

Ignacio Gatica

Sujeto Cuantificado: Quantified Subject

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von ammon co
Curated by Isabella Achenbach
25 March - 07 May 2023

Washington DC: von ammon co is pleased to announce *Sujeto Cuantificado: Quantified Subject*, a solo exhibition by Ignacio Gatica. *Sujeto Cuantificado: Quantified Subject* is the 23rd exhibition at the gallery's current location, and the artist's first presentation with von ammon co. The exhibition is organized by New York-based curator Isabella Achenbach.

Ignacio Gatica uses language, currency, and the technologies of urban space as material to reveal the transactional operations that dictate contemporary life. *Sujeto Cuantificado: Quantified Subject* exhibits these transactions as both myopic and mythic in scale—from boarded-up designer stores, closed to shoppers and looters alike in times of civic unrest, to the true, incomprehensible numbers illuminating the world's most indebted countries. Gatica's work highlights the tragedy and nonsensicality of life fifty years into postmodernity. He does so with a transnational scope, tracing neoliberal economic policies initiated from Wall Street to the White House, while he lives and works between New York City and his country of origin, Santiago, Chile.

Gatica is interested in the inherent abstraction of currency—from printed money to the invention of credit to digital financialization—made ever more arcane over time. His interest, and ensuing body of work, stems from a history that is personal to the artist. Fifty years ago, in 1973, Chile became the experiment for American free trade market systems under the new authoritarian rule of Augusto Pinochet. A group of Chilean economists, trained under the American Milton Friedman, were deployed to initiate an entirely new economy through a shock therapy program. This turn, and social rupture, was supported financially by the Nixon Administration, reflecting the enduring struggle for economic hegemony during the Cold War. Born during Pinochet's rule, this socioeconomic landscape affects the artist's outlook on life and art.

Ignacio Gatica (b. 1988, Santiago) lives and works in New York. Gatica has exhibited at SculptureCenter, New York (2022); Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY (2022); Fundación Marso, Mexico City (2019); El Museo del Barrio, New York (2018); Galeria Jaqueline Martins, São Paulo (2018); Fondation Hippocrène, Paris (2017); and Galería Gabriela Mistral, Santiago (2016); among others. Features of his work have been published in *Mousse*, *The New York Times*, and *Balcony* magazine.

Debt-bolstering systems loom large in Gatica's presentation of new and ongoing works at von ammon co. The installation incorporates credit cards, both functional and purely aesthetic, deadpan imagery of boarded up or emptied retail stores, real-time debt calculations from World Bank data, and a dynamic, evolving index from the New York Stock Exchange. Across the work is a contemporary, universal symbology—brand names, logos, and inflated US dollar numbers. The effect for the viewer is a self-awareness of the omnipresence of this hollow material across cultures. For Gatica, it's also a commentary on the absence of translation in an accelerated and globalized economy. The name "Visa" was given to the first Bank of America credit card because it sounds the same in nearly every language.

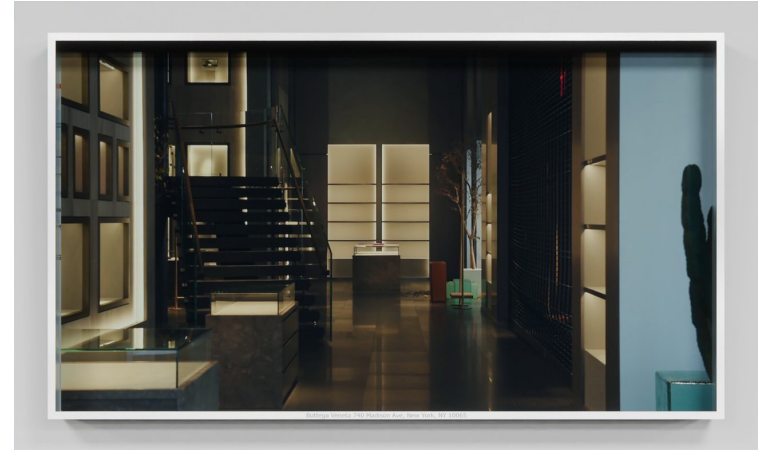
One piece, *Stones Above Diamonds*, alters the statistic-driven, documentary nature of Gatica's work. In this multimedia installation, artist-made credit cards are programmed with unique phrases gathered from graffiti and street memos collected by the artist around New York and Santiago at times of mass protest. Inside the gallery, visitors can swipe the cards at a reader, which re-programs an LED stock ticker to display the anonymous, poetic messages—in both Spanish and English. This sudden shift in language, from company prices to a far more urgent rhetoric, cuts out an otherwise never-ending cycle of symbolic wealth disparity, and replaces it with humanizing calls for collectivity and basic equality.



