddenly lost their significance. No one could remember a recipe for a Kohutek Cocktail. The Bradford Exchange medallions are languishing on eBay. And I give up trying to convince anyone that The Comet of the Century really did happen in the most astonishing way.

Jeanne Randolph
Jeanne Randolph | Jeanne Randolph spends a lot of time contemplating psychoanalytic theory, consumerism, the technological ethos, western white male philosophy and unicellular species. Her most recent book is SHOPPING CART PANTHEISM.

EPIC FAIL

Emily Goodden
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Curated by Collin Zipp

EXHIBITION
07 April - 20 May 2017

OPENING RECEPTION
Friday 07 April | 7 PM

EXHIBITION TOUR
Saturday 08 April | 2 PM

IMAGE | Emily Goodden, Outside Chance, 2017

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