Jennifer Gilbert in conversation with disabled artist and sculptor Tony Heaton
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Jennifer: Right, I'm going to get started and if people start to join separately that's fine I'll admit them. So, I've just popped in the chat box the link to the live transcript on otter, which if you need please click on that link, I have checked, and this time it is working, which is a relief. Not sure what happened last time so apologies to anyone that needed that last time. So today, I will introduce our speaker in two seconds, I just thought I'd give a brief overview, to the talk. And just to explain that today we have two interpreters Siobhan and Alex. And if you need the interpreters, if you go to the go to their screen and go to the top right hand corner and the three little dots and you can pin them. If you need them. And then if you want to pop any questions in the chat box and we'll try and get to them as the talk goes on, David if you want to ask anything please do Raise your hand. So that I spot that. So today's talk is based on some research that I did earlier this year. That was funded by the Arts Council into things that disabled artists, saw that were available and think things that they felt were missing. And one of the things that kind of came up quite a lot was that they wanted to hear from other disabled artists that had had some form of success within the contemporary arts world. So today I am joined by Tony Heaton. If you want to say hi Tony.

Tony: Hi, Tony.

Jennifer: And we're going to talk through Tony's life, and his art. And as I said, any questions that pop up please do pop them in the chat box. There's images that's going to be on the screen. So we will try to describe some of those images for you for those that need it. And there are titles on the screen if you need the titles of the work as well. So without further ado, we will get started. So as I mentioned, I'm here with Tony, and as a way of introduction. Tony on your website it says, I am concerned with my own existence, and my interaction with both the material and non material world. In my interaction with other humans, I am almost always reminded that I'm perceived as a disabled person. This is manifest in their actions towards me and their interaction with me much of my work explores my personal analysis of these everyday interactions. Sometimes art making becomes self psychoanalysis. So let’s start at the beginning, can you tell us about your earliest memories of art, and when you thought about doing a career within.

Tony: Sure.Yeah, no, I can do that, I think, you know, your introduction I mean you know I'm interested in material objects. I'm also interested in ideas, and those thoughts and ideas, sort of combine in some kind of alchemy to end up making sculpture. I'm not sure how that happens. But it does, and I really enjoy it. And of course they say you've got seven seconds to make an impression. And the impression people always get from me is as a disabled person.

I'm a wheelchair rider. You can't hide that. And I would never want to you know, I'm very proud of my crip identity. And actually it's a rich source of material for me as a sculptor, and as an artist so it allows me to think and say things in a way that non-disabled people can't really say, and that's what that's all about. I guess as to my early life I mean my early memories, I always used to draw as a kid you know rainy days and winter. My mom and dad gave me a pile of paper and some pencils, and I'd sit, you know quietly in a corner somewhere. Drawing away it was a way to, you know, nullify the chaos that I normally created, you know, though, as I got older I continued to create chaos and do drawings, but I've always been interested in drawing and sort of the imagination, you know, exploring the imagination. I know I live next door to a wood, when I was a kid and I spent most of my childhood running wild in Woods whittling sticks with a pen knife. You know, lighting fires climbing trees, roasting potatoes in the fire and you know generally having a wild outdoor time. But it was a great way to explore the world. And it was quite free, you know, and I enjoyed that freedom. I guess I've always been curious as well. And, you know, that is amazing what adults will say in front of a child. When I sat quietly in the corner so my curiosity spilled out from there into the real world. I think probably my first real memories are when my old man took me to the Roman museum because he was interested in Roman history. And he also took me to the Harris Museum and Art Gallery in Preston, and I remember that being a real amazing opportunity, you know, apart from it being a very intimidating and incredible building, but to go in there and see paintings and sculpture for the very first time. You know I don't do drawings now, but you've got to remember Jennifer TV was black and white when I was a kid, you know actually seeing paintings in colour was pretty astonishing really, and I wanted to do that sort of stuff. And then later on I signed up for art classes with a guy called Steven seitan (?). He used to be the keeper of fine art at the Harris museum. And his way of lecturing and talking about art and artists really brought the subject alive. I really enjoyed the time that I spent in his classes, really. So that was my early sort of experience - I was making sculpture with a pen knife, I guess, and doing drawings on bits of paper.

Jennifer: Excellent. And then you move from that to going to university which I guess was a little more advanced than what you've just said. You went to Lancaster University where you studied visual art sculpture.

Tony: I did, but I didn't go immediately to Lancaster University. I first went to Southport College of Art. Which just preceded my spinal injury. So basically I was recovering from my spinal injury. And I really wanted to go the Harris Museum, sorry the Harris Art School, which was impressive them. And all my mates when you know my art mates went to the Harris art school, but it was totally inaccessible to a wheelchair user. So I sort of looked further afield, and I'd been in the spinal injuries unit at Southport. So I went to the art college at Southport. And I didn't really settle in, I didn't know anybody. And it was pretty weird experience and the principal had to give up his car parking space for my invalid carriage. And he also had to give

