

Transcript of Interview with Tony by Kit Heintzman

Interviewee: Tony

Interviewer: Kit Heintzman

Date: 10/14/2022

Location (Interviewee): New Haven, Connecticut

(Interviewer): Unknown

Transcribed by: Kylee Mamon

Some of the things we discussed include: Organizing work with Asian migrants in the USA as shaping one's own understanding of position as a migrant; permanent transience as a migrant, the pandemic as permanent transience. Hearing about the pandemic through Weibo in December 2019, then traveling in Europe, and anticipating COVID-19 hitting the USA. Awareness that the American government would not be able to keep COVID-19 under control because Americans won't be controlled. Having experienced SARS in elementary school in China. Feeling lucky to not be living under Chinese authoritarianism when COVID continued. Having come out to parents the summer before the pandemic; frequent long-distance communication with family. Taking a pause from hooking up early in the pandemic; working as an escort. Father working a surgeon in China; minimal contact with the healthcare system because of at home available treatment growing up. Having relatively sufficient health insurance for a healthy young student in the USA; doctors prying about PrEP, STI testing, etc. Rearranging the home environment when roommates left; moving during the pandemic. Hosting BLM protestors who needed shelter in summer 2020 once Brooklyn Bridge was blocked. Changing artistic plans for undergraduate thesis, moving from making physical models to online design work. Zoom graduation, parents could not watch the YouTube stream because the platform is blocked in China. Father unable to travel home from the hospital during the pandemic to prevent the spread, staying at the hospital for more than a month. Starting a relationship in January 2021, being in a pandemic couple; catching COVID together during the Chinese New Year. Living in Elmhurst, NY and having access to home foods. Exploring gender; partner's transition. Bodies remembering trauma, whether or not one decides to process it; access to therapy/psychoanalysis. Working with an immunocompromised abolitionist activist colleague who cannot safely attend all events. COVID fog; how hard it was to see things, the uncertainty and instability about what we were/are doing. Literacy, Language access, internet access, phone access and equity.

Kit Heintzman 00:02

Hello, would you please state your name, the date, the time, and your location?

Tony 00:09

My name is Tony, and it is 1:21pm, October 14, and I'm currently in New Haven, Connecticut, United States.

Kit Heintzman 00:19

And the year is 2022.

Tony 00:21

The year is 2022.

Kit Heintzman 00:23

And do you consent to having this interview recorded, digitally uploaded, and publicly released under a Creative Commons License attribution noncommercial Share-alike?

Tony 00:33

Yes.

Kit Heintzman 00:34

Thank you so much for being here with me today. Would you just start by introducing yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening? What would you want them to know about you?

Tony 00:44

My name is Tony. I am Asian migrant, F-1 student visa holder currently, and non-binary. And currently, I'm studying at Yale School of Architecture for my masters. But also, I'm a practicing sex worker, as well as an organizer with Red Canary Song based in New York.

Kit Heintzman 01:18

Tell me a story about your life during the pandemic.

Tony 01:20

Um, I actually started escorting during the pandemic and that was primarily because lack of income. Graduating in 2020 was difficult. There is a lot of plans got messed up by having the thesis like cut short, wasn't able to move to a different city as I was planning and so didn't really look for jobs. Both, you know, like in New York and LA, so then ended up like, not having a job as I wandered up till like November, December of that year. And then that's when I was like, you know what, I'm going to take a dip into this. And just so I can pay my bills because I'm also I was, I was also paying my rent in cash at the time. So, does this all make sense? Yeah, so I started escorting and then about half year in and actually I uploaded my bio, what my profile onto to the platforms and the SEC, and ended up actually like the day I had, I got confirmed with a client and then, so I have my first client the second day, after I like, put out my profile. Would that be like a good story? Or should I stop there? So, it's, I guess, half a year in, of that sorts, to like April 2021, this is when I started organizing with Red Canary Song as well. Because I because we are kind of like a sex worker, organized station most of the core members are sex workers in the industry. So, it was also at the time of the vigil for the Atlanta shooting that happened a year ago. That reminded me of the recognizer sounds like existence in the city. So, I reached out and started doing outreach for them, even flushing because at a time I was living very close to flushing and, and-and that's where I started to, like visit parlors. I started talking to ladies in the community and also kind of started really starting my own process of reflection, being, you know, a migrant in this country.

Which was very before that, I think it's very suppressed because it's something that I wanted to overcome. And so not really like discuss because I hope that one day I don't have to deal with this anymore. But I think seeing these people, you know, living in a stage that's so much more marginalized than that than I am. And then that is the constant immediate, I guess, experience that they don't know what the end is. How many to understand, like, "hey, like I'm also in a like, sort of permanent transient space as well." And then that should be you know, questioned, thought through, and challenged and just processed. So yeah, and then I think that process So that like, that experience really helped me to start. Also, like, understand what pandemic, how, like, what would-would, how is affected by the pan-pandemic, because that cuz I mean, we all know by now that it's such a, like a permanent transient space as well but at a time I think we were all like, "Oh, this is gonna be over in a year or two." You know, so like, like, I was also in that kind of like in that denial that like, we don't have to really process this is gonna be over soon, like, let's just move on after it's over. But instead, like, you know, start to process like, "hey, like this is gonna just be the everyday from now." And that really helped me to like, you know, like, reposition myself to and then kind of started doing the work that I'm doing today in school as well. Yeah.

