

Wambui Mwangi

Re-collections

Matter, Meaning, Memory

How do you photograph a memory?

The photographer, the subject of the photograph, and the photograph are bound by the shared space and proximities of the photographic moment, but afterward, they embark on different trajectories to unpredictable else-wheres and else-hows of inhabiting diverse modes of being in the world.

Photographs are not what was photographed. Photographs are themselves re-collections, interpretive memories that grow more distant from that which they represent by circulation and with the passage of time, but “representation” also means “to make present again.” As a genre, “still life” is life that is still but not stilled. Still life is, still, life. Life perceptible to the stillness of an attentive mind; life collected and re-collected; life present, absent, remembered, re-gathered. Photographs are both here (as object) and not-here—the markers of the absence of what or who is photographed.

Each of these images represents an African woman whom I have known and now mourn or miss because I have lost them in some way. I could not photograph them. They include my mother, my grandmother, my cousin, my friend, and even a younger version of myself. Some died, some moved away, some simply grew and changed. Yet, absence is a form of presence and an active shaping of the now: in memory, in mourning, and in melancholia. Presence is similarly an absence from elsewhere or else-when.

Memories gather and matter by gathering meaning and matter. Sticky objects persist and follow and collect in human lives.

My task was also to think about and through the actions of objects not only as they impact on human lives but also as they go through their own lives, changing and charging their own matter and their own ways of mattering. Matter gathers and assembles. It changes. It moves and can be moved. It morphs and mutates. It too collects and re-collects itself.

The way memories matter is also about the matter of memory, matter that has memory and matter that imparts memory.

Note

These images are excerpted from a larger set of my photographs that were part of a collective exhibition in 2011 in Nairobi, Kenya. The larger exhibition, “Curving the Visual,” consisted of photographs of African women by five African women photographers.



“Wambui (portrait of a younger self)”



Beatrice



Phyllis



Ng'endo



Rahavu