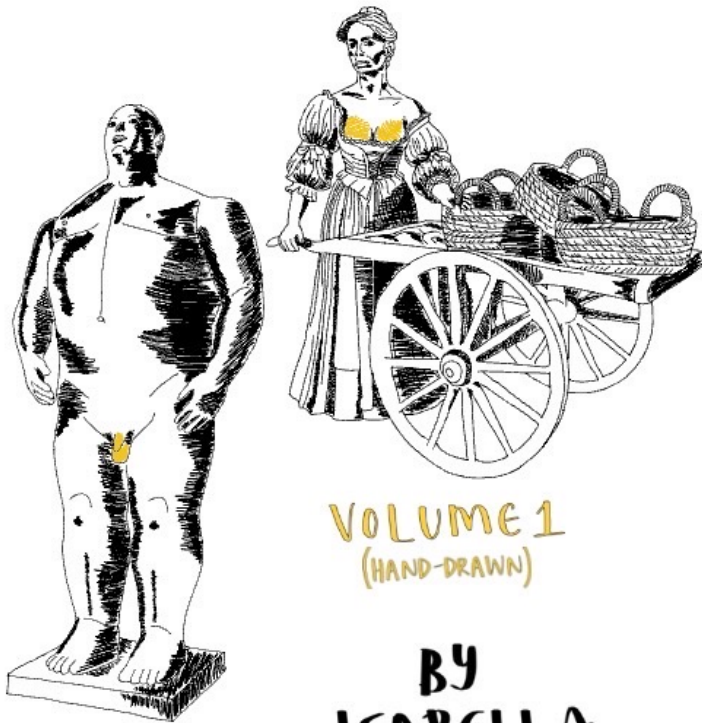


Statues in Society:

INTRA-ACTIONS, THING POWER,
& SEXUAL VIOLENCE



VOLUME 1
(HAND-DRAWN)

BY
ISABELLA
GRECCO



ABSTRACT

The act of rubbing statues for 'good luck' and photo opportunities has been a phenomenon for many years. Usually, when people do this, they rub or touch the breasts or genitals of a statue, in an attempt for a quick laugh, picture, and the notion of prosperity. But, in reality, these acts of touching reproduce social dynamics that allow for harassment and assault of sexualized, exposed bodies. Throughout this piece, I plan to explore how statue rubbing demonstrates the power and agency objects can have as they experience sexual violence when intra-acting (Karen Barad, 2007) with humans. These repeated intra-actions, a step beyond interactions as they create collaborative meaning and agency between the living being and the object, leave a visible history in the statues, where they look worn, and even golden, exemplifying their thing-power (Jane Bennett, 2004) as a material reminder of the cultural normalization of sexual violence and harassment. These themes will be explored using three statues, 'Adam' (1990, NYC) by Fernando Botero, 'Mellymalene' (1988, Dublin) by Jeanne Rynhart, and 'Youth' (1909, Germany) by Bernhard Heister.

ADAM

LOCATION: NYC, NEW YORK
(FERNANDO BOTERO, 1990)

In Time Warner Center, two large Botero statues greet visitors. 'Adam' & 'Eve' are in the coined style, 'Boterismo', standing at 15 ft tall at the entrance of one of the city's busiest malls. The Colombian artist, born in 1932, has become a world-renowned Latin American painter and sculptor, known for the plump features in his work. Adam specifically, is touched by many passerby, wearing away the bronze to reveal a golden, lasting reminder of what Adam faces.

One New Yorker said, "you can't fight nature. Trying to stop the people of New York from abusing Adam's appendage is as futile as asking the East River to stop flowing."

