

## DANICA PHELPS

“I DRAW AS IF I CAN SEE THROUGH THINGS.”

Items—and how many of them—Phelps would have to sell to pay off her credit-card debt:

*Her most expensive drawings—8*

*Her most inexpensive drawings—480*

*Cups of soup—4000*

**A**t Danica Phelps's recent opening (LFL Gallery, New York), Phelps moved through the crowd in a pink beaded gown and horn-rimmed glasses, with a small Jack Russell terrier at her side. Phelps had moved her home into the gallery as part of her show's telltale (and ambitious) mission of “Integrating Sex into Everyday Life.” The occasion for her work's thematic shift toward the erotic was the artist's late-in-life revelation regarding sex and its efficacy. After a seven-year marriage to the first man she kissed, Phelps fell in love with her present partner, Debi, in 2002.

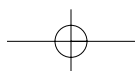
—Suzanne Snider

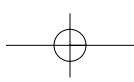
### I.

*The Gallery: The “rooms” are vaguely designated in the open*

*gallery space with furniture—a table and toaster mark the kitchen, bookshelves and a desk for the studio, a bed and wardrobe for the bedroom, a sofa for the living room. Despite the conceit of home, the undeniable focus of the show is the collection of drawings, which depict everything from bodies gorgeously entangled to a lone figure grocery shopping, along with Phelps's trademark: copious records of her daily expenditures, noted in units of both money and time.*

*During lunchtime, several friends stop by, along with a few artists, tourists, and committed gallery-goers. Artist Nicole Eisenman strolls in and sits on the sofa with Lucy the terrier before noting with some embarrassment that she's positioned beneath her own artwork. Another young artist with a shaved head pulls up a chair and grills Phelps. “Do you make love in the gallery?” she asks earnestly. When Phelps concedes that yes, she and Debi do make love at the LFL, the*





## *DMP*

8/13/03

Dear Family, Friends, and Colleagues,

I apologize about sending you a photocopied letter like this (and it's not even New Year's), but I've been really wrapped up in some big life changes without really staying in contact with a lot of you. Some people have sat with me through lots of tears, and others I just haven't had the opportunity to talk to. So, I wanted to write it all down so that I can be sure that I've given all the information to everyone who should know.

Well, first things first which is that part of why I haven't been around much is that I haven't been around much. I've been traveling a lot working on projects for a month at a time here and there, and it makes it hard to keep in touch with people (and the credit card companies). For example, I've walked a total of 680 miles since last September in 4 cities for different "Walking 9-5" projects.

When I have been home, I've been trying to figure out my personal life. There have been some revolutionary changes in my life since May of 2002, the biggest being that I have fallen head over heels in love with a woman. After having been married for 7 years to the first person I kissed at the age of 20, it's been quite a surprise to have a sexual awakening at the age of 32. I am so thankful to have been able to very thoughtfully and carefully transform my marriage into a strong friendship. So I've gained a really close friend.

I'm afraid that I've thought of myself as an asexual person all this time. I mean, there is certainly a lot more to life than sex, but I've discovered in this past year, that there's not much that's more fun when you're deeply in love! I think the main thing is that feeling this way about your partner can cut through a lot of bullshit. I can be so angry with Debi for some foolish thing, and if she just kisses me once, the anger starts to melt away. I think maybe sex is the magic that reminds us how much we love one another. But there has to be enough attraction to make you want to do it when you're pissed at each other! My God, I want to make love with Debi every time I lay my eyes on her.

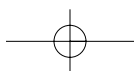
I was always a wanna-be lesbian. At Hampshire College, even with half my friends being lesbians, I didn't think I qualified, you know? I realize now, that wishing you could be a lesbian is not like wishing you could be tall which you literally can't change. Sometimes the changes are pretty involved (I'm so glad I didn't have kids), but WOW, it's worth it to be able to love a woman.

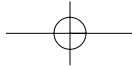
This has, of course, all manifested itself in my rather diary like drawings. A friend of mine once asked me why there wasn't any sex in my work, and I said, "Well, there isn't much sex in my life...". Now there is. I'm having a show in September called "Integrating Sex into Everyday Life" because that's what it's felt like this past year for me.

