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5 Shots of Culture

Jeroen Boomgaard

This article consists of individual snapshots, taken from different points of view. This is not because it would not be possible to identify a general line in the role of art within the gentrification process, nor because the different viewpoints are of equal value. This approach was chosen because the area of concern is still too fragmented to capture in one clear representation. Moreover, it offers the reader an opportunity to relate his or her own observations and conclusions to the various fragments.

The first section of this article examines the presumed role of the artist and of art within the process of gentrification. After a short introductory comparison of the standard image of this, associated with the evolution of SoHo in New York, with the situation in Amsterdam in the 1960s and 1970s, the text explores the way in which notions about the avant-garde position of art and of the artist in the perception of gentrification play a role in texts by artists and art critics.

In the second snapshot, the text takes a look, using a case study, at the role of the artist as resident or transformer of a particular neighbourhood. The case study is a project by Gijs Müller, which was intended to set an example for young people in the Bijlmer. A lack of participation and response seems at first glance to have doomed this endeavour to failure. On closer inspection, however, the work demonstrates the ambivalent position of the artist 'in residence': The conclusion is that there is a significant gap between artistic intent and community problems.

In the next section, this gap is explored using the various ways in which art institutions function within a neighbourhood. Here, too, it is difficult to find a proper balance between an emphasis on art and attention to the specific problems of the area.

The fourth picture 'zooms in' on the strong predilection that both artists and clients, despite the aforementioned problems, are currently demonstrating for projects that aim to be neighbourhood-specific and socially interactive. Based on existing literature, questions are raised about this sort of project, with the ulterior agenda particularly at issue. In this regard, the fact that it is the client who now particularly makes use of avant-garde rhetoric is taken as an indication of the fact that gentrification through art has become part of policy.

The final snapshot is a shot across the bows. Using a work by Thomas Hirschhorn, a different approach to the problem is examined in detail. The choice of a clear position for the artist and the avoidance of any suggestion of social helpfulness or interactive elaboration brings the issue of the role of art in a particular place into focus, in a way that can serve as an example for policy in relation to art in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Snapshot 1 The Vanguard

Now that gentrification, and particularly the role of culture within it, has become a marketing strategy instead of

a historical development, it is time to take a good look at the presumed impact of art. The process has been widely recounted: dilapidated neighbourhoods become the domain of artists of all stripes who find affordable living and work space there. Their efforts and activities make the area attractive to other enterprises, and eventually to developers, who with a wave of price rises flush out the artists along with the original residents of the neighbourhood.

This picture raises all kinds of question marks. Although it has been outlined with great plausibility for certain areas of London and New York, it is not certain that a compelling causality can be ascribed to it. The influx of artistic professions into a given area can be a symptom of an already operating process, and not its instigating factor. Moreover, this sequence of events does not apply in the same way to every situation. Amsterdam in the 1960s and the early 1970s provides an interesting case study of a comparable process that nonetheless unfolded differently. The dilapidation and lack of occupancy in part of Amsterdam's city centre elicited, under the impetus of the Provo movement, the first wave of squatters. Under the motto 'Redt un pandje bezet un pandje – Gnot wil het' ('Save your house squat your house – it's Gnot's will') the Witte Huizenplan (White Houses Plan) was launched in issue no. 9 of Provo (1966), highlighting the fact that thousands of properties along the ring of canals and in the Jordaan quarter stood vacant.¹ This was followed several years later by the fight for the Nieuwmarkt, in which artists once again played a role.² Both movements were primarily a reaction to the policy of the 1960s and 1970s, which was geared more towards creating new residential areas by means of expansion and demolition than toward the possibilities offered by the dilapidated city quarters themselves. The sea change from this 'functionalist model' in which transport and housing for the many was privileged, to a more 'romantic' vision of urban development took place partly under the influence of these movements.³ A characteristic of the Dutch situation is perhaps the fact that in spite of the unmistakable yuppification of both areas, a significant portion of the original activists still live there. In the development process, certain groups succeeded in establishing certain rights, something that, through rent regularisation and the transfer of buildings to the people who originally squatted them, has in any event partly kept an area like the Nieuwmarkt from becoming completely gentrified.