up his private toilet, because I couldn't actually get the wheelchair through the toilet door so he had to give up his own private toilet. So you can imagine how popular I was, as a sort of long hair scruffy student. but the greatest thing I learnt at Southport was even though it was only 20 miles from where I lived. The kids were incredibly rich, you know, the friends that I made, you know when you go back to their house it was like three storey house and they occupied the entire top floor, you know, and had their own bedrooms and guest rooms and their own bathroom and kitchen, it was kind of hang on what's going on here. I shared a bedroom with my younger brother. You know, even up until that point, everybody I knew was like me, you know they were working class people that lived on estates. And that was the world that I occupied. And then suddenly I saw this different world I guess in my naivety it was the world of class and privilege. I just never knew about it. So after Southport college I did a lot of random stuff - I was in interested in music and I went to Holland with a with a rock band, which was, you know, a great experience. I used to be a drummer before my accident. So was always interested in music, I started a record store. I did quite a lot of odd jobs. I trained to be a sign writer I painted signs. I did graphics I did all kinds of things. I made my sculpture but nobody was really interested in it. Because they would say well what's your formal qualification and of course I didn't have a formal qualification. And so that's when I decided to go to Lancaster University. It was much later it was in the mid to late 1980s I think. And as I say I basically went to play the game, nobody would take the work seriously without a formal arts qualification, so that's why did I it. I guess the lightbulb moment came on for me at Lancaster. The fellow in sculpture, a guy called Paul Hatton who is sadly no longer alive, used to take all the sculpture students out onto Morecambe Bay which is, for anybody that doesn't know morecombe, it's an amazing piece of landscape. it's beautiful and the water comes in really fast. Quite rocky, quite wild round there and we used to go on the beach and environmental law was very at the forefront, you know, Andy Goldsworthy was working there and a lot of artists, you know, Richard long people like that were making work. And so we were on the beach, and he said, you know what, I always know where you are, you can never escape me. I said well what do you mean, he said well, all those footprints over there could be any of the students, but your feet stick out and your crutches make all these little holes in the sand. So your pathway is very definite and different to everybody else's. I think that's quite interesting. And perhaps you should think about exploring that sculpturally. And so I did and that was the first piece of disability arts that I actually made, though I didn't realize at the time that it was a piece of disability arts. So yeah, that was Lancaster. That was the background.

Jennifer: Good. So if we touch really briefly now, so that we can mainly focus on your work, but I didn't want to miss out two big things in your life so these images we can see on screen now are of holton Lee. On the right, is a kind of bird's eye view looking down of what looks like a big field well big fields and a lake. And on the left, two new buildings that were built.

Tony: Well, yes. I was the first professional director. It was a brilliant idea by Tom and Lady faith Lees, who had quite a lot of land in rural Dorset, and they wanted to set something up and to cut a long story short, that combined four elements, disability, the environment, the arts and personal growth and spirituality. And I applied for the job. You know, Norman Tebbit said if you want a job, get on your bike so I went, I got my wheelchair I went 200 miles south to deepest Dorset, and that top image is not all of but quite a lot of the landscape. the lake you talk about is actually pool Harbor, and the sort of the reedbeds leading down to pull harbor there, which we managed, and quite a lot of land, and to the left which is out of camera out of photograph was quite a lot of woodlands. So i built lots of paths and we had wheelchair accessible buildings and all sorts of things. while I was there over the 10 years I set out a 10 year plan. And I wanted to build an art gallery, which is the top left picture which is called faith house gallery. It was a very beautiful. a very environmentally friendly building. It had red cedar walls on it that you can see and at the right hand side is the quiet room where you can just about see the trees and silver birch trees which made a circle in it. So it was a reflective space but it was also brilliant art space. And I showed artists like Tanya raabe webber in there and Sue Austin. I think her underwater wheelchair was shown for the first time, I think she was a student when she sent me her work. Rachel Gaston stayed there, and people like Julie McNamara used to come and sign dance collective used to perform there. And the art gallery called faith house won the best British building of 2002 in The Guardian newspaper which was quite an accolade because the planners refused the planning planning permission as they thought it was an ugly and awful building. That's another story. And the studios were a set of old pigs stys which we basically built these four or five studios around. We built these Northern Light pods on the roof of the studios, so that you could open the windows and at the far end which you can't see very well we built a fully accessible common room, kitchen and shower, so that when artists came on residencies they could be really self sufficient and work there, you know, any time of day or night. So it's quite a quite an exciting place to be able to build, you know, to decide on a 10 year plan and live the dream really. And of course I set up and NDACA there, which is the National Disability arts collection and archive and I started collecting work of disabled artists who exhibited with us. Because I wanted to fill the walls of all the rooms and all the buildings. I mean things you didn't see in the pictures there were holiday cottages there too. There was a residential building, and I wanted all the art on the walls to be worked by disabled artists. I wanted to give a subversive message that disabled people were creative and made brilliant work. And I also took the social model of disability with me to tell everyone and you know, it was a fantastic place and a fantastic opportunity.

Jennifer: And did you only showcase the work of disabled artists on the wall was that your main remit?

Tony: yes, pretty much, I sometimes showed allies of disabled people. And I showed work by one photographer who'd made some interesting work, and I showed some work by a

photographer who documented an organization, sort of quite an enlightened place where learning disabled people lived and worked. I curated a lot of exhibitions. I've missed loads of people out who'll shout at me if they ever find out that I didn't name check. But we showed some great work. I mean, it's a pity, it wasn't in London, you know, we've had massive audiences, but it was the first ever gallery dedicated to showing the work of disabled artists and giving residencies to disabled artists.

Jennifer: and from your 10 years at Holton Lee, you then went for 10 years as the CEO at shape Arts in london. So, for those that might not be aware what is shape arts?

