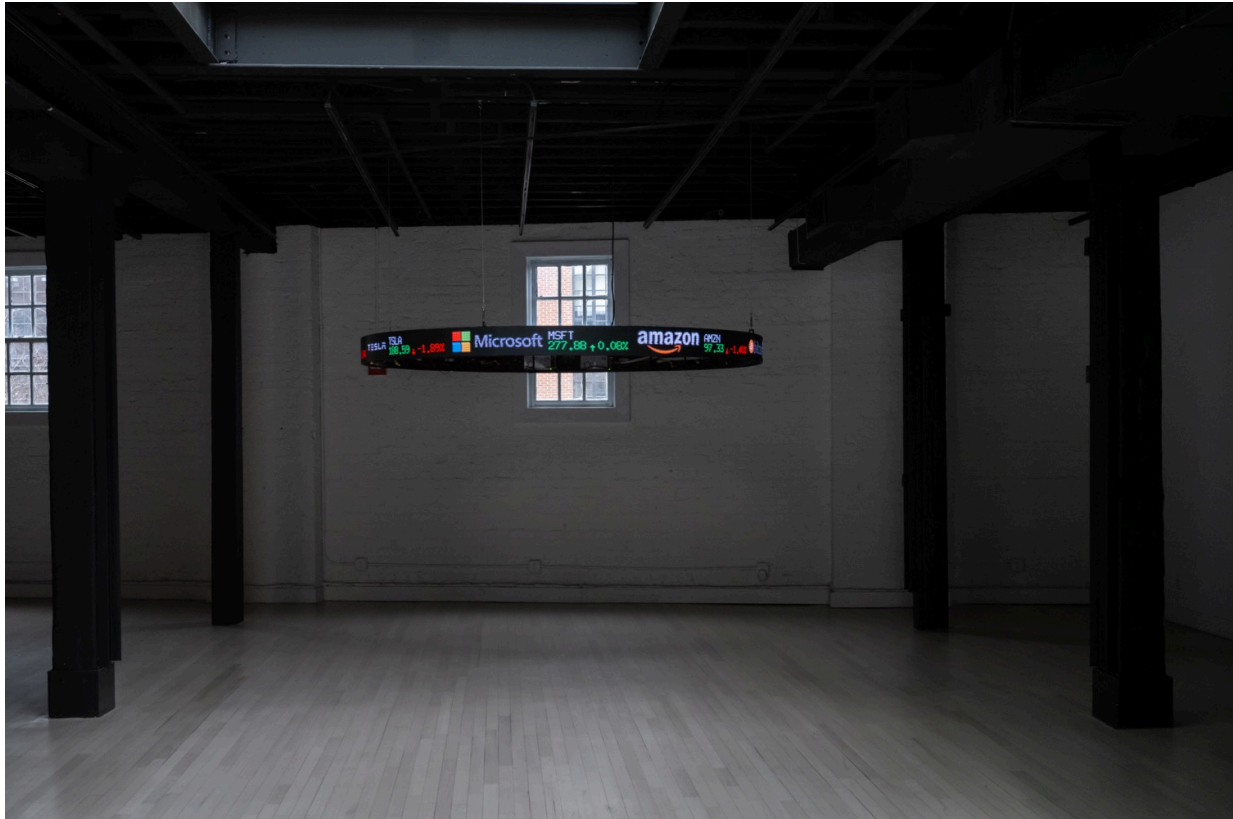




# ARTnews



*Stones Above Diamonds* (2020–23), Ignacio Gatica. VIVIAN DOERING/COURTESY OF VON AMMON

## 50 Years On From Chile's Coup, Ignacio Gatica Examines the Aftermath Wrought by Neoliberal Globalization

OLIVIA HEFFERNAN | MAY 1 2023

1973 was a big year in the United States: the Watergate scandal dominated the news, the Supreme Court upheld the right to abortion with *Roe v. Wade*, Springsteen and Dylan ruled the radio, and everyone loved Post-Minimalism. But abroad, President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger obsessively expanded America's economic hegemony, an effort that found a willing partner in **Chile**. That year, the Chilean military deposed democratically elected socialist president Salvador Allende in a coup, and installed Augusto Pinochet as head of a military-backed junta.

Fifty years later, Washington, D.C., gallery **von ammon co.** presents *Sujeto Cuantificado: Quantified Subject*, Chilean artist Ignacio Gatica's solo show, imbued with symbolism of the unbridled capitalism and consumerism propagated by a neoliberal system experimented on in Chile in the post-coup years, further developed in Washington, D.C., and emulated in corporate-run New York City, where Gatica now



resides.

“The real tragedy of Pinochet’s reign took place 5,000 miles from Washington, but so much of the narrative was orchestrated in the gallery’s own backyard,” gallery owner Todd von Ammon told *ARTnews*. Von Ammon said that choosing to exhibit Gatica’s work “was one of the easiest and most definitive decisions I’ve made since opening the gallery ... For me, this felt like the highest expression of the personal intersecting with the political.”

Born in 1988, Gatica was raised in a Chile remade by the so-called “Chicago boys,” a group of Latin American economists who studied under University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman. The Chicago Boys were known for initiating a series of neoliberal reforms around deregulation, privatization, and free-trade liberalization.

