Performance makers and multidisciplinary artists Annie Saunders and Andrew Schneider respond to questions from EMPAC curator Ashley Ferro-Murray about the evolution of their practices individually and as collaborators. The conversation focuses specifically on the artists' collaborative creation of the proof-of-concept for a digital expression of *Rest* with experimental new music orchestra Wild Up, composer Emma O'Halloran, and additional interdisciplinary collaborators, which was supported and commissioned by EMPAC. Sanders and Schneider have also worked together on *The Home* and are in the process of creating a site-responsive soundwalk in Lower Manhattan.

AFM   **You are both often identified as artists who work with "technology" — can you talk a little bit about why that is? What if anything interests you about technology (I'll leave it that broad), how you have included media in your artworks, and why?**

AJS   Why do you use technology?

AS   To run the show. So the show can go forward and things can happen that are mysterious and magical for the audience. That is what technology is for.

AJS   Right. I would agree. And I would almost go back to the beginning and say that's not a category of things. Technology isn't a category. It's just like saying 'why do you use language in your work?' If we stopped thinking about it as a category, it's just everywhere. It's the water that we swim in — and we use it to run the shows. And if you write things down with a pencil, you write at a certain pace. If you write things down on the computer, you're at a certain pace and you have different thoughts. If you clip things out of a magazine, you have different thoughts. You record voice memos and you have different thoughts — like I know that when I work in this or that program, I have different thoughts, I'm not interested in the technology, I'm interested in how it feels. How do I make this feeling happen? How do you have a magical moment? I think that's why I accidentally misread that question, or I read it literally: 'you're often identified as artists who work with technology. Why do you think that is?' That's the right question. But any comparison I'm going to do right now is going to make me sound like I'm comparing myself to a famous artist.

AS   Michelangelo, what's the role of painting in your work?

AJS   Yeah. When people only talk about the technology, if all they can see is the novelty of it. . . I see that as a, or my failure to follow through with the idea. And what you're really good at is always focusing first on the experience of the audience member. What do I want to feel, if I were them? What do I want to have happen to me? And that could include technology, or it could not include technology. And I think I'm catching up to that. In old shows I started with a piece of software or hardware because I thought it was cool. Now I think, I could just try and make things that make me feel like what I want them to feel. And they still usually happen to involve some sort of technology, but I'm not showcasing the tech anymore.

AS   What's interesting to me about this question is how you feel about people thinking you are the tech person. I would be flattered if people consider me to be a person who works with technology, but I think that they do actually see you that way. And I think I have seen you that way, but maybe that's changing. I think people see my work as being technology-based before I do. I am in an accelerator for mixed-reality artists now, for instance and I am learning a lot about all these platforms and mediums people are working in. They definitely do relate to my work — I'm very inspired and stretching in new ways.

AJS   Do you think people think of you as the immersive person, as the experiential person?

AS   I think they're like, oh, it's going to have interactivity, or it's going to have an audience and performers together, or it's going to be spatially different. I love those phone calls — 'we want it to be interactive, we want to use a space in a new way.' I feel like, yes, I can do that, you have the right number, that is my interest and to some extent my expertise. Do you feel like I see you as the tech guy?

AJS   No. Are people coming to you with like, hey this technology exists, I want you to know about it?

AS   Yes. 'We have this stuff, we have this thing, tool, platform, wearable haptic app. It's a virtual space where interactive activity can happen or some kind of intimate engagement in a virtual space. Do you have any stories you want to put in this space using this headset?' That definitely happens and has been happening for years. It is challenging to use the tech's capacity as a starting parameter but not impossible and I am always grateful for the invitation. Usually it's more hand in hand in a way — for *Rest*, when I went in a sensory deprivation tank for the first time, I thought, what if we could use those VR headsets as a blindfold? Can we somehow shine darkness at people? I had seen the technology and then had an experience that made me think — I see how this technology can do this thing and I want to do this thing. I want to share this thing, because something happened where I felt like I could see my own consciousness in a new way. I learned under the conditions of sensory deprivation that I can just tell myself anything and I'll believe it, and my senses are just making decisions all the time about what things are. And I thought maybe this tech could do this, and also maybe it could be in a space.

