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Art in America

July 1999

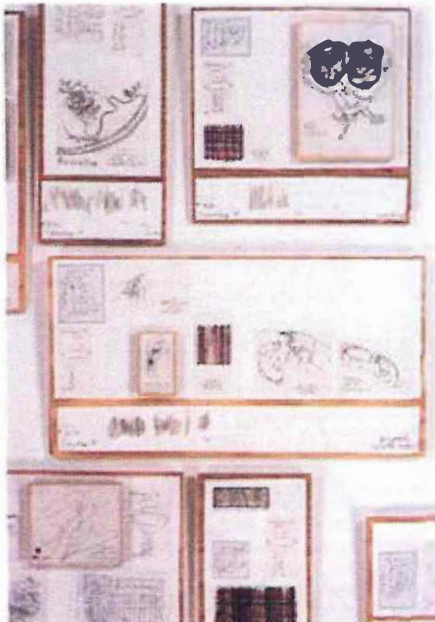
Danica Phelps at Jack Tilton

Since graduating from art school a few years ago, Danica Phelps has addressed a topic that is of enormous importance to many young artists: money, especially the difficult getting and easy spending of it, and the anxious business of making one's creative way while encumbered by day jobs and whopping rents. *Plaids* (1998), a horizontal row of diminutive gouaches and watercolors, seems like a set of rather lovely minimalist grids until you decipher exactly what's going on. Each piece consists of two interlaced colors, green and red, with the green representing Phelps's earnings and the red her expenses. The paper they're painted on is recycled U.S. currency, which adds a neat conceptual twist: works about money painted on the raw stuff of money.

Most of the works in this show feature drawings, scrawled notations and handmade charts and graphs, and in all of them Phelps attempts to fit the details of her own life into economically derived systems. *Honeymoon*

(1996-97) is a sprawling, wall-covering work that consists of dozens of drawings (once again on recycled currency) attached to variously sized wood panels. The disarmingly casual drawings follow Phelps and her husband on their honeymoon voyage, which included stops in England, France, Italy, Egypt and India. She focuses not on important sites and events but on small details: a bar of soap, a laundromat, a taxi in Cairo, a telephone call. What each costs is duly noted. At first you suspect Phelps must be nuts, out there in the enticing world and fixating on expenses. Still, there is something richly poetic in the way these drawings suggest myriad scenes, encounters and states of mind while sticking to a matter-of-fact objectivity.

On the vertical panels of *Block Island* (1997), we read about the ways Phelps earned money one summer (selling photos, waitressing) and how she spent it. *Brooklyn* (1998) finds Phelps in the artists' neighborhood of Williamsburg. Painted "week-at-a-glance" panels chronicle the days of her life and even provide maps of her daily route. Throughout this obsessive quest for order, you notice the vicissitudes of personal existence—welcome extravagances (lobster!) and potential calamities (studio disaster). Painted grids at the bottom of each panel chart, in greens and reds, the ups and downs of the artist's economic activity; red increases alarmingly when rent is due, while green days seem downright beneficent. Scruffy yet exacting, Phelps's works are both weird and compelling. —Gregory Volk



Danica Phelps: *Honeymoon* (detail), 1996-97, pencil, gouache on paper on wood, dimensions variable; at Jack Tilton.

Volk, Gregory. "Danica Phelps at Jack Tilton". *Art in America* (July 1999):96.