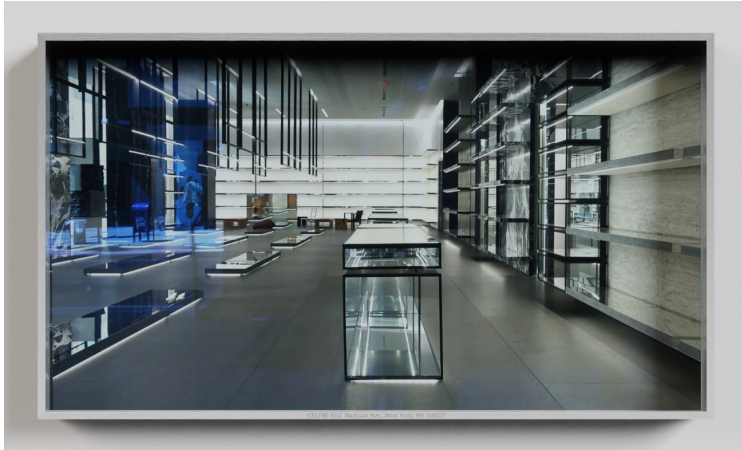
Installation view from *Operational Excellence*, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, April 2 - May 29, 2022. Master's thesis exhibition curated by Isabella Achenbach. Photo: Olympia Shannon 2022



BALENCIAGA (620 Madison Ave, New York, NY, 10022), 2023
Inkjet print, engraved aluminum artist's frame
24.3 x 43.3 in.
61.7 x 110 cm.



BOTTEGA VENETA (740 Madison Ave, New York, NY, 10065), 2023
Inkjet print, engraved aluminum artist's frame
24.3 x 43.3 in.
61.7 x 110 cm.



CÉLINE (650 Madison Ave, New York, NY, 10022), 2023
Inkjet print, engraved aluminum artist's frame
24.3 x 43.3 in.
61.7 x 110 cm.



Fantasmas Terminal, 2023
Color video, digital card reader, media console
running time: 8:10 min
9 x 8.5 x 2.2 in.
23 x 22 x 5.6 cm.



Stones Above Diamonds DC, 2023

Stock ticker, live financial data, LED screens, steel frame, printed credit cards, card reader, aluminum shelves
 100.5 in. diameter
 255.3 cm. diameter



Preface to an Automated Stratosphere, 2022

LED screens, live World Bank data, aluminum and steel frame
 126.5 x 6.3 x 6.3 in.
 321.3 x 16 x 16 cm.

LOUIS VUITTON



Infinite, Exponential, Universe

Isabella Achenbach

Ignacio Gatica creates art that challenges the imposition of order on his native Chile. He's done so across his practice, in ways that are often counterintuitive. His material vocabulary engages prominently with the austerity of automation and the designed landscape. His artworks look sleek, made from metal, LED signage, specialty video devices, and credit cards. Live data is a material for the artist, who harnesses the firehose of information from the New York Stock Exchange and the World Bank, and incorporates it into two of his works on view in *Sujeto Cuantificado: Quantified Subject*.

