Video Classics: A Guide to Video Art and Documentary Tapes

OPYX PRESS
the meaning of a compulsion to endure this primitive race with
Death. It ends with producer Bill Marpet in the bull ring, trembling in
his boots but gamely waving a cloth before a bull calf. He grins and
waves, now a participant as well as observer of this age-old ritual.

Sabda
by Dan Reeves
1984. 15 min. color. 
Distributor: EAI. Formats: ¾", VHS, Beta.

Credits: Producer/Photographer/Editor Dan Reeves Associate 
Producer/Sound Recordist Debra Schweitzer Post-production Assistant 
Larry Mishkin CMX Editor/Digital Video Effects Richard Feist Post-
production Facility Matrix Video. Thanks Lillian R. Katz, Larry 
Mishkin, Marcia Dickerson, Marilyn and Bob Schweitzer, 185 Cor-
poration. “Kabir’s Song” translated by Swami Chidvilasananda; po-
etry by Nammalvan translated by A. K. Ramanujan; by Kabir, trans-
lated by Linda Hess; by Basavanna, translated by A. K. Ramanujan;
by Ramprasad Sen, translated by Leonard Nathan and Clinton Seely. 
Funding John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, New York 
State Council on the Arts, Port Washington Public Library.

Inspired by Indian poetry, philosophy, and religion, video artist Dan 
Reeves set out on his own mystical journey through India. SABDA is 
his lyrical video poem, a collaboration with some of the great Indian 
medieval poets. In it Reeves succeeds as few Westerners have in 
revealing the complex reality that is India.

The tape is a visual rhapsody of exquisite, luminous, slow-motion 
imagery. Reeves’s movement vocabulary ranges from breathless still 
images of a moon between two trees to wide, sweeping arcs that shift 
ground and transport the viewer into a mental state where Shakti 
indeed seems to dance amid the flames. Loosely swinging his camera, 
Reeves addresses the eye level of a tiny child or soars heavenward, as 
though flinging his camera into the air. His sensuous camera move-
ments are like the gestures of a dancer. Their subtlety and grace are 
further enhanced by digital video effects, which grab frames at varying 
rates, producing an illusory sense of reality: In one poignant 
scene, a woman beggar stands, solid despite her fragile frame, as the 
material world streams past, transparent and insubstantial.

Over lyrical phrases of people walking, working, begging, playing, 
over landscapes alive to the harvest picker or strangely still and remote, Reeves graphically displays the poems of Kabir, Nammalvan, 
Basavanna, and Ramprasad Sen. He thus enters into a dialogue with 
poets, a dialogue between eternal India and the heart of a Western 
visionary.

Selected Treecuts
by Steina
1981. 6 min. color & b/w. 
Distributor: The Vasulkas. Format: ¾”.

Awards: Ithaca Video Festival

SELECTED TREECUTS rhythmically alternates between black-and-white 
images of trees blowing in the wind, a computer memory of those 
trees rendered as a digital, gray-and-white mosaic, and “real” trees, 
seen in shimmering color. While drawing relationships between these 
three levels of visual abstraction, Steina also creates a composition 
for the ear. With audio modulated by the video signal, an om-like 
sound reverberates, building in intensity as the various visual images 
cut in and out and the camera zooms in and out on them. The 
increasing speed of alternation between scenes and their sounds cli-
maxes and subsides like the dying wind in the sunstroked trees. 
Mathematically balanced in its formal composition, the tape stirs a 
metaphysical reverie: Steina’s images seem to peel away the surface of 
the natural world and reveal, in all its nakedness and primal energy, 
the life force at work.

Born in Iceland, Steinatrained as a violinist before marrying 
Woody Vasulka and embarking on an internationally renowned career 
as a video artist. She is noted for exploring the aesthetics of “machine 
vision.” Although she frequently collaborates with her husband, 
Steina uses only her first name when producing individual tapes.

SELECTED TREECUTS was made using the Digital Image Arti-
culator, or Imager, a unique instrument the Vasulkas developed with 
designer Jeff Schier to explore real-time video and image perfor-
mance. During the 18 months they spent designing the Imager, Steina 
produced a tape about its design, construction, and use for the 
Television Lab at WNET/13. Titled Cantaloup—the fruit is used as a 
model to demonstrate how the system works—this tape offers a fairly