Tony: Well I did 10 years as you said, and I felt you know as a development worker you kind of feel after a while you go round in circles. Oh, it's that time of year. Oh, we'll do that again. You know, and at some point for development work because you evaluate your life and where you want to go. And I worked in London quite a lot in all my jobs. I worked for the CIA before ultimately in radar, which became true Disability Rights UK. I'd always spent time in London, it had offices. I never actually lived to work there, and I knew shape because I used to be the chair of Northwest shape up in Manchester and Preston, so obviously knew about the organization. the job came up so I thought it was time to move on. I delivered the 10 year plan and had the NDACA project. I'd already commissioned an architect Sarah Wigglesworth to build the archive at Holton Lee, we'd raised a substantial amount of money and had £40,000 from the Arts Council towards it. And I in my naivety thought that hopefully they would just carry on and deliver the archive you know it was all there. It just needed to be rolled out to happen, but then they changed direction I mean it was my baby in many ways. And when I got settled in it at shape. I thought well maybe we should try and resurrect NDACA, and that's what you can see in the right hand picture. That's Alex the archivist. Who is the person you'd speak to if you ever get in touch with NDACA. The National Disability arts collection and archive I urge you to look at the website. I think there's about 3,500 objects on the website, and we partnered with the new university bucks. Because sign downs collective were working there. I know David from sign dance collective, he is David Bower a deaf actor, and Olivia and they are both dancers, actually, and they said we're working at bucks and that it's an amazing place. Why don't you approach them and see if they'd want to host the archive, they just built a fantastic library of books. So they very kindly gave us a part of the library to operate from and the actual archived objects are housed now in the library and the picture on the left is my shape picture. David is now the chief executive of shape, and I knew David from the past but he actually applied to deliver the NDACA project for me. And over three years. You know we raised a million quid and he did a very good job of making NDACA a reality. And he applied for my job. When I left shape and you know, it was very rigorous recruitment campaign but he did get it, and he's been a great chief executive since. And next in line is Yinka Shonibare, who is a shape patron. And again yinka worked for shape, way back when, it was his first real job in the arts, and I approached yinka when I started to work at shape said be lovely to have him as

a patron. And he's patron for the open, and that's Helen next to yinka, who won the shape open and that's her work behind her, and of course the fat geezer with a bald head in the wheelchair is me. So I think that was the last shape open before I moved into the role of shape chair, and David moved into the role of Chief Executive. my suit is rather more relaxed than David's suit. Because I'm moving into getting stuck into doing my art full time rather than whenever I can find five minutes to do it, really.

Jennifer: Excellent. So, just very briefly before we move on to your art. In 2013 you received an OBE for your services to the arts and the disability Arts Movement. You know, was this a shock to you? How did it make you feel?

Tony: Yeah, it was a shock. It was unexpected. I thought the letter was from the taxman. I've heard somebody else say this but it does look like a very formal and I thought oh my god it's a tax demand. Now, I thought I'd look at it when I'd got a bit more time to read it. So it sort of sat on the side for a few days and I finally got around to reading it. And I was I was actually speechless. And it's not often that I'm speechless, as anybody who knows me will tell you, shutting me up is the biggest problem, though I was totally speechless. You know I'm a working class northerner. I'm not part of the great and the good. But the great thing about it was, when I went to Buckingham Palace they parked me up in the Queen's picture gallery with the palace minder, and I was in there for quite a long time while they get everything sorted out. And everybody gets lined up I mean the Crips go in a different non-step entrance obviously. but I was in my element really, this amazing Rembrandt work. For me, you know, and the biggest kind of (?) Venice you've ever seen in your life, and the Queen was walk past these every day, you know, rushing through the palace like oh I don't have time to look at my art. but it was great, it really settled me down - It was fantastic. And it was good fun. I really enjoyed it. We all went to the Ritz afterwards and had high tea. It was very pleasant. But you know seriously, I think for shape, it was a good thing. It gives confidence to people who don't know you. And who don't know the organization very well, so I think it gives a bit of confidence I think you can possibly open some doors with it. And I think you know I think it was good for shape in that sense.

Jennifer: Do you think as a disabled person it changed people's opinions of you?

Tony: Um, you'd have to ask them. I don't think so. I think, I mean the sad thing for me is my mom and dad had already died so they didn't know that I got it. And I think my mom would have liked it. And my dad would have said, Oh OBE's are other buggers efforts, because actually that's quite true because I think it is. It is a lot of other buggers efforts, you know, one of my strategies as chief executive was to surround myself with people who are much better than me. Basically pointing them in the right direction and giving them lots of encouragement. And, you know, let them get on with it really so um so yeah other buggers efforts.

Jennifer: It's something you keep in your back pocket and pull out when you need to.

Tony: I guess when I'm feeling a bit pompous. When people ask me to sign up for things. And I always have a chuckle when you know when people who don't know when things like that pop up from the past. I had to go to the hospital the other day and he said he said Oh my name is Dr so and so. And I said, Well my name is Dr. He said medical? I said no no I'm not medical

Jennifer: right onto your art practice.

Tony: I thought I'd never ask.

Jennifer: The image on screen Tony if you could tell us what we could see so this is your shaken not stirred performance from 1992, can you talk about what we can see on the screen?