Kit Heintzman 05:57

With the extent that you're comfortable sharing, would you say something about your experiences with health and healthcare infrastructure, pre pandemic?

Tony 06:06

Yeah, um pre-pandemic? So, I was doing college, I was under school, international student insurance. It was a pretty okay, insurance, even though I didn't have too much like, interaction with it at a time because I was not on any medication other than prep. So it was, I mean, that was kind of my first like, healthcare experience in this country. Also, I was, I grew up- my father is a surgeon in a public hospital back in China. So, I grew up never had to go into a pharmacy or hospital because my, my dad could, like, prescribe anything for me if I needed. So, I kind of never really had any direct interaction with the health-healthcare system, anywhere period in my life. So, like finding my own doctor, I mean, my primary provider in a city when I was in college, and like, you know, going there, and then like, start a conversation with a doctor, it was like, all new to me. And it was kind of I was smooth for me because I don't know, I guess I was like on a very comprehensive insurance plan. So, everything kind of worked out and have to try to worry too much. Other than sometimes my doctor is a little bit, how to put this, can like being concerning about stuff that she didn't have to be concerned about because it's like, none of your business. When it approaches like, you know, like, why I'm taking PrEP, why I'm like, need to, you know, get ST-STI shots or stuff like that. I feel like there were questions that I was asked, that would not necessarily like part of their job. And then move. Well, I guess then the Yeah, that's a summary of like the situation before pandemic.

Kit Heintzman 08:19

Do you remember when you first heard about COVID-19?

Tony 08:24

Yeah, I was. So that was December 2019. So, I heard from I don't I think I heard from the Chinese Twitter platform Weibo where people started talking about some things happening while the government is trying to like lock down like the information so like, not too many people know exactly happened. But the it has spreaded across the ocean to the states and then so like people knew that something happened in [inaudible]. And then I was traveling in Europe that winter. And it was kind of just like off the news until I come back to the states in January before the semester started. By the time I was still pretty much like I think it developed to a point that people were thinking this is like a second wave of SARS, which is regional but like high death rate and like people were very-very worried but like people in the states are not so worried so like we were kind of feeling like lucky that we're not in there in this like authoritarian like a government controlled country while like a another SARS is going to happen. And then that that was total like, I mean, there's I think there's then I think the first case that we like officially heard in the States was Like maybe around March or something if my memory is correct. But between January and March, like everybody's like, of course, it's already here. It's just, you know, like, why there's no cases reported yet this is just stupid and confusing, but also, like, it was still, it was Trump, right? Was this to Trump? Yeah. So, then it was also like, you know, like, we don't know what this government is going to do, like, just period. So, like, nothing is really surprising either. So, like, I kind of just waiting, like, when and where the first case is gonna, like be reported. And I was kind of like, of course, it's going to be New York. So, and I was in New York at the time. But, yeah, I guess that's the first like my first reaction to it. But I was and also, I don't remember if I was worried too much about my own life here in New York at a time yet, because I was like. Yeah, I can't remember? I, I would- no, I was worried. I was very worried. I was very, very worried because it was like, I knew this is how this can roll out. And I know, like the states like this, America is a country that's so like, hard to control the population, when it comes to these kinds of things, it's gonna be really bad. And in my head, it was like, "This is gonna be much worse than what happened in China." And, but that was kind of it's like, there's no other like, measures that I could take to, like, understand what that kind of life could be. Because it was. I don't know, I guess, I guess I also didn't have time to process further beyond that point. Yeah, that was. Yeah.

Kit Heintzman 11:49

I'd love to hear any reflections you have on sort of how previous experience with SARS shaped your reaction to what was happening here. And the difference between the two locations and sort of what you were thinking about being here in the US for COVID?

Tony 12:09

Yeah. I think disease control is a very, very now I learned I think at the time, I didn't really have a sense that it's different in so different in different countries. I think, I think my, what my experience, my experience with SARS is the only like, reference point that I had to understand any kind of disease control even, like, you know, reading about history of like, the Black Death in Europe, like, like, like, what, like, like, those are just not like I couldn't really see, like assimilate like, other than the numbers

