Obsolescence sometimes seems an unavoidable part of modern life. Consumer goods become outdated and are replaced, while factories and mines close as their activities are outsourced, offshored, or become redundant. Despite efforts to “reduce, reuse, recycle,” throwaway culture is entrenched. In America's current political moment, industrial decline is a familiar concept, and the social and environmental problems it causes are typically discussed in the context of the Rust Belt and deprived former mining towns. Such places might become the object of intense public scrutiny, in an effort to diagnose their social ills and political leanings.

But what does obsolescence mean in a world that is characterized by renewal, transformation, and interconnection? Obsolete objects do not cease to exist once they are replaced by a shiny new model; their stories continue, albeit in sometimes unobtrusive or unknown ways. The impacts of declining industrial-scale manufacturing and extraction do not end in the face of remote communities, but are widespread and intertwined. These transformations contain surprising historical layers and feedback loops, reaching into corners near and far and creating unexpected points of contact between apparently disparate places and people. From an abandoned factory on another continent to the discarded cell phone at the back of your bottom drawer, these sites of encounter may appear remote or mundane, yet they contain meaning and beauty that reward greater attention.

Sto Len’s printmaking and performance practice explores the political moment, industrial decline is a familiar concept, and the social and environmental problems it causes are typically discussed in the context of the Rust Belt and deprived former mining towns. Obsolescence becomes a political gesture: it is a refusal to see material degradation as a one-way trajectory towards redundancy, and an insistence on the ongoing repercussions of decay, beyond the point at which most of us have stopped paying attention. They question the finality of obsolescence, reactivating materials in order to investigate contemporary environmental, socio-economic, and geopolitical crises.

Tracing Obsolescence brings together four artists who follow the material and psychic traces left by deindustrialization and material decline. Working within different geographical contexts and scales, through printmaking, sculpture, installation, and performance, they attend to goods that have been discarded, places that are abandoned, and memories that seem forgotten. By inserting themselves into these histories, the artists examine the processes and trajectories of deterioration and abandonment, noting that they may be experienced differently depending on one’s position in relation to the chain of production. For these artists, the act of tracing obsolescence becomes a political gesture; it is a refusal to see material degradation as a one-way trajectory towards redundancy, and an insistence on the ongoing repercussions of decay, beyond the point at which most of us have stopped paying attention. They question the finality of obsolescence, reactivating materials in order to investigate contemporary environmental, socio-economic, and geopolitical crises.

Sto Len's printmaking and performance practice exists. From an abandoned factory on another continent to the discarded cell phone at the back of your bottom drawer, these sites of encounter may appear remote or mundane, yet they contain meaning and beauty that reward greater attention.
By recuperating and recombining Congolese and other materials into original sculptural forms, Karmali creates for them new pathways and new meanings. Collapsing the STRATA series, Karmali’s practice connects to the process of reconstructing Africa’s resources and their aesthetic consumption in the gallery space, STRATA makes conspicuous the unequal nature of human relationships to raw materials. Karmali also obliquely references the problematic circular fate of many cell phones; having had their material origins in cobalt mines in the DRC, and having passed through the hands of consumers in wealthy countries like the US, they eventually find their way back to Africa either as trash, or as hand-me-downs. The unearthing of this is not incidental to Karmali’s practice; his ongoing investigations into cell phone production seek to uncover the human cost of the constant demand for new electronic devices.

In Selasi Awusi Sosu’s work, an abandoned glass factory in Aboso, in the Western Region of Ghana, inspires an enigmatic reanimating of lost industry. During site visits and interviews with former factory staff, Sosu discovered a community that has been irrevocably changed. Their livelihoods lost, many of the factory workers had turned to illegal artisanal gold mining, a practice known locally as “Galamsey.” Digging by hand, Galamseysers operate under conditions of economic disadvantage and physical danger. Their work also has detrimental effects on the surrounding environment, polluting rivers and contaminating the drinking water supply.