So please come by and see the show and say hi and let's catch up. I'll be living in the gallery for the month and I'll be there almost everyday, so you'll be pretty sure to catch me.

Danica

OK. All my best for you and I'm looking forward to hearing about what's been going on in your life.





woman says, “Awesome” and then inquires where Phelps showers. Phelps explains the sponge-bath method and points to the back of the gallery.

DANICA PHELPS: The most bizarre thing that has happened here [in the gallery] is that a nudist came in. He had called a few times before to ask if it was okay to come in, and—

THE BELIEVER: Did he announce himself as a nudist?

DP: Yeah, he called and said, “I’m a nudist. I’d like to see the show nude,” basically. I guess he was going to drive up in a car or something. He called three times. On Saturday morning, I heard a rustling in the foyer and I could tell he was there, undressing. He came in and he wanted something more than a hello. I could tell, because he was standing, waiting. He came into the space and [one of the gallery owners] said, “You have five minutes to be in the gallery and look at the show, and then you should put on your clothes and leave.” He stayed and looked for a while and then he put on his clothes and said, “You’ve been very gracious. Thank you.” The strange thing was that he was not a confident nudist at all.

BLVR: He was an apologetic nudist?

DP: Very insecure. A little not-very-sane. It would have been an interesting idea if he were confident. It’s odd that a nudist would be uncomfortable because you don’t have to be nude.

BLVR: Well, he certainly leveled the playing ground. Do you think he specifically sought out your show because there are drawings of you and your girlfriend having sex—nudity involved?

DP: Maybe he felt that if I was exposing myself then he could expose himself.

BLVR: That would gain him entry to a great number of museums and galleries worldwide. I find the idea of the apologetic nudist fascinating. Isn’t it sort of against the

philosophy to wear your clothes and then undress?

DP: Yes.

## II.

BLVR: Your artist’s statement was a very personal letter on monogrammed stationery... and what’s your middle name?

DP: Marie. And first of all, let me tell you, I actually used that letter to come out to my dad. I sent it to him. You know, I had been meaning to talk to him about it for a long time and he knew something was going on. But I finally realized that I just had to tell him in the easiest way possible or it wasn’t going to happen, and I just sent him the letter and he was really great. He wrote me back and told me how happy he was for me that I was happy.

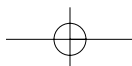
I met Debi nine years ago in Skowhegan [a residency program for artists in Maine] and we actually had an affair there. So, there weren’t the kind of boundaries there usually are between people you might have a crush on. When I saw Debi again after eight years, we were just kind of magnetically stuck together so we started seeing each other a lot. I talked to my husband about it immediately and it became part of the evolution of our relationship. I mean we really had to think about some things we hadn’t thought about before in our relationship.

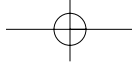
It was in the work but it was very kind of covert. And my work is so much my identity. I mean my honeymoon with my husband was my first show in New York, you know at the Jack Tilton Gallery.

Part of my drawing style is that I draw as if I can see through things, and I have to say that making love with Debi, there’s something... I don’t know how graphic I should be.

BLVR: You can be graphic.

DP: There’s something about being inside someone else with your hands that was so thrilling to me to draw. And I thought it had a really powerful connection with the





way that I draw and my work in general. I just really wanted to draw making love with Debi, for a long time before I started doing that. I didn't work on those drawings at all until I was absolutely out of my house with my husband.

I originally started drawing the mundane aspects of life—that had to do with money—and making love with Debi on the same sheets of paper. But then I got so into the drawings of making love that they ended up filling sheets of paper by themselves, so they're just kind of mounted in with the drawings of everyday life. One element of these drawings (and in all my drawings of the past) is that the lines don't pile up on one another and there's not a lot of erasing. The lines are pretty directly a record of the time that I'm spending working on the drawing, and I like you to see that. I should have a better way to say it but the line kind of records my hand moving through time and through space.

BLVR: I had a difference of opinion with a friend about your show. I explained you were living here and he said "Oh, it's a performance." And I said, "No, she's living there." And he said, "Yeah, it's a performance."