and the facts of these-these pandemics know nothing about. Like, the kind of like the ambience of like these events really like I could I, I could process I guess so. So, for me, when SARS happened, the extreme, the most extreme situation would be like, we have got temperature body temperature app twice a day, three times a day. This was I was in elementary school. I was we were we were outside of sort of outside of Shanghai, so kind of far from Hong Kong. So, we were relatively okay, my-my county never had a single case reported. But also, like all the borders, the road the streets were all blocked, and everybody had to get checked and like, look at a few crosscut, like towns or counties at a time, I think so that's the most extreme measures that were taken at a time. But it was it was doable and easy because how Chinese government run the country. And then so I was reflecting back to those-those things, and I was like, "No, this will be able to be like actually implemented here." Like to anyone to any to any town or like New York, and I'll never be in lockdown. So, I'm like, what, how this is gonna roll out. It's like, what? What, like, what's going to happen and then lockdown happened a week, it just hits so fast. I was notified the school is gonna close tomorrow on the like, on the day of and this is during my thesis here. And then like, for me, the hardest part to process was to and at the time I was living my I was at Cooper. It was in East Village, and I was living Alphabet City. It's kind of like a 15-minute walk from school and I was living with two roommates at the time. And then they moved back to one to Miami, one to New Orleans, like the second week after school closed. You know, like the third day after school close the weekend. And so, I was left alone in our apartment, in Alphabet City when I think more than half of the people living there were gone at a time. I didn't leave my apartment for almost a weekend. And then I started taking like, short walks outside of my apartment. And then like go into grocery stores when, when-when, like, the fridge is running low. So-so, it was like, I was like, trying to stay positive. And just like, you know, like, oh, at least my roommates are gonna have to share rooms, I can just like keep walking like walking, walking naked. In my apartments, like I have at least like other rooms that I can step into, I like change my environment from my own room, because at a time I had to, I want I rushed to, I took the-the ferry to IKEA in Brooklyn to get a desk. Because I didn't have a desk in my apartment to work at because I never work at my apartment because Cooper's 24/7 note who Cooper's and alternatives ever open, but it's close enough that if I want to work out, just go to school. So, I had this like tiny ass desk. That's like a, I don't know, like a, like a secretary desk that like you, I used to have two large drafting desks in school, to just do drawings and like, one to do drawings and make mottos the other one to like to do is to do computer stuff. And then so-so I had to also change all the plans that I had planned for a thesis to kind of like, because I couldn't make any models, it would be any, it would be even it was I always say that my class is worse than a class that started in the pandemic, because we were planning to do the whole thesis with without thinking about the pandemic, then we had to do under a pandemic, there's no planning for what we had, like we just had, there's no plan, the to-to that were made for what had were happening. So, it was not even like the problem of like making models, I don't have space to make models, it was like I couldn't even make small sketch models, because like, the art supplies stores are not open. So, like, if I start doing something, then I don't like I used all the materials that I have to make those sketch models, there's no materials that I can supply myself to keep making iterations. So, then the design process will be just like stuck there. So, then I had to make this decision to like, move everything digital. Because pretty much like, like, given the domestic infrastructure that was

lack of that was not even the problem that actually becomes the urban infrastructure. So, I was not being able to, like continue the study that I was I was doing and so I don't know, this is so I guess they have so much so far having so fast. So, like I just didn't really have time at that point to really think about like, "Oh, what happened during SARS?" Like it was just, it was completely like, like, everything is every day is a new situation. But at the time, you know, I was like kind of just like taking it day by day. And I'm kind of it was very peaceful to me actually, it was not chaotic, because I think reflecting back, I knew that it would be a very, very deep hole if I become depressed at that point. So, I sort of a lot like blocked myself to not become depressed at all. To be able to keep living in that situation. I'm very good at kind of compart- to my compartmentalizing my thoughts because of just I think trauma and like my past life. So, I was able to do that. And then kind of just think, oh, look at the positive things that we're doing. And I made some actually very, very, some piece of sculptures that I was very proud of even to this day, with like, stuff that I was just staring at in my apartment that yeah, I just saw like it was it was also kind of cute, I guess. Yeah, that was that was kind of like-like the summary of like the summer of 2020 and 2022, yeah.

Kit Heintzman 19:45

May ask what happened with graduation?

Tony 19:49

So, we had a zoom graduation and then I mean, everything was kind of just a joke, like, and so like I knew is everything. He's kind of a joke to begin with. So, I don't really take it too seriously. I know everybody's trying to, like, just cope with it, including the faculties the school president. So, like everybody's going through, like they're trying their best, we're trying our best, our parents are trying their best to like to catch up with whatever's happening. So like, it was just, I, you know, it's like, I mean, looking back, all the work that was produced like that were presented a thesis will also just kind of a joke also, because it was undergrad, like, everybody was naive, and like, you know, but-but then graduation so for Cooper, there was this like, half, half day YouTube prerecorded session of those people speakers speaking, that just being played, and then move on to the, like, the individual schools graduation with, like, the, the awards and like, like the Dean's speaking and everybody's like, showing face [inaudible]. And my-my parents because they're in China, so they couldn't even do watch the YouTube thing because YouTube is blocked. And then by the time I reflected this problem to school, they're like, oh, my God, we totally don't think about this. And there's my parents were really upset, because like, they already don't know enough about what's happening my, in my life, because of the intergenerational communication problem that we've been having. Also, because my gender and everything, so like they were, these are some of the moments that are more public that I would, you know, make, I would have make sure that like, they could get grab as much as they can. Because like, I was, like, I would like, present myself also like, like, less kind of, like, with less censored content from them. Because it's a public event. So, it was really a pity that like, they didn't even get to experience that. And, and, but I kind of, I don't know, I because I kind of thought is everything was a joke to begin with. So, I didn't really like have too much of like expectation versus reality, like disappointment. I mean, I

think they did. But the second year, we did like a in-person graduation with our class and upcoming classes. Wow. And I actually showed up to graduation and in full drag. And that was the first time that I kind of did drag in public, I think. And that was great. And also, that was benefited from my parents. I didn't tell my parents that we're doing this thing the second year. So then, like they didn't, didn't, they just don't know that, like, all of these photos were taken in or like, like this event was happening happened. So, I was able to kind of like, like, you know, being dragged and like, like, kind of do the graduation the way I personally would want it to. So yeah, that was that was nice. A good, sweet, tender, reun-reunion moment with a bunch of people, a lot of people that just haven't seen in a year

Kit Heintzman 23:22

Were you keeping in touch much with family back home while all of this was going on?