Tony: Yeah, the top picture is in the Attenborough Art Centre in Leicester, and it was an exhibition about disability rights, I can't actually remember the title, but it is a Pyramid of 1,760 red charity collecting cans. And in the picture below it in black and white, you may just be able to make out as the pyramids tumbles, that there is a prosthetic leg. It's sort of just at the top of the cans that haven't quite fallen over yet, but you can just see the bit where it actually fits on to the leg. You can't see the leg or the Doc Martin steel toe cap boot that's at the other end. And I made it for Euro day, which is ironic now we're being forced out of Europe, and it was funded by two amazing disability warriors, Sarah Scott who worked for the Disability Rights unit in the Arts Council back in the day, and Sean Vaizey who very sadly died recently, who was the editor of disability Arts in London magazine, and was involved in older London disability arts forum. And they funded it and it cost a hell of a lot of money because the people who made the charity cans wouldn't sell them me at a reduced price or wouldn't give me them or lend them me. They sold me them at top dollar. it tells you all you need to know about charity. Really, the people who saw it then said, we've got the press conference for block telethon, which was for anybody that doesn't know about block telethon is, it was on the news quite recently for the 25 years of DDA coverage that telethon was this awful begging TV program which went on for hours, where D list celebrities begged on behalf of disabled people for money. we said it was demeaning, and that it really was I guess, offensive really and oppressive for disabled people and shouldn't be on TV. And so I constructed the pyramid in the diorama. whilst the press conference, then took place so the pyramid was there, and the leg was just stood at the side of it with the shoe a Doc 14 hole steel toe cap exposed steel. And as the TVs were rolling and the thing was happening. I rolled past picked up the leg and threw it into this pyramid which fell to the ground, and it made a hell of a noise because the diorama has got a marble floor and really high ceilings, and actually the noise shocked me and people jumped out of their seats. it was really one of those moments so it ended up on the TV and in

the newspapers and stuff. And it was called shaken not stirred, which is after James famous Martini, of course, thought it was about shaking cans but not staring consciences to do anything about the oppression of disabled people - really a heady days in the struggle back there in the 1990s.

Jennifer: And so another piece from back then I guess is great britain from a wheelchair that we can now see on the screen.

Tony: Yeah. Um, I made that, because a curator called Catherine Walsh was developing an exhibition called unleashed at the laing Gallery in Newcastle. I think it was one of the very first exhibitions, showing the work of disabled artists, and certainly in a mainstream space like the Laing Art Gallery. And she came to look at some of my work in my studio then, as I was showing her some work in my ideas she was asking about what sort of stuff I got planned. and I got this really rough sketch in an ideas book. I said this probably going to be called great Britain from a wheelchair and is made out of two ex ministry vessel wheelchairs if I ever get around to making it. And she said i'd love it. Will you be able to make it in time for the show. So I went to the alac unit at Preston hospital, the artificial limb centre, as it was then called and I just took two condemned wheelchairs from them, took them to bits, and reassembled them in the studio and I came up with this, which people either see is an outline map of Great Britain or they just see a lot of jumbled bits and bobs of wheelchairs, really. But she described it in her writing about it as an allegory for the decline of the welfare state, and of a country whose government has resisted all attempts to recognize the discrimination faced by disabled people. And who were actually implementing changes that continue to cause oppression. And of course the sculpture, you can't really see it, but it hangs from a symbolic thread. And I made that back in 1994, 26 years ago, and now I kind of feel like country's largely been declining ever since. I mean witness today's government and the collateral damage that they've inflicted on disabled people as a result of, you know, the last 12 years of austerity and policy decisions where you know we face the brunt of that as disabled people. we're the sixth richest nation in the world, apparently, but we won't look after our people. Anyway, enough politics

Jennifer: so you said that this lady came to your studio. Could you say at what stage, do you think that people became more known of you as an artist, you know, to come and visit you and visit your work - was there a moment or something that happened, that kind of made people more aware of you?

Tony: Well I guess the piece that we've just looked at shaken not stirred was featured in quite a lot of things at the time. And of course, really, back in the day there was just the, the disability magazine you know from disability Arts in London, and you've got to think back then there was no social media or anything. there's a full collection of that magazine in the NDACA collection at bucks University. So it did features and that piece was covered in the observer

newspaper, The Guardian newspaper, it was on BBC TV, and David Hevey actually made a film of me. my studio was flipping Grange over sands where I lived at the time. And he rolled up in his leather jacket with a van and a film crew and he said right pile all heaton's sculptures in the van and let's go off. So it was absolutely freezing, he would say that was good, but we have to do that again in like 14 takes, and it started snowing. It was really windy. people didn't think it was real they thought it was a stage set – there was snow going sideways and me freezing. And I don't know where the film is now, so there was lots of that sort of stuff going on. Okay, so I guess if you knew about disability arts you'd know where to look for stuff.

Jennifer: So, moving on to your gold lame, which obviously did not start life gold so here we can see you with a blue car in front of you, can you tell us about this.