DP: I've had that discussion, too. I guess you have to talk about what performance is. There are some things that tend to define a performance. For me, that's generally an audience and a performer. I don't feel like I'm performing. Anyone who sits down in this chair is as much a part of it, but I don't think there's anything absolutely different about me being here when people are here. I guess since I'm the artist, I can just say, "It's not a performance."

BLVR: There are so many things we do alone that we never do around other people, so to that end, maybe we're all performing a little bit. I heard a sociologist argue that Amish people have lived up to their ideals because outsiders romanticize Amish people. The sociologist was arguing that the whole situation, ironically, may affect the community positively.

DP: By being in the public eye?

BLVR: Yes, and they're exposed to the ways in which outsiders see them, which is a sort of homespun and simplified fantasy containing lots of buggies and bonnets.

DP: Right, like they're seeing a mirror of themselves so they can adjust the way they want to be.

BLVR: It makes me wonder if we play ourselves better when other people are watching.

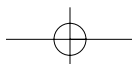
DP: Debi and I are moving in together and this involves moving about 120 boxes and a lot of furniture and a lot of paintings and a lot of clothes up four flights of stairs, coupled with the anxiety about the clash in our living styles, which has all put us really on edge. I've definitely noticed that my behavior is much better when there are people helping us move. We meet the neighbor, and I suddenly feel much more cheerful and like everything's going to be okay. Even in everyday life, you can be walking down the street by yourself, and when you see someone, they can change your whole day.

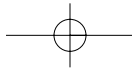
BLVR: There is a sense of endurance to the task of living here. I keep thinking this must be exhausting for you, but people stay in their homes all the time, with and without visitors.

DP: I feel a bit like Becky Smith, who runs the Bellwether Gallery in Brooklyn. Her living space is the back half and the gallery is the front half. I'm living and working and people are coming in constantly. I do feel tired around 3:00 p.m. (it used to happen more). After a rush of people, I would maybe go to the bathroom to wash my face and someone would ask me a question and I'd think, "I don't know if I can answer this." And there *are* two questions that everyone asks.

One of them I hate answering: Why are you living here? It's not just a simple answer. There are a lot of people who will ask me a question and then I answer them and they stay there looking up into the corner, absorbing it and trying to think of something else to ask me.

BLVR: I think Nicole Eisenman asked you if it was an





Danica Phelps, "Making Love With Debi," 2003, graphite on paper. Courtesy LFL Gallery.

extension of coming out. You said that wasn't the way you intended it.

DP: You know, I was with [my ex-husband] for twelve years and my being able to say I'm going to live in a gallery... it's really great that [Debi] comes here every night, but it's really an independent feeling. I would always go somewhere else and have that independent feeling, go to Spain or other places and do projects where I felt independent, but I've never really done that here, within a relationship, so that's been really good for me.

### III.

BLVR: What's the other question?

DP: The other question is much easier to answer but

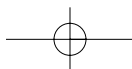
then you can't go back to working: What are the three stripes [on the drawings]?

BLVR: Now you have to answer that question.

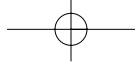
DP: There are lists and each list is one day and the stripes on the bottom of the list are how much money I spent on that day and one stripe equals one dollar. And the red is money I spend and there's sometimes green, which is money I earned. But then each small drawing is a thing I spent money on that day. For example, if I bought ice cream, there'd be three red lines on that drawing. The lists have all the lines from the drawings.

BLVR: So there's no record of your cumulative money? You'd have to add up...

DP: Yeah, actually I'm going to do that. I want to make







one big chart of the ebb and flow of money for this year. It goes way below zero. I'm definitely at least in \$12,000 of credit-card debt. But also, sometimes I have to borrow money from people. Sometimes, it's rather mysterious how I get by.

BLVR: I was interested in the descriptions of not only the approach to the show but also the value system by which you priced your own work.

DP: I show all of my drawings, regardless of whether they're good or not, because they're all part of my financial records. So instead of throwing out the bad ones, I would just write a price that would indicate how I felt about it, so the cheapest ones are \$25 and the most expensive ones are \$1600, just based on how much I like them. And size plays into it somewhat.