AJS   The VR headset would literally be a blindfold. I remember when we had that conversation thinking: well, that's the opposite of what most people would try. But people who are aware of their own senses or perceiving their own perceptions or seeing themselves see realize that they're hallucinating all the time and that their brains are just making these things up – how susceptible they are – people who are strongly interested in that as a elemental ingredient in both form and subject matter – they – you – are like, we have to talk about these things because they are what make us, they're the thing that connects us.

AS   Did we have that conversation before we did *The Home*?

AJS   No. For *The Home* it was like we were still kind of flying on trust more than anything.

AS   I feel like there's been an evolution in our relationship where there's an opening up of the kinds of things that I would bring you in on — almost anything at this point. But do you feel like you would hire me for something?

AJS   Yes.

AS   But as it relates to the technology question.

AJS   You can think about all of it. What is valuable to me and I hope to you too is our conversations, how we talk about things, and how we perceive things and metabolize things. I think that you and I are interested in the importance of what actual experience is being had in the room including the temperature, the lighting plot, and everything else, like how the ushers greet you at the door. How does all of that filter into that experience? And that's the most frustrating part of making work for me, that I can't clear enough of that aside to get to the real experience. It can take years of work with a collaborator to get two of you on the same page of 'here is why that matters.'

AS   I don't think that when people look at our bodies of work they'd think 'these people are really similar,' but I think what we have discovered in this process is that we really understand what's important to each other. The idea that experience never stops at the technology. In and of itself it cannot deeply move us. There has to be something else. The technology serves the experience. And it goes back to this question, 'what's the role of technology? What do you use technology for?' To run the show.

AJS   We use technology to run the show.

AS   Right. And 'run the show' means give people the experience that we're trying to deliver to them. Run them through. Run the show through them. Through their heart muscles.

AJS   And for me, these are all new thoughts. I didn't know this is what I was interested in, what the driving force was behind it. And that was around the time where we started talking more. Being able to put language to it has accelerated it.

AS   In this time that we've been working more closely together.

AJS   Yeah. I feel an opening up of my own.

AS   In terms of the technologies of performance making, I feel like there's a feeling in these collaborations of capability. Our shared capacity. Which is what technologies are supposed to enhance, right?

AJS   Yeah. Like, 'Oh, I don't know how to do that. We'll figure that out.' And what's nice about that is because of it not being driven by 'What can we do? What can't we do?' It's being driven by 'we know enough to know that we don't know this, but we know that we know enough to know how to think about it and what we can use to do it; to get through to the thing that we want to get to.' And the tech we use will change the thing we get to. But I think it's the capacity to be able to see the thing that is hard. And I know that I learn a lot from you. You remain open longer than I have the ability to remain open. Judgment comes in for me and I don't even know that it's judgment until I see you not judge it.

AS   Right. To trust your instincts and not judge them.

AJS   Right. That's hard to do.

AFM   **Has your relationship to technology as a performance maker changed since COVID?**

AS   I can't remember if I had this idea for an interactive video or whatever it was before the pandemic. I think it was the first idea during this time. Somebody called like March 21st or something really early and was like, 'do you have anything for the Internet?' And I was like, 'The only thing I have in my brain right now is something to do with this existing project *Rest* — mainly audio, part oral history, part TED talk, part guided meditation, with a lot of music, with intermittent visuals that are poetic and abstract.' And basically whomever was speaking was like, 'Is it finished?' And I was like, No, I literally thought of it right now during this conversation.' And they were like, 'goodbye.' But EMPAC took a very different approach and now we've proved the concept — and I think even in that early conversation there is evidence that I feel emboldened to make for mediums that I might not have otherwise — those invitations to imagine are inspiring and in fact I have been craving that for years, craving the invitations to make work that can stretch in different ways across different mediums in different ways.

AJS   There was a COVID period of 'Do you have anything for the Internet?' And I was like, why are we making things for the Internet? They aren't surrogates for in-person things. They are their own things. And people make really good things for the Internet and it's called Netflix.

AS   And the medium matters, experientially. It's not just the same content in different containers.