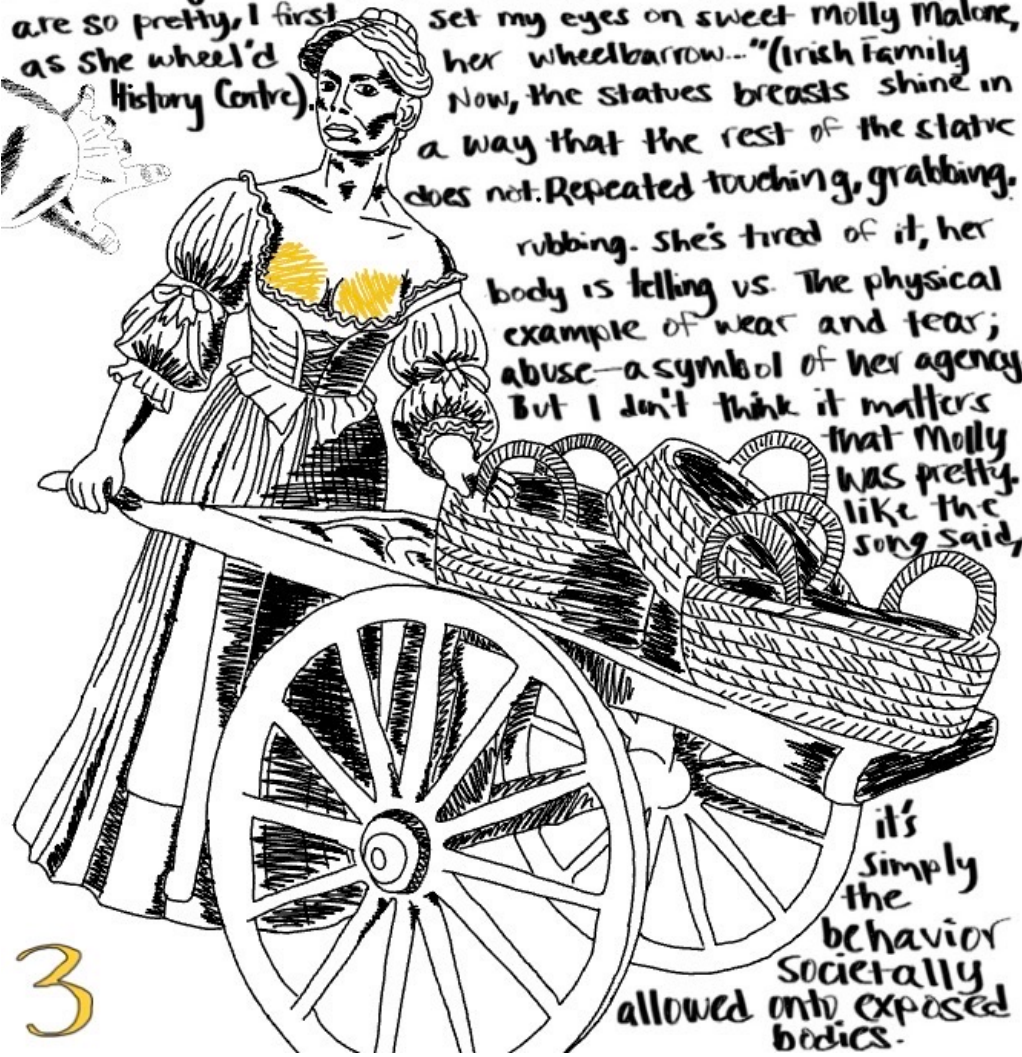
IS IT NATURE
THOUGHT? OR IS
IT US?



MOLLY MALONE

LOCATION: DUBLIN, IRELAND (JEANNE RENWART, 1988)

unveiled at The Millennium Celebration, the Molly Malone statue was made of bronze, standing in the middle of the hustle & bustle on Grafton Street. Malone is deemed a representation of Irish culture—a working class woman who died young with deep connection to her roots. The song 'Sweet Molly Malone' begins with, "In Dublin's Fair City, where the girls are so pretty, I first set my eyes on sweet Molly Malone, as she wheel'd her wheelbarrow..." (Irish Family History Centre). Now, the statue's breasts shine in a way that the rest of the statue does not. Repeated touching, grabbing, rubbing. She's tired of it, her body is telling us. The physical example of wear and tear; abuse—a symbol of her agency. But I don't think it matters that Molly was pretty like the song said,



it's simply the behavior societally allowed on exposed bodies.

LOCATION: BREMEN, GERMANY

(BERNARD HOETGER, 1909)

YOUTH

Hoetger's 'youth' statue in Bremen, Germany has been 1 out of 3 of importance to Germany's largest women's rights groups, Terre De Femmes. With their focus, a placard was placed in front of the gold-breasted statue. The placard allowed visitors to scan a QR code to hear recordings of the statue speaking. The statue "visibly show(s) the decades of assaults by passerby," Terre De Femmes said. It leaves its mark "just as it does for those affected by sexual violence." This personification of 'youth', where she can speak, allows further understanding of her agency, her ability to resist & change. Touch rendered by tradition, but she resists abuse marked as devotion!