Gatica employs these stark containers—and monoliths of global trade—as critical references to a kind of balance and order that was developed and implemented by the “Chicago Boys” in Chile.¹ The Chicago Boys were a group of Chilean economists trained at the University of Chicago’s Department of Economics under the extremely influential professors Milton Friedman and Arnold Harberger in the 1960s. The Chileans made their way there not by coincidence, but through the US-funded “Chile Project,” which used Friedman’s free-market ideology to reverse the country’s Marxist leanings. One hundred Chilean students were granted full rides and all expenses paid to pursue advanced degrees at the university, via US tax dollars and support from the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations.² Soon thereafter, Chile became the crucible for neoliberal experimentation.

Gatica was born in Santiago in 1988. He was raised under the political conditions of General Augusto Pinochet’s authoritarian regime, which embraced the privatization of public companies, the breakdown of trade barriers, and decreases in government spending. Pinochet installed the Chicago Boys and their 189-page “Program for Economic Development” at the helm of the Ministry of Finance. From the classroom to the seat of government, the Chicago Boys’ program suddenly and dramatically upended all socialist systems put in place by the former President Salvador Allende, whose government was overtaken by Pinochet in 1973—50 years ago today—by coup. In his final public address, made by national radio as Pinochet’s military tanks and bombs laid siege to the presidential palace, Allende announced, “I am certain that the seed we planted in the worthy consciousness of thousands and thousands of Chileans cannot be definitively uprooted. They have the strength; they can subjugate us, but they cannot halt social processes by either crime or force. History is ours, and the people make it.”³ Allende died soon after this statement, and Pinochet’s era of political terror, marketed as “economic freedom,” began.⁴

Previous page: Ignacio Gatica, *Stones Above Diamonds* (detail), 2020-23, digital photograph

Within mechanisms of control, like debt-bolstering credit systems, Gatica exposes layers of interruptions and disorderly modes of opposition. His work is pointedly not “free of interferences,” as Klein writes of the Chicago Boys’ dogma.⁵ Rather, Gatica uses ideas and realities of transaction, which are not clean, one-to-one forms of exchange, but, in Gatica’s work, exist through language, translation, and quotidian gestures. Currency, and its muddled physical and virtual manifestations, provides material for Gatica. Poetry does too. Poets are the vagabonds of language. Their form has the ability to evade order, to refuse to communicate, and, also, to hold meaning in multifarious and abstract ways. Gatica brings this abstraction into his work through mediums of transaction and subjective concepts of value.

Many of Gatica’s works call into question belief systems, folklore, and the creation of desire. “Credit, or belief, involves the very ground of aesthetic experience,” Marc Shell wrote in his 1982 book of essays, *Money, Language, and Thought*, an influence for the artist.⁶ The aesthetic experience that bolsters the use of credit could be the pleasure that comes in the form of material things. But Shell’s argument is that it is specifically language, writing, and textured communication that creates an aesthetic experience which drives the use of credit. Language, in its many hieroglyphic forms, has been utilized to apply symbolic value to things that have no inherent worth for thousands of years. Operating between Chile and New York, Gatica is interested in the twists and turns of exchange as things travel through space, across time, and in and out of digital and physical forms. The belief system embedded into the credit system—which at its core is a project and hope for the future—is a dynamic that Gatica interrogates in his art. Credit (buy now, pay later), in its everyday context, asks that belief trump reason. This socially accepted, dematerialized value system happened on the advent of paper bank notes, printed with symbolic numbers and icons. The same gestures are at play with the use of the handwritten ledger or the simple swipe of a smart card, an action Gatica incorporates into his work. “The apparently diabolical ‘interplay of money and mere writing to a point where the two be[come] confused,’” writes Shell, “involves a general ideological development: the tendency of paper money to distort our ‘natural’ understanding of the relationship between symbols and things.”⁸

Brand logos dominate the landscape of Manhattan, like a mall turned inside out. They line city blocks. They walk around, emblazoned on humans. By now, they are built into the fabric of civic life. Gatica describes the “religion of retail” in a conversation with curator José Esparza Chong Cuy for *Balcony* magazine.⁹ This religion hinges on the production of status symbols. It’s done through material means—an aesthetic experience—in which objects are conduits for desire. But the pandemic changed the materiality of things. Gatica watched, and documented, the architectural response to the Covid-19 crisis. As people fled Manhattan, so did retail.