Tony 23:27

Yes. We're we our communications frequent. We text at least every day, and we try to video call every other week, I would say that's the average frequency. But it was very, I mean, there's a lot of ups and ups and downs. Actually, the summer before the pandemic was the last time I went home. So, this is three years back. And that was the time that I officially came out to my parents. So, after that, I mean, there was a lot of like preparation work done, done before that point, like I was preparing that event for like, three to five years. But after that, I mean that was kind of like the milestone when like, "Okay, I'm going to you know, start pushing because the coming out. This process made me realize that they're still in denial. So then like, yeah, I need to keep pushing them to like engage with this, these materials and topics so they can like at least process little by little every day." Instead-instead of just not mentioning after coming out then they're just not going to get anywhere. So, I was intentionally bringing up more and more like of my just life to them. that they never I would that was never I was never given a chance. I was never given them the chance to learn about and be- And so that created a bunch of volatile moments and a lot of ups and downs. Because the I think the argument was kind of just like, "oh, like," my parents will my mom's like, "Oh, you're not telling us anything." But then I'm like, I like, "Yeah, because like, you guys don't want to hear anything that's like, actually, well, my life and everyone ever, whenever tell you something, you just get so mad or like, like, just so much like, like feedback on like," on asked for feedbacks of like, my, I don't know, behavior whatsoever, that I that I'm, like, not asking you to critique me, basically. So, I don't want to share because I that I didn't ask for this. And then they're like, why you're not sharing. And I'm like, I should try it. And just like, you know, like, it's not well received. So, it's just a lot of that back and forth during 2020 to 2021, and then 20- And then and then 2021 to 22. Like, I mean, the past year, I was working with a therapist, kind of specifically focusing on the generational conversation, I think. So that helped a lot. And this year, we've been having a more communicative, more effective communication between us. So, and also in terms of the pandemic. It this is also like, it's, it's, it's also both ways, right? Because for them in China, like there would be a huge waves of like, large lock downs, like for example, in Shanghai earlier last year, and since my home town is close to it, and my dad is a surgeon, like he had a lot to go through, because he was also kind of like in some illustrative row in the, in the in the hospital, there will be times that my dad can't come home from

hospital for a month straight, just leaving the hospital for a month, 45 days straight, because they were like checking the travel history of every person that's coming in and out of the hospitals, including the doctors, and nurses. So, I know it was at a time that my mom broke her ankle. Because of all the stress that's pent up, also just between us like I think she's just like very stressed. And so, like was not being careful as a result not being careful enough, or like don't have energy to be careful enough and so broke her ankle and then made my-my grandma was going was doing knee surgery as well. So just a lot of things are happening at all kind of like went south in one within one week. And it was a difficult week for me hearing school as well. And that was kind of just like volcano eruption moments when everybody's accusing everyone for like something and while nobody is really have the capacity to like be there for each other, even just income in terms of communication and keep each other like posted. So again, like my mom and my dad was not like physically together because my dad is in the hospital and etc. And no one's like could take care of her me. But my mom would her broken ankle had just take care of my-my grandma after post-surgery and then my grandma had to take care of my mom, like with the ankle, even though she like couldn't really walk. Anyways, so yeah, so and then I felt really-really bad for I guess not being able to ask more. Like, what's happening, like more frequently because I was, I was focusing so much on my own, like frustration towards their mis communication or their ways of communication that I yeah, I just didn't really just forgot I like oh, like there's a lot happening on that side as well. And I should have like, you know, be more just be more communicative with what's happening in their lives as well. Yeah, that was that was a moment in my family, yeah.

Kit Heintzman 30:26

What have been some of your sources of support during a pandemic?

Tony 30:30

I also started, I also met my partner during the pandemic, we are pandemic, couple. So, that was in 20, January 2021. Yeah. So, since then, everything goes so much better, because, just, it's, it's been great. And so, I'm really appreciative of that. And, um, before that, I was living, my friend and I decided to moving together, and then moved to Queens from Brooklyn, for a larger apartment, and a quieter neighborhood. And then that really helped because domestic space was what I was hoping to, to have projecting myself into a longer pandemic. And some sense of nature and like, in a sense of let go, I can go something like on the balcony, for example. So yeah, so-so living in Queens was and also, we're living in Amherst. It's a very Asian neighborhood. So, I was blessed with like the humph foods and like, there's so convenient, convenient to get, get the things that I crave everyday waking up. Yeah, so it was, it was that it was it was the cute apartment that we set up for ourselves, we, we decided to have three rooms for two of us instead of just two. And so, we can have like a work room, and we have to work in our own bedrooms, that was a very, very deliberate decision that we made to like move to separate our sleeping and working while working from home. And I will add a large, a giant living room and a giant kitchen plus dining room. So, we're dining and living or was separate, which is usually not the case living here. So, we're really blessed with that and a huge balcony with a beautiful rack of like herbs and stuff that was started growing. So that was what really kept me sane during that year and kind of an end.

