

The Aesthetics of Self-Invention



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著者:Waldrep, Shelton

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By printing the title "Professor of Aesthetics" on his visiting cards, Oscar Wilde announced yet another transformation—and perhaps the most significant of his career, proclaiming his belief that he could redesign not just his image but his very self. Shelton Waldrep explores the cultural influences at play in Wilde's life and work and his influence on the writing and performance of the twentieth century, particularly on the lives and careers of some of its most aestheticized performers: Truman Capote, Andy Warhol, David Hockney, and David Bowie. As Waldrep reveals, Wilde's fusing of art with commerce foresaw the coming century's cultural producers who would blend works of both "high art" and mass-market appeal.

Whether as a gay man or as a postmodern performance artist ahead of his time, Wilde ultimately emerges here as the embodiment of the twentieth-century media-savvy artist who is both subject and object of the aesthetic and economic systems in which he is enmeshed.

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