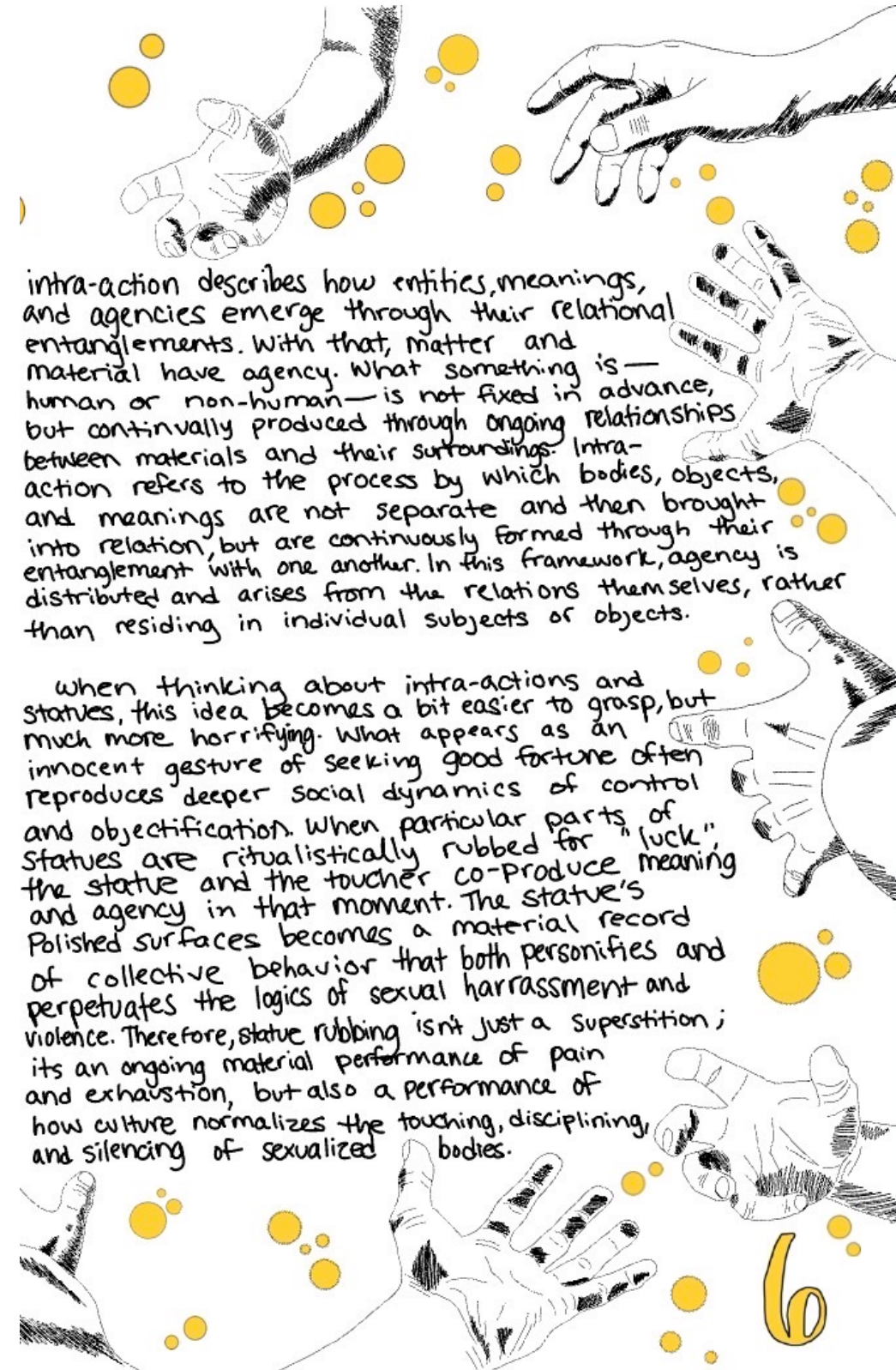
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INTRA-ACTIONS

by Karen Barad & how it applies to statues in society

Karen Barad is an interdisciplinary researcher; a physicist and a feminist theorist. With this combination of focuses, Barad's work is often post-qualitative, going beyond traditional notions of data collection and combining physics with feminist/queer studies. In her book, "Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of matter and Meaning," Barad does just that. She developed a theoretical framework; agential realism. This allows us to rethink how meaning, knowledge, and reality are formed. In an interview, she stated, "Quantum physics as well as feminist, post-structuralist, and queer theories that have been inspiring coworkers in my efforts to think about the nature of matter and how differences materialize. According to my agential realist account, matter is not mere stuff, an inanimate given-ness. Rather, matter is substance in its iterative intra-active becoming — not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency" (Kleinman, Pg. 80). This framework while grounded in science, is also feminist because of the ways intra-actions are understood; breaking the binary of human and non-human. More than just interaction, intra-actions challenge the assumptions that entities exist independently before coming into relation. Rather than beginning with separate subjects and objects that then interact,

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intra-action describes how entities, meanings, and agencies emerge through their relational entanglements. With that, matter and material have agency. What something is—human or non-human—is not fixed in advance, but continually produced through ongoing relationships between materials and their surroundings. Intra-action refers to the process by which bodies, objects, and meanings are not separate and then brought into relation, but are continuously formed through their entanglement with one another. In this framework, agency is distributed and arises from the relations themselves, rather than residing in individual subjects or objects.