I mean, that was also the first year after graduating from Cooper and then actually living by yourself in New York. So, like, it was a very, I don't know, it's like a combination of like, like what-what was supposed to happen plus what was not expected. In terms of setting up my own like, kind of my own life in the city that I've been in for almost it was like five years at that point. But I really appreciate that- that year and that I think I my understanding of neighborhoods in New York also changed a lot since that was the first time, I lived in Asian-Asian community that I otherwise wouldn't choose to. I wouldn't move away from Brooklyn if this didn't happen so I can't know from reflecting back because now I'm such like a pastoral person these days like I'm like New Haven so nice. I don't want to move back to Brooklyn ever. But that person kind of started during that year when I was in Queens Yeah, but we were also able to like you know go back examiner's is kind of an artist is really interesting. It's also like just half hour away from-from Bushwick. So, it was very convenient and going back to, to Bushwick to like me friends that like, go to Highland Park for raves and stuff. When none of these is like legally supposed to happen, but it happens. Sometimes I was there, and it was great. And yeah.

Kit Heintzman 35:04

What's it been like having a partner during the pandemic?

Tony 35:09

It's very special. It's, it's, it's very okay. I guess in terms of pandemic, well, our honeymoon was like, so we met like late January 2021. And early February 2021, we got COVID together. So, then we had to quarantine together. And then that was our honeymoon. And then, so I was able to cook extensively cooking very elaborately, during that week, just like me, it was also Chinese New Year. So, like, you know, I was making a lot of like big dishes, I would usually not do because it takes a lot of time, it takes a whole day to prepare. But also, like I was living Amherst, there's enough grocery options, Asian grocery options, we were able to get like, like live fish fresh, like water tank fish, and like other sea foods, and so. So that was really cute. And then ever since that week, I have not cooked that way yet. And it was, I mean, I guess it's not like, I don't know if this is specific to like, the pandemic situation. But like, for me, I was, I kind of had a love and hate relationship with my, with my aesthetics, like the things I like, when it comes to like, music particularly. I kind of never found the friends, the group of friends that like, appreciate what I secretly appreciate. And I was also like, I mean, like, like, I don't know, spending college time at Cooper Union is also a very weird experience, because like, oh, like, you're all of a sudden exposed to all of these edgy, artsy people in a city. Before you kind of formed your own, like, understanding or, like, perception of art in general. So, you're constantly trying to align yourself to like, your people that are in your face, and like, oh, like, is this cool? Is that cool? Is this like, like, like, like, actually good stuff? Or is that like, kitschy or not? Like, so there's a lot of like, navigating it, like, in the fog, like when it comes to like, like, I guess beauty and, and things that makes you feel good. Versus the things that you think are good. So, my partner's kind of the first person that I and then so she's a musician. And, and I shared some music to her. And, and it was it was so like, affirming for myself to be confirmed that like, these are some things that she really enjoy as well. She initially didn't know about before. And then so then like, so that really set a tone of like, my own confidence, I guess.

And so I was able to in the relationship, and I was able to, like, you know, stay confident and like, and then that that helped me to bring the best of me in front of her to make sure that you know, she has a good experience when I'm around. I think so. So that initial dynamic I think it really set the tone and-and like so like the healthy relationship could have been just established to this day. And that's one and then two is kind of our own gender, it's blood relations. During the pandemic, we kind of both started as like cis gays at the time, and she started transitioning this year after like, we sort of I don't know we kind of I think we kind of can affirm confirmed a bunch of, like feelings that we individually have both been feeling in terms of gender and sexuality. It was just never, like be able to kind of like, explore them practicing our own ways because we're, she went to Juilliard. I went to Cooper again; we were exposed to all these already. So processed in terms of gender, gender, or sexuality, the friends that in our lives that were like we're not, we're just different. So, we kind of just blocked ourselves, you know, to process these topics, our own pace. So we kind of went through that together, but just like between two of us, and then that was really, really special, because, because I feel like I would have never it was like, the perfect timing and like situation and space, to not feel like scared to be judged to be like, laughed at, being maybe ignorant, or just not sensitive enough, like when, just like, when we discuss these things. It was safe enough was safe enough time and space for both of us to like, just like ask questions and like, be like, what will we what will we are what Who are we? What do we feel like one want to become and all of these? That yeah, so. So, she started transitioning this year. And I also really, I kind of I started a started identify as non-binary only. Last fall when I when I arrived at Yo, so we kind of both like sort of reestablished our gender identities together in the past year and a half so Yeah.

Kit Heintzman 41:43

Other than COVID-19, what have been some of the social and political issues on your mind and heart over the last couple of years?

Tony 41:53

I mean, that's a very interesting question. And because the Black Lives Matter also happened during the pandemic, it was, again, being exposed to all these topics in the past, in the five years, what I was when I was at a undergrad while not really involved in these topics, but that kind of prep, prepped me up to that point, to like, really, process and like engage what was happening in the city. And there's this funny anecdote that the when the, during the peak of the protests, I think it was one weekend. In the summer. We- our class decided to do like a little picnic upstate. And so, I rented a cart, and drove everybody up. And while we were there, I took some shrooms, hoping that thinking that it was going to come down before we drive down, but I think because I messed up the timing with like, eating food, I ate it after I ate. So, I my body didn't process until I process the food. So, it was I was really, really high. So couldn't drive down. So, my friend drove us down instead. But then I had to return the car after we got to the city that I had to do myself, so I drove from Brooklyn to Tribeca on shrooms during while everybody's out in the street protesting and helicopters above us just like sirens everywhere and it was just a moment of like, why I'm here where I'm where am I? Why I'm here. What is this time of history like-like when everything's just colliding together and audit stimulus you know, like sound a lights people's faces