The value of money itself can change, which is so bizarre. I mean if you have \$6 and you spend \$3 for a cup of soup, that's half the money you have. But if you just got paid and you have \$600, \$3 is nothing, so that exact money—that \$3—has different meaning for you at different times.

BLVR: How does it work, your system of “generations” of drawings?

DP: I had a show at White Columns in 1998 that was a long scroll, about twenty feet long. It had drawings of everything I spent money on during a three-month period. People wanted to buy the drawings, which was amazing to me, so I cut them out, and there was an empty square left over. I thought, “Well, I don't want there to be a hole in the drawing so I'll trace the drawing and put it back in,” and that's the way I started the generations, and it's just kept going from that. Every time someone buys one of the generations, I've added a strip at the bottom of my second generation that tells them who bought it, when, and for how much money and where. And then that one is for sale. And on some of the drawings, there are four red dots, because people can buy the same drawing.

BLVR: If someone described you as someone who

makes art about sex and money, I'd picture something completely different than what's on these walls. It's interesting because even though they're abstract in the way you can see through things, and sometimes the figures are almost like smells or spirits, the show is narrative and explicit. You've got a whole new economy going on, not just with the money work. I think with sex, too.

DP: When you buy something, you give someone an amount of money and you expect an equal value of goods. And there's a balance there. And I feel that when making love is really good, it's so equal, it just feels like an equal exchange.

#### IV.

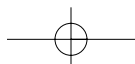
*In addition to her work as an artist, Danica opened a nursery school in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, in the fall of 1996, which she named Blue Dot. The school was located in a Reform Church, and expanded from two to thirty students by the time it closed in 1998. A pleased parent once told me she picked up her daughter at Blue Dot one afternoon only to find the children hammering the classroom's bookshelf together and painting it. Danica closed Blue Dot in order to commit to art full-time, and she returned in some ways to her initial interest in (arguably) performance-related work.*

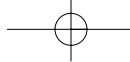
BLVR: What did your work look like in the beginning?

DP: Well, I didn't really draw for quite a while in college and grad school. The last time I made drawings was when I was a sophomore in college and I kind of made little drawing machines at that point. One of them was a wooden box—it had six sides that I covered inside with paper and then I would throw different drawing materials in there and shake it and then pull out the paper and that would be the drawing.

BLVR: What's another example?

DP: I made this kind of thing that's like a prayer wheel. It has a handle and has a circular tin on the top that has a lid. I would line the tin with paper and then hang things inside, like chalk, and spin it, and it would record the chalk spinning and hitting the paper. Before that,





I made pretty representational drawings. In grad school, I told you about the work I was making then—

BLVR: [*Shakes head*]

DP: It's kind of funny. I was making work about pornography. I was doing all these things with pornography like cutting them up into little squares and boiling them and dying clothes with them and turning them into pulp. I made a piece called "Hustler Pulp Beauty Treatment" and it was *Hustler* magazine all blended into a blender. Then I put the stuff on my face and it was a performance. That was all kind of sculptural in a way. I was bullheaded in college; I just made this work even though people were kind of asking me what exactly was I trying to say with this work: "Are you a sociologist or an artist?" But I wanted to make the work and I thought it was good and humorous. Every time I'm a visiting artist at a school, I tell students that the most important thing I learned in grad school was to make work regardless of what people are telling you, or what they're suggesting. And even if the information kind of seeps through you, eventually you're going to absorb it and it's going to come through as a change in your work, but I think it's an important thing to learn.

## V.

*In 2001, Danica started the walking project, walking as far as she could in eight hours, making one straight line in various directions from her home in Brooklyn. She did this project for twenty-eight days over three months, and viewed it as a "direct translation of time into space."*

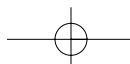
DP: I haven't found a really good way to manifest the walks in drawings as much as I have in these works. One of my favorite things to do is to go to a city I've never been to, and to have a big piece of paper and to try and draw a map while I'm walking. Compositionally, if I start at the lower left-hand corner and I want to go to the upper right-hand corner, I have to physically walk a great distance to get over there, especially if I want to be really intricately detailed over here. Then I've set the scale, and I have to walk and set the scale

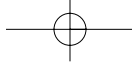
and it might take hours to get to the upper right-hand corner. I really like those because they manifest the walk better. And actually, that relates to these drawings with the direct link between the line and time and distance. You know, I want to tell you about this image from—did you see Ann Hamilton's performance with Meredith Monk?

