

## ***BOMB* — Artists in Conversation**

May 12, 2016

### **Brent Green by Chris Chang**

*“Like holding hands with a stranger—for kind of a long time.”*



Part of a motor-driven, sculptural, stringed instrument under construction at Brent Green's Park Avenue Armory studio, 2015.

The following interview is culled from several encounters with artist/performer/filmmaker Brent Green, and it's occasioned by (at least) three major things. First and foremost are his “outsider films,” and really, there's no easy way to summarize the ragged beauty of the work. Second—from the fall of 2015 to early 2016 Green was an artist-in-residence at the Park Avenue Armory, where he performed animated works-in-progress with a live ten-piece band as part of the venue's Under Construction Series. And third—in April, Green provided video projections and music for the first portion of Aaron Landsman's *Empathy School/Love Story*, a theater diptych of individual yet perfectly paired

monologues that deal with, in abstract sum, existential pleasures and terrors of both rural and urban varieties. Landsman might be called an “outsider dramaturge,” as he is best known for performances that can take place in private homes, public office buildings, moving buses, etc. But *Empathy School* took place in an actual theater, the Abrons Art Center, only the curtain remained closed. We, the audience, were seated behind the drapes, onstage, where the action took place.



Brent Green (far right) performing music and animations for *Empathy School*, alongside Jim Findlay (center), 2016.

**Chris Chang** How did you first meet Landsman?

**Brent Green** I've known Aaron for years and really admire his work. All his characters seem as if they've been shot. *A lot*. You can look straight through the bullet holes and see all kinds of wonderful stuff on the other side—the stuff that makes you fall in love with the world: beating hearts, flying trapeze stunts, a couple submarines tied together by a rope—that kind of thing. His plays allow the characters to contort themselves, look through their own holes, and say things like: “Ouch, an Elephant!”

He sent the script for *Empathy School*, and I loved it, and I made some animations and music. My wife [Kate Ryan] loves Aaron's writing and wanted the music to be better. So she and musician Catherine McRae joined up and wrote better music.

**CC** Were you familiar with the work of [actor] Jim Findlay prior to this?

**BG** I'd seen a couple sets he designed. Apparently he can do everything.

**CC** I can easily imagine him—or rather, the character he plays—as part of the dark Brent Green universe. I hope that will be taken as a compliment.

**BG** I hope so, too. If my characters moved to a city, they'd turn into Aaron Landsman's characters. But better a character in a play than thrown in jail in reality—which is the only fate I can imagine for my characters in the city... We'll stay in the woods.

**CC** The background animations are obviously by your hand. What about the nocturnal driving imagery?

**BG** The first time we did this piece, at the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (EMPAC), it was performed live on a moving bus. The animations were projected onto billboards and barns along the route. We attached GoPros all over that bus and filmed the road and performance, then edited all that down so we could recreate the piece in a theater... People keep offering us theaters, but no one else has offered a bus.

**CC** It was very *Lost Highway*.

**BG** It's like the menu from the *Lost Highway* DVD.

**CC** What did you make of the directorial decision to have the theme of loneliness, which runs throughout both monologues, made palpable by the act of strangers, i.e., the audience—as requested by the solo actor—holding each others hands?

**BG** In all of Aaron's work he makes the audience uncomfortable—*really* uncomfortable. As the saying goes: Get them out of their comfort zone. It sets our minds looking for something to hold on to, to be comforted by. His writing makes you uncomfortable, yet it's full of love. Like holding hands with a stranger—for kind of a long time.

**CC** I understand you'll work with Landsman again? Will it be on future performances of *Empathy* or something totally different?

**BG** I would work with Aaron on anything. He asked my wife and I to act in a piece about two teenagers burning down shopping malls. I said, "You know I can only act like myself, right?" He said, "I think you'll do."

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*(Several months earlier...)*



Brent Green in residence at the Park Avenue Armory, New York City, 2015.

**CC** Where exactly is home?

**BG** My wife and I just bought eleven acres and an old farmhouse outside of New Paltz. It's amazing. She's opening a bookstore in Beacon, so we'll be spending most of our time there. I still have my barn in Pennsylvania, but we'll be getting rid of that.