AJS   Right. And thought no, I'm just going to probably spend some time thinking about how I can make things. Not for the Internet, but instead for safe in-person performances or performances for one. And I had two projects that were not compromised at all — this is exactly what they were supposed to be and they happen to be COVID friendly. Hopefully now we talk about it so much that we are a little bit more fluent in the technology.

AS   I agree, and I think there has been an interrogation of some fundamental concepts of our medium in a way that I don't think there would have been otherwise. What does togetherness mean and feel like? What feels like being together? What makes something feel 'live', what is liveness? I think we're even learning that on the creation of this soundwalk. Like even when you know the speaker is not with you, the way the speaker is speaking to you and small changes in their manner make you feel – that's togetherness and this isn't — you can feel it. Did someone stand here before? Did they know that I was going to stand here now? It really is tender when you feel like they did.

AJS   Absolutely. I will say that I'm much more open to it now. Over the past couple of years I have been considering what I am really after in my work, and that has now coincided with this openness to working in new forms that, frankly, I would have judged before.

AS   I think also things that we've talked about, like, what is the door of the work? What is the threshold of the work? How do audiences first encounter this story? What is the total arc of their journey of experiencing this thing? Where is the threshold of our fiction? Where and how do we invite them in. Those things actually feel a little more interrogated in this time as well. People are thinking about, 'does it go on its own website, or does it get done through zoom, or do we situate it in this way or that? Is it a phone call?' I think that inside of that people are thinking a little bit more about the totality, the importance of really looking deeply at the total arc of the experience of the work, these fundamental concepts of what our medium is made out of.

AJS   Right. There's no more short circuiting. You have to think about it because the usual tools are no longer there. 'This can't feel like it usually feels, how do we make it feel more like how it feels? What makes it feel how it feels?' And that's maybe forcing people to realize that that's what they should've been doing all along. People are thinking more about their actual received experience and less about their own intent.

AS   And you can't un-have the conversation. It's been had. I hope we keep having it.

AFM   **What are your priorities now as a performance maker? What questions do you have for your work moving forward?**

AS   We have talked about the interrogation of these fundamental concepts and we talked about coming from a place of being motivated by what we want to offer the people experientially and working outward from that. Those are priorities.

AJS   Along with questions including: Who is this for? What community is this for? Whose voice is this, or who has access to this? Why do they have access to it? In what site is this situated? What does this site represent? I feel like there's an expansion of people having conversations around that, especially white people. Equity of distribution is a priority in a way that it hasn't been before in access to work or at least being intentional about thinking through it.

AS   What you're describing also sounds like context. Who is it for? Where is it for? Who has access to it? Who doesn't? What is its broader position in the landscape?

AJS   And just to double down on liveness — that is a priority. Focusing less on what I want to say and focusing more on what I want people to feel. I'm dubious of putting something into a new form because I have to. Or because the circumstances constrain it. That is brought into relief for me now. It raises the question about the job of an artist.

AS   Openness is a priority for sure. And yes, the idea that this is my job. And it's my responsibility within that job, that element of professionalism, to try to maintain my wildness.

AJS   Yes.

AS   My freedom and my expansiveness of my imagination and my fierceness within this professional job that I do, you know? So priorities are context, freedom, and liveness. Do you balk at that word? Professionalism?

AJS   No. No, not at all. Once there's a shared definition of what that means — once there's context.

AS   Context over everything.

AFM   **Both of you make work that presents with great spectacle, yet anytime that spectacle appears grandiose it is made up of attention to extreme detail. Can you talk about the role of subtlety in your practice?**

AS   What does subtlety mean? Genuine question. For the Internet.

AJS   Ask it.

AS   It says 'delicacy,' 'precision.'

AJS   Well, that's what I think the role of subtlety is. It is the role of precision, or the role of intentionality.

AS   Does it also mean 'barely there?'

AJS   No, I don't think so — maybe a little bit. I mean, yeah, that's 'subtle.' It's 'barely there,' but it's also...

AS   Like our clouds in the proof-of-concept for *Rest*. Definition says 'so delicate or precise as to be difficult to analyze or describe, delicately complex and understated, making use of clever or indirect methods to achieve something.' Why do you think we wanted those things that are barely there in the video?

