

ON THE DOTNotes on Video, by Gerry Gilbert.

A framed image of the sight and sound of what is happening, available as it is happening and at any time in its future: television. Now that we have access to tv equipment for personal use, after decades of its impersonal misuse, we begin to understand that television is a modern form of a very old technique of graphic projection. The use of tv equipment is so straightforward, as a tool to work with and as an instrument to play, that it could become Everyman's creative medium: a way to enrich our experience of the present, and to extend the very narrow definition of "reality" which our culture permits.

Fifty years ago, while Paul Klee was noting that a line was a dot walking, electronics engineers were developing a device which did exactly that. A television picture is created by a dot scanning a screen from left to right and down, exactly the way we read a page in a book. The screen glows with whatever amount of energy the dot possessed at each point on its journey, and the dot zips back to Go, so quickly that the image seems to be alive. This apparent movement is the old trick of letting your eyes be fooled by a fast hand. When we are aware that it is happening, our eyes can return to the surface of the situation, the screen, and we can wake from that foolish gaze the mass media has required of us -- and then we can proceed to deal consciously with the images.

From the caveman's spray of paint blown through a straw onto the wall, to Seurat's pointillist paintings, to the television screen, the dot has been the key to artists' image-making skills. Stand back, the dots vanish and the picture appears. The process is the same whether the dots are broad brushstrokes, tiny silver beads on photographic film, the spaces

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in the mesh of a silk-screen, the grain of the lithographer's stone, the particles of iron oxide on magnetic recording tape, the patterns of round specks which permit $\frac{1}{2}$ -tone printing, and, in a way, even the alphabets and characters with which we read and write. To activate the dot in a tv system, all we have to do is switch it on. What happens next is up to us, if we want.

Felix the Cat, standing on a turntable in a lab in New York in the late '20s was the first North American to see himself on video. Of course, being a stuffed doll, he might not have noticed; but to the people down the line watching on their 2-inch screens he was as alive as their imaginations. We have a wonderful ability to resolve the dots into images full of the strength of our belief. When we have learned to "read" the screen, the act of creating an image on it is as easy as the mechanics of walking — but it remains something each of us is doing for ourselves. We become artists at those moments we are conscious of the process of image-making, when the image we are seeing is the very structure of sight. That is what Felix was showing, beyond any story he was turning around on. At some points it is possible to have our stories, without our stories having us.

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VIDEOBAG

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