movements of people flocking of people and just all coming together and-and then the radios not the radio mic the like anyways, it started with playing a very sad version like a piano version of imagine like a cover by I forgot somebody else not John Lennon himself in my car when I was at the at a intersection. I went I was at the intersection of Bari and, and Hudson. With like, helicopter right above me. So that was a moment I think that marks my own, like political education and, and-and then and then after, after the protests that was when I really to start to, like, read and try to assimilate the conversations that are happening with like ACAB with-with-with racial discussions and-and that half of year prepared me to start doing work with Red Canary Song cuz I had a better understanding of being Asian as well. Yeah, I was I think the first sort of like active engagement that I participated other than just going out to the street to protest was to host people in my hand because I was still living in Manhattan at the time because people couldn't go back to Brooklyn because Brooklyn Bridge was blocked. So yeah, there were like a few nights that I just put up you know, stories on Instagram be like if anyone needs to need a shelter tonight like feel free to come over. So, I met some friends that are still like our friends with through those nights and had great conversations. and yeah, yeah.

Kit Heintzman 46:33

What was it like hosting strangers in the middle of a pandemic?

Tony 46:39

That's also a funny question because as gays we host strangers all the time. So, I kind of didn't feel weird at all it was just something I do literally every day. It was I will just say I will, I will use some other anecdotes to talk about this about hygiene and about-about-about strangers. I paused hooking up obviously when I first got locked down, but I think after maybe I don't, I can't really remember exact but maybe two three weeks in I started a re-initiated my efforts to-to have sex with people again. So out this is a great story. So, there's this cop that is as he's a married cop and he works at the precinct. Is that the word? Anyways, the bureau at in Alphabet City and so he I guess he was also very pent up he's a he's a he's a cop in his relationship but he's just like looking to suck dick outside of one he's cheating. so basically, I-I well we were chatting and then like he would uh you know come. So also, at a time because I mentioned that I made some very some pieces of sculpture that I was very proud of. And one of them was this kind of like, like Doric curtain that was glued together with semen, and I argue that it's all by semen but obviously there was some glue involved as well. But-but just like-like cum rags tissues from my dustbin next to my bed I just like where all my comrades go. So, then it was like re tessellated into this like this white curtain thing of just tissue paper and then with a hole there and I call it glo-glory hole. And I was kind of my own artistic reflection of what was happening at the time, but then also with this dude I was like actually have a glory hole setup. Do you want to like you know, like, use that and then so this dude would have cum and then just like suck me for like an hour straight because like he was like, it was setup as a whole like, like slave-ish, like sexual sexually moment so like you just like cumming on for and like climb like I could be on Zoom like in a class and he would like climb over and then the stress I can be under the desk or something like as is still speaking to my professor but then we also try to with this like, like the glory hole that it was made out of cum. Um, it was. Yeah. So, so it was,

I guess I wasn't feeling weird, but it was just like, I was recognizing the weird situation that we were in. And it was kind of practicing over it and, but also kind of like, you know, being creative trying to be creative to like, find ways to reflect on as like a fun side gig artistic gig situation, within my constant oscillation between want to be an architect or an artist. Struggle, yeah.

Kit Heintzman 50:45

What does the word health mean to you?

Tony 50:50

I think, speaking as of today, I think, to me really is about being able to enjoy the things that you want to enjoy in life. So, there's the physical dimension, and there's the psychological dimension to enable you to do so. And you need to be like, I think you need to be, like, able in both dimensions to be able to enjoy what you want to enjoy in life. Because I think happiness is something that you generate-your body generates, when you enjoy, enjoy, as well. I mean, Joy is a variable, like enjoying as a process, that's where happiness-happiness is generated. And I think healthy health mean means that you have the mechanism-mechanism to be able to do that. And so yeah, so-so I think, I think, I think how health, I guess another thought, just in my head is that I have this, in that sense, the health is not directly related to like pain or not pain, and because pain can be also enjoyable. I think enjoy in enjoyment is like a more active, proactive process that like you. It's also about like, your perspective, like how you look at this, how you feel about things. So-so it's, it's, it's, it's-it's, it's, it's, it's more psychological to me these days, but then there is the physical, like, capability that you need to be able to practice the psychological dimension of that. If that's clear.

Kit Heintzman 53:06

What are some of the things you think we would need to change as a culture to make that version of health and enjoyment available to everyone?

Tony 53:16

There's not enough therapists, psycho analysts, psychiatric is available, I think. I think I'm extremely privileged to-to be able to, to have a reflective personality, so that I can actually process a lot of things by myself, even without the help of a therapist, but even with somebody like me, it's so different when somebody else is guiding you through the process versus not. So, I can't even imagine how people who don't have the reflect the reflective personality there have to be even like to you know, to process any of this. So, I feel like processing is-is so important to be able to face and deal with what happened to so because our brain often blocks you know, what happened because we would make decisions to not engage the body remembers and-and the which means it if even if you decided to tell yourself, something didn't happen to you, it happened to you. And if you don't process then there will never be a chance to be able to embrace whether it's like your Only shortcomings are like whether it's something like, like some trauma that like you. I don't I don't know how to frame this, like whether it whether it's some external trauma that you experienced. And if you don't process things, you would never be able to

overcome. And then be free to talk about and experience the things that you're scared of, because you made this decision to be scared of those things. So, we need more people practicing mental health. And so more people can be guided through their mental health problems and traumas. And so, we can all discuss more things that are socially constructed to be not discussed with each other more. So, we can flip this page that, like just so many things, we just can't discuss it and process. Yeah.