Tony: Yes, blue arms as well - I didn't work in a garage folks, honestly. Um, well this started at the DadaFest in 2014, and dadafest in collaboration with the bluecoat Gallery Liverpool, and they commissioned the artists aaron Williamson, to curate an exhibition for Dadafest. And it was called the art of the lived experience (?). And I think at the heart of the idea of Aaron's was the idea of transmutation, and the philosophical tradition of alchemy. And I'd made a piece before this called squareinthecircle?, which was which was a bit of a play. Oh yeah, there it is. So squareinthecircle? was a play on this idea of not being trying to turn a square into a circle which was deemed to be impossible, you know, mathematically impossible. So I decided to make a stone sculpture, this is 15 tons of Portland stone. And I don't know if you can see it very well on the image, but I basically etched a square into the top of the five blocks. And then I carved a circle, an arc. So each of the five pieces has a bit of an arc of a circle and a bit of a square. But when you combine the five pieces it makes your eye and your brain work together to sort of see it as a whole circle and a whole square. It was exhibited at the Portsmouth School of Architecture, in a square, so you can see the flagstones there. I think they're about two foot or three foot square. And they're grey, but I designed a white circle of stone on the floor which the circle sits on, and a black square in the middle of black flag stones. And then I made it at Portland quarry down in Dorset. And we delivered it to Portsmouth and the night before we were delivering it, I suddenly realised that I'd never actually seen the five together. You've got to imagine that big pieces of stone that come up to about my chest as a wheelchair user. And part of the idea is that I as a wheelchair user cannot get to the middle. You know the center of power. That's the sort of symbolic thing behind it. And of course it's outside the school of architecture and architects are renowned for forgetting to build access into their buildings, so it was a bit about that too. Well, it was a lot about that really. And so, I can't see from the side I just see blank walls. I just see blank barriers all the way around it, as I push around it, no way to get into it and no way to see what's actually carved into it.

Jennifer: tony how tall is each block?

Tony: It comes up to about my chest sat down, so they were probably about metre high something like that. It takes up about 15 feet across, and it weighs about 15 and a half tons, so it's a big piece, and they all stand on a smaller piece of stone so they're elevated off the floor. But there's a tall building so if you go up the tall building look out of it. You can see down on it like this. And that's where this photograph is being taken from, but I'd never seen the five pieces together, and I suddenly was terrified that they wouldn't line up. And if they did line up they might not line up on the drawings for the square, you know, did the guys put the circle in the right place or put square in the right place. So I was really scared because it would have looked dreadful if it didn't line up you know I mean you may think it's dreadful now but there we go. Anyway, that's a side story. So to go back to Aaron Williamson. So he invited me to make a piece, he said, What would you like to make and I'll commission you. We've got X amount of money. What would you like to do and I said well I'm quite interested in this idea of alchemy and turning you know maybe thought about turning base metal into gold. Or what's the base metal. Well you know I think about my transmission as a human. And I transmuted from a baker into a wheelchair user, you know, and I swapped my rec motorbike for an invalid carriage. That was my next set of wheels, and we went off to the pub to discuss what I might make. And I think after about two or three pints we come up with this bad idea of buying an invalid carriage off the internet because of course the invalid carriage doesn't exist anymore they took it out of circulation.

Jennifer: Tony can you explain what an invalid carriage is for anyone that doesn't know please?

Tony: An invalid carriage is a three wheeled fiberglass car, if you go back to the slide before you can see it better. they were all painted this blue, which we used to call spaz blue everybody called spaz blue. And they are basically three Wheelers, they went about 45 miles an hour, it had a wheel at the front. It had one seat. And you got it from the NHS. It was a prosthetic, it was not seen as a car. It was seen as a means of transport you know it's like a buggy or a wheelchair in many ways, but it just had one seat so it assumed that you had no lovers or family or anything you know just the solitary cripple chugging along at 45 miles an hour, really. And there were lethally dangerous you know we used to think that they invented them purely and simply to exterminate all disabled people you know because people would crash them all over the place. Anyway, they are out of service, but I tracked one down by the good old Internet, and we shipped it back up north, it was in a terrible state. And you can see me sanding it down, getting it ready for paint. So what I said to Aaron is I'm going to paint it gold, we're going to hang it from the ceiling in the bluecoat Gallery, and it's gonna be like a spaceship. It's amazing what you think of when you've had a few pints bitter isn't it. And he said yeah great go away here's the money. So, I just got cracking, and the small pictures are of gold lame hanging. As it hangs down as you can see in the bottom picture with the lights and the indicators flashing and the top picture shows the feed much better actually. I think it's

three or four storey's high in the bluecoat Gallery. And they had to put a roll steel joist and rsj (?), which we just about see at the top so it cost huge amounts of money actually, I think we went massively over budget, but they basically got to put a new beam in up there to hang the car, you can just see the chains hanging down that I hung it from. And you can see a little person at the bottom looking up, and the gap is where at each floor where the lift comes out. There's this gap where you can look down into the void. And it meant it was great really because you can see it from the top, and from the middle and from the bottom. And the picture on the left is from when it finished at the bluecoat Gallery. It then got shipped to America to Detroit, Michigan, where it was exhibited. it costs a lot of money to ship it across to the states but apparently the mayor said, Hey, we're Detroit we're Motor City and we're gonna have this lame gold car. What the hell, so they shipped it over to the states which was great and it got shown in a couple of the contemporary art galleries in Michigan. And then it came back to England and then it went to the Attenborough Art Centre. And then when I left London and moved back up north. Somebody told me about this new initiative for the Liverpool plinth, which was kind of moulded around the London Trafalgar Square plinth. And I proposed gold lame for it. And they shortlisted me and then they interviewed me and then they selected it so it was the first piece of sculpture on the Liverpool plinth and it was up there for a year which is I think where you saw it.

Jennifer: I did, it was great raining when I saw it.

Tony: Yeah, well it's the North it always rains. So my strap line for that is you know from blue to gold, and from lame to lame. Yeah, something like that. It's up in Glasgow at the moment if you want to see it it's that Riverside Art Centre. No, the riverside Museum in Glasgow,

Jennifer: Little plug there Tony!

Tony: got to do a bit of a plug.

Jennifer: So this photo is from 2012, when you were commissioned to create a work outside the channel 4 building, so briefly Tony because time is flying?