Despite their differences in dynamics, the processes in the different cities share a certain rhetoric. The vanguard position assigned to art in the salvation as well as the decline of these areas is entirely in the tradition of the avant-garde ideal that has occupied an important place in thinking about the role of art and the artist since the nineteenth century.⁴ The theory of the avant-garde clears out a great deal of room for the breaking through of the traditional boundaries of art and the re-establishment of the presumed unity of art and life. This breakthrough is often formulated literally in terms of place: the avant-garde is outside the museum, keeps away from the exhibition circuit, seeks its own place in the world to manifest itself. At the same time, the connection to 'the real world' is often conceived in terms of resistance and struggle, so that living in condemned areas at risk of becoming victims of the determination of clearance-minded authorities is almost a natural habitat for thinking based on avant-garde objectives. A good example is the way in which the American art critic Lucy Lippard describes the gentrification process of the Lower East Side: in 'the late seventies and early eighties, the Lower east Side and east Village became a hotbed of punk, new wave, avant-garde art as groups of dynamically disenfranchised young artists rebelled against the expectations of an art world career and identified to an unprecedented extent with the disenfranchised in whose midst they lived. This was a political and an aesthetic choice, and the art that resulted was more profoundly influenced by the city as place than any other modern movement I can think of ... Young, cool, into "new contexts": they came to know these "ghettos" and the people economically confined there more intimately than most artists know the places they live in for economic convenience. Many of their projects were collaborations within the neighbourhoods,'⁵ The decline is part of this story as well: 'By then [1984], gentrification had taken hold in earnest. The SoHo model was applied, though with less saturation; small shopkeepers were ousted in favour of boutiques, galleries, restaurants, and suddenly expensive housing; classy spacious white galleries replaced local small business; European art dealers arrived; crack dealers hung on ...'⁶

The mythical expulsion of the artist from the area for which he or she has fought is part of the same rhetoric. Whether he or she succeeds or fails, according to his or her own ideal the avant-garde artist can only disappear. The best-case scenario is when his or her disappearance takes place when the union of art and life has been achieved, when art is no longer a separate domain – in this case when cooperation with area residents has led to projects that have more of a social than an artistic significance. His or her being driven out of the neighbourhood is then proof that integration has succeeded. Or he or she disappears because the world is not yet ready for the objective upon which the work is predicated. His or her disappearance must then be symbolic of oppression, the proof of the validity of the struggle. Most of the time, however, he or she vanishes in a banal way, into acceptance by the art world. Ironically enough, he or she is replaced, as Martha Rosier asserts in a crucial text about this issue, by the very same wealthier professionals who buy his or her work and who followed him or her to these areas.⁷

The fact that the description of the role of the artist in the gentrification process is rhetorical in nature does not mean it is entirely invalid. It does mean, however, that the actual consequences of this rhetoric for the practice of art must be examined. What role does art play in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and urban renewal, and what place do art institutions occupy in this battleground?

Snapshot 2 – A Running Artist

On 26 May 2002 artist Gijs Müller ran a marathon. This is not extraordinary, but what was unique was that this was a work of art. Under the title *Opportunity I Am*, the artist, with his dodgy knees and without any training to speak of, dragged himself through the traditional distance, ending up on the athletics track of the Bijlmer in Amsterdam. The effort marked the conclusion of a five-month stay in the Bijlmer, as part of the project *Bijlmair*. Müller wanted to literally set an example for the unemployed and partly drug-addicted young people of the Bijlmer, who in his view were wallowing in their own ‘disadvantaged’ status. The athletics track was well chosen as an end point, because former athlete Sammy Monsels had already set up a comparable project for young people there.⁸