High-end stores along Madison Avenue not only shut down their stores in lock-down, but cleared out their merchandise, to deter looting and petty theft. "That emptiness was beautiful," Gatica said in the *Balcony* piece. "I had never seen that happening in the city. Complete silence."¹⁰ Gatica took to the streets of the Upper East Side to film the desolate scenes. *FANTASMAS* (2020) is the result: an eight minute video work, with a new edition made in 2023 housed inside a credit card console, like you'd find at a store, post office, or in the back of a taxi cab. The piece documents a shifting moment, when the excess of retail and the desire it evokes was removed from its objecthood. Instead, retail was made fully reliant on its branded symbolism in the world, in order to maintain relevance and significance.

Gatica shot *FANTASMAS* from the street, highlighting this distorted, historic moment through the store's glass partitions that function both as a window into the ghostly interiors and a mirror for that of the world outside. The two scenes often combine, in reflective, graphic overlay. The emptiness of the stores is accentuated by their dramatic infrastructures, whereby large scale architectural elements are implemented for the display of, for example, "18K Polished Rock Candy Large Teardrop Earrings, \$995," as one abandoned tag reads in the video. Shiny display cases, pedestals, and the glass storefronts themselves are relics of consumer bliss. Repeated imagery of dead, indoor plants also exaggerates the ghostliness of these spaces. Cars honk their horns. That, and the static of the street comprise the soundtrack, which plays only at the beginning and end of the original video. The rest is silent. *FANTASMAS* acknowledges the experience of this historic collapse as one of phantasmagoria, in which the haunting specter of death was the virus for some, and the drought of retail for others. It images a time when nothing was clear except store shelves.



Ignacio Gatica, *FANTASMAS* [video still], 2020, color video, sound, running time: 8:10 min

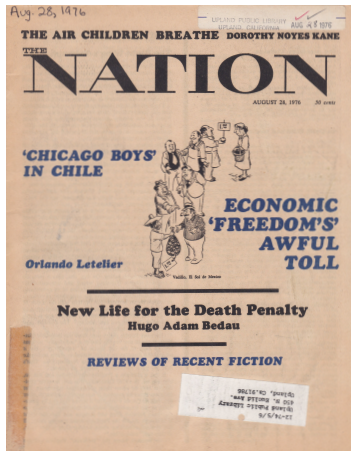
"Friedman's Chilean disciples... have succeeded, at least temporarily, in their broader purpose: to secure the economic and political power of a small dominant class by effecting a massive transfer of wealth from the lower and middle classes to a select group of monopolists and financial speculators."¹¹

This quote, by Orlando Letelier, was published in *The Nation* on August 28, 1976. Letelier was the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Interior, and Defense under President Allende. For Chileans, like the author Roberto Bolaño, who gives a prominent mention to Letelier in his novel, *By Night in Chile* (2000/2003), and for Gatica, Letelier was a hero in the anti-fascist movement, fighting for democracy and freedom of expression. While working as the Chilean Ambassador in Washington, from 1971-73, Letelier advocated for the Chilean nationalization of copper, which had replaced the private ownership model favored by the US government. Chile is the world's top producer of copper, supplying 29 percent of the global industry in addition to many other natural elements.¹² Letelier returned to Chile in 1973 to serve in Allende's cabinet. In the coup d'état on September 11, 1973, he was the first high-ranking member of the Allende administration to be arrested by Pinochet's junta. Letelier was tortured and imprisoned for a year. Eventually, through the support of international diplomats, he was exiled to the US. On September 10, 1976, his Chilean nationality was stripped by Pinochet's decree. He gave a speech in New York the same day, saying, "I was born a Chilean, I am a Chilean, and I will die a Chilean."¹³

