

**Photography****Is It Necessary To Ask What They Mean?**

By GENE THORNTON

IN one of the most over-rated movies of the 1960's, Francois Truffaut's "Jules et Jim", part of the decor consisted of a series of reproductions of Picasso paintings. The unframed reproductions were done on stretched canvases, just like real paintings, but in smaller sizes than the originals. And, as the movie progressed, the pictures were changed, starting off with early works and progressing chronologically through the painter's various periods.

"What does it mean?" people asked—in those days, the era of "L'Avventura" and "Last Year in Marienbad," everything in a movie had to mean something. Nobody I know came up with a satisfactory answer, and in the end I concluded that the Picasso paintings in "Jules et Jim" were only meant to prompt people to ask what they meant and thus keep the wheels of conversation going.

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Nowadays, of course, works of art no longer have to mean anything — they simply are. So it is not, strictly speaking, necessary to ask the meaning of Stephen Shore's photographs which are on view at the Metropolitan Museum through March 21. But people will ask anyway, and since the Museum's Department of Prints and Photographs has refrained from providing any answers, I shall attempt one myself.

First of all let me say that Stephen Shore, though only 23, is an accomplished veteran of the photographic scene. When he was 14, three of his pictures were bought by Edward Steichen for The Museum of Modern Art's collection. He also photographed (in 1965) the long essay that concludes the catalogue of Andy Warhol's 1968 show at Stockholm's Moderna Museet, a splendid sequence that conveys, better than anything I have seen, the bleak charm of Andy's "let's pretend" world.

In the last two years, how-

ever, Stephen Shore has attempted to move from such essays in picture making and interpretive reporting into those desolate reaches of contemporary art where both subject matter and the artist's feelings are suppressed, where the audience's anticipated responses are systematically nullified, where indeed there may be no work of art at all, but merely an idea. The 39 prints at the Metropolitan date from this period, and they demonstrate the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of bending so rich and pictorial an art as photography to such dessicated ends.

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The pictures are exhibited in six sequences identified only by the place and date of their taking. The sequence that most successfully stays in a conceptual framework is the one taken on the great lawn of the Institute of General Semantics at Limerock, Connecticut. It consists of two takes of four pictures each. The first picture of take one is dominated by the knob or bole of a huge tree. From this, the photographer walked backwards and shot a picture at roughly 50-foot intervals; in the last picture the tree has shrunk to a tiny ornament on a vast, spreading lawn. In the second take, the photographer stationed himself between the tree and a house and, revolving on that one spot, took pictures at 90-degree intervals.

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In this entire sequence, the most successful from a conceptual point of view, the order of the shots was determined by an arbitrary decision of the photographer, not by the subject matter or by any formal or pictorial consideration. The form is not so much in the work itself as in the doing of the work. Even so, human interest obtrudes. In one of the eight shots two teenagers are seated on the vast, empty lawn gazing at the spectator. Who are they? What are they doing there? Where is everyone

else? Already the literary imagination is at work, and the arbitrary conceptual framework has been transformed into a dramatic device reminiscent of Antonioni.

In the other five sequences the subject matter plays an increasingly decisive role. Sixth Avenue itself determines the sequence in which its various blocks are photographed. A flat lawn in Canyon, Texas, photographed 10 times in as many minutes, is galvanized by a mysterious game of musical chairs. Finally, in an automobile graveyard at Kingston, New York, the photographer chucks all conceptual guidelines to produce a free-wheeling and somehow cozy study of abandoned automobiles snuggling together like small animals under a blanket of pine needles.