

## Profile: Claudia Joskowitz

by [Matthew Harrison Tedford](#)



Claudia Joskowitz. *Sympathy for the Devil*, 2011 (still); two-channel HD video; 9:00. Courtesy of the Artist.

*This article is part of the Visiting Artist Profile series, which highlights some of the artists, curators, and scholars who intersect with the Bay Area visual arts community through the various lecture programs produced by local institutions. Claudia Joskowitz will speak on **Friday, February 22, 2013, at 4:30 p.m.** at the [San Francisco Art Institute](#).*

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Claudia Joskowitz, who is an artist based in New York and Santa Cruz, Bolivia, creates videos that reawaken violent events and their residue from Bolivian history. Often filmed in very slow motion, these works allow viewers to focus on the intense emotions or complicated scenarios they document. Oscillating between serenity and suspense, Joskowitz's videos first create points of entry and then confront viewers with the trauma and anguish of the videos' subjects.

*[Sympathy for the Devil \(2011\)](#)* is a haunting peek at a commonplace interaction between two unassuming neighbors in a La Paz high-rise. The opening scene shows two elderly men passing each other, as one enters and another leaves an elevator. The man facing the camera holds his head high, averting the gaze of the other, who looks down. The former represents K. Altmann, the alias of Nikolaus "Klaus" Barbie, the German Nazi officer who earned the nickname "Butcher of Lyon" due to his torture of Jews and Resistance leaders in Vichy France. In the video, the second man represents an unnamed Polish Jew who immigrated to Bolivia during World War II and was allegedly Barbie's neighbor, living on the floor below. The scene progresses like molasses, with almost indiscernible movement—as one might imagine feeling the time passing during such an uncomfortable situation. Did each of these men know the history of the other? Is Barbie's distant glare evidence of hubris or humiliation?

A split screen then shows the two men lounging in their respective apartments. With differing decors but identical layouts, their living rooms have the same view overlooking La Paz. A young male

accompanies the Jewish man, and his apartment has seating for several others. Though he has possibly experienced unimaginable horrors, in La Paz it seems he has family or friends, and he shares his life with others. The white upholstery and curtains imbue innocence on him. His companion puts on a record, and as the vinyl pops give way to Mick Jagger bellowing “Sympathy for the Devil,” viewers see Barbie’s apartment on the other side of the split screen.

Barbie is alone, well dressed, and pensive; his apartment has no seating for anyone else. His curtains are crimson, as though alluding to the blood he spilled as a member of the Gestapo. As The Rolling Stones run through Lucifer’s curriculum vitae, the frame showing the unnamed neighbor fades out and the lyrical scorn zeros in on Barbie. (Although Lucifer’s taunt, “Hope you guess my name,” came true in 1971, when Barbie’s identity was discovered, he remained in

Bolivia until his extradition to France in 1983.) At the end of the video, the two men find themselves once again facing off at the elevator.

Joskowicz’s interest in depicting the history of violence in her country has brought her to events that are still shaping contemporary Bolivian politics and society. In October 2003, a social conflict over the foreign privatization of Bolivia’s vast natural gas reserves erupted in the streets of La Paz, particularly in the largely indigenous suburb of El Alto. Scores of protestors were killed in the conflict, and it resulted in roadblocks that caused food and fuel shortages in La Paz, a declaration of martial law, and the eventual resignation of then-president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. The conflict led to major changes in Bolivian politics, including the rise of the current socialist president, Evo Morales.

Joskowicz’s [\*Every Building on Avenida Alfonso Ugarte – After Ruscha \(2011\)\*](#) revisits this tumultuous struggle with a little inspiration from Ed Ruscha’s *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966). Ruscha created his famous twenty-seven-foot-long accordion-fold book by mounting a camera on the back of a truck and continuously photographing while driving. Joskowicz transposes this technique to the streets of La Paz, taking it far from legendary Hollywood to dusty Avenida Alfonso Ugarte, where much of the gas conflict took place.

Like *Sympathy for the Devil*, the twenty-six-minute *Every Building on Avenida Alfonso Ugarte* is a split-screen video. The left frame pans left and the right frame pans right, creating the illusion that these alternate views of the street are merging into one another. The left frame depicts what appears to be a typical day on the avenida: merchants selling their goods, dancers and musicians performing in the street, and people milling about and doing their business. The right frame begins similarly before passing over a phalanx of riot police, street fires, and ragtag protesters. These different scenes depict the same street, but it is unclear if the stories are hours, weeks, or years apart. The wildly different scenes in *Every Building* are merged into the single narrative of a society wrought into a powder keg, where an ordinary day can explode into violence at any moment.

In her other works, Joskowicz recreates moments of violence from Bolivia’s history, including the shoot-out that allegedly killed Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, the quartering of Aymara rebel Túpac Katari, and the public display of Che Guevara’s body following his execution. Her works don’t just highlight Bolivian history but also are re-lived proof of the deeply global nature of the country,

which is often ignored by the world community that labels it a forgotten Andean province. And yet, Bolivia has been an international crossroads since the Babylonians and Assyrians were squabbling in their fertile crescent. The advent of Spanish colonialism and then neoliberal colonialism have entangled Bolivia in the world community even more, bringing with them a new magnitude of violence. Joskowicz’s cinematic videos deftly tell these less-known historical tales with an eerie, percolating quality that compel you to watch, again and again.



Claudia Joskowicz. *Every Building on Avenida Alfonso Ugarte—After Ruscha*, 2011 (still); two-channel HD video; 26:00. Courtesy of the Artist.

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