The fact that this example generated little immediate emulation will come as no surprise, no more than the fact that the intended target audience was virtually entirely absent from the project. What is more interesting are the questions that this performance raises about the role of art in so-called disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In light of the participatory projects that have been all the rage since the mid-1990s, Müller’s endeavour seems naïve and a failure. It is a well-intentioned but pointless attempt at performativity, an example devoid of result. In the end, he had made virtually no effort to involve area residents in the project, organised no workshops, had made little to no attempt to familiarise himself with the community, and therefore had precluded any chance of participation. The only thing Müller had skilfully handled was the media, which were supposed to lend the event visibility.⁹ This seems to place the project more in what you might paradoxically call the tradition of the avant-garde. Breaking with existing or accepted art forms, playing the media, but also setting an example without much care about its being followed are all part of this tradition.¹⁰ For although, as the above demonstrated, seeking out the margins of society and establishing alliances with the less fortunate can be effortlessly incorporated into the rhetoric of the vanguard, art did not take on a subordinate or servicing task within this ideal. On the contrary, to a significant extent the emphasis was placed on following an autonomous road toward a hopefully better, yet still rather vague future.¹¹

An artist’s stay in a neighbourhood has ambivalent aspects. When he or she lives and works there it is an environment like any other, but when he or she takes part in the struggle for preservation and improvement of a disadvantaged neighbourhood, a certain shadowiness comes into play. He or she is not among the ‘original’ residents, whoever they might be. His or her fight is also inevitable waged out of self-interest, but this interest does not necessarily coincide with the marginalised people he or she identifies with. Although many artists are indisputably compelled to live below the poverty line, they are not dependent on badly paid exploitation or

hopeless unemployment. Their position is that of the small independent entrepreneur with client in a somewhat better situated area. The artist's stay in the disadvantaged neighbourhood is in fact temporary almost by definition, the alliance as a project somewhat splintered in intent. Müller's marathon brought this unbridgeable gap between local problems and intention into sharp focus.¹²

Snapshot 3 – Desperate and Hip

The ambivalent presence of the artist in the neighbourhood is mirrored by the aimlessness of the art institution in the area. Artists' initiatives, alternative art spaces, minimally subsidised art centres with a community function all seem to lead a somewhat lost existence, to be fighting a hopeless fight. Yet this desolate and desperate quality is inherent to art spaces: the more alternative they are, the more you get the feeling of witnessing a pointless quest towards a better world. That is not so bad in itself – in fact it may be their strength. More likely it is our own viewpoint, geared to numbers and success, that interprets this loneliness as a deficit. Perhaps we have become so indoctrinated by the jargon that hammers on about the market and the creative industry that we can no longer recognise the simple fact that our own visit to this place already justifies its existence. This is somewhat more complicated when the art space attempts to involve itself directly in the neighbourhood. Art projects about the neighbourhood and its residents, often documentary in nature in order to be accessible, or those that are carried out in cooperation with residents, seem aimed at a different audience and make the absence of that audience all the more palpable.

It is not probable that such marginal spaces play a significant role in the gentrification process: they may attract a wealthy audience to the neighbourhood, but this is so limited in size that it is not at all worthwhile for other enterprises to base their branch establishment policy on it. The situation is different when traditional galleries discover a neighbourhood. For instance, the galleries that have opened in the most desolate streets of London's East End are undoubtedly a symptom of a process that will radically transform the area over the next ten years. Their presence, on the one hand, shows that real estate prices are low enough to give beginning galleries the chance to exhibit not yet established artists, yet high enough to seem 'hip' rather than 'alternative: Because the decoration of these spaces copies the standard image of a gallery as faithfully as possible, they give the visitor to a location in a dismal back street the feeling of entering a parallel world. That is the world that attracts investors and developers, not the dismal reality outside. There they already dream of the spruced-up future.

Amsterdam's policy of converting existing art spaces and initiatives into official broedplaatsen (incubators or breeding grounds) creates a new category. Whereas the alternative art space was a place where something could emerge, where inconsequential mucking about could lead to an interesting confrontation, the broedplaats is expected to immediately stimulate a business establishment policy that trades in marginality for methodical gentrification.¹³

