



## **The Biopolitics of America: Bodies, Environments, and the Liberal Imagination**

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Sandow Birk. *Salinas Valley State Prison (SVSP) - Soledad, CA*. Image courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery.

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### **Self-Optimization, Adaptation, and the Newly Conventional US-American Novel: On Franzen, Eggers, and the Like**

The success of what I call the “newly conventional US-American novel” is both noteworthy and somewhat disturbing, in part because this ‘genre’ realigns certain literary styles with (interrogations of) cultural conformity. What do we make of the fact that – after the prominence (if only in certain circles) of an experimental post-modernist aesthetics, retained in the writing of e. g. Mark Z. Danielewski – a more “readerly” prose has been applauded again in the last two decades?

The newly conventional texts, I like to suggest, quite consciously partake in a far-reaching general trend to self-optimize and adapt to (mostly imaginary) economically ‘conditioned’ environments – environments which, to different degrees, they help to create and reaffirm, yet also challenge. Ultimately, I engage in comparative close readings that aim at accounting for the (dis)comfort we (may) feel reading the 21<sup>st</sup>-century work of Jonathan Franzen and Dave Eggers or recent rediscoveries, such as the fiction of Richard Yates and John Williams. Too conventional for the common 1960s reader, the latter speaks to a contemporary audience in part, because it foregrounds the complex complicity between literary etiquettes and the proprieties of our newly encoded lives; and so does the work of Eggers, in particular. As a consequence, the newly conventional novel may not pave revolutionary roads, yet invites us to reconsider the cultural work, or, more precisely, the biopolitics and the “liberal imagination,” of literature – and its ongoing transformation.