Activist Naomi Klein famously characterized these policies, instituted during concurrent catastrophic events, such as the coup, as a “shock doctrine,” replicated around the world, and, in the case of Chile, resulting in the dismantling of its public sector and social safety net. In his work, Gatica speaks to the austerity behind the excess imposed by a neoliberalized economy, providing a critical commentary on what he calls the “mall-ification” of Latin America.

The 3,500-square-foot gallery at first appears sparse, a purposeful curation to create an atmosphere of absence in opposition to materialism. In the show’s accompanying publication, curator Isabella Achenbach describes the work as an “... automated format and sleek aesthetic [that] is an example of technology and architecture combining to create desirable, alluring forms.” The aesthetic of balance and order is meant to evoke Pinochet and the Chicago Boys’ tactics of austerity and control that produced an inhumane system dictated by economic production.

Looming over the sleek gallery floor is Gatica’s most ambitious work to date and the centerpiece of the show, *Stones Above Diamonds* (2020–23). Eight feet in diameter, the installation features a circular stock ticker with an LED display of financial data from the New York Stock Exchange; visitors can swipe artist-made credit cards through a reader in the gallery to reprogram the display to show phrases (mostly graffiti Gatica collected during protests on the streets of both Santiago and New York) that transform the focus from stock prices to a collective message that speaks back to the debt economy, rampant consumerism, and the delusion of living in late capitalism. These phrases—ORGANIZE YOUR RAGE, THE ECONOMY AS GOD, THE DAILY LIFE THAT IMPOSES ON US, SLAUGHTER ZONE, ARE YOUR DESIRES YOURS, ALL CURRENCY IS FAKE, DICTATORSHIP COLOR, I STILL WAIT FOR YOU MY FREEDOM—become found poems. Photos on the credit cards of vacant and boarded-up retail stores, taken during the 2020 Black Lives Matters protests in New York, call further attention to the disparities cultivated in this economic landscape.

At the heart of *Quantified Subject* are ideas of credit and transaction, which Achenbach writes are not “clean, one-to-one form[s] of exchange,” but rather ones that “exist through language, translation, and quotidian gestures.” Language and exchange become devices for Gatica to halt the mechanics of finance and bring poetic humanity into his work, which is in direct opposition to the uniform and reductive form of language that exists in capitalism. Bank of America chose the name **Visa**, for example, for one of its first credit cards because it sounds the same in nearly every language. Gatica’s fixation on language is in relation not only to brand logos, which litter the streets of Manhattan and his work, but also in the sense that language is the arbiter of transactions, namely, credit- and debt-bearing ones.



Gatica's commentary on the use (and manipulation) of language to obfuscate **neoliberalism's** true intentions and implications parallels the arguments of French Marxist philosopher Guy Debord in his seminal *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Debord argued that, in the future, capitalism will debase humanity to the point that nothing we experience will be the actual thing, only a representation of it. Gatica sees our consumer-driven society, and the language at its center, as driving this change.

"I try to use verbal language in my work to problematize subjects that define the context and landscape I inhabit. The act of problematizing and thinking about this landscape through objects, text, and moving images helps me to understand it, and at the same time makes me an accomplice of what I'm aiming to decode," Gatica said about his use of language.

Indeed, the manipulation of language was at the core of the Powell Memorandum, a 1971 document that is seen by many as launching and legitimizing the neoliberal project. Two years before the Chilean coup, Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell warned that "the American free enterprise system was under attack" and urged the US government and corporations to respond through privatization, before "communists, new leftists, and other revolutionaries" endangered the "strength and prosperity of America and the freedom of our people." Like money, fear is a language we all understand and seek to avoid.

To that end, Gatica's work asks the question, where do nuance and creativity fit in a world of one language (money) and dictated by a fear of not having enough? Ironically, the very words that populate Gatica's work are those that neoliberals use to justify their policies. Facing housing, incarceration, and debt crises, Americans are arguably less free than they ever have been, and the images of abandoned retail stores in Gatica's show are the closest depictions to what we have as an authentic life.

About his work, Gatica says he hopes that those who visit the exhibit engage with it physically and in the spirit of what he calls *emancipación poética* (poetic emancipation), his term for using poetry to free an object or a situation from its common use or understanding. The objects in the show, he says, carry that sense with them.

Indeed they do: consider *Stones Above Diamonds* and *Preface to an Automated Stratosphere*(2022), which displays the debt of the world's middle-to-low-income countries, according to 2022 World Bank data, on a long narrow column of LED screens. Achenbach likens the piece to the National Debt Clock that stands near Times Square, displaying the trillion-dollar, and growing, public US debt. For sociologist Jean Baudrillard, the clock represented "the disappearance of the referential universe." Gatica's work explores similar abstractions of value, though, in this case, with a gaze turned toward the rest of the world.

Gatica derives inspiration from a multiplicity of writers, artists, and activists, including Orlando Letelier, a Chilean politician, who, in 1976, a month after writing an open **letter** in *The Nation* exposing the "awful toll" of the Chicago Boys' policies, was assassinated only a mile away from von ammon co.

"It's a very early, almost illuminated text about what would happen with Chile under the new economic interventions imposed by the U.S. under Pinochet's regime," Gatica said of the letter. Almost prophetically, Letelier's warnings to the world about neoliberalism came true.

Gatica's photographs and multimedia sculptures reverberate Letelier's warnings and their aftermath. Perhaps, 50 years from now, Gatica's commentary will resonate for another artist. *Sujeto Cuantificado*:



*Quantified Subject* is on view through May 7.