Tony: Basically, yes that's channel 4 Paralympic Games. They put a callout for disabled artists to create something to dress the big four. So this is the four that you see on your TV screens, that sort of whizzes round and becomes a four. And my proposal was to basically turn it into the wheelchair logo you know the ubiquitous stick figure with a wheel that blue badges are made out of. And what I wanted to do was more fit into the disc mobilus, which is the sculptor Myron I think 450 BC, people will know the bronze marble carving of Myron (?) the discus thrower. The beautiful sculpture. So it's a discus thrower in a wheelchair, which is a four so there's a gold, silver and bronze uprights stainless steel in the body and the wheel is a

stainless steel but he's got two neons which you can see - this is a obviously a nighttime picture as you can see the car lights zipping past it. It's about 55 feet tall so it is quite big. And the discus is a polypropylene discus. An obscured discus and it's filled with I can't remember how many LED lights, and it's lit from above and Channel Four is a four story building so you can get a sense of the scale of it. And that's it at night. It's called monument to the unintended performer. I didn't call it that till I knew I got the job. And it was a done deal because I thought it was quite a contentious title. And the idea is that disabled people who stood out in the street, they might not want to be stared at, so they become unintended performers you know getting on a bus or walking down the street with a guide dog or a white cane or whatever. And of course, Paralympians want to be looked at, you know, they want to. They want to perform, there are athletes. So it was that, that sort of paradox really. moving on.

Jennifer: moving on to neon works here, one called tragic brave and one called raspberry ripple, which is the grundy art gallery has now acquired. So why neon, and what's the message behind these works that you're trying to share?

Tony: Okay, well I did neon in 2012, and I really liked it, there were big them circles. And I like to play around with text, some of my early works at text works. I made a carving called split many years ago which, you know, which is on my website. I've done lots of text based works, and tragic brave is - if you ever read about disabled people in the press, were either described as tragic, you know we've had this awful accident or something that's before us, or we're really brave, you know, we've crawled around the London Marathon or something, you know, so we were never just ordinary folks getting on with our lives. We are always tragic or brave and if you don't believe me, just go through some press cuttings, and you'll find tragic or brave. so I juxtaposed them in this cruciform shape. And so I just use the A that links tragic and brave in the middle. So it's just the polarity of how people see us and see our lives. And that's nice somebody said they related tragic brave, you know, a lot of these words I hope will relate to disabled people as well as non-disabled people

Jennifer: and tragic brave, just as a short description is more like outlined bubble writing almost line forms in neon, that's kind of purples, pinks, corals and kind of Bluey greeny colour.

Tony: Yes the colours move down exactly as you describe it. It's a very 70s hippie typeface, you know it's a quite stylized typeface, and then raspberry ripple is again a cruciform. It's in, can I say nipple pink I probably can't, it's the kind of raspberry you get on top of your ice cream pink. So it's sexy. You know, the lettering it's very Blackpool and raspberry ripple is rhyming slang for cripple, but you see a raspberry and it seem pinks and is kind of juicy and all that. But raspberries got a p in it, ripples got two p's in it, so where this cruciform meets in the centre, what I've done is left a P out of raspberry because it's a silent p, so you don't say it, and three P's seemed to be a crowd. So there's a deficit and again Crips will know about the deficit

model. And so I left the P and people who are really pedantic will say, oh look he spelt it wrong, which is great. And people don't get it, or get left out on purpose. Any balance is up of course when you leave it out in there. It would look weird wouldn't it with ripple having three p's in the middle of it, too. So it's playing with language and it's playing with meaning.

Jennifer: I remember talking to you about this piece a few years ago and you said it went to the Southbank Centre. And you've just explained that it rhymes with cripple and you said that when the Southbank Centre showed this, they kind of altered your use of language and how you describe this piece?

Tony: Yeah, I made this piece when I did my residency at the art house in Wakefield, and that's where I got it made by Neon works (?) with brilliant people in Wakefield. And this was shown as a light piece on the side of the Southbank Centre and it wasn't the Southbank Centre, it was the commissioners. I think they were really nervous about my text, and I said something like, you know I liken cripple to the N word in the sense that it's forbidden. And yet is full of power in association. And I just think it scared the hell out of them really, so they cut my text, even though I was well within the word count for the catalogue. I didn't see the copy. So, fair enough. I mean, you know, they made a decision on it. If you want to read the text it's on my website anyway. And as you said, it's been purchased by the grundy Art Gallery in Blackpool for their permanent collection of neon, so thank you Grundy, and it's on exhibition actually it's been on exhibition in and out of lockdown I think it finishes quite soon, but there's a neon show called the lights and my bed fellow is Tracey emin. I'd like to go around Blackpool with Tracey.

Jennifer: Someone's asked an interesting question which I'm sure you have a lot to say on saying that they're interested in your use of language. So you use words like cripple and invalid. And they've asked do you use these words in a way to provoke a reaction?

Tony: Simply, Yes. it's in the same way I talked about the N word briefly then, I think it's the same with black singers black writers rap music. we can take ownership as disabled people of words that we say, that other people can't use. So if I'm talking to another politically aware, friend of mine who's disabled, you know, we might say come on your crip, you know, it's your turn to get the beer in or whatever, It's our language and we can own it, but it's language that other people wouldn't use because it is offensive to be quite radically offensive. But I think it can open up a dialogue. I mean, it might shut the dialogue down as well so it's powerful. In that sense. I think it created a dialogue with the curators of the Southbank work. Definitely. But they didn't want to use it just as they wouldn't use the N word, if a rap artist was wanting their lyrics written I guess - I don't know, maybe. Yeah, but yeah I think reclaiming our language and reclaiming our identities, you know, enough people speak up for disabled people whether we want them to or not. And we have to speak up for ourselves and that's what and NDACA is all

about. It's about us being in control of our own destiny and that's what the social model is about.