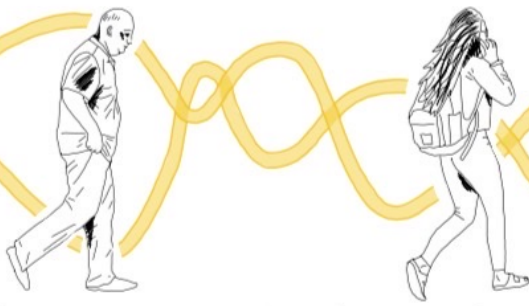
When thinking about intra-actions and statues, this idea becomes a bit easier to grasp, but much more horrifying. What appears as an innocent gesture of seeking good fortune often reproduces deeper social dynamics of control and objectification. When particular parts of statues are ritualistically rubbed for "luck," the statue and the toucher co-produce meaning and agency in that moment. The statue's polished surfaces become a material record of collective behavior that both personifies and perpetuates the logics of sexual harassment and violence. Therefore, statue rubbing isn't just a superstition; it's an ongoing material performance of pain and exhaustion, but also a performance of how culture normalizes the touching, disciplining, and silencing of sexualized bodies.

THING POWER

by Jane Bennett & how it applies to statues in society

Jane Bennett is a philosopher and political theorist, as well as a feminist one, as her work takes emphasis on matter having its own vitality that creates social impacts. Her idea of 'thing-power' was widely fleshed out in her book, 'Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things'. It is here, and amongst her other work, that she argues that political theorists need to acknowledge the liveliness of non-human, non-living things. She situates this theory in environmental harm, saying, "As I looked at these items, they shimmered back and forth between trash and thing-between, on one hand, stuff to ignore (notable only as a residue of human action and inaction: the litterers' incivility, the neighbor's failure to keep the storm drain clear..., the Department of Public Works road maintenance schedule) and, on the other hand, stuff that commands attention as vital and alive in its own right, as an existent in excess of its reference to human flaws or projects. The second kind of stuff has thing-power:





it commands attention, exudes a kind of dignity, provokes Poetry, or inspires fear" (Bennett, pg. 350). Thing-power describes the capacity of non-human things to exert influence, produce effects, and participate in events beyond human intention or control. Rather than viewing objects as passive or just existing, thing-power names the vitality of matter—the ways materials act, resist, invite, and shape outcomes within human-non-human relations. And, do so in ways that create social impacts with political consequences.

When it comes to statues having thing-power, they absolutely do. The statue's change of color is an act of resistance, acting back upon repeated touches. In this framework, a sign of life; where the statue is able to affect others after being affected, and make an unexpected impact. This reworks how power, agency, and value are understood, as they are serving as passive objects in the background that are allowing humans to make meaning. This zine is just one example. The statues have power with an ability to not only resist, but shape further behavior of sexual violence. At the same time, statues like 'Adam', 'Molly Malone', and 'Youth' spark conversation of power imbalances for sexualized bodies in society, like Tres De Femmes and the QR code for 'Youth'. This kind of Power reframes how we look at the agency and impact they are able to enact and exude when having continued intra-actions with humans.



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CONCLUSION

Overall, it's clear how something that seems so harmless, just a playful tradition is actually a Practice that reproduces normalized forms of sexualized touch. This is seen through Karen Barad's framework of agential realism, where humans and statues do more than interact, they intra-act, in such a way where agency, power, and meaning are co-produced. With visible wear—shiny smooth surfaces, eroded body parts, color change—there is a material archive of intra-action; the statues' thing-power. Proof of its agency, its ability to amplify the Practices that have altered them. These worn and exhausted statues aren't just reflecting human action, they are enacting their power through their bodily ability to say 'no'. They create meaning—with vs. 'Adam' (1990), 'Molly Malone' (1988), and 'Youth' (1919) are demonstrations of statues being sites for normalized sexual violence in the everyday. They bear a physical consequence because of our culture. Sexual harassment and violence leaves traces, for anyone. These statues are meaning-makers, so we need to acknowledge how our practices sustain cultures of sexual violence, with statues serving as material-witnesses.

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THANK YOU

for reading!

This piece was handwritten and drawn on iPad using Notability and Apple Notes. Feel free to reach out with questions or inquiries at bmgrecco@gmail.com