Kit Heintzman 56:13

What does the word safety mean to you?

Tony 56:21

It means that I can ask questions, it means that I can't- it means that I can ask questions, I think, I think that's the ultimate safety that I can feel it to, to, to feel that I'm okay to be ignorant with maybe some of the questions that we be asking. And so, because that's the only way to learn about the things that you don't know about yet. And then so change the bad, the ignorant sides of you by asking these questions that are maybe are ignorance, so. Yes, that's the kind of safe space I crave, and I want to create for other people.

Kit Heintzman 57:27

There's been this really narrow idea of safety in relationship to the body and COVID-19. I'm wondering in that tiny biomedical framework, what are some of the things you've been doing to keep yourself feeling safer?

Tony 57:45

You mean, in terms of like sanitation, and like, like, the psychological boundaries between people that set up by these practices?

Kit Heintzman 57:55

All of it.

Tony 58:07

I think I think not overstepping. I think I think acknowledging everybody has different understanding uncomfot zones, and the size of these spaces are different. So, I think asking and keep asking and keep vocalizing before you make any moves and actions is something that I've been feeling it's very helpful when I interact with people these days, to make sure that you're not stepping into their space that sometimes you might not, like aware that you're stepping into. And then that that's, I think that's more about communication rather than overprotection. I think the, I think I think protocols are necessary. But it's also like, like, like, it's not what I mean, like, I don't mean like whether it should be or should not be imposed onto everyone. But I think everybody's protocol is different. And so like, like, the differences between everybody's protocols, you just want to make sure that like it's aligned, I think that's the least that we should do to-to-to protect each other and, and-and then that also, because that ties back to you

know, everybody's fiscal condition somebody more like immune compromised somebody, you know. So, like, a lot of times you just don't know why people practice a lot of protocol protocols the way that they do, why? Why they do that? So, I think and then a lot of time is too sensitive to ask. So, I think by confirming that, like, this is the line, this is the boundary of for you, and for you, and then everybody could be different is-is-is-is very important to me.

Kit Heintzman 1:00:37

Could you give me an example of one of the conversations you've had about those boundaries and relationship to COVID and safety?

Tony 1:00:44

Yeah, so one of the colleagues, at Red Canary Song is disabled, immunocompromised person. And we do, you know, we've been hosting lots of community engagement events like Dimitri eight events or like, just like visiting parlors, or like, gatherings, vigils, like a lot of these things with a good intention. of you know, during the pandemic, everybody needs to like, like, just spend time more time with each other. At times, we would kind of get loose on you know, sanitization-santaiz-sanitizing and like, partially because, like, how the community that we're origin to, again, it's their, that's their protocol. So then like, sometimes we just kind of tag along with how they practice it. And then it was, it was very harmful, actually an upsetting to this one colleague, because they felt left out because they couldn't practice couldn't participate in these kind of events, given their own condition, with their own bodies, so and then there's, we still haven't found a good way to do to figure this out, because we want to host these events, because that's what the community needs and wants, because of the pandemic. But meanwhile, exactly, the situation that they want is what our colleague just can't do. So that's, I think, a good story of like, like, you know, the line is very blurry. And it's, it's, there's sometimes not a perfect solution for everyone, we and I guess in that case, the you know, the response is just like, going back to like the conversation with organizing, not everybody can do everything, like do some time there's just like some people with some people, some other people with some other people like any can just it's not personal and it's just, it's like puzzles coming together. If it doesn't happen, it's just not meant to be. But yeah, that was Yeah, the one of the anecdotes, I guess.

Kit Heintzman 1:03:18

How are you feeling about the immediate future?

Tony 1:03:20

Immediate help immediate, like, tomorrow, or? I'm very stressed in general with, like, lots going on academically and ending life as well. And there's a lot of like juggling between New Haven, New York. For me right now. That's very challenging. And I'm, but I'm also feeling that I'm onto something that's very important, the projects are underway to something more magnificent that more, I feel like I'm adding more weight to the things that I'm doing. And a lot of it is coming from the experience of the pandemic. And my organizing experience during the pandemic. So-so, I guess this is we struggled to

begin to be like, this is too much. I'm always over committing myself to things but also like, they're the good things to be committed to. But-but I was well, I was also I just started with a new psychoanalysts last week. So that really is my situation, or projecting to the future. I feel like I'll be fine for a while since now and I'm starting to be had to have a to be able to work with a second psychoanalyst, I didn't have a therapist since like, June to like, last week. And that was kind of like a lot to, to put up with. Yeah, that's what's on my mind.

Kit Heintzman 1:05:22

What are some of your hopes for a longer-term future?

Tony 1:05:28

Um I hope I don't know, there's so many hopes that I have I hope I'm more I hope I'm more true. I, I recognize my own existence more as in like, I think I'm, as I mentioned, I'll constantly in this oscillation-oscillation between wanting to do art versus doing architecture, like or wanting to, I don't know, like, boosts my sex, sex work, work or wanting to, like, boost my academic work. And, you know, there's a lot of these like, opposite things that I both want to do, but then like, realize that I probably can do both. And then I think in the past, I was like, you know, like, I need to find, choose one I need to like and make a decision, I need to, like committed to one path and then take the others as side gigs. But I think I want to recognize this stage more and then be like, that's maybe just why I am and then that's okay. Like, it doesn't have to be art or architecture, it can be just like, focusing on what I'm doing, and then evolve that to become its own practice. And whatever that is, it is what it is. And as long as you know, it, I'm proud of it. And it's I think it's meaningful, and I know like it's good work. So, I'm trying to like I think I hope that I'll be able to be more comfortable with this kind of a solution that's in my every day and I hope I can talk to my parents more I hope I can be more articulate hello I feel safe with them. And I want to I hope that I can feel I hope that I can feel more and be less rigid and a little bit more messy and I hope that I, my partner, and I can stay true to our experiences with each other. And just keep this good dynamic going. Yeah.