**CC** That's gotta hurt.

**BG** Losing the barn?

**CC** Yes. I would describe it as a character in your work.

**BG** And it's filled with things that, both inside and out, I made myself. Everyone who goes there feels as if they're walking into my brain.

**CC** Just like walking into this studio, here at the Armory, except the barn has ten years of accumulation, right? Ten extra years of your brain?

**BG** Except that a lot of what's in the barn was my brain when I was in my twenties. So now I'm starting anew.

**CC** A fresh brain? Or will it still be a part of the accumulation process?

**BG** You can't get rid of all your accumulations!

**CC** When some people move they leave everything behind.

**BG** I'm trying not to bring much. I'm going to fill a shipping container. And then there will be a fire.  
(*laughter*)

**CC** So you're going to have a ceremony?

**BG** I'd be less precious about it. It will be all the things I'm tired of.

**CC** Will you have a party?

**BG** Maybe a one-man barbecue.

**CC** You're talking about burning artwork. You should have a get-it-while-you-can event.

**BG** Do you want some? I'll send you some.

**CC** That's terrifying to think of! (*laughter*) I remember being at Andrew Edlin's gallery when you brought out the most disorganized box of stuff—materials from your animations. You were just rifling through it like a garbage can.

**BG** I've had conservationists yell at me. They were really freaking out about a similar box. Wait, maybe it was the same box? They were upset. They offered to fix things.

**CC** Where is that box now?

**BG** I don't know. Probably still with Andrew Edlin, at the gallery? (*laughter*)

**CC** It probably ended up sorted into a climate-controlled flat file.

**BG** He has those things.

**CC** I think it was during that same meeting that I asked the basic Brent Green question. Andrew is known for his work with outsider artists. Are you an outsider artist?

**BG** Oh my God. I don't think that's up to me.

**CC** Can you name other outsider filmmakers? I mean, because of access and use of technology, isn't it sort of a contradiction in terms?

**BG** I think there are people who are way more outside than me.

**CC** For example?

**BG** George Kuchar, even though he ended up being extremely influential. He was way more outside than me—I think.

**CC** Another person with conservation issues.

**BG** I bet. There's a guy in Seattle, who had Asperger's, and he would obsessively rent the "How to Make a Pizza" video from the library. He watched it over and over until it broke. So *heremade* it and returned it to the library.

**CC** You didn't go to film school. You taught yourself how to animate. You didn't have a book or video like "How to Make a Pizza."

**BG** No.

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**CC** In a nutshell, this residency is for you to work on your new film, *EE*. Can you give a brief synopsis?

**BG** *EE* is a film about my granddad, Edward Earl Green, who was basically a really violent and cruel person. But I'm trying to look at him and make a point. I think, ultimately, the goal is to just talk about him and think about things, such as: How do we create the people around us by the way we treat each other? And the way our society and its infrastructure is built, and what we expect of people for jobs, that kind of thing. It's all really built to undermine our families, and the way people feel about each other. It's a brutal system we've set up...

**CC** You mean, the way I treat you...

**BG** We get along totally fine!

**CC** But it's going to be...

**BG** It's going to effect who you *are*...I used to date a woman who built a low-rider. She was awesome. I spent a lot of time in Phoenix while she built it. I'd go with her to the auto body shop.

**CC** You mean one of those cars that jump up and down?

**BG** Yes. Her name is Liz Cohen; she's a phenomenal artist...So Liz would go and work at the shop, and a couple of the guys who worked there were from immigrant families, and a lot of them had gotten involved in gang stuff.

**CC** She's a photographer?

**BG** Mostly a photographer. Salon 94 represents her...But, I think most of the violence in our country is caused by people who are disrespected at every single turn. People are disrespected when they are at work, when they are doing things that keep them away from their family—and those things don't exactly provide very well either. To be ultimately disrespected, for that, in your own home, or on your own turf, is what pushes things a little too far. And that's when people get shot. That doesn't account for, like, the mass killings in schools and that kind of thing, but it does account for a lot of interpersonal violence—whether it be gun violence, or just general abuse, or whatever.

From Green's "notebook," an animated storyboard for work in progress *EE*, 2016.

**CC** Getting back to grandpa.

**BG** Sorry.

**CC** The violence?

**BG** From him...

CC That's violence he inflicted on you?

BG Violence was inflicted on everyone around him, but probably less on me than anyone else.