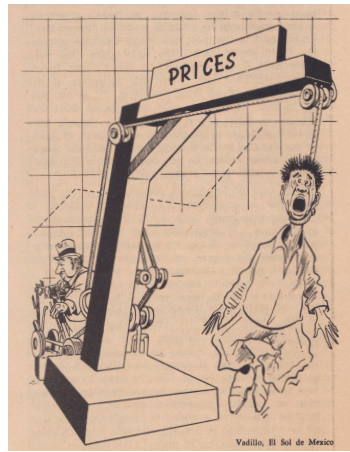
Back in Washington and working in a leadership position at the left-wing Institute for Policy Studies, Letelier continued to be outspoken about Chile's humanitarian crisis and the new economic program of Pinochet. He wrote, "After a visit to Chile, during which he discussed human rights violations by the military government, William Simon [the United States Secretary of the Treasury under President Nixon] congratulated Pinochet for bringing 'economic freedom' to the Chilean people. This particularly convenient concept of a social system in which 'economic freedom' and political terror coexist without touching each other, allows these financial spokesmen to support their concept of 'freedom' while exercising their verbal muscles in defense of human rights.... The imposition of this policy is inevitably accompanied by massive repression, hunger, unemployment and the permanence of a brutal police state."¹⁴

On September 21, 1976, less than one month after his exposé in *The Nation*, and with a draft article intended for publication in *The New York Times*, Letelier, age 44, was assassinated in a car bombing on Washington DC's Embassy Row. His colleague at the Institute for Policy Studies, Ronni Moffitt, age 25, was also killed in the attack.

"They would never dare to attack me in Washington," Letelier had said to his associates about the constant death threats he received.¹⁵ Through the declassification of US government archives authorized by President Barack Obama, it has been made clear "that the U.S.



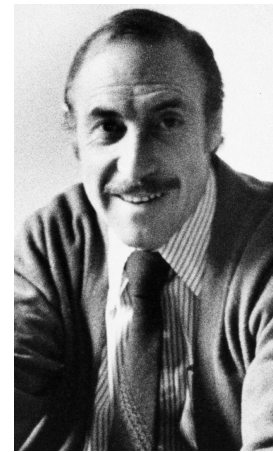
Orlando Letelier's cover story and accompanying illustration for *The Nation*, 1976



government knew, as the result of a report written by the CIA in 1978, that Pinochet had been not only aware of the murder but had ordered the murder. And nothing was said or done in this respect during all these years, particularly when Pinochet was alive.¹⁶ International diplomacy was maintained between the US and Pinochet throughout the Cold War era, and Pinochet was never tried in the case.¹⁷

To most, the story of Letelier is forgotten history. But the diplomat's assassination, as it was described in a *Washington Post* article commemorating the 40-year anniversary of the incident, "becomes a window into a strange chapter of the Cold War, with secret police, hired assassins and left- and right-wing activists all converging on Washington."¹⁸ In DC's Sheridan Circle, at the site of the bombing, a memorial plaque is dedicated to the lives of Moffitt and Letelier. "Justice, Peace, Dignity" is engraved alongside their names and cast bronze portraits.

In Gatica's most ambitious project to date, *Stones Above Diamonds* (2020-23), the artist centers ideas of a subversive voice through layered modes of interruption. The piece is anchored by a whirling stock ticker that displays a live feed from the New York Stock Exchange, programmed by the artist with 40 of the world's top grossing, consumer-related companies. Surrounding this structure, Gatica displays a long line of credit cards, each printed with a singular photographic image on it. The photographs were taken by Gatica and document the boarded facades of retail outposts in New York City, when they shuttered in response to the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020. In a concurrent series of Gatica's credit cards, the same plywood-boarded facades shrouded banks in Santiago. This defensive architecture was erected in reaction to city-



Orlando Letelier, 1975 (Photo: Associated Press/AS). Isabel and Orlando Letelier (Photo: Museum of Memory and Human Rights, Santiago)