ARTISTS on ARTISTS

CHRISTINE HILL

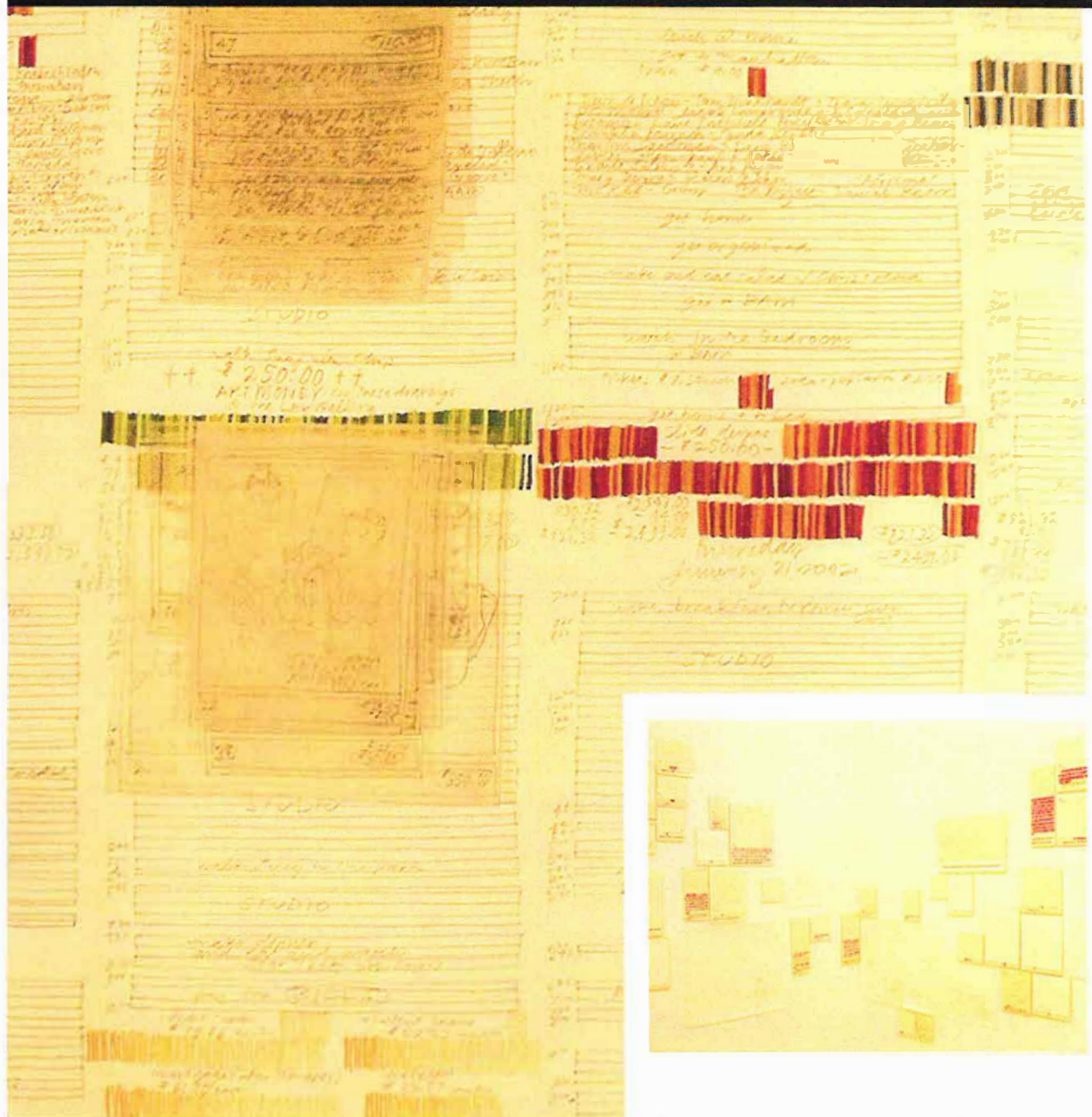
on DANICA PHELPS

MY ACCOUNTANT RECENTLY ALERTED ME TO A nuance of the Bush Administration: an upswing in artist audits. He mentioned the need to carefully record claims, while the two of us silently considered how much there would actually be to shake from this tree and how this might be simply a distraction technique to keep the artist occupied, lest he/she use that extra time (not to mention income) to ... riot?

If we're rioting, then I'm for Danica Phelps's form of revolution. She is not distracted by issues like transcendence; she is making everything she can out of what she

has at her immediate disposal. Everyday occurrences fuel her work. Entering her home and its studio space is overwhelming. Balancing precariously between surrendering to the complex clutter of life and painstakingly attempting to keep track of it all, her home is an installation of piles, lists, salon-style wall hanging, strewn laundry and probably something cooking on the stove. If one singles out the "art works" in the visual array, they are precise, meticulous renderings of everyday transactions, recorded in list form, in calendar-like adaptations and in isolated, somewhat transparently drawn images. A thorough, slightly convoluted accounting system keeps line-by-line track of daily income and outflow, coded green and red respectively, and single dollars noted by small, single brush strokes. The resulting tallies are mounted matter-of-factly on light board, and then hung in expansive clusters that rarely read in a linear fashion. Thus a hierarchical system gives way to a more democratic one. Everything counts.