AJS   So that you're engaged enough to not think about the fact that you're looking at a computer screen.

AS   Right. So you ask yourself, 'Did I just see something, or did I think I saw it?' I want to be unsure if I'm seeing something or not. How do we do that? I mean, these definitions of subtlety are everything I love about being alive. 'Things that are so delicate or precise as to be difficult to analyze or describe.' These are the magical moments of life. Things that are so delicate or precise that they're difficult to describe or analyze are the lasting memories of our time on earth.

AJS   That is the most potent stuff. Everything else is papier-mâché.

AS   And they're also always available, which I think is so much of what we've been dealing with in a lot of this work — we can find them. Or make them.

AJS   Find them and direct other people's attention to them.

AS   Yeah.

AJS   And press pause there for a millisecond.

AS   That's the role of subtlety in the work.

AFM   **To create the proof-of-concept film for *Rest*, you experimented in a room together with physical materials and then led a remote film shoot with EMPAC's team. Can you talk about that experience, how it worked and how it didn't?**

AS   The only thing I want to say about the remote directing is shout out to the whole team at EMPAC. We love you.

AJS   EMPAC is incredible.

AS   There's nowhere like it on earth. There's nowhere on earth that we could have done what we did. Besides that it did nothing but emphasize the absolute necessity for open-ended experimentation.

AJS   In the room. In-person, open-ended experimentation.

AS   Without a product in mind. The lesson of the remote directing is like the value of the experimentation that we did prior to the remote directing. I also think the remote directing ran smoothly because of kind of some of the stuff that we talked about in the earlier questions about our capacity and relationship and ability to —

AJS   To adjust — what do they call that —

AS   Adapt.

AFM   **Why was it important to you that this proof-of-concept be made using physical materials and not computer graphics or editing in post-production?**

AS   It's about how it makes you feel, it's about how it moves you. It's about this intuitive — I want to feel like this. And I felt or saw very early on in the scratch test that you did feel like that from watching this material — I could tell a computer didn't make that. And I don't know how I can tell, but I have enough trust in my own organism that if something in me knows that — 'that wasn't made by a computer and this feeling is meaningful to me, it has wonder in it and a kind of suspension' — I believe in my heart that it is going to be felt by an audience as well. The word visceral gets thrown around so much, but it's that — I feel in my body — and maybe I don't need to question it or judge it beyond that feeling.

AJS   Why not use the real thing? It's much closer to humanness, much closer to human viscerality.

AS   Again, I feel like this is what I hope we are evolving in our collaborations. I hope it's what I'm evolving in myself. I've hope it's one of my priorities going forward, just be curious about how things are affecting me. I think in one of those very early scratch videos the moment that I thought, 'Is that real?,' it eventually made the cut. The 'Is that real?' moment contained that relationship, embodied that relationship with myself, which I suppose I'm offering to the audience member in that moment.

AJS   And that ability to look at yourself, unfiltered somehow: 'This is a human being, having a real human being experience' without also bringing to the table a certain kind of judgmental expertise.

AS The only thing that I really have access to is how things are processed through my particular apparatus — it is really the only thing I have to experience the world and to express that, so I have to be prepared to notice that and treat it with a spirit of curiosity.

AFM **When you set out to begin this experiment, you had a question, but didn't know what you would find. Can you talk about the vision you had at the start of your work and how the result matches, challenges, or exceeds those expectations?**

AS My question at the beginning was if it would be meaningful to be offered something on a device as an audience member. Something that was an audio artwork that had some expertise in it and was part Ted talk, part oral history, part guided meditation, a lot of music, and intermittent visuals that are only light and shadow. Would that be meaningful as an experience to an audience member at home on some kind of device and in a non-performative space. So that was the question. And we did everything we said we were going to do and to try to test the idea and the question; to see if the answer was yes — 'Yes, this could be a meaningful experience done on a device.' I would say that what we created for the proof-of-concept is a section of what that experience might be for an audience member. And I think where we are in the process now, once this proof-of-concept comes out, is to ask the next question: Does it stay on a screen with headphones? Does it go in a headset? Does it go at all? What do you say in answer to that question?

