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<https://brooklynrail.org/2024/02/artseen/Joo-Maria-Gusmo-Animal-Farm-1>

Publication
Author
The Brooklyn Rail
Laura Valenza

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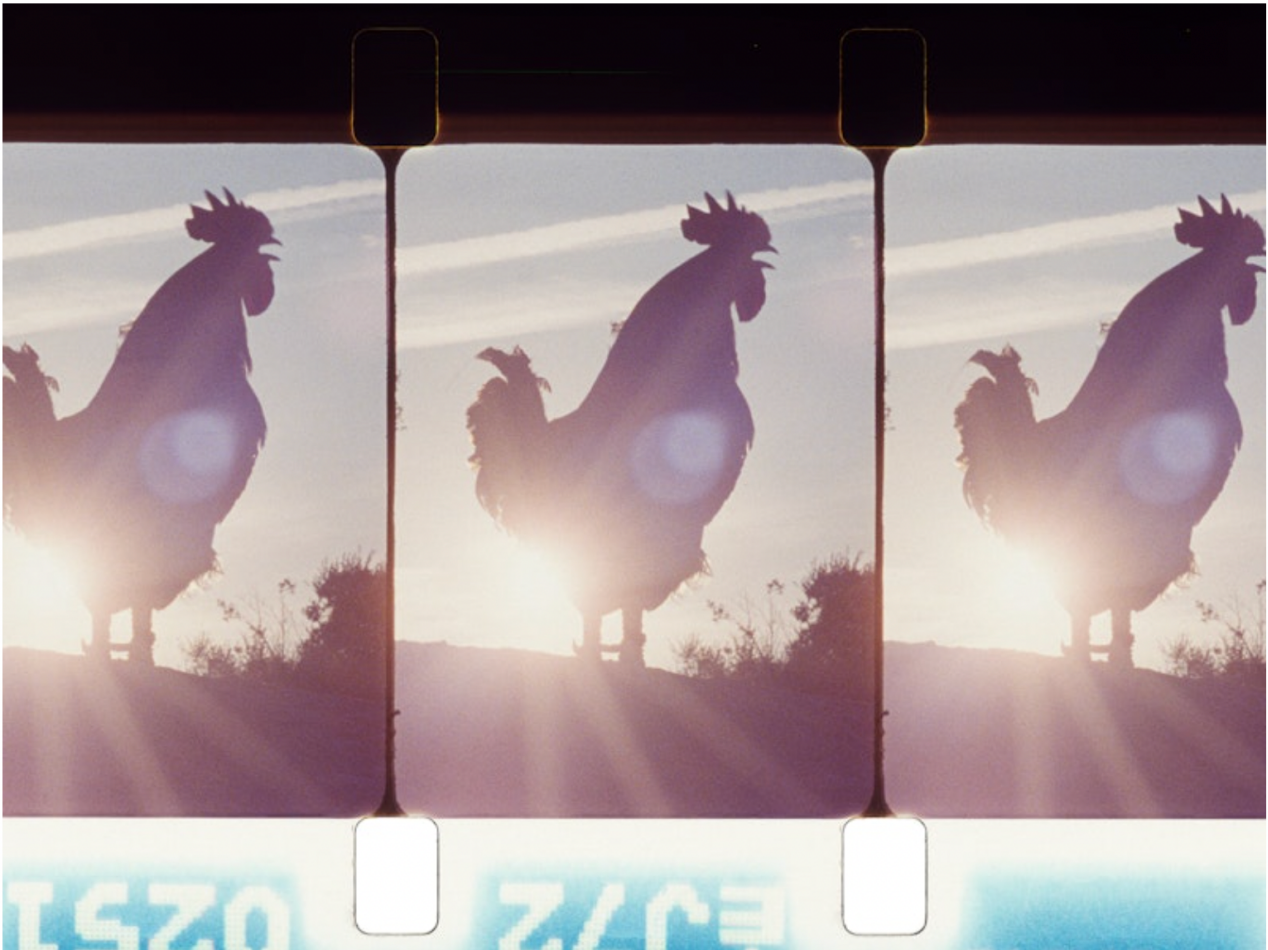
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ArtSeen

João Maria Gusmão: *Animal Farm*

By [Laura Valenza](#)



João Maria Gusmão, *Rooster at dawn*, 2023. 16mm film, color, no sound, 2'33". Courtesy the artist and 99 Canal.