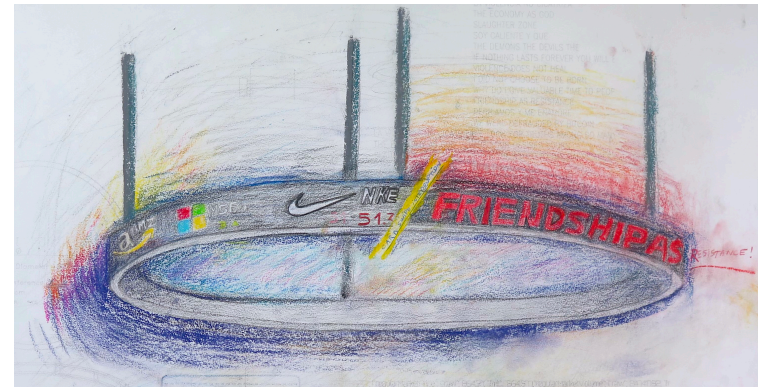
wide protests that broke out in 2019 and 2020 over increased metro fares. Each card is encrypted with unique messages gathered from graffiti tags around both cities, which similarly experienced outcries of an enormous scale against unchecked civic enforcement. The messages are poetic indications of class disparity and struggle, and link New York City and Santiago through medium, message, and the artist's personal experiences. Gatica often highlights experimental, capitalistic trade between New York and Chile that occurs through technological and architectural development. The trickle-down tends to run north to south.

The disruption in *Stones Above Diamonds* is multivalent. It occurs through gallery intervention, as visitors can swipe the cards at a reader and the poetic messages of the street replace company prices and logos on the stock ticker. Handled in this way, Gatica's cards are charged in the spirit of freedom, rather than debt. The artist's interference with traditional forms of monetary transaction also manifests through Gatica's careful chronicling of the architectural response to a new social landscape. The abstraction of space that came with the boarded stores and banks was connected, for Gatica, with the exponential abstraction of monetary value, as debt numbers soar and new, electronic systems continue to take hold.

While much of Gatica's source material stems from the last fifty years of Chilean history, the social significance is anything but bygone. Rather, the influence of the Chicago Boys, Pinochet, and Nixon-era foreign policy, particularly in relation to the financial sphere, is today omnipresent through online networks and modes of transmission. The digitization of finance has accelerated the opaqueness of money, and multiplied forms of exchange.

Gatica addresses the incomprehensible numbers at play in the global economy in a work from 2022, called *Preface to an Automated Stratosphere*. The multimedia sculpture is made of a long, rectangular LED panel housed in an aluminum structure. Expanding on ideas developed in *Stones Above Diamonds*, the text and images displayed on the *Stratosphere* screen run like a stock ticker. It features evolving information on the forecasted external debt of an assortment of countries designated by the World Bank as “low” and “middle” income. The World Bank was founded in 1944 as a loan-granting institution, but became particularly active in the 1970s, loaning to developing countries in pursuit of capital development projects. After sorting through the organization’s yearly data sets, Gatica incorporated the external debt averages into an algorithmic program. This then generates forecasted external debts, displayed in real time in *Stratosphere*. Elaborating on his linguistic interests, Gatica’s *Stratosphere* uses the symbolism of numerals, alongside country flags rendered in perfect LED pixels, to comment on increasing economic disparity across the globe.

In the work’s automated format and sleek aesthetic, it’s an example of technology and architecture combining to create desirable, alluring forms. In that way, the projected global debt numbers also become seductive. The exorbitant figures provoke a state of mental stimulation, just as a run-of-the-mill \$995 Upper East Side earring might stimulate the brain to think: this is good. Gatica’s work calls to mind the essay “Global Debt and Parallel Universe,” by Jean Baudrillard, describing a famous electronic billboard placed in Times Square that displays the American public debt. The number represents some thousands of billions of dollars, and it increases at a rate of \$20,000 a second. The Times Square structure is similar to Gatica’s *Stratosphere*, though larger in scale and smaller in scope. Baudrillard points toward this fantastically grotesque display (a warning sign? a brag?) as an example of “the disappearance of the referential universe,” calling it a brand new phenomenon. He wrote, “There will be no judgment day for this virtual bankruptcy. It is simple enough to enter an exponential or virtual mode to become free of any responsibility, since there is no reference anymore, no referential world to serve as a measuring norm.”¹⁹ Life within the religion of retail—led by strict, harmonious swipes and taps—is inexorable. There is no turning back. Gatica’s work acknowledges the mindless sensation of moving ahead within regimented, highly designed systems. And he pushes against this linearity.