Snapshot 4 – Socially Motivated

The greatest resistance to the process of neighbourhood regeneration with anti-social consequences seems to come from the participation projects that have sprouted like mushrooms out of meagre ground over the last ten years. Miles describes such projects as follows: 'The value of new genre public art is, then, in its ability to initiate a continuing process of social criticism, and to engage defined publics on issues from homelessness to the survival of the rain forests, domestic violence and AIDS, whilst its purpose is not to fill museums, even with Dadaist anti-art, but to resist the structures of power and money which have caused abjection, and in so doing create imaginative spaces in which to construct, or enable others to construct, diverse possible futures. New genre public art is process-based, frequently ephemeral, often related to local rather than global narratives, and politicised.'¹⁴ The popularity of this kind of project in the Netherlands has resulted in a publication presented in a way that betrays these vestiges of avant-garde ideology: 'In an effort to bring clarity to the relationship between art and society, neighbourhood and community, Cultuurnetwerk Nederland and Sandra Trienekens have taken the initiative to conduct research into social engagement in art projects. In socially engaged projects, the idea is to bring about a clear interaction or encounter between artists and participants, as well as equality and

the sense that everyone can be creative. The artist is motivated both artistically and socially, and often the motivation is a resistance to (or at least a critical reflection upon) the established artistic order and/or the established political or social order.’¹⁵

While this form of art answers the question of what the artist is doing in the neighbourhood by offering an activity for or with the residents, which at first glance produces much more effective integration and socialisation than in more autonomous projects like Opportunity I Am, it does raise significant questions about its ambitions and intentions.¹⁶ Or as Miwon Kwon puts it in her thorough study of the new genre of public art: ‘In actual practice, how does a group of people become identified as a community in an exhibition program, as a potential partner in a collaborative art project? Who identifies them as such? And who decides what social issue(s) will be addressed or represented by/ through them: the artist? the community? the curator? the sponsoring institution? the funding organization? Does the partner community preexist the art project, or is it produced by it? What is the nature of the collaborative relationship? ... If new public art engages the audience as active participants in the production of an art work, which to a degree renders them subjects of the work, too, then who is the audience for this production? What criteria of success and failure are posed now, especially to the artist, in this major reconfiguration of public art that moves aesthetic practice closer to social services?’¹⁷ The eagerness with which all sorts of government institutions in the Netherlands stimulate these projects and emphasise their pseudo-avant-garde nature, as we saw above, distracts from the pitfalls and conceals the extent to which social participation is in fact used to mask the effects of urban renewal and suppress the process of social disintegration.

‘The enthusiasm to get to work in restructuring areas, to “do, do, do!”: as well as the refreshing quality that emanates from the initiatives in inversely proportional to the political courage to tackle the dubious agenda behind the great renovation of the city in the Netherlands with equal enthusiasm and inventiveness. In this, “art in the public space” achieves precisely the opposite of what it intends at an official level: instead of politicising the public space, we get a depoliticisation of it?’¹⁸ If we agree with this assertion by Bavo, there seem to be few opportunities left for socially motivated projects. It remains to be seen, however, whether all the assumptions at work here are correct. Not very many socially motivated projects officially intend to politicise the public space. In addition, the history of Provo and the Nieuwmarkt shows that politicisation of activism can be absorbed fairly easily into the struggle for position of the powers-that-be and that it at most slightly corrects the course of, but does not stop, gentrification. Meanwhile, the rhetoric of political engagement, just like the avant-garde, has become the standard idiom of government policy. This governmentally initiated engagement not only makes the art projects innocuous from the outset, it also seems mainly the whole marketing policy that uses *broedp/aatsen* in a creative city to provide a progressive layer to conceal the hard face of the neoliberal market mechanism that underpins it.¹⁹

Snapshot 5 – An Alien Entity

Is it possible to find a way out of the dead-end street that perverts avant-garde ideals for the benefit of neoliberal proliferation? Is it possible to conceive a middle way between an advocacy that mistakes intentions for results and a mistrust that interprets every attempt as a manipulation by an allcontrolling market? A brief detour along official policy shows, in any event, where the core of this policy lies and what might be devised to counter it. In *Cultuur en Stedelijke Vernieuwing* (Culture and Urban Regeneration), a joint publication by the Ministry of Culture, Education and Science and the Ministry of Public Housing, Physical Planning and the Environment, Robert Kloosterman and Merijn van der Werff write, 'In contrast to the United States, in Europe local culture policy is also used to reinforce the identity of a place and in so doing generate a sense of social cohesion by mobilising various social groups and then integrating them. In this case as well, it is not a matter of a governmentally directed dissemination of culture as a public good for the existing local population, but of culture as a strategic instrument to make a place more attractive to potential residents, employers, businesses and tourists'²⁰ What is striking here is not only the unabashed, explicit agenda of social engineering and gentrification, but primarily the new interpretation of the concept of 'strategy.'