BLVR: [*Shakes head*]

DP: The first image, I'll never forget. It was Ann Hamilton—she had a pencil with a camera on it, a video camera, and she had very simply tied a string to a huge long scroll of paper about that wide. The string went all the way to the back of the theater and someone was winding the string and pulling it so the piece of paper would travel under the pencil. The line was projected onto a wide screen on the back of the stage and it was so gorgeous and there was a microphone so you could hear the pencil and the paper. It was so beautiful.

BLVR: That partnership, the potential for the two of them—I'm sorry to hear the rest was disastrous.





DP: I related to that idea of the relationship between the line and time and space. But I think I'm more toward the Vito Acconci endurance kind of thing. Especially with the walking projects. It's really not about wandering around, observing the world. It's more about walking really fast in one direction, as fast as I can, and getting as far as I can in that amount of time.

## VI.

BLVR: What is the role of "daily practice" in your life? Clearly, record-keeping is a daily practice.

DP: I actually quite often forget or can't bring myself to write things down at the end of the day and I sometimes let it go for a couple of days and then I try to recall a few days before, so sometimes I resist that daily practice. And actually, I am more consistent with my habit of going for a walk every day, every morning in the park. Even if I'm incredibly busy, I still do that, and I think it's really important for my concentration in the studio. I think I get more done if I go for that walk in the morning. The only time I miss that is if I have an appointment in the morning that I have to go to. Or if [Debi's daughter] is staying here and I get up and play with her instead.

I write down everything I do every day in fifteen-minute increments but I don't own a watch, so it's totally estimated and not very accurate at all. So it's just a lens; it's not in perfect focus.

BLVR: It's fascinating for a fastidious record-keeper, though, not to have a watch. Is there a reason you don't have one?

DP: I don't like the feeling of it on my wrist and I don't really like to know what time it is. I mean I always just look at clocks when I see them. Sometimes, if Debi and I make love late at night, I'll look at the clock after we make love, and it could seem like I'm thinking of it so I can write it down on my schedule the next day (and maybe that is part of it), but it's actually so I know when I go to sleep, so I know I'm getting enough sleep. If I'm only getting six hours of

sleep that night, I'll have to make it up the next night or something. You kind of have to know how much sleep you're getting in order to know whether you're tired for a good reason.

BLVR: So it only counts if there's a reason you're tired? If you slept eight hours, and you were still tired, you'd think you got enough sleep, right? Those eight hours were accounted for.

DP: Yeah, and you'd have to think of something else, like maybe you didn't get enough food yesterday. I think the biggest reason people [set alarms] is because a lot of people would sleep longer than they need to. Some people have a hard time getting out of bed. I always set an alarm. But I want to know how much sleep I'm getting. That would be really weird not to know. And you can get tired from sleeping too much.

BLVR: I think the record-keeping takes me back to the Amish and this whole idea of an audience. Are you aware, even if it's a hypothetical audience when you're record-keeping, of how you'd like your schedule to look? Do you live by how you'd want your schedule to look later?

DP: Well, sometimes I feel self-conscious, if I haven't worked in the studio enough. People are going to be looking at this [*gestures at her artwork*] and they're going to know what a slacker I am. So I guess it keeps me honest in that way. But sometimes I just don't work enough and it's out there for everyone to see. Well, it was interesting when I was seeing Debi, I knew I would have to write it down in some way, and it keeps me honest quite literally. If I were to seize another woman without telling her, she would know very quickly if I wasn't honest.

The audience I'm thinking of (sometimes and not often) lightheartedly—I think after I'm gone that there'll be this funny record of a certain kind of artist who's not making that much money, trying to get by, at a certain time in history. But it also it gives me a sense of my time passing. I think that's why most people write things down, to make their lives more significant. ★

