



Abele Collective

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Abele is an art collective formed with the intention of creating immersive works that invite the experience of art with all the senses: from vision to hearing, from olfaction to taste and even touch.

Comprised of six individuals – Uthman Wahab (visual artist), Adey Omotade (sound artist), Nyancho Nwanri (video artist), Renee & Seun (culinary artist duo) & Emalohi Iruobe (storyteller) – each iteration of the project will present an unusual creative energy that each artist will respond to in their own way, creating a holistic art experience.

▼ INTERVIEW

▼ 1st question – The collective

How was the collective formed?

“On a typical sweltering day in Ikoyi (Lagos) – a neighborhood on the Lagos Lagoon in Nigeria – Adey Omotade, a sound artist who has lived and exhibited in this neighborhood for most of his life, imagines that art making could be guided by sensory triggers. He began to explore how touch, sight, sound, smell and taste can influence the way we create and experience art. He immediately shared his idea with Uthman Wahab, a visual artist whose main concern is to develop a new visual language that consciously rejects traditional forms of representation in order to document the ongoing history and reality in the making.

At this meeting, over a bowl of asun – a spicy and chewy treat made from young goat – Adey Omotade discusses how they could include other sensory elements such as touch, taste and smell by including the culinary artist duo Chef Renee and Chef Seun – an innovative culinary duo, who explore ways in which culture, supply chain and meal creation can be sustainable and in line with global trends – as well as Nyancho Nwanri – a lens-based creator from Lagos, Nigeria whose work focuses on African history, culture, language, spirituality and social issues.

In the following meeting, Adey Omotade, Uthman Wahab, Nyancho Nwanri, Chef Renee and Chef Seun discussed the development of this idea over dishes prepared by the chefs and a tasting of their local wine, Eko Wines. This meeting was a glimpse of what a sensory art experience could look like. The dishes served were cassava-based pasta – an innovative creation of the culinary duo – and were accompanied by their local wine with varied flavor profiles – cashew, zobo, also known as hibiscus, and agbalumo, a cherry fruit native to West Africa.

Cassava, a starchy, tuberous root, is an important source of carbohydrates in the tropics, after rice and corn. The culinary duo’s exploration of cassava as a pasta base demonstrates their commitment to innovation and sustainability, as cassava is one of the most drought-tolerant crops capable of growing on marginal soils. Experimenting with cassava, its texture and taste, beyond garri (dried, pressed and fried flakes) and tapioca (starchy root extract with very little nutritional value), brings new tastes and textures that contribute to creation through the senses. The conclusion of this meeting was the beginning of a collective attempt to elevate the idea of sensory stimulation as a catalyst for artistic creation and a showcase for avant-garde artwork.

It was exciting to see how individuals seemingly disconnected in their practices and mediums could come together to merge thoughts and ideas to create in an open and experimental way, providing a space independent of formal institutions. The principles of the collective were thus born and focused on the incubation of emerging, experimental and transdisciplinary creative practices and pedagogies. Subsequent meetings were planned to take this idea further.

A week later, Adey Omotade, Uthman Wahab, Nyancho Nwanri met again at Uthman’s studio. There, Adey Omotade began playing music from his *NIRI* album – a Yoruba Afrohouse project that uses archival Yoruba sounds fused with digital productions. As the music fills the studio, Uthman Wahab pulls out a roll of archival paper and begins creating in response to the sounds. Nyancho Nwanri films the process and brings a different dimension to the visual stimulation as it is triggered by the fluid and engaging techniques of video mapping.

Following this moment, as Adey Omotade continued his exploration of sensory stimulation, it became clear to him that he would benefit from the intervention of a griot - griots are storytellers gifted in oral and written narration. They have been an important part of the West African culture and community since the 13th century. Charged with creating and preserving stories, genealogy and history, they are integral to preserving culture and tradition for generations to come. He would meet this griot nine months later during a visit to Uthman Wahab’s studio. The griot, Emalohi Iruobe, a storyteller whose work focuses on identity, self-reflection, and multiple realities, immediately joined the heart of Abele Project.

Finally, in 2022, the collective is complete and about to leave for a residency at the Cité internationale des arts for a research and creation residency.”

▼ 2nd question – The practice

What is your creative process as a multidisciplinary artist collective?

“Art is inseparable from life, this is one of the guiding principles of the Abele collective and it influences our creative process. We are inspired by the concept of “art of the commons”. *On The Commons* explains that the commons are “the things we inherit and jointly create that (hopefully) will last for generations to come.” Peter Barnes, founding member of *On the Commons*, describes the commons as a river with three tributaries: nature, culture, and community.” He explains that the key characteristics of the commons as “shared gifts” are things that are received and by the community as a whole, not by individuals.