If previously 'strategy: in line with Michel de Certeau's analysis, was the way in which power occupies a place, withdraws it from time by excluding any form of change in favour of its own perspective of action, then it encompasses the traditional model of gentrification'²¹ These days, however, 'strategy' stands more for a way of operating, more for behaviour than for a place. Neighbourhoods are made more attractive for all forms of gentrification when residents participate in cultural acts that are not directly and not solely geared towards themselves, but rather serve primarily to give a neighbourhood a different 'atmosphere: To stay with De Certeau's terminology: tactical action is brought under control in order to remove contradictions and conflicts from the public space.

To thwart this strategy, therefore, it is no longer sufficient to prevent the occupation of a specific place, such as *Mobiel Bureau OpTrek* does in the Transvaal neighbourhood of The Hague, for instance. Admittedly, *OpTrek* succeeds quite well in avoiding a number of the pitfalls of art in the community by linking local issues to global ones and by maintaining a certain autonomy for the art, but the question remains whether some of the activities are not aimed at mobilising and integrating the population, the way the state likes to see. The strategy is perhaps best thwarted by the façade project the Bureau is carrying out. Artists provide houses marked for demolition with a temporary growth on their façade. This not only makes the demolition policy all the more visible, it also introduces an alien entity into the neighbourhood that is difficult to integrate and therefore visually disrupts the official integration policy. ²²

However, it is Thomas Hirschhorn who most consistently does not integrate art into a specific location, and therefore gives the tactical use of the public space an opportunity that other projects attempt to exclude. For Documenta XI in Kassel, Hirschhorn, with the help of local residents, constructed a monument to the philosopher Georges Bataille, which consisted of a sculpture, an exhibition, a library, a television studio and a snack bar, all located in a neighbourhood of Kassel in which many Turks live. For the record: the participation of the neighbourhood residents was remunerated – this was no communal art project. Nor did Hirschhorn suggest he was doing something for the neighbourhood residents. On the contrary, as he puts it himself, it is not the artist who helps the neighbourhood residents, but they who help him. This reversal of the current practice of socially motivated projects has had interesting consequences. The Bataille Monument was not made especially for this location – according to Hirschhorn it could have been set up anywhere.²³ At the same time, it functioned as an artwork at this location because it was maintained and managed by residents. The result is that the work seemed simultaneously 'alien and ordinary. Ordinary, because it was accessible to everyone, used by neighbourhood residents and visited by art lovers, alien because no attempt was made to bridge the contradictions among all these elements or camouflage them with a pretence of cosy collectivity. By operating this way, something emerged that might be considered an 'agonistic public space.'²⁴

The artist is an intruder in the neighbourhood, the artwork an alien entity. Yet it is precisely because of this that they are able to make visible the diversity and the fundamental contradictions that exist in an area. This may not stop gentrification, but it does punch a hole in the screen of pseudo-avant-garde jargon and soft engagement with which the state and market players attempt to gain strategic control over an area.

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Notes

1

Virginia Mamadouh, *De stad in eigen hand. Provo's. kabouters en krakers als stedelijke sociale beweging* (Amsterdam: Sua, 1992), 69. The same manifesto, which is primarily about Amsterdam's largest vacant building, on the Dam, also protests against demolition and alludes to Constant's New Babylon. This mix of irreconcilable ideas is characteristic of the anarchist outlook of Provo.

2

Ibid., 113-140.

3

Ibid., 46-47.

4

The standard literature on this topic is Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974); and Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA / London: The MIT Press, 1996).

5

Lucy Lippard, 'Home in the Weeds' (orig. from *Lure of the Local*, 1997), in: Malcolm Miles, Tim Hall and Iain Borden (eds.), *The City Cultures Reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 2000). 273-274.

6

Ibid., 275.