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Tucked between storefronts on a block past the entrance to the Brooklyn Bridge, 99 Canal feels like a step back in time before the Lower East Side and Chinatown were dotted with white-walled galleries and high-end thrift shops. It's not a spot you'll ever accidentally stumble on. You'll have to know it's there, and even if you know it's there, you still might miss the arterial hall that lies beneath an unlit 99 painted the same color as the building.

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

Once the elevator at the end of this gray hall spits you out on the sixth floor, you arrive in an environment at once vastly different from the street below and yet perfectly in sync with it. The cigarette smoke-soaked studio at 99 Canal evokes the gritty DIY galleries of the seventies East Village art scene, albeit with twenty-first-century flair provided by a cleverly hidden kitchenette stocked with beer behind the sleek black paneling of the walls. The black interiors, the opposite of a typical gallery setting, create a cinematic space perfect for the fourteen screens (and their projectors) that make up João Maria Gusmão's exhibition, *Animal Farm*, curated by Marco Bene.

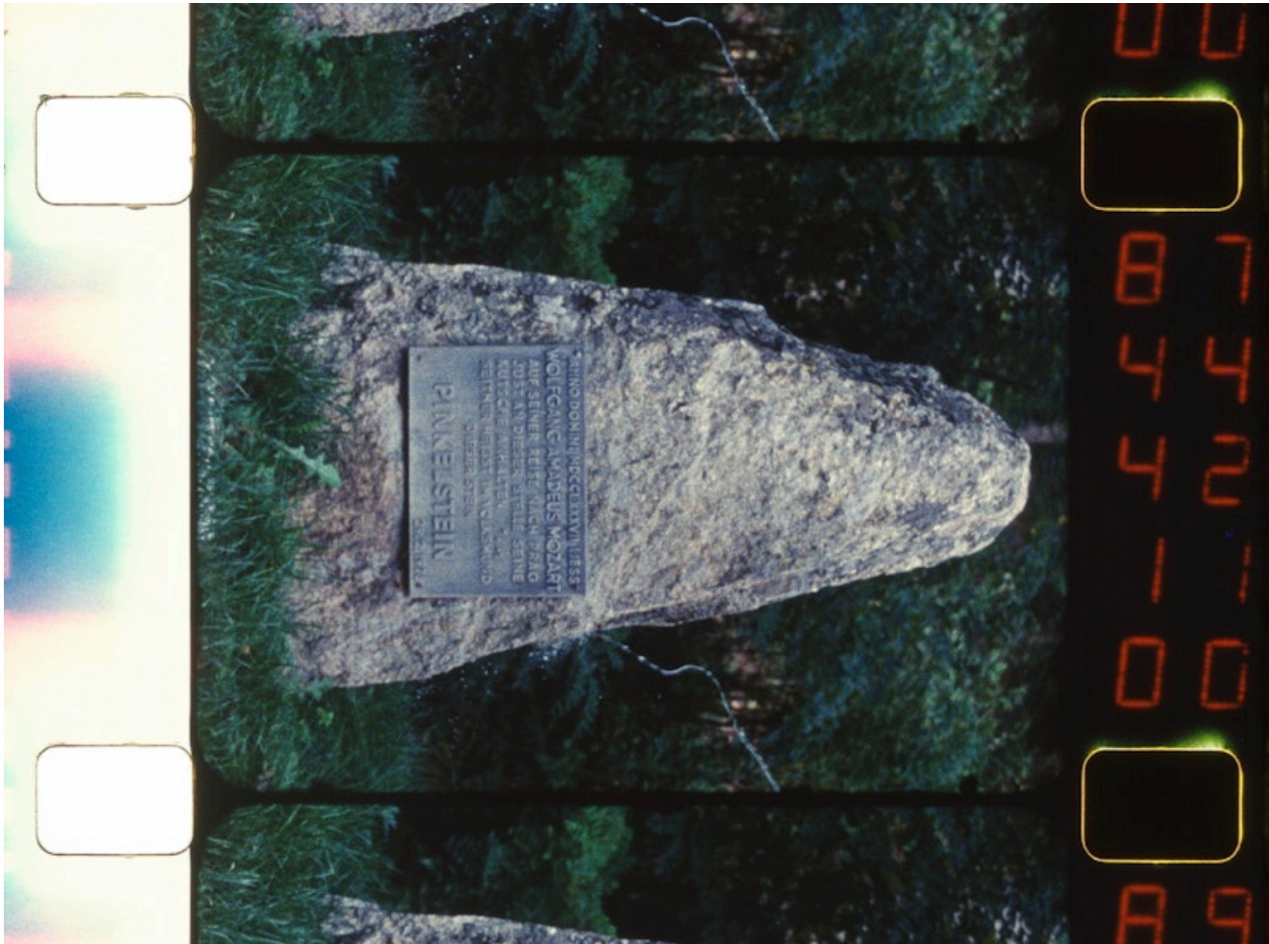
The show—if the name hasn't given it away already—is based on George Orwell's 1945 book of the same title, and uses Orwell's text to contemplate production and commodification in agriculture. It goes further as well: the curator's companion text imagines an epilogue to the original novel and explores “flora fauna rights,” among other concerns relating to the place of animals in our apocalyptic (and all too familiar) sounding “Anthropotherocene” Epoch.

