At first glance, Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa’s performance *Feather Piece* might appear to be an act of self-mutilation, some painful rite of expiation or bloodletting. However, as he continues affixing feathers to flesh with acupuncture needles, we become aware of the delicacy with which the Guatemalan artist pierces his own skin then stretches out a newly adorned arm for us to admire. Ramírez-Figueroa once described the piece as a pre-Columbian transformation ritual of sorts. If so, what has he become? In the Hispanic Caribbean, “pájaro” (bird) and “pato” (duck) serve as slurs against gay men, and in many parts of the Spanish-speaking world, to show one’s feathers (“dar pluma”) is to display effeminacy. As he shows us his, Ramírez-Figueroa neither preens nor hides. He plucks the quills from himself and leaves them scattered for our gaze to gather: armless feathers, traces of a body already in flight.
Structured as a Platonic dialogue between stand-ins for Syd Krochmalny and Roberto Jacoby—the artists have stated that the video documents and fictionalizes their year-long pact of chaste cohabitation—La castidad makes the case for its eponymous virtue as an antidote to a visual culture obsessed with sex. The master and his student argue for language and speech as deeper forms of penetration and, in doing so, lament that the “splendors of chastity” cannot be represented through images, that its “infinite time” resists visual narration. As opposed to chaste listening, seeing is promiscuous. Seeing is sex. Yet when the piece asks the audience to participate in pairs, to join their pact for sixteen minutes, it invites us to both listen and see. Just as the two figures on screen touch and graze each other in their fragile Eden, we cannot help but engage in sight’s crasser penetrations, letting their light slip past pupils to stroke our retinas.

Whether their bodies are partially obscured by trunks and branches or sprawled on grass and mattress, the film often teases us with close-ups of their hands, feet, backs, and eyes. At one point, the young man asks his mentor what will happen at the end of their pact. Once La castidad’s dialogue has ended, the video offers up one last visual pleasure: a blurry close-up of sunlight filtering through a leaf, its speechless green a final intimacy shared with the other viewer just a breath away.
José Leonilson passed away from AIDS-related illness in 1993 at the age of 36 leaving behind an impressive oeuvre of drawings, paintings and embroideries, as well as the audio journal he had kept for years. In *com o oceano inteiro para nadar*, Brazilian filmmaker Karen Harley stitches these elements together into an elegiac portrait. Just as the shots of waves, sand dunes and hillsides echo the folds in Leonilson’s embroideries, Harley’s use of visual and aural snippets mirrors her subject’s artistic practice. Leonilson’s autobiographical embroideries incorporate small fragments of text to signal interior states, whereas the scraps of cloth and clothing serve as metonymic reminders of the artist’s body, always out of sight. Similarly, Harley’s piece pointedly refuses to show images of its subject until the very end when it finally presents us with a healthy, smiling Leonilson rather than the emaciated bed-ridden figure so prevalent in media depictions of AIDS. Leonilson’s body becomes the absence around which the film winds then undulates—his voice and work like folds of fabric suggesting skin that no longer lies beneath and our gaze the stitching over wounds left unseen.
**AGRIPPINA É ROMA - MANHATTAN**

1972

Hélio Oiticica (Brazil)

*Single channel video, Super 8, 15’04”

*Courtesy of Projeto Hélio Oiticica*

Best known for his wearable cloth sculptures and room-sized participatory environments, Hélio Oiticica began experimenting with film in the seventies during his time in New York at the height of Brazil’s military dictatorship. Its title referring to the Roman empress exiled for plotting to assassinate her brother Caligula, *Agrippina é Roma-Manhattan* might represent a reflection on Oiticica’s own exile due to politics and sexuality. A first attempt at what he came to call “quasi-cinema,” the piece eschews traditional narrative for a series of shots in which a young woman finds herself dwarfed by Manhattan’s imperial architecture. As the camera sweeps back and forth attempting to account for the buildings’ enormity, for the profusion of windows, only Puerto Rican drag queen and Warhol superstar Mario Montez seems capable of holding its attention, her wry smile and stolen glances betraying a knowingness about who watches from behind lens and glass, who gapes on the other side of the screen.
No video recording exists of Carlos Leppe’s 1981 El día que me quieras. During that performance, Leppe slicked his hair back with brilliantine, applied makeup, and belted Carlos Gardel’s famous tango “El día que me quieras” while cradling a television monitor to his waist. Audio of his mother singing the same song blared on the sound system as a childhood photograph of them together shone on the screen behind him. The footage shown here was shot by Leppe and his collaborators, including cultural theorist Nelly Richard, to be played on the television monitor during the performance. Structured around a childhood memory of his mother, the performance functioned according to a strange—queer, even—temporal logic: its subjunctive title and the song’s lyrics gestured toward an unspecified future, even as the photographs and video staked claims on a concrete past. Drifting in time, Leppe’s body also moved fluidly through gender: his slick hair evoked Gardel’s heartthrob masculinity and the makeup his mother’s conventional femininity. Without video documentation, the performing of this unfixed body remains inaccessible to us; the performance has now become a memory of a memory. Leppe’s corporal performance depended on texture—a voice’s crackle, the whirring projector, childhood’s photographic grain, powder pressed to eyelids—and, of course, his body’s solidity, the yielding flesh into which the television’s rough edges could sink. The remaining photos and this footage represent second- or third-level ephemera. Thus, like Leppe, we must also make due with queer time, with less than straightforward remembering and its different kind of texture: that of fragments and process, of takes and retakes, of discarded shots and audio, of video’s flicker filling in for song’s warble.
Carlos Leppe’s *Acción de la estrella* performs a series of inscriptions and erasures with the artist’s own body serving as locus and nexus. Both the text covering the back wall as well as the one read aloud by cultural theorist Nelly Richard inscribe Leppe’s tonsured star within an avant-garde lineage, as a replica of Marcel Duchamp’s 1919 shaved star, and a national tradition, as a reproduction of the Chilean flag’s lone star. When Leppe takes the stage so that his head occupies the upper-left quadrant of the flag’s outline, body, nation and avant-garde art all seem to align. Momentarily. Soon, a small sack of paint bursts atop his head streaking the star white, marring it with its own emblematic color. From that moment on, the performance enacts one erasure after another, from gauze covering the back of Leppe’s head to the lights going out. Six years into a military regime responsible for the disappearance of thousands, the performance with its blank and transparent flags easily elicits a political allegorical reading. And yet, swathed in white, blending into its colorless surroundings, it is Leppe’s body that very visibly performs the effacements into which it might vanish. Like the white splotch on the transparent flag’s outline, his body remains a stubborn residue, a damned spot all the more damning with each attempt to blot it away.
UNTITLED (A PORTRAIT)
1991/1995
Felix Gonzalez-Torres (Cuba, USA)
Video (5’), monitor, pedestal, and chairs
Overall dimensions vary with installation
Courtesy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation

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