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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Sympathy for the Devil

by [Susan Silas](#) on December 17, 2012



Claudia Joskowicz, "Round and Round and Consumed by Fire" (2009), video still (all images courtesy the artist unless otherwise noted)

Claudia Joskowicz is the master of the tracking shot. In her video "Music to Watch Dead Girls By" (2006), the camera moves seamlessly for 20 minutes through an endless interior, entering into and departing from rooms, discovering and leaving dead girls in its wake. In her next series, the camera moves outdoors and away from directly pop cultural source material, but never far from pop culture, beginning its examination of historical events and "real spaces" based on anecdotal histories and actual historical events, for the most part focused on her home country of Bolivia.

In Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, being drawn and quartered is exquisitely described on the third page (in the Vintage edition paperback). The text is taken from a description dating from the late 1700s, and it goes on for three pages. In "Drawn and Quartered" (2007) Joskowicz's camera slowly tracks across Plaza Alonso de Mendoza until it happens upon the outstretched body of Tupac Katari, who was executed in 1781 by the colonizing Spaniards.



Claudia Joskowicz, "Drawn and Quartered" (2007), video still

While the work is based on a historical event, it has taken its inspiration and perhaps directorial cues not from historical records but rather from another representation, a diaramic recreation of the incident that is housed at the [Museo Costumbrista](#) in La Paz. And this pattern, almost a game of telephone in which the artist takes a previous representation of a historical event, often from a popular source, and recasts it again, creating a new transmission and a heightened awareness of that process of transmission, is a principle *modus operandi* for Joskowicz.

From the town plaza, the series moves forward into what Joskowicz describes as Bolivia's "mytho-historic" landscape. In the second work in the trilogy, "Vallegrande, 1967" (2008), the camera (Michael Snow "Wavelength"-style) moves very slowly toward a small building. The building, covered in graffiti memorializing Che Guevara, served as the actual location for the display of Che's dead body to the press in 1967. As the camera moves into the shaded interior, it reveals a reenactment of the famous scene photographed by Freddy Alberto on October 10th, re-imagined as [Mantegna's dead Christ](#).



Left: Freddy Alberto's photo of Che Guevara's body (image via Wikipedia); right: Claudia Joskowicz, "Vallegrande, 1967" (2008), detail of video still

In the last work of the trilogy, "Round and Round and Consumed by Fire" (2009), we see the shootout leading to the deaths of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Here, rather than the camera moving slowly toward the subject, it forms a complete circle around a small Bolivian town.

Joskowicz's current exhibition at [Forever & Today, Inc.](#), curated by Sara Reisman, presents a new work, "Sympathy for The Devil" (2011). Here we are presented with a more complex visual space; rather than a single-channel video, we see two channels with the camera slowly tracking in each one.



Installation view, Claudia Joskowitz, "Sympathy for The Devil" (2011) at Kiosko Galleria in Santa Cruz, Bolivia

This work begins with an anecdote. In my upbringing as a first-generation American, there were many of these: small chunks of history that had adhered to particular persons who passed those fragments along to their children and grandchildren. While anecdotal information is neither analytic nor objective, it often presents a carefully preserved, crystalline tidbit that's able to encapsulate in a short narrative the prevailing conditions and situation in which the story transpired more vividly than a long, historical exegesis.

In the case of Joskowitz's video, the story was told by her brother-in-law about his father, a Polish Jew who escaped to Bolivia during the Second World War. The father found himself living in the same building as Klaus Barbie, who had been the head of the Gestapo in Lyon — he later became known as the "Butcher of Lyon" — and was considered directly responsible for the deaths of over 14,000 people. The Polish Jewish father and his son were about to step into the elevator in the building when the doors opened to reveal Barbie standing inside. The father put his arm out to block the puzzled son from entering. The doors shut, and Barbie moved through the elevator shaft alone.

Bolivia became home to European refugees but at the same time accepted former Nazis with open arms — Nazis who paraded about in the streets in broad daylight and were embraced by the government and were passed on the street daily by Jews who were powerless to do anything. Not getting into the elevator was about as much as one could do to protest. By literally showing us this confrontation in a tiny space, in an urban building, in a small country, Joskowitz makes us feel the claustrophobia of a small world in which those who commit the most egregious atrocities live among us without consequence. And by doing so, the work points to the enormous obstacles to reconciliation in many war-torn and traumatized parts of the world.



Claudia Joskowicz, "Sympathy for the Devil" (2012), video still

The coordination of the two tracking cameras is exquisite: one moves in a circular motion from the backs of the heads of the grandfather and grandson into the tight hallway of the urban skyscraper; the other shifts slowly back from the window, revealing a view out the window of the Bolivian Andes. This view that each man sees from his respective apartment represents a world of sameness that they share, due to a history in which one, in essence, lost his original home because of the other. And each man lives with the other's presence very close by, reminded daily of their relationship to one another and to history.

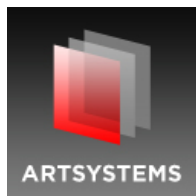
[Claudia Joskowicz: Sympathy for the Devil](#) continues at *Forever & Today, Inc.* (141 Division Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through December 23.

Tagged as: [Bolivia](#), [Bolivian art](#), [Claudia Joskowicz](#), [Forever & Today](#), [video art](#)

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