CC That violence doesn't seem to have adversely affected you.

BG I was a pretty big fucking asshole until I was well into my mid-20s. I think I had a lot of kind-of-Republican ideals. I thought it was possible to be, like, a self-made man. That sort of thing. *(laughter)* When I started to have some success, like from getting the Creative Capital grant, I was like, "Yeah! I did this!"

CC And you blame that on grandpa?

BG No! No! I blame that attitude on the culture that I think most of our country exists in. It took a long time, after I had travelled a lot. Getting the Creative Capital grant had way more to do with [founding President and Executive Director] Luby Lerner than it had to do with me.

CC Which year is this?

BG 2005. I was just an asshole, until I got to travel, see a lot of things, and realize I was incredibly lucky, and there are a lot more options...

CC Is this akin to that metaphor that we were talking about before—that all the art work in your barn/brain was being left behind?

BG Maybe!

CC So you are starting to accumulate a new non-Republican, non-asshole space?

BG I feel like this conversation is going down a weird turn, but, yeah, basically I started to see how much luck and good fortune I generally have, and how much of that is withheld from other people. So everything you see right here is a better way to do things! ...I'm even writing a movie for kids right now.

CC I feel like, in this studio, that we're in a kid's movie right now. *(laughter)*



Two views of Green's studio at the Park Avenue Armory, 2015.

**BG** I did the Sundance Lab—and that kind of stuff. I'm on the Rooftop Films board. The producers, Matt Parker and Carly Hugo, are pretty great people. Matt asked me: Have you ever thought of making an animated film for kids? And so I started thinking: I really like this guy. He sends hand-written thank you notes and flowers to people. This is a dude I can work with. For me, it has to start with the relationships, even more than the projects, you know?



CC Yes, I get it.

BG And there is such a narrow range of voices making animated kids' films, because the budgets can be like 80 million dollars! No one is going to take a risk on some weirdo for their first film. Then I thought: Man, I bet we can make a commercially successful kid's film for 3 million dollars. Right? So I wrote this story, and we're setting up a studio.

CC Film's title?

BG Right now it's *Over the Eves*.

CC Feature length?

BG Oh yeah.

CC Will it be aesthetically, unmistakably yours? Will I instantly recognize it?

BG It'll be cleaner, a bit, but yes.

CC You will have your first actual animation studio?

BG Very much so.

CC Like a staff?

BG Like a staff. It's thrilling. But the idea, what made me want to do it, was thinking that if we can do it, then we can make other people's films in the studio, too.

CC You've got to come up with a studio name!

BG I know.

CC What is your website's name now?

BG Nervous Films.

CC How much work is available there?

BG None.

CC That's not true.

BG Is there stuff still there? I haven't looked at it since I had a kid.

CC Which was when?

BG A year ago.

CC Name?

**BG** Garland Houdini Green. (*laughter*)

Garland is my granddad's name. Houdini? Well, we were making fun of him because he was three weeks late, and we were like, "You were unable to pull off the fucking escape that all humanity did!" Then he came out at the last second, total surprise, totally healthy. And we were like, "Houdini!"

**CC** Judging by the toys strewn around here, he's obviously been to this studio.

**BG** Yeah.

**CC** This does not seem like a safe place for kids.

**BG** This is the second-most dangerous space where he is allowed. The barn is *way* more dangerous.

**CC** Have you slept here?

**BG** I will, though they said we can't. And one night, it was very late, and I left the lights on, and someone came in, and they asked, "When are you leaving?"

**CC** Are there guards here 24/7?

**BG** The fourth floor is a women's shelter.

**CC** Have you met them?

**BG** Yeah.

**CC** It's gotta be scary at night.

**BG** For them?

**CC** No. For you.

**BG** No.

**CC** It's a spooky place.

**BG** My only relationship to New York is Woody Allen movies. He lives two blocks away. I go the wrong way home to walk by his house.

**CC** To see if he's home?

**BG** Yeah! When his lights are on, I'm like, "Woody Allen's in there making shit for us!" And I'm really glad for the rest of humanity that he's in there doing that.

**CC** Do you see yourself as Woody Allen?

**BG** No way! I just like him a lot. When I finally leave this studio, I will walk out, I will not be a city person, but I will have a year of my life when, like, my evenings felt kind of like a Woody Allen film.