Ignacio Gatica, draft sketch for *Stones Above Diamonds*, 2022, graphite and colored pencil on paper

- ¹ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007), 127.
- ² Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 72-73.
- ³ Pamela Constable and Arturo Valenzuela, *A Nation of Enemies: Chile Under Pinochet* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 16.
- ⁴ Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 92.
- ⁵ Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 127.
- ⁶ Marc Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 7.
- ⁷ Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400-1800*, trans. Miriam Kochan (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 357-58.
- ⁸ Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought*, 7.
- ⁹ Ignacio Gatica, “Objects for Viewing,” Conversation with José Esparza Chong Cuy. *Balcony* (New York, 2021). Issue 1, 173.
- ¹⁰ Gatica, “Objects for Viewing,” 173.
- ¹¹ Orlando Letelier, “The Chicago Boys in Chile: Economic ‘Freedoms’ Awful Toll,” *The Nation* (New York, August 28, 1976). Vol. 223 No. 5, 140.
- ¹² “Chile, Country Commercial Guide: Mining,” *International Trade Administration*, Department of Commerce, United States, September 30, 2022. [https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/chile-mining#:~:text=Equipment%20and%20Machinery-,Chile%20is%20the%20top%20copper%20producer%20in%20the%20world%20with,and%20sodium%2C%20and%20potassium%20nitrate](https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/chile-mining#:~:text=Equipment%20and%20Machinery-,Chile%20is%20the%20top%20copper%20producer%20in%20the%20world%20with,and%20sodium%2C%20and%20potassium%20nitrate.). Accessed March 22, 2023.
- ¹³ Orlando Letelier, Speech transcript, *Felt Forum*, Madison Square Garden, September 10, 1976. <https://www.tni.org/en/article/transcript-of-orlando-leteliers-speech-at-the-felt-forum>. Accessed March 22, 2023.
- ¹⁴ Letelier, “The Chicago Boys in Chile,” 137.
- ¹⁵ Karen DeYoung, David Montgomery, Missy Ryan, Ishaan Tharoor, and Jia Lynn Yang, “This was not an accident. This was a bomb.” *The Washington Post*, September 20, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2016/09/20/this-was-not-an-accident-this-was-a-bomb/>. Accessed March 22, 2023. This is a quote by Juan Gabriel Valdés, former Chilean ambassador to the United States (2014), paraphrasing Letelier.
- ¹⁶ DeYoung, “This was not an accident,” *The Washington Post*.
- ¹⁷ “Declassified US docs reveal Pinochet ordered killing in US,” *AP*. October 8, 2015. <https://apnews.com/article/0590ccd337c14f33ac09dd2f353a8da0>. Accessed March 22, 2023.
- ¹⁸ DeYoung, “This was not an accident,” *The Washington Post*.
- ¹⁹ Jean Baudrillard, trans. Francois Debrix, “Global Debt and Parallel Universe,” *Liberation*, Paris, 1996. <http://www.naturalthinker.net/trl/texts/Baudrillard,Jean/Jean%20Baudrillard%20-%20Global%20Debt%20and%20Parallel%20Universe.htm>. Accessed March 22, 2023.



Ignacio Gatica, *Stones Above Diamonds* (details), 2020-23, printed credit cards

Isabella Achenbach (b. 1993, Washington, DC) lives and works in New York as a curator and writer, and in the studio of Matthew Barney. She has curated exhibitions and theatrical productions at the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center, Troy, NY (2022); the Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY (2021, 2022); and Young Curators, New Ideas V, Detroit (2019); and contributed as a Curatorial Fellow to the 59th Venice Biennale (2022). Prior to her time in New York, she worked as the Manager of Curatorial Affairs at the Cranbrook Art Museum. She received her MA in Curatorial Studies at Bard College (2022), and her BA in Art History and Spanish at the University of Michigan (2015).

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