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The Brooklyn Rail
Ginevra de Blasio

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João Maria Gusmão: *Animal Farm*

By [Ginevra de Blasio](#)



João Maria Gusmão, *Ghost tape*, 2021. 16mm film, color, no sound, 3'22". Produced by Fundação de Serralves. Courtesy the artist and 99 Canal.

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“Cock-a-doodle-do” is what you would expect to hear when encountering *Rooster at dawn* (2023), the first 16 mm film at the entrance in João Maria Gusmão’s new exhibition *Animal Farm* at 99 Canal, the not-for-profit space in Chinatown, New York City. Instead, the only audible sound is the mechanical whirr of the projector. The exhibition’s silence is confirmed by the second film and a preamble to the show, *Ghost tape* (2021), capturing a spinning cassette. According to the artist, the spinning is illusory, a mere phantasmagoria. However, what the viewer is really seeing is the projection of a moving cassette onto a static one, that is, a screen possessed by the image, the movement and the detail of its true function.

The discord between expected sounds and their notable absence introduces the exhibition’s allegorical character, drawing its title from George Orwell’s seminal work, *Animal Farm* published in 1945. While Orwell’s work offers a direct and forceful critique of the Russian revolution and the rise of the Stalinist Soviet Union, Gusmão’s analogies are nuanced and layered, offering an array of interpretations that depend on the viewer's active engagement and curiosity.

ON VIEW
99 Canal
Animal Farm
February 2–
March 10, 2024
New York



Installation view: João Maria Gusmão: *Animal Farm*, 99 Canal, New York, 2024. Photo: Kunning Huang.

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The film *Flat cows make nice yogurt* (2023), set against the luminous backdrop of New York City's skyline, highlights cows grazing in a pastoral landscape that appear stretched, oversized, and distorted, an effect achieved by the employment of an anamorphic lens used for shooting and projecting the scene. This not only demonstrates an inventive manipulation of cinematic techniques and delves into the deeper, metaphysical aspects of imagery, but also, the whole sequence evokes subtle and unsubtle interpretations, including the immediate critique of the environmental impact of the meat industry. This evocation is amplified by the eerie and symbolic images incubating in the surrounding screens. These range from the scatological reverse extraction of mustard from a tube in *Mustard piece* (2023), to a whimsically depicted cow on a duvet in a forsaken seventies department store in *Bedrooms* (2023) and culminates in the artist's performative act of urinating on the very same stone where Wolfgang Amadeus is said to have pissed in *Mozart's piss stone* (2023), a primordial territorial gesture.

Just as the exhibition begins with the silent call of a rooster heralding the dawn, it concludes with a post-apocalyptic image of a *Sunflower at dusk* (2023), at which time the silence is even more pertinent in this curatorial context: the sunflower is depicted in its waning days, dried out by the passage of seasons, mirroring the fragile life of film, and how it can be disintegrated by the overexposure of light.

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João Maria Gusmão, *Sunflower at dusk*, 2023. Vertical 16mm film projection, color, no sound, 2'29".
Courtesy the artist and 99 Canal.

João Maria Gusmão, born in Lisbon in 1979, has spent the last two decades exploring the metaphysical perception of images through traditional cinematic devices such as the analogue medium to push the poetic boundaries of visual storytelling. His work transcends the tangible world, invoking a spectral, memory-laden version that prompts viewers to contemplate the very nature of visual perception. *Animal Farm* offers a remarkable presentation of Gusmão's skill in navigating the interplay between fiction and reality, science and philosophy, as well as the man-made world and nature. By fearlessly exploring his conceptual yet visceral deployment of how the interplay between the films and site-specificity can spatially intersect. For every single element, from deploying the different sizes of projected images onto various surfaces, the different heights of pedestals on which the various projectors are placed upon; to the juxtaposition of predominantly natural scenarios against a view of New York's Financial District, all of which serves as a metaphorical bridge that hints to the themes of manipulation present in the imagery, enriching, thereby, the viewer's experience of these complex dichotomies.