These shared gifts build our creative process in that each member is encouraged to use their individual explorations, questions, and ideas as a personal guide, especially as each person responds differently to different sensory stimuli. After that, each member then shares with the collective, with openness and authenticity, their discoveries and responses to the individual explorations they may have made. This sharing becomes the fuel for the things, experiences and processes we inherit and create together. By sharing all of this in a common space, we reimagine the political economy of art making. It is well known that in order for an artist to make a decent living from their creativity alone, they must accept the way the market generally privileges individual artists over groups in order to commodify art. By remaining aware of this, we approach our creative process by abandoning traditional processes. We work together to push each other beyond our comfort zones to open up unexplored channels of communication, to process our individual and shared stories and pour them into the collective pool of process, sensory triggers, varied responses to those triggers and how they are inseparable from life. All because we believe that art speaks for itself, we allow ourselves, individually and collectively, to create freely and trust the audience to engage processes by relying on their intuitive response to sensory stimulation.

For example, the Abele Collective’s first experimental exhibition at the French Consulate in Nigeria was inspired by a body of work by Uthman Wahab, which celebrates women with forms, a widely accepted concept of beauty and femininity in Nigerian and African cultures.

Simultaneously, Uthman Wahab begins to paint; Nyancho Nwanri develops a video in response to the colors used by the visual artist; chefs Renee & Seun are invited to prepare a meal made of ingredients deemed “fatty” by Western cultures; and the blending of these sounds (brushes against canvas, simmering of cooking, clicks of video) becomes a new sound piece for Adey Omotade.

Several weeks later, when a video of the event was shown to Emalohi Iruobe, she wove a narrative around the process. A narrative that was then used to collectively create the film *The Abele Project – A Multi-Sensory Journey*.”

▼ 3rd question – The residency project

What project are you working on during your two-month residency at the Cité internationale des arts?

“Our residency is a research residency. We focus on sensory process research, intuition and expanding the collective by finding artists in all disciplines and inviting them to contribute to the collective. We focus on activities that will increase our stock of knowledge. We will in turn use the knowledge gained from this research to design new applications of art, artistic process, artistic definition and import.

As the first and only collective of Nigerians by Nigerians at the Cité internationale des arts, we quickly realized our role and relevance in a global perspective of cultural exchange at the heart of global identity and the ongoing understanding of changing perspectives and narratives on art, its creation and consumption.

So we settled into the life and community of Paris and our new home, the Cité internationale des arts.

The first few days were spent exploring, mapping, and meeting artists and the community at large. We then visited several historic cultural spaces in Paris to engage everyone we met in discussions about how sensory stimulation triggers them in their daily lives and practice. The visit to the Chateau Rouge market became an exciting part of the research because it encompassed all the senses. The metro ride and the announcements that can be heard formed a soundscape for the collective, which interacted with the smells, colors and heat of Paris (a city without air conditioning).

Afterwards, the collective worked to continue the exchanges with the artists in residence, professionals and to engage in culinary and cinematographic research.”

▼ 4th question 4 – Commoning

How do you integrate your practice into the lives of the Cité’s residents?

“Because our practice is based on the idea of “commoning”, we have implemented an open door policy for our individual and collective workshops. We wanted to inspire artists at the Cité internationale des arts to be curious about us, our process, and to be willing to engage in our exploration.

We in turn attended several *Open Studios* and contributed to the conversations and learning. We screened Abele’s film specifically for the Cité community as an invitation to see, touch, feel, and wonder about such an intuitive artistic process that relies on sensory triggers, which may or may not produce an outcome.

Through our research and contacts with artists inside and outside the Cité, we were able to invite musician Keziah Jones to attend the screening, as well as representatives from the French Institute and UNESCO partners. We have established relationships with several artists in the Cité who have expressed interest and willingness to contribute to the work of the collective. We recognize that many practices are collective without being public and this has been supported in the invisible ecosystem within the Cité.

Many artists working in ecosystems, with the weight of their own memory, understanding and sense of purpose, have unwittingly contributed to the collective’s research. Through their presence, the sounds they make, the colors and style of their clothing, their accents and expressions, they have all collectively contributed to our process and we are grateful for their openness and generosity of thought, advice, praise and presence. The honesty and depth of the *Open Studios* evenings and the willingness of residents to answer questions, share their vulnerabilities, memories, struggles and processes moved the collective deeply.

One of the goals of our presence at the Cité is thus to find resources to put back into the community – first at the Cité, then in the broader Parisian community.”

These responses were written by storyteller/griot Emalohi Iruobe, for the collective.