7

Martha Rosier, 'Fragments of a Metropolitan Viewpoint' (orig. from *If You Lived Here*, 1991), in: Miles et. al, *The City Cultures Reader*, op. cit. (note 5), 118-119.

8

Jelle Bouwhuis, 'Gijs Müller – Iopen voor de Bijlmer' (orig. from *Stedelijk Museum Bulletin* (2002) 3), In: *Cities and Eyes. Bronnenboek* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 152-153.

9

Ibid., 153: 'Müller would not be Müller if he had not devoted media attention to this as well, in the form of striking images that refer to advertising.'

10

An enlightening example of this is the performance by Wim T. Schippers in 1963, when he emptied a bottle of fizzy drink into the sea in Petten. An act that not only linked art and everyday life in a way that had virtually never been seen before, but also sought direct contact with the media: the performance was shown in the television programme *Signalement*. See S. López, 'Videovertoningen; tussen televisie en de tentoonstellingsruimte,' in: J. Boomgaard and B. Rutten (eds.) *The Magnetic Era. Video Art in The Netherlands 1970- 1985* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2003), 113. For Fluxus in the Netherlands, see also H. Ruhé. 'Over schilderkunst, nieuwe media en het avontuur van Fluxus,' in: G. Imanse (ed.), *De Nederlandse identiteit in de Kunst na 1945* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1984). 121-139.

11

See J. Boomgaard, 'De utopie van de argeloosheid; een Korte cursus engagement: *De Witte Raaf* (1999) 77, 23-27.

12

J. Boomgaard, 'De valkuil van de publieke ruimte', in: *Cities and Eyes*. op. cit. (note 8), 253.

13

Or as the declaration of principles of the Bureau Broedplaatsen of the City of Amsterdam puts it: 'Creating cultural hot spots for the basic and middle segment of the creative industry, whereby in cooperation with the properties owned by the city and market players, appropriate and more sizable real estate is sought and the real estate needs within the target audience of broedplaatsen as well as creative businesses is better identified'. www.broedplaatsamsterdam.nl.

14

M. Miles, *Art Space and the City* (London/New York: Routledge. 1997), 164. It is interesting to note that the examples of themes Miles cites, his definition notwithstanding, are more global than local.

15

www.cultuurnetwerk.nl Participatory projects have been an international trend for years, which makes the suggestion that they are somehow a form of resistance against the art world rather odd. For a collection of international examples, see Bartolomeo Pietromarchi (ed.), *The [Un]common Place. Art, Public Space and Urban Aesthetics in Europe* (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2005).

16

According to Malcolm Miles, the contribution of the visual arts to regeneration processes is very limited. Performance arts, in his view, are much better suited to generate 'socialisation', See Miles, *Art Space*, op. cit. (note 14), 112. A shift to a more performing and interactive practise is therefore logical when artists wish to

play a concrete role in the social processes of a given area.

17

Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another* (Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press, 2002), 116-117.

18

BAVO (Gideon Boie and Matthias Pauwels), 'Kunst in De Grote Verbouwing: voorbij de collectieve conditie van interassiviteit', essay commissioned by Stroom Den Haag on the occasion of the presentation 1951 DHZW 2007:

Toekomstig erfgoed, 14 January to 11 February 2007 (no publishing location listed).

19

See also J. Boomgaard. 'The platform of commitment', in: *New Commitment* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2003), 98-108.

20

Robert Kloosterman and Merijn van der Werff, 'Cultuur: een lokaal ankerpunt in een wereld van grensoverschrijdende stromen?', in: *Cultuur en Stedelijke Vernieuwing* (The Hague: The Ministry of Culture, Education and Science and the Ministry of Public Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment. 2004, 158-159.

21

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1984), 35-36. More traditional forms of art in the public space are the classic method for power to underscore its occupation.

22

www.optrektransvaal.nl

23

Thomas Hirschhorn, 'Bataille Monument', text available at the exhibition Anschool. Bonnefantenmuseum Maastricht, 26-5-05 to 11-9-05.

24

Chantal Mouffe, 'Some Reflections on a Agonistic Approach to the Public', in: Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Karlsruhe: ZKM Karlsruhe, 2005). 804-810.

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