CC You're more of a city person than a lot of city people actually are.

BG In what way?

CC To experience the city from your point of view. To have that kind of psychic relationship with Woody Allen—that's an insider New Yorker thing, though maybe also an outsider New Yorker thing. It's a concept parallel to your art, in a way, because, just like Andrew Edlin said, "Brent Green is an insider-outsider."

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CC Tell me about your debut show.

BG I had never shown any of my work before, so when I gave my presentation at the first Creative Capital retreat, there were people waiting as I walked off stage, saying, "We need to show your work at the Getty, at Sundance!" I was represented by Bellwether, and my first show sold out before it opened. People wrote about it, and I ended up with this whole strata of curators and programmers who felt personally responsible for my career, because they had all discovered it first, at the same time.

CC What was that pivotal work?

BG After showing a clip, and sort of rambling about *Paulina Hollers*, I did a seven-minute presentation. I was talking to Sam Green about it recently, and he said, "Yeah, but you were like a feral child back then, and there's a real power to that."

CC What exactly did he mean?

BG We should ask Sam what he meant. I agree with him. When I watch my really early films, I feel like they are maybe pure, and naïve in a beautiful way. And I certainly didn't know that then.

CC It was like you were stumbling toward this beautiful thing—fumbling your way into beauty.

BG Yeah, that is exactly what it seems like to me. That's a gorgeous line, too.

CC How far along is *EE* at this point, what percentage would you say?

BG It's probably going to end up coming out in installments. We've already shot scenes, and I'm animating stuff for it. There's a scene where grandpa gets struck by lightning and one where he shoots the grouse. Those I showed at the Armory preview. Those two segments of the film will be finished with all the sculptures. So we'll show that as an exhibit at Andrew's, next year probably.

CC Will there be a performance as well?

BG Yeah.

CC Is it my misperception? All your films are capable of—not just being projected—but *performed*?

BG Yes.

CC So, then, all of this work is in flux, forever?

BG Yes.

CC That's kind of great. I mean, painting definitely is not like that.

BG The one thing I've always loved about *performing* the films and *showing* the films is that I still love every one I've made. Every part of them. And when I watch them, I think I was just trying to say something that was sincere... trying to state a clear, sincere epiphany. These things have a different meaning when you're twenty, than when you're thirty, forty, or fifty—but they always mean something, even if it's just: I remember when I thought like that. But the meaning evolves as it goes. They never feel old to me. I don't know if that means there's something wrong with my brain.

CC It's an autobiography that you can go back and reread.

BG Without even changing that much. I'll drop a line here or there. Sometimes I add lines, but not that frequently. Change parts here and there, but then the core of it, of whichever film it is, is still there. Like in *Paulina Hollers*, we're always forgetting [*a recitation of lyrics so quick as to be impossible to transcribe*—all that stuff. Every time I try to do that, it hits me in a different way. It still means this incredibly powerful thing to me, and I hope it will my whole life.

CC The idea is to have a constantly evolving thing. Can we really call them films?

BG I call them films for lack of a better word. They're films, or they're *also* films.

CC For lack of a better word.

BG Yeah. They are ALSO films.

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(*Still later...*)

BG I woke up today and was like, I should read Céline. Because tonight, after I leave here, I'm going to go and work on the dialogue for the kid's movie.

CC Which Céline? Louis-Ferdinand?

BG Either *Journey to the End of the Night* or *Guignol's Band*.

CC Those are *not* children's books.

BG I know, but man, who's better for crazy fucking dialogue? Neither book is in my apartment—then I saw Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and thought, Well, that's the next best thing. If you're going to write a kid's script, you gotta read *The Master and Margarita*.

CC Can I ask a completely left-field question? What's going on with you and rap music?

BG I'll admit to what I believe are pretty square tastes. It depends on what I'm writing, but I feel like I love Talib Kweli, in particular.

CC Name check an album?

**BG** *Eardrum*, I guess. I listen to it particularly when I'm writing, or finishing my writing, he's so creative with the rhythmic use of words. I feel that, in terms of narration, it's really important to have all these inner rhymes and tripping rhythms. So I'll just say him.

