

My name is Dahlia Bloomstone, and I am writing to apply for the **Whitney Independent Study Program**. I have developed a body of work rooted in video, which has evolved to encompass animation, video games, sculpture, code, film, sound, and performance. However, my focus for the past two years has been on video games. I attempt to address and reconcile representations of domesticity, joy, social value, and mutual aid, often through the lens of specific modes of affective labor. With humor, vulnerability, and political urgency, I survey the technologies, economies, and ecologies around the social value and social implications of sexual commerce and investigate the paradigm shifts in these economies. In my practice, I am especially interested in conjugating the surrealities of sex work, dumbness and cuteness as inquiries into the aesthetic preferences of patriarchy, the nonstop vigilance that comes with participating in US healthcare particularly without employer-sponsored coverage, the fraught space between online digital gaming culture and online sexual commodification, damask patterns, the psychological corporeal responses elicited by the digital visuality in video games, gold, examining the spectralization and parameterization of digital ecosystems through unintended game mechanics, using fishes as main characters, metaphors and as vehicles and activators to embed conversations of intertwined ecologies, and speaking to alternative systems of value and care. I am a relational fable-teller in dialogue with concurring socio-political and economic issues, and I am constantly renegotiating my relationship to these concepts within the panoptic moralizing discourse in certain domains.

At present, I am a Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) Art Resident and a New York Community Trust Van Lier Fellow at Theater Mitu. I just finished my time as a visiting teaching artist at the University of Texas-Austin. I taught Advanced Performance Art in the Transmedia area of the College of Fine Arts and developed the syllabus this semester focusing on video and expanded approaches in performance. I also served as a teaching assistant in the MFA in Studio Arts program at Hunter College, where I graduated in December 2022. I taught new media seminars and contributed to the programmatic development of the new media-focused curriculum. Additionally, as a Skowhegan fellow in 2023, I facilitated video game-building workshops. I earned my BFA from Bard College in 2018, where I developed my absolute fidelity to and passion for video art. After I graduated from Bard, I spent a year interning with Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), which I consider my second and most significant video art education.

My scholarship encompasses a range of new media projects, including *Push for Help*, a diaristic episodic 3D-animated video series, currently comprised of seven episodes, set in a money-driven fishtank simulator gentlemen's club, and each one visually, somatically, and narratively investigates different components of affective labor through the lens of both my own and my community's experiences with sex work, *SWer-NPC-Fable*, a blurry video performance filmed between my workplace and home, that is a renegotiation of personhood and the idiomatic phrases "becoming your work" and "taking your work home with you," and *Opulence*, a 35-minute short film following a dancer named Carp who is ethically and spatially overwhelmed by receiving thousands of free Walmart Returns packages to her small apartment. This Walmart situation did happen to me; I still have hundreds of Walmart reseller knockoff goods even after

bringing many of them to Skowhegan to donate to my cohort and installing them as free-to-take objects during my MFA thesis. I asked people to *take good care* of all of them. Gestures of care and acts of donation have been important to my practice. I have continuously looked to Felix Gonzales Torres, how death becomes a gift, and using that logic to interrupt the cellular universe of meticulously monetized exchange. It's me versus the excess that gets generated, breaking capital and disrupting economic circulation. Donation serves as another method to subvert sex work stereotypes and provides another avenue to address the moralizing that happens around sex work and the societal legitimacy of sex work as an ontological concern. I have constantly come back to Aesop's *The Miser and His Gold* when reflecting on these gestures.

Money-Driven FishTank Game, a playable video game I built, coded, and designed in Roblox Studio, is a game where the fish tank and the club converge into one labyrinth where getting home, past many kill-on-contact underwater creatures and a nearly impossible-to-get-away-from Shark that is the size of the virtual world is the goal, and is playable on all devices with a Roblox account. The avatar in this game is tired, coded to sit down constantly, and the player has to press the space bar to force her back up. The game is made more difficult by the day/night cycle: programmed to go through day/night every 15 seconds, and it can get hard to see at night. I build the scores for my games using various synthesizers, instruments like omnichords and MIDI keyboards, and controllers.

I build games in Roblox Studio, the popular children's platform, as it resonates with my research conceptually and visually due to its many possibilities for in-game glitches and its controversies related to strip clubs and sex clubs as they continue to appear on the platform despite constantly hiring moderators to get them deleted. My newest game, *An Ode to the Exit Sign*, thematically thinks through both game theory— I often reference Elizaveta Schneyderman's writing on the explicit nature of fatalities in games, media materialities, and their effects on corporeality— and the interpersonal vs. systemic issues sex workers face; the avatar walks through a long, damask and gold chandeliered hallway based on the one at the Ritz-Carlton (a client favorite) and a text-fable unfolds as the avatar keeps walking that reveals that the worker is done with trying to get her relationships to understand her work and marries her work instead, despite having to wear her wig that hurts her head the rest of her life. At the end of the game is a bug I haven't fixed: gold fishes clone and duplicate around her, follow her, and sometimes they clone too much. When this happens, she flies into the starry sky, stuck hanging there. But sometimes, they enclose her in a hug, leading to a red 70% opacity sign filling the screen and reads, "THE END, GOOD WORK AND LOVE HARD!" which kills the avatar and puts her back to the beginning of the game again.

The damask pattern began appearing in my work in 2021. This symmetrical pattern not only shows up in spaces where I've worked and currently work and continuously shows up in strip club video games but also has a deeper context in art history and within "whore" history. I initially became interested in using damask in my work not only for its various references and its historical role in transactional relationships but also as a way to think about what I was seeing when I was working, playing with and disturbing the

aesthetic of symmetry - of beauty. Within my work, the pattern is often animated by the lighting, warped by the fish tanks, and doubled by the bubbles. I want to give the pattern its own materiality, movement, and visibility. I do not want the pattern or the fish to feel under-theorized or under-cared for.

In Herman Hesse's novel *Narcissus and Goldmund*, the protagonist, Goldmund, discovers his humanity and empathy through fish. Goldmund is at a market; he looks at the fish offered for sale. *Why are people so numb and crude, so insensitive? Why didn't they see the mouths of these fish in pain, their deathly frightened eyes? These people saw nothing, knew nothing, nothing touched them.* I have continued to lean into this theme of someone shifting their ideology and figuring out how to respect and empathize with "the other" through fish. At Skowhegan, I began focusing on real and imagined fish care. One project involved a contractual agreement archiving visits to measure the pH of the local Wesserrunsett lake to ensure optimal conditions for the resident fish and sculptural work, where I "unhooked" the fish bait, gave them shoes, and spray painted them bright gold.

Much of my Skowhegan work was derived from thinking about a popular bachelor party banner sold on Amazon that reads in gold shining letters, "SHE SAID NO STRIPPERS." This 4-word statement creates a mythology, and within it, there is man, wife, and stripper. I was interested in the logic of it: STRIPPER = NOT WIFE, WIFE = NOT STRIPPER, BUT STRIPPER = POSSIBILITY OF WIFE? And that logic is embedded in much of my sculptural work; one sculpture is a golden wood chair entitled "SHE SAID NO SKRIPPERS." Online censorship of sex workers results in us losing the accounts that make up our livelihoods; unable to use the tag "STRIPPER" on TikTok, we can use "SKRIPPER." I am continuing this linguistic research by archiving and looking at images of strip club signage and ephemera from the pandemic. At ISP, I'll continue incorporating diverse methodologies and engaging with these critical intersections.