Kit Heintzman 1:08:57

Do you think of COVID-19 as a historic event?

Tony 1:09:06

I mean, I think history to me is the accumulation of past experiences. I mean, this is very it's right, this is very forward. But that's an it's-it's all sorts of experiences that are that are sent that not just visual or sound or it can also be sense like-like movements and all sorts of other sensations experience, distance or immediate so it definitely is historical. But I don't know, if we put the word event in what does it mean here because it's like it. I mean, I'm sure it is like 100 years late later in the house, like history book like this event, but I think it's more complicated than that. And I think that's exactly why I, I was really excited about this project because it gets to, you know, like, bring in more facets of, of

experiences and ambiences that collateral to-to the three, three sentences that would describe COVID as an event. And yeah.

Kit Heintzman 1:10:39

What, if anything, do you think scholars in the social sciences and humanities should be doing right now to help us understand the human side of the last couple of years?

Tony 1:10:50

I don't know, I'm not a scholar, and I'm not in academia, I don't even know what is going on right now, already, I can only speak from my very, very immediate experience with reviewing the situation or situationist international collection at the by Nikki, that that's some kind of important work to do to look at the ambience. At least for my, for my, for my own industry, like in architecture, like we need to look at urban spaces, like, as in, like, our psychological perception of the urban spaces these days. And, and, and that's, that's kind of so neglected. In the discourse, at least in my school, right now, I think, and also the work of on solidarity. And its we're just too super, me included, too superficial to like, you know, be in the Ivy League institution and fly somewhere for two days to like, take a look at the community, and argue that we are researching on the community and then feeding what they're feeding and trying to solve their problems when nobody shows up to unionization meetings. So, I mean, of course, there's more conversation happening around these topics and in academia, but I think I just think there should be more there should be way more and-and-and it's not a yes or no question. It's like, it's like, you can't it's not about like, oh, like you decide to like talk about labor, or not talk about solidarity or not organizing or not, it's everybody chipping in one cent a day, so that this movement can keep going with or without your one cent today, so-so I think that heroism that's always there for like, oh, you know, I mean, that that is true in every industry should be really dissolved into like, small, like nameless contributions to more things, more topics, but like, less, it's also less about careers on my guess. So yeah, that's where my headspace is right now. In terms of this.

Kit Heintzman 1:13:28

This is my last question. I'd like you to imagine speaking to a historian in the future someone far enough away that they have no lived experience of right now. As they go forth with their studies, what would you tell them cannot be forgotten about right now?

Tony 1:13:50

That's a loaded question. The fog, the confusion the disorientation. Yeah, nobody knows what I don't think anybody knows what we're doing today, but also, we're also trying our best to figure out where we're doing. So, we're constantly in a state of disorientation sp- also searching for a path and work. So work are being work or experiences are being produced in this experience of navigating through the fog. And the fog itself, I think cannot be forgotten. Because it's real, it's, you can see it because you don't see things. Yeah.

Kit Heintzman 1:15:40

I want to thank you so much for the generosity of your time and the kindful wisdom in your answers. Those are a lot of the questions I know how to ask at the moment. So, I'm wondering at this point, if there's anything you'd like to share that my questions haven't made room for, please take some space, and share it.

Tony 1:16:09

Um, yeah, I guess just one note on something that I think I assumed too much of what condition everybody lives under. When it comes to the pandemic, it was the first time that I realized actually, a lot of people don't know how to use their phones. A lot of people living in New York don't read our know any, can speak any English. Living in New York don't know how to get around the city with getting on subway can only communicate with vocal accounts. So, when it comes to work, organizing art, like whether it's academia scholarly or not, it is so narrow if we only operate, if you only assume the world operates on the ways that we operate, and then so use those as, like assume those as the universal methods and means to understand and go get through this world. And so-so, because when everybody started doing that the people who don't have access to whatever it is that they don't have access to that is considered as a universal tool. for whatever purpose of living the life gets further marginalized. And these marginalization ones get amplified when pandemic, things like pandemic happens. And anybody can break at any point. Nobody's strong, grow- I think growing up, I always have the idea of the strong people versus the non-strong people. I think everybody can break any point. And, and then, and then it's a matter it's not a matter of your own tenacity. It's a matter of like, the timing and where you like to place the time that you're, you're in with your whatever's going on in your mind that can trigger a you know, to-to crush someone and then that can happen to anyone and that doesn't mean you're not strong or anything and but also like for the people who-who-who don't think that's their problem. It's-it's, it's it I don't know it's rendered in so different dimensions on other bodies and other people that we can never imagine such as like, give other give each other space some time and care why we're all in this together.

Kit Heintzman 1:19:21

Thank you so much.

Tony 1:19:23

Thank you. This is a very you have very, very good questions.