**CC** I asked because I consider you a rapper of sorts.

**BG** Oh... *(laughter)*

**CC** A rap artist.

**BG** The hip-hop community will be thrilled...

**CC** In my very naïve understanding of rap, I associate it first and foremost with religion.

**BG** Why do you do that?

**CC** You're an especially great example of a religious rapper. Would you agree? *(laughter)*

**BG** I don't have any idea—you'll send this transcript to me to edit, right? *(laughter)*

**CC** You disagree?

**BG** It's just so bizarre, that idea. It would be a very bizarre thing to read, to see that someone wrote, "Religious Rapper, Brent Green." I'd be like, That's crazy.

**CC** Mm. There's an aspect of rap and an aspect of your performative technique, in which you're playing a role—rappers often play roles. They become, in a way, *guided by voices* (I don't mean the band). You also become guided by voices—enraptured, right? It comes out in your voice. In the Armory performance, you were nervous at first, and you were apologetic, stumbling again, fumbling toward that beautiful state. You reassured the audience that you would get better. Because you knew you would. It was as if you knew—and now I'm going to push it a bit—that a spirit would take over.

**BG** Yeah. I knew I would forget everyone was there. I would say that's true.

**CC** It's beyond guided by voices; what's the next state of religious fervor? Speaking in tongues?

**BG** Only if the tongues are scripted—maybe they often are.

**CC** You're empowered by that thing, but you do stick to the script.

**BG** Mostly. It's a strange combination of things.

**CC** Is there—and I'm asking this because sometimes you find out during an interview that there is, in fact, a religious underpinning, or upbringing...

**BG** My mom's a missionary.

**CC** Okay. So she speaks in public with this empowered language as well.

**BG** She has a variety of jobs. She works at a Christian safe house in Dubai, she goes to Guatemala, walks around the jungle, prays where she feels the presence of the Devil...

**CC** She feels the presence of the Devil? Have you felt the presence of the Devil?



Part of a sculpture in Green's Park Avenue Armory studio, 2015.

**BG** No. I don't really believe in things that way. To me, an interest of God, which has changed over the years, is like a magnet. I actually think that Richard Dawkins is a complete idiot, because I think he's this giant intellectual who's saying, "Limit your thought", instead of putting the magnet higher. Think of the biggest thing you can think, then be aware that there's something bigger. And he doesn't seem to be doing that. I've read a couple of his books, and I think that's the interest of God—that you try to define a thing to get to an even greater understanding of it. In my multimedia installation, *To Many Men Strange Fates are Given*, God is a massive storm that you're able to exist within for a while. I don't know that I've really topped that in terms of...

**CC** In terms of?

**BG** In terms of thinking of a definition of God that I can't get bigger than.

**CC** Did that earlier you, that sort-of-Republican-asshole you, have religion?

**BG** That's long dead.

**CC** Long dead. But what about his religious beliefs?

**BG** None. Yeah. It was part of the limited thinking. Being an asshole for me was just not seeing a lot of options. And so when I was an asshole, I was a straight-up atheist, and I thought like Richard Dawkins or Bill Maher. You're dumb, if you believe in God, because it's something you can't see. Then, not having the wherewithal to look at, say, Einstein, standing right there, being like: Yeah man,

God makes plenty of sense. Not so sure about the afterlife, but God? I'm in. And if Einstein's in, I'm going to go along. If he's walking in front of me, I'm just going to trust there're no cliffs there.

CC Science is obviously a very important thing for you.

BG Yes.

CC You told me a great anecdote about someone who works here at the Armory.

BG He's one of the maintenance guys, he changes light fixtures and sweeps the floors, and he's...

CC ...a closet...

BG ...physicist.

CC A closet physicist!

BG He reads a lot. He's originally from South America, and he moved up here and has this job, but all he does is go home and read and think about physics.

CC Is he practicing in any way?

BG I don't know if he's got his own theories.

CC So you guys are bonding over your closet physics.

BG Yeah. I get a daily science aggregate thing. It's awesome to read about what other people are doing, because they're all viewing things in different ways—like viewing math in a much more poetic way than I can handle. It's a fascinating thing—just because you're seeing something of the smartest people in the world, exactly like what you said, fumble toward something beautiful. How could that not be appealing?

*Brent Green and Sam Green (no relation) will perform May 12–13, 2016 at the Exploratorium in San Francisco.*

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