

This Artist Proposes a Community Space ‘to Dream, to Imagine’

The poet and performance artist Jaamil Olawale Kosoko has reimagined his work “Chameleon” as a daylong virtual experience, “a global gesture in listening.”



Jaamil Olawale Kosoko in “Chameleon” in 2019. The work is being re-envisioned as a daylong virtual experience. via EMPAC



By **Siobhan Burke**

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Since New York theaters shut down in mid-March, creators of live performance have been quick to adjust: improvising on Instagram

performances have been quick to adjust: improvising on Instagram, reimagining dances for Zoom, uploading their archives to Vimeo.

The poet and performance artist [Jaamil Olawale Kosoko](#) was well equipped to adapt when he learned that his latest work, "[Chameleon: A Biomythography](#)," would not go on as scheduled at New York Live Arts this month. As its title suggests, "Chameleon" is mutable, the result of Mr. Kosoko's exploration, over the past few years, of what he calls "adaptive strategies and ways of being in the world." On April 22, Earth Day, it will take a much different shape than originally planned, re-envisioned as a daylong virtual experience, "[Chameleon: The Living Installments](#)."

A meditation on black queer life in the United States, dealing with themes of healing and survival, the work evolved along with Mr. Kosoko's increasingly international career, which, from his home base in Brooklyn, has recently taken him to Germany, South Africa, Sweden and England for residencies and teaching engagements. Like many of his projects, this one channels the ideas of writers and artists he calls his queer ancestors, in particular the poet Audre Lorde.



Mr. Kosoko in "Chameleon." In a repeated motif, his character slinks beneath an expanse of brown fabric, searching for a way out. via Jaamil Olawale Kosoko

Speaking by phone from Philadelphia, where he has been living with his partner during the coronavirus pandemic, Mr. Kosoko said that the more he traveled with early versions of "Chameleon," the more he realized: "This thing needs to be adaptive. It needs to be able to respond to its audience, to the situation of the moment."

In the most consistent part of the live performance, a section called

“The Hold,” his figure slinks beneath an expanse of shimmering, stretchy brown fabric, searching for a way out: a metaphor, he said, “for certain psychic realities that many of us want or try to escape.” Around that, everything shifts.

Mr. Kosoko, 37, did not anticipate the moment we’re now in, but he is acutely familiar with [making art in times of tragedy and mourning](#). A Nigerian-American artist whose work incorporates movement, song, poetry and film, he grew up in Detroit and Natchez, Miss., with his mother and grandmother. Both died before he turned 17. In his early 30s, he lost his father and his brother, who was just 22.

“So much of my work already deals so deeply with grief and death and how to hold that alongside joy and pleasure,” he said. “And so this really was no different than some of the things I’ve had to negotiate in the past.”

Still, Mr. Kosoko has been shaken by the pandemic and the threats it poses to his friends, some of whom are health care workers, and his artistic community.

“Shortly after this thing unleashed itself and we were put on lockdown, something in me broke psychologically,” he said. “It took me several days to work through the fact that friends of mine were on the front lines of this thing. It was so intense. It still is.”

Not one to give in to despair, Mr. Kosoko has reconfigured “Chameleon” in order to bring people together from around the world, “for idea sharing, for resource sharing, and hopefully for healing,” he said. He calls it “a global gesture in listening.”

“We need possibility in this moment,” he added, “and so that’s really what I’m trying to propose: a space to dream, to imagine, and to do that in community.”

The day’s offerings include the release of the digital zine “Chameleon: A Syllabus for Survival”; the streaming of a prerecorded conversation between Mr. Kosoko and the choreographer Bill T. Jones; the premiere of an excerpt from the coming film “Chameleon: A Visual Album”; and a performance of “Pidgin Chorus,” a vocal section of “Chameleon,” by the work’s collaborators. Mr. Kosoko plans to host at least some of these events on Discord, a chat app used mostly by video game

enthusiasts; anyone who prefers a less interactive experience can tune in on YouTube Live.

In organizing the online gathering, Mr. Kosoko has worked with the Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (better known as Empac) in Troy, N.Y., where he has had several creative residencies for “Chameleon.” It was Empac’s engineers who introduced him to Discord, a platform that allows users to hear but not see one another.

Ashley Ferro-Murray, Empac’s curator of theater and dance, has been meeting with Mr. Kosoko on Discord to test it out. She said that at times, although she can’t see him, she feels as if they are physically present together.

“There’s something really poignant about being in the space,” she said. “Hearing Jaamil talk and perform and sit, I’m getting his presence somehow.”

Mr. Kosoko spoke about adapting to the present and changing the future. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.



Why did you choose to use Discord for this online convening?

In my experiments on the platform, there's been a kind of intimacy. Not being as distracted or seduced by visual content, you're asked to meditate a little bit more on the beauty that comes from hearing someone's voice.

This is a new platform for many of us, certainly for me. By no means can I pretend to become some tech guru in three weeks. [Laughs.] It will be a little clunky, especially if you've never experienced this thing before.

Liveness is such an important part of your work, being in the room together. Are you trying to approximate that?

There's nothing that really equates to the magic of being able to assemble in tactile, intimate space — to share breath, to be forced to brush against your neighbor, to maybe meet somebody new that you didn't expect you would.

What I am learning from this work is that I'm hearing the voice in a different way. I'm hearing the subtlety, the inflection, the vibrato, the cadence, just the rhythm of one's vocality. That's become for me the new elbow brush or shared breath. It's something that's really giving me hope, something to move toward.

You've been traveling so much recently. Has it been challenging to stay in one place these past few weeks?

Yeah, I was in the world. I was in the wind. My passport was my lifeline. Knowing that I could leave the U.S. at any time was what kept me sane in a lot of ways, being able to experience other cultures. It was very much a dream, and then suddenly I woke into a nightmare.

We're all grappling with this. There's something soothing about that but also petrifying, like there is no place to run but to where you are.

You've talked about the idea of changing the future, since we can't change the past. Do you see "Chameleon" as part of that effort?

Yes yes yes. When I was going through my episode, we'll call it I

was in panic. I saw a future, and it was like watching this tornado in the distance, just watching it come and not being able to do anything about it.

I think all artists have foresight. The work that we do is to create futures and invite people into them. And so that's what I'm trying to do: to put forward a proposal for the future and invite people into it.

What kind of future do you propose?

I think there's no way we can go back to business as usual. I think that would be a huge misfortune, to return to normality, whatever that could mean or whatever that meant. I think we have to be radical, we have to be strategic, we have to be strong and enduring, we have to be organized, and we have to support each other in the grass roots, because we see that our government does not have the capacity to do it and isn't interested in doing it. We are the ones we have been waiting for, in the great words of [June Jordan](#).

Does this new iteration still focus on black queer identity — what this moment means for black queer people in particular?

I'm not trying to speak for all of any one group; that's impossible. But I do think that I can speak to my specific lived experience and the communities I circulate inside of.

I'm reaching back to these folks I call my queer ancestors: Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, Sun Ra, Alain Locke. There are so many. I'm reaching toward them and asking them to help me through.

I think that no matter our race, creed, color, nationality, whatever, there's something to be learned from those who exist in that space of black and queer. And both of those words are very unstable signifiers. What is black and what is queer, really? I think there's something in that illegible, unstable set of identities that everyone can learn from. Whether we're open to that, that's another question, but there's something to be learned, believe me.

For updates on "Chameleon: The Living Installments," follow [@chameleon_coalition](#) on Instagram and visit empac.rpi.edu.

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