AJS When we were doing these experiments, I was like, I can't wait to do this "live," or in a room. And then I was like, right, we're filming it. So it's going to happen, not "in a room" as we know it — it's going to happen in your room, whatever room you're in. And that really challenged me to think, 'Ok, it's going to be on a screen. What is the audience's relationship to the screen? What is your relationship to the device?' All of those things. And I do feel like this is a start towards that. When we say it is a proof-of-concept, that is what this is. A proof of a concept. It feels like a start. It checks all the boxes for asking if it should go forward from here and my answer to that is, yes, absolutely.

AS It should go forward from here. And that is absolutely what we set out to do, to check, and to see if this should go forward from here. Done.

AFM **Each viewer will have a different experience of this proof-of-concept depending on their device, screen, the lighting in their environment, sound system, etc. Can you talk about what to expect and how these environmental differences might impact the perception of the work?**

AS I feel like I've reflected a lot in the pandemic about the luxury that we had in terms of the access to people's bodies that we had when we used to bring them into a theater and we could really curate that for them in a spatial way.

AJS But the thing that excites me about that is that it gives us this opportunity to think more deeply about what we might like them to do. The fact that we've lost control of people's bodies has made us think about how we want to interact with them. As you have said in the past, people bring their bodies with them. People bring their whole bodies with them everywhere they go.

AS That's where they live. Where we live.

AJS So many people forget.

AS I know.

AJS Especially when you make for a screen you lose control of the space. I remember we considered sending people a kit and the kit would have like a shade that extends from your face...

AS Like a hoodie! With your phone inside it!

AJS I still think that's a good idea! Because we know how to watch videos on our laptops. We know how to watch videos on our phones and I would say it's the least sacred way to consume media. A book is way more sacred, newspapers and magazines, physical objects, you pay attention in a different way. A phone you look at it, you cancel a telephone call, you look at your bank account, it's an everything machine.

AS And it does, as you say, in that way, culturally vanish in a way. I don't think of my phone as an object in some way.

AJS Yeah. It's not an object and it's also not a portal. I think it'll take years. It would take a couple more months or years of work to get someone to watch something without the habitual quality of watching it on their phone like they watch everything.

AFM **I remember having a conversation once with a friend who is a film scholar — this was a long time ago, before I worked at EMPAC. She is someone who felt that the sacred space for screen-based media was in a cinema context watching movies on a big screen with others present. One afternoon while watching a movie on her iPad in bed, however, she realized that curled up with the screen in this moment and with this particular film she was having a more intimate experience than she typically had at the cinema. This does not erase the specificity of collective gathering, or the environmental context of going to see a film on a big screen. I don't think that this experience changed this friend's view of the cinema. I do think, though, that the anecdote shows how maybe we can be so focused on the traditional sacred spaces for a particular medium that we forget what we might gain by stepping outside of them. It seems like maybe that's what you've both found space to consider during this moment and during the making of *Rest*. I do think you're right,**

AFM   **though, that then taking an audience member with you on that journey is an entirely different step. Perhaps that will translate back again to the live in-person performance space when the time comes.**

Okay, to close us out, what's next!? Hopes, wishes, wants, desires, fears, concerns, expectations?

AS   All of the above is the answer.

AJS   My question or concern for *Rest* and what we've made here is how to do some of it or part of it in a room. The light. The lighting design. Or, if not, I hope you still consider hiring me to be the darkness designer.

AS   I feel like at this point you are stuck with me for life.

AJS   Sounds good.

AS   No, but I mean, that was the original vision I had before we migrated to the device — I saw a space in light and shadow that really changed the room around people and gave them this experience of how their brain and body decides in each split second what is real, and how maybe those seconds can be extended or shifted in some way. I think I am going to be in a space with the question, at least in part, of what the spatial translation of the feeling of those clouds and moments of electricity we made in the camera for the *Rest* proof-of-concept? How do we go back into physical space with the way that those things felt, how do they talk to, teach, listen to each other? My hope is that we keep working and see what happens next.

◆