Jennifer: Sarah Carpenter's just said we need to reclaim the words like nuts crazy and insane as well.

Tony: Well, we probably do yeah I mean, maybe. Let's have the discussion.

Jennifer: Right Tony, this is carrera where you just find yourself going most years when COVID is not happening. You want to tell us about Carrera and the marble work?

Tony: Yes this is a place up in the Carrera mountains where I work, my studio is to the right of that picture on the left. So you can see a little white tent. And you can see a lot of marble stacked up outside and there's a parked car on the side of it. And behind it there's a crane and up at the top, beyond is the Marvel mountains. And these are the lower mountains. To the left is huge mountains about another three or four kilometers, but where the real quarries are. This about halfway between the tops of the quarries and the beach at Carrera, and the picture on the right is me in the studio working on a piece that's quite big, it's got five figures in it. It's called you laugh. And it's you laugh at me because I'm different. I laugh at you because you're all the same. So the title's you laugh and the figure in the middle, has got his back to us so you can see the cheeks of his bottom. And there's two fingers to the left, two figures to the right and the figure in the middle facing the wrong way sat on a bench. I happen to be in my subversive t-shirt working. Yeah, I like working in marble. I've been working in marble for about 15-18 years. This is another piece of marble called Sweet meeting again carved out of statuary marble again playing with Words, everybody looks at this and go oh it's a big polo mint and of course it's not. He doesn't say Polo it says loop. But what you see isn't always what you get. And that's the subliminal disabled person's message you know what you see, isn't always what you get.

Jennifer: And this photo is like you said it looks like a big Polo. A big circle, 3d, and then raised off the top of it is the word loop twice with a dot between each word.

Tony: Yeah, just like a polo if you get a polo out it says Polo twice exactly like that. It's made exactly to scale I can't remember what scale up it is, but it is exactly the scale.
This is Portland stone, it's called five pillars. And it was this year when the Beveridge report of 4,475 years of Beveridge, and he said these are the five pillars that we need to get rid of: want, disease, squalor, idleness and ignorance. And I had this broken piece of Portland stone in my studio I didn't know what to do with it. So it was broken exactly as you see it. And I decided to carve those five words into it, so it looked like it had been broken off. So it's the wrong way

round it looks like it's broken but actually that's how it was when I carved the words into it. Am I making sense?

Jennifer: yeah

Tony: The words are incomplete and they look like they've been broken off, but actually I designed it like that, but it's about the fact that we've never got rid of those five. Those five dreadful things in the sixth richest country in the world, they're still with us, you know.

Jennifer: and what do the five words say Tony?

Tony: they say want disease squalor idleness ignorance. And that's what Beveridge said - they're the five things that are plaguing this country and we need to rid ourselves of them if we want to be a civilized nation. That didn't happen did it, 75 years later. Onwards

Jennifer: right Tony last slide.

Tony: Okay, good.

Jennifer: We are just at our time so that's good, so we'll just go slightly over. So my last question to you is, for others with disabilities who are emerging artists, or those who have been plugging away for a while, with no luck cracking the art world, is there any words of advice that you would offer or top tips that you've learnt along the way that you feel is good for you to share?

Tony: Well never take advice off me. I never tried to give advice. My advice to myself has probably always been dreadful. I don't know if it is random and chance in the broad sense isn't it. I would say to all disabled people you need to understand the social model of disability as a fundamental emancipatory tool, you know, it helps us to understand, disability as a social construct, and it helps us to identify barriers to inclusion. And I think when you understand it, it can give you confidence to be assertive around your own access requirements. So that you know that will be some advice and if you want to make money don't go into art, you know, unless you've got the Bank of mom and dad behind you. And, it's a tough thing, you need the networks, I guess, and you need to be resilient because every time you get a gig you'll get 99 rejection letters, or you won't get any letter at all. You just get an ominous silence and sort of people over the chiasm into the void. You know I'd say make because you're curious about the world and that you've got a restless desire to make things, and it becomes an art you know it is an outlet then for some of your ideas, your experiments. You know I think the arts are a selfish pursuit really and the world already overflows with things that we don't really need. So, and I

think do your work to help you understand yourself, and understand the world. And the objects that you know, it takes us back to where we started Jennifer, I guess, doesn't it.

Jennifer: And like you said like for every opportunity that you get like the image on the left shows your residency last year at the art house in Wakefield, you get 99 rejections from other things that you've applied.

Tony: Yeah, I think everybody does. You know funding applications. My advice to anybody starting out, is keep your rejection letters and use them to decorate your toilet bathroom with, paste them on the wall, you know, give everybody a smile. On the right hand side is that a bronze piece that I just made. So that's my most recent bronze cast.

Jennifer: Pippa has just asked, Did you find that your qualification helped you because she said she was surprised when you said your work wasn't taken seriously so do you think this qualification helped?

