



Andy Kaufman: Wrestling with the American Dream

Florian Keller

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When Andy Kaufman succumbed suddenly to lung cancer in 1984, some of his fans believed that his death was yet another elaborate prank. Over the previous decade, Kaufman had achieved improbable fame for his bizarre antiperformances—lip-synching the Mighty Mouse theme song, reading *The Great Gatsby* aloud in its entirety when people expected comedy, asking audience members to touch a boil on his neck—that perplexed, annoyed, or offended his viewers.

In *Andy Kaufman*, Florian Keller explores Kaufman's career within a broader discussion of the ideology of the American Dream. Taking as his starting point the 1999 biopic *Man on the Moon*, Keller brilliantly decodes Kaufman in a way that makes it possible to grasp his radical agenda beyond avant-garde theories of transgression. As an entertainer, Kaufman submerged his identity beneath a multiplicity of personas, enacting the American belief that the self can and should be endlessly remade for the sake of happiness and success. He did this so rigorously and consistently, Keller argues, that he exposed the internal contradictions of America's ideology of self-invention.

Keller posits that Kaufman offered a radically different—and perhaps more potent—logic of cultural criticism than did more overtly political comedians such as Lenny Bruce. Presenting close readings of Kaufman's most significant performances, Keller shows how Kaufman mounted—for the benefit of an often uncomprehending public—a sustained and remarkable critique of America's obsession with celebrity and individualism.

Florian Keller is a fellow at the Institute of Cultural Studies, School of Art and Design, University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Zurich.

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