Phelps insists on baring her intimate information, and



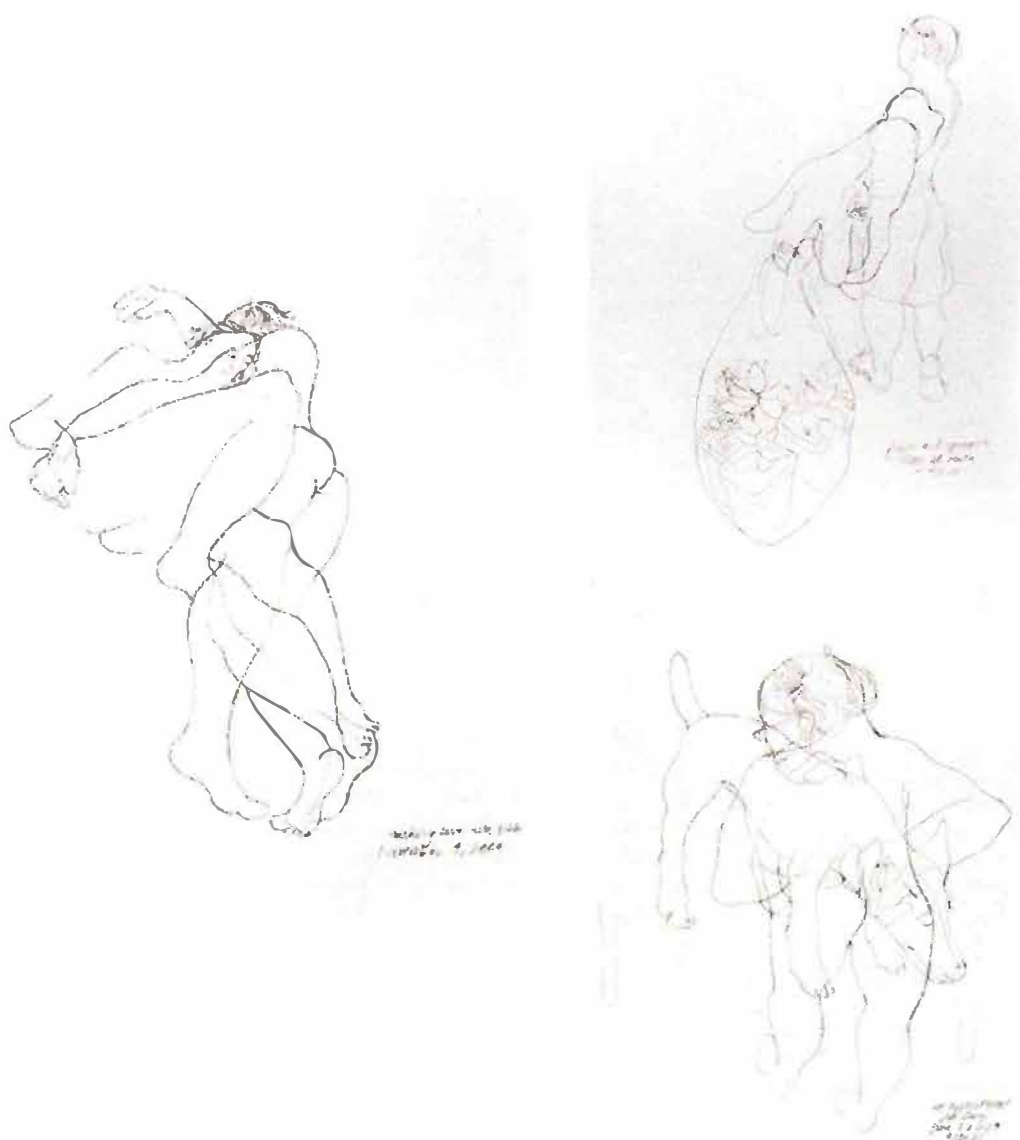
therefore establishes a playing field of forthrightness and directness. There's also something to be said for saying that which is usually left unsaid. "Full financial disclosure" in Phelps's case means revealing details that, in polite company, we are told we had better squelch—from credit-card debt to sexual habits.

Her inversion/re-interpretation of "value" is empowering. It's the ultimate sign of freedom and intelligence to be self-determining. Keeping track implies significance. Keeping score implies progress. Phelps's tallies aren't really about the sort of "accumulation" the American system prioritizes. The American Dream is about charting progress, or so we are told. Prescribed progress includes striving for better living conditions, accumulating frequent flier miles, taking advantage of seasonal sales, upgrading computer technology and, of course, more cash. As an antidote, counter-offer or supplement, Phelps maintains that the evolution of relationships—to other people, to oneself, to one's routines—is a better currency, and that

being acutely aware and respectful of the detailed exchanges in life equals wealth.

Phelps's exhibitions and projects—*Artist, Curator, Collector, Spy* (pointing out the economics and transparency of the art world, not to mention plainly admitting covetousness); *Trade Two* (establishing a barter system among artists, in a classic display of "sharing the wealth"); *Walking 9-5* (tracing accidental encounters in one's daily trek and incorporating rigor and determination into her agenda); *Integrating Sex into Everyday Life* (displaying a candid tally of mounting debt but also divulging an exceptional increase in frequency in her lovemaking, which certainly can be perceived as a wealth)—are all about tracking the progress of life.

Christine Hill, an artist and the proprietor of Volksboutique, an evolving space/artwork in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, is currently Professor of Modes, Trends and Public Appearance at the Bauhaus University in Germany.



Hill, Christine, "Artists on Artists: Christine Hill on Danica Phelps", Bomb, Spring 2005, No. 91, pp. 14-15