Claudia Joskowicz’s “Sympathy for the Devil” depicts the restaging of a familial anecdote set in the 1970s in which two immigrant neighbors living in La Paz, Bolivia, wordlessly encounter one another at the elevator of their building. The installation is comprised of two video channels, one for each of the protagonists: a Polish Jew who fled Europe during World War II, and the former Gestapo Captain Klaus Barbie, living under the name Klaus Altmann. The anonymous Jew is attended by a younger man—perhaps a son—whose darker complexion suggests he may be the progeny of a racially mixed couple, ethnically more Bolivian than his older companion. The father stops him from entering the elevator, and we watch a stone-faced Altmann look straight ahead as we eXclusively wait for the elevator doors to close. They never do; the encounter hovers, frozen in a tense state of prolonged recognition and coexistence. Altmann is rendered a strange specimen by this prosaic domestic context, so physically and temporally removed from the murderous crimes he perpetrated suppressing the French Resistance, eventually earning him the appellation “Butcher of Lyon.”

A proxy for the viewer, the younger man gazes toward the notorious SS-Hauptsturmführer as the artist’s slow tracking shots invite us to attend to every detail. But the pace is at once too slow and somehow accelerated, mimicking the dizzy disorientation that accompanies a horrific realization. How can this Nazi be standing here, in my elevator? One video inches us toward Altmann’s front door while the other shows the young man, back in his own apartment, putting on a rock record. The authenticity of the narrative is called into question with clues in both channels. Altmann’s name appears as “Altman” on his front door, reminding the viewer of the nature of oral histories. The cover art of the Rolling Stones’ album of 1968, but the 2003 compilation of remixed versions of the song “Sympathy for the Devil.” The anachronisms remind us that this is a story filtered through the artist’s subjectivity, shaped by her own understanding of the era in which the narrative takes place and by her own memories. “Sympathy for the Devil” starts to play as the father and son sit facing each other. Performed by Mick Jagger, the lyrics recount scenes of evil in the first-person narrative of a boastful Satan. In one verse, referring to the German tactical method of warfare that involves coordinated military efforts by tanks, infantry, artillery, and aircraft, he sings: “I rode a tank/ Held a general’s rank/ When the blitzkrieg raged/ And the bodies stack.”

As the song plays, we see the two older men in the identical apartments of a high-rise. Altmann sits alone in his stately furnished living room, reading. Heavy, blood-red curtains trim the modernist glass wall. In the other, the Pole sits with his son on pristine white furniture; presumably his is the more social existence. But the overwhelming similarities outweigh any differences. These well-dressed, middle-aged men sit comfortably in their affluent homes, both overlooking the same metropolitan skyline of La Paz, the Andes rising beyond the city. The scenes of their private lives are bookended by the encounter at the elevator, the door of which never seems to close; rather than successive instances, the two vignettes situate us in a perpetual moment of anecdotal history about injustice and a continuous state of tension in a shared space. This is a story that alludes to the specific role of Bolivia as a haven for refugees both political and persecuted—the outlaw and the hunted—and the particular strangeness of Altmann’s comfortable life in the close proximity of a Jewish refugee and his family. But it is also a parable about the omnipresence of evil and one’s inability to fully grasp the capacity for Man’s inhumanity against Man, whether from direct experience or from the remove of decades and the act of storytelling.

Sympathy for the Devil
Claudia Joskowicz

Sympathy for the Devil, 2011
Two channel digital HD video (color, sound)
8 minutes total running time
Courtesy of the artist and LMAKprojects, New York

Claudia Joskowicz's work has been featured in numerous exhibitions, including the XVIII Bienal de Arte Internacional de Santa Cruz, Bolivia (2012); the 10th Sharjah Biennial, United Arab Emirates (2011); the 39th Sao Paulo Biennial, Brazil (2010); the 10th Havana Biennial, Cuba (2009); the 4th Seoul International Media Art Biennial, Korea (2006); and the Fotofest Biennial, Houston (2002). Among other awards, she is the recent recipient of a fellowship in film and video from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation (2011) an artistic residency prize from the 17th Videobrasil Festival (2011); and a research and teaching fellowship from the J. William Fulbright Program (2009). CMP Projects is her first solo presentation on the west coast.

Joskowicz was born in 1968 in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia. She earned her BFA from the University of Houston, Texas, in 1991, and her MFA from New York University in 2000. She lives and works in Santa Cruz de la Sierra and New York, where she is currently teaching in the Steinhardt Art Department at NYU.

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CMP Projects: Claudia Joskowicz’s on view from November 23, 2013 through April 12, 2014 at the California Museum of Photography, part of UCR ARTSblock in Riverside. CMP Projects is an ongoing series of solo presentations organized by Joanna Szupinska-Meyers, CMP Curator of Exhibitions. Support has been provided by UCR’s College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (CHASS) and the City of Riverside. Additional thanks to Bart Keizers Koning.