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João Maria Gusmão, *Mozart's piss stone*, 2023. 16mm film, anamorphic projection, color, no sound, 5'13''.
Courtesy the artist and 99 Canal.

Some of the looping films in the exhibition make the *Animal Farm* connection obvious—the first stop off the elevator shows a rooster greeting the dawn in silence. None of the films, in fact, use sound. The projector sits deep in a narrow cavity next to the elevator shaft so that you are tempted to look back at it, but at the same time as you are drawn to the rooster on the screen it's difficult not to stand in the way of the projector's beam. The shadows cast on the screen and the interference of the viewer's body set an uncanny tone that continues through the rest of the installation. For example, another direct tie to *Animal Farm* comes in the form of *Flat cows make nice yogurt* (2023) (played on the largest screen), which shows distorted bovine bodies in a field without a trace of human activity (other than the phantom hand of domestication).

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Other films, like *Mozart's piss stone* (2023), have a less obvious connection to Orwell's narrative. A disembodied stream of piss pours onto the stone marking the spot where the maestro once took a bathroom break himself. By standing off camera, Gusmão speaks again to the ghostly presence of humans, haunting the animals' world. Another film, *Bedrooms* (2023), shows a series of dated and sometimes flamboyantly kitschy bedroom furniture display rooms hauntingly devoid of any lived-in feeling. The only film to show humans is *The wondrous pumpkin farm* (2023), one of my favorites, for its uncanny attempt at a kitschy American-style pumpkin patch attraction in Austria. But most importantly, each of the films on view here is *funny*. There is humor and absurdism to be found throughout the show, even in the accompanying epilogue, which describes the "the crossbreed of a horse and an ostrich" as "a sad example of a two-legged animal" and notes how "most chihuahuas sport cardigans".



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

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You're meant to have fun as you wander the three rooms, each further subdivided into spaces by the projectors and their screens. The projectors even cross each other, but at different levels in order to keep the picture clear. One small screen, close to the floor in a corner, is almost hidden behind the largest screen, turning your tour of the room into a scavenger hunt. When you enter the exhibition, you'll be given a map—the artist and curator recommend a specific order that allows you to see the full narrative arc of the show before filling in the middle gaps. The unavoidability of the projectors as you wander through the show mirrors Gusmão's investment in playfully experimenting with the technology he used during the production of the exhibition. *Ghost tape* (2021) looks like a tape playing itself. *Solar farm* (2023) shows a flash of light created by pointing a mirror at the exact center of the camera lens. *Fermented foam* (2023) may just be foam, but the infinite layering of the image has a similar effect to the psychedelic lights shows of the sixties and seventies. *Half a horse* (2023) is just as it sounds: a series of shots of ghostly half-horses flicker across the screen (though, occasionally, a full horse shadow appears). A sunflower shot at sunset (a callback to the opening rooster) features a technical glitch Gusmão chose to embrace as part of the aesthetic. These optical tricks make it impossible not to think about the film itself, lending the exhibition something like a tangible physicality.

Perhaps some of the most compelling work in the show is actually found beyond 99 Canal. On the corner of the top floor of the building, large windows line the walls so that the city's skyline and the Financial District loom over every work of art. You can't examine Gusmão's dehumanized bedroom displays without also voyeuristically watching people in their own bedrooms through the windows of the apartment building across the street. With the very specific operational hours of 4 to 10 p.m., you will go through the exhibition from sunset to nightfall, a very intentional nod to the rooster and the sunflower. The experience provides both one of the most beautiful views of the city and an almost oppressive reminder of the process of commodification that the films engage.