Sosu’s installation, The Glass Factory, adapts the nineteenth-century technical illusion technique known as Pepper’s Ghost to bring the factory back to life. Four moving images of the same object—in this case, a glass bottle, like those once produced by the factory—are projected onto the walls of a plexiglass prism, forming a 3D holographic vessel. The accompanying atmospheric sounds are reminders of the factory’s fate; in place of the workers’ commanding voices are the chirrups and squawks of the site’s new feathered inhabitants.

For Sosu, the factory is a haunted site of nostalgia, fragmented but ready to burst into activity any second. Her installation represents an attempt to resuscitate it. Yet beyond its local significance, the factory is also a symbol of the problems of Western intervention in economies like Ghana’s, and a reminder that the stories of industrial sites around the world are intertwined. Sosu notes that despite (or perhaps because of) a succession of interventions by bodies such as the IMF and the World Bank, operations at Aboso, like much of the southern region of Ghana, ground to a halt as a result of the withdrawal of state support combined with local mismanagement.

The decline of factories in countries marginalised in the global economic system is also central to the work of Dana Whabira. In her piece Nobody’s Thing I, a discarded dress form acquired from the auction remnants of a bankrupted business in Harare, Zimbabwe, becomes a symbol of the slump in the country’s textile industry, a process at least partially caused by international agreements drawn up in distant boardrooms. In particular, the end of arrangements restricting textile exports from China in 2005, combined with Zimbabwe’s downturn in the midst of the global economic crisis, crippled the local economy. Whabira reflects on the historical notion of “tributary states”—states held in a system of unbalanced power relations, often through the regular transfer of wealth—as an analogy for the ways in which entire economic sectors can be adversely affected in certain places thanks to the vagaries of the world market.

Beyond a critique of crippling trade agreements, the double meaning of the word “tributary” points to deeper layers of colonialism. Rivers and their tributaries are one of the defining features of colonial maps of Africa, along with the presence of gold and other resources that determined borders and partitioned the continent. The title Nobody’s Thing I refers to res nullius, a legal term used to justify colonialism through the notion that land and resources were owned by nobody (despite being occupied) and therefore open to appropriation. In her piece, Whabira rides this historical trajectory of colonial power from its journey toward redundancy, Whabira embroiders its surface with black cotton thread to create a new, subversive kind of cartography. The use of thread, which is ordinarily used for hair-braiding, references pre-colonial transatlantic narratives of slaves who plaited detailed maps of escape routes into their hair, while the process of stitching into the form—puncturing the torso, creating scar-like lines—points to sites of colonial trauma and processes of repair and healing. Nobody’s Thing I thus embodies the ways that global economic systems and colonial histories intersect to act upon human bodies.

In bringing these diverse works together, Tracing Obsolescence in Residuals reveals the complexity of both conceptual and material. From waterways to factory floors, through mapping and mark-making, these artists’ works propose non-linear, context-embedded ways of tracing obsolescence through an expanded view of both industrial landscapes, revealing material circuits and thwarted movements. The unexpected is expected to create unexpected, problematic, and mysterious beauty.

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FOOTNOTES:
1. Stroessner’s book, the artist’s book, Bad Water Place (2010), which documents his printmaking practice on the Newtown Creek.
2. These interventions include the Structural Adjustment Program and Economic Recovery Program of the 1980s and 1990s, and the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative of the 2000s.
3. The Multifiber Agreement (1974-2004) and the subsequent Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC) were designed to curb the growth of imports from China, mainly by capping the amount of textiles and clothing developing countries were allowed to export to developed countries. When the quotas ceased, China’s textiles exports grew at the expense of those from other countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. Irene Brambilla, Amit Khandelwal, Peter Schlott, “China’s Experience Under the Multifiber Agreement and the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC),” National Bureau of Economic Research, August 2007, Accessed July 30, 2018, http://www.nber.org/papers/w13346.pdf.

Tahir Karmali. Stargazer, 2017, Raffia and cobalt oxide, 45 x 38 x 99 in.

Dana Whabira. Nobody’s Thing I, 2018, Dress form, black cotton thread, Documentation of work in progress (detail)

Selasi Awusi Sosu. Glass Factory, 2017, Video installation and mixed media, Dimensions variable (still)