Tony: I think it does Pippa, actually, if you go to shows, I'm trying to think of I don't really want to name names, but let's say the jerwood sculpture prize. If you go and look at the jerwood sculpture prize, you will find that everybody's CV says that they went to the Royal College of Art, or, you know, the Slade or one of the London schools of art, and I don't want to cast aspersions, you know that there's a sort of background that says you know here is somebody who has had privilege. You know, when you look at their education they may just be brilliant who knows. But you know, something in a prize like that, where the artist was well this person, you know, doesn't have a qualification didn't went to this school didn't have that school. And it's very rare you see that. I think curators and people that select work for exhibitions rely on people's track record, as well as the work. And I think, you know, being cynical for a second about the modern world. You know, there's a lot of art that you know leaves me scratching my head I'm sure my art leaves a lot of people scratching their head too. I'm not being dismissive in any way, but I think you need all the clues you can get to try and make a decision about work that you're going to give prizes to, and whether we like it or not I think that people do look at qualifications and do look at which schools you went to.

Jennifer: Shouldn’t we be moving away from that model Tony and just look at the work and not looking at the education

Tony: I think so, but, you know, most of the Prime Ministers of this country went to eton and, you know, there's no way of getting away from that, you know, and it's what counts. Well the shape open’s like that, you know, if you put a work into the shape open, the people that select that, look at the work you know they look at the work, and that's what the decisions are made

on. We don't see people's names. We don't know anything about people when the decisions are made and that's the best way to do it.

Jennifer: I think more of that needs to happen as well as being less reliant on qualifications and word of mouth, and more going out there and seeing what's out there firsthand.

Tony: I'd love to say that to people who you know the people who like I'm not picking on the jerwood prize, it was just the first thing that came to mind. And obviously I've been rejected by the jerwood, which is why they're in my mind, but the jerwood sculpture prize, I'd love to say, why don't you just look at the images and select five winners, and then look at all the documentation and pick five winners and see if they're the same. I think it'd be a lovely experiment, actually, it, it would take some guts, I think, for people to do that.

Jennifer: I'm gonna ask one last question that was asked, because I realise people might want to go and eat some food.

Tony: Oh, you mean you'd rather have food than me.

Jennifer: Aiden's asked, how can you improve the chances of getting that first big gig and creating a sustainable creative career?

Tony: Ah, well it's the million dollar question

Jennifer: It is a very good question

Tony: it's impossible to know how to get into that place. You know, I mean i can't go back and go to Oxford or Cambridge, or go further back and get a mum and dad to be multimillionaires who know the director of the Tate Gallery or, you know, went to school with them, you know. I am being cynical but I think, you know, it really helps. For those people, you know, well I mean look at art out there in the public realm and then look at people's backgrounds and it tells you time and time again, you know these artists are largely from privileged places. And they went to the right schools, they've got the Bank of mom and dad behind them, and they get the breaks because their mates are the curators and gallerists, you know, jay Joplin didn't go to my comprehensive school with me. You know Joplin that the owner of the white cube galleries. I don't know how you break into their world. I found it impossible really, you make the best work you can make, you apply for things, you enter things. And you do the best you can, you know, it's, I have seen it from the other side of the fence a bit when we've into you know when we did the Adam Reynolds bursary. But again, the galleries had a very strong voice in the selection for Adam Reynolds and they take a lot into consideration. You know, and it is the luck of the drawer whatever that gallery likes is what they're going to go with and whatever fits their

program is what they're going to go with. And you can't pretend that well you can do a little bit of background but you can't really preempt it. You know, I've been trying to get work into the tate for years you know every time I see nick serota I say Nick when you getting a piece of mine. And he just says hello Tony How you doing, haha. Ditto the British Council ditto the Arts Council. You know, they either don't like us disabled artists, or they don't like our work or they don't want our work up there, but I don't know, you know. Maybe I am being hard on them and cynical but i think disability arts is a real thing. It's a real movement, it changed the law. And it's a powerful social movement, and I think people should be proud of that non disabled people as well as disabled people and I think they should show our art, you know, there are just started to show more women, you know, in art galleries. And, you know, women make up the majority of the population. There's some fantastic women artists and there always has been. So again, they get overlooked. I hope that's changing. You know people at the top, there's a lot more women at the top. Now, I don't think there's a lot more disabled people at the top, you know when you boil it down it's about power and rank. We don't have a lot of power, we don't have a lot of rank. And I think, you know, until that starts to change, until we start to be in positions of power, then it won't change until we can get people to understand what our works about, but we could do that by getting work in the British Council collection and the Arts Council collection and get work shown in some of these major galleries, you know if they got the guts to show it, and let's show it, you know.

Jennifer: And on that note, Tony, we will end the discussion
So thank you for everyone coming today and for listening and I hope you've all got something out of it, Tony is a very political. He may say things that may cause offence. But everyone is entitled to their own opinion. Yeah, people will agree or disagree with what you say.

Tony: you should have put a warning on Jennifer really

Jennifer: It is about being totally respectful and everyone is allowed to have their own opinion of things

Tony: I think so and if anybody's got any questions that I've not answered I'm really very happy if you want to send me questions, I'm happy to write responses to questions if people want. If people haven't had a chance to have their questions answered.

Jennifer: Tony is on social media so you can bombard him with hate mail! ha

Tony: Yeah. Thanks for telling people that.

Jennifer: As Tony said he's obviously very welcome to any questions you might have for him and you'll find his contact details on his website. So all that's left to say is thank you to Alex and siobhan, the interpreters today. Thank you to Tony.

Tony: Yes, thank you, Jennifer

Jennifer: Thanks to Arts Council for funding this series of talks that I'm doing. And I hope everyone has a wonderful evening.

Tony: